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ROBERT GRAVES

THE MYCONIAN

I

OUTSIDE THE WINESHOP everyone was teasing the mild-mannered stranger who wore the grey cloak of a Greek philosopher. The usual run of philosophers are much-travelled, sharp as needles, knowing as vultures; but this one seemed ignorant and artless, a regular hick.

'In Hell's name, where do you spring from?' Scorpus asked. 'Anyone would think you'd been asleep a thousand years and just woken up!'

'From Myconos, the Aegean island. It's not very big, but quite famous. Why, the Giants who attacked Heaven are buried beneath our granite rocks, which the God Hercules threw at them. And we show the Tomb of Ajax, too -- a Trojan War hero.'

The philosopher then began to quote Homer, but Scorpus cut him short. 'You're not a real Myconian,' he teased.

The philosopher blushed. 'How did you guess?'

'Look at your thatch! "Myconi calva omnis juventas!" -- All Myconians are bald as pumpkins, even boys.'

'Yes,' he mumbled. 'My family, I confess, originated in Athens. Political refugees. This thick hair does make me somewhat conspicuous at home. But I have the most beautifully bald wife and children.'

He spoke in such earnest tones that we took to him in a big way. 'Ever travelled before?' I asked, when the laughter had subsided.

'Some years ago I attended a course in philosophy at Athens. From there I went to the Olympic Games: an unforgettable experience! As Homer says...'

'Forget Homer! We're not buying Homer. Did you see good sport at Olympia?'

'Sir, it was fabulous! A score of events crammed into five days! First, the sacrifices and the classification of athletes; then a contest between trumpeters. Great Heavens, you should have watched them puff out their cheeks until they looked like pigs' bladders -- veins swelling on foreheads, eyes bulging. A little fellow from Sicily ought to have won,

but the judges disqualified him after an objection; it seems he had once served a prison term at Syracuse for striking a priest. Only freeborn Greeks of good character may compete at Olympia. But, by Jove, how he blew -- what sweet thunder! Next, to whet our appetite, the boys' races! So two days glided by in the horseshoe Stadium. No less than forty thousand visitors must have gathered there from all over the Greek world! We put up tents and picnicked beside the river. The third day, the day of champions... Two-hundred-yard sprint, quarter-mile and two-mile footraces. Classical wrestling. A race between armed soldiers carrying shields and spears; our Myconian champion came in third. Hard-glove boxing. Freestyle wrestling. Magnificent! The competitors had trained for years.'

'Footraces!' scoffed Bufotilla, Scorpus's green-eyed girl friend, blowing her nose daintily with thumb and forefinger, and wiping them on my cloak. 'Left, right; left, right; left, right -- elbows jogging, lungs whistling, eyes glazed -- round and round and round... I can't imagine a drearier spectacle.'

'Ah, dear women!' sighed the philosopher, 'you're all alike -- pretending to despise the Games which you are forbidden, on pain of death, to witness!'

Bufotilla stared at him. 'Forbidden -- on pain of death? And why, pray?'

'Because Olympic athletes wear no clothes, young lady,' replied the philosopher.

'By the Girdle of Venus, what's wrong with that? Don't you have nude mixed bathing at public baths in Greece?'

This time it was the philosopher who stared at Bufotilla.

'Well, don't you?' she insisted, sharply.

Scorpus had heard vague talk, some place or other, about the Olympic Games, and broke in: 'Big prizes, eh? Heavy bonuses?'

'No, Sir. The same award serves all events: an olive-wreath, cut with a golden sickle from the sacred tree.'

'Yes, yes, that's the token award, I don't doubt. But how much cash does it mean? You can't tell me that these fellows train for years, then flock to Olympia from all over the Greek world, in the hope of winning only a wretched wreath, such as they could cut anywhere themselves?'

The philosopher smiled reprovingly. 'We are Greeks, not barbarians,' he said.

'So what? Doesn't anyone ever sell a race or match at Olympia?'

'They swear a solemn oath beforehand that they won't. At the altar of Olympian Zeus, in front of all the judges.'

'And if an athlete breaks his oath?'

'The judges fine him severely, and the city he represents is shamed. At Olympia, you can see rows of bronze images flanking the Temple steps. They were paid for with fines imposed on men who bribed their opponents to lose: long rows of images, worth I don't know how much.'

'Thanks, I knew that money came into it somehow,' said Scorpus. 'It always does.'

We burst out laughing, but the philosopher saw no joke. 'It's true,' he said, 'and on each image is engraved a warning that the Olympic Games were founded by Hercules as a contest in manliness, not in money; and that the Gods always discover cheats.'

'Oh, get on with your tale! Bufotilla's growing nervous; aren't you, my honey? We want to hear about the chariot race. That's the main draw at any Games.'

'Not at Olympia. When we talk of bygone Olympics, we always identify them by the name of whichever athlete won the sprint -- our earliest and most important athletic event. The chariot-race winner may be a moribund old prince from Cadiz, or the Black Sea provinces, who never saw Greece before but happens to own a good stable. In the sprint, it is the man who wins, the man whom poets celebrate -- not a team of dumb horses. Therefore we philosophers despise the chariot race: it infringes the Olympic rule that money is no substitute for manliness.'

'Haven't you forgotten the charioteer?' asked Scorpus gently, stroking his large nose. Any other member of Scorpus's profession would have knocked the philosopher down, instead, and jumped on him. But Scorpus could afford to be forbearing.

'Oh, yes,' the philosopher answered. 'Charioteers get the best out of their teams, I suppose; but at Olympia nobody pays them much attention. It is not a dangerous race: a driver who deliberately fouled an opponent's chariot, why, he would be disgraced for life!'

This drew fresh guffaws from our party, and Bufotilla cried: 'By all the Gods in Heaven and Hell, what a nation of sissies! No wonder our Roman legions went through you like string through cheese!'

Scorpus, controlling his mirth with a great effort, said: 'Go on about this most ethical chariot race. How many laps are run?'

'Laps? Just one -- as in Homer's day.'

'Mention Homer again, and I'll scream!' screamed Bufotilla.

'And the length of the run?' Scorpus asked.

'Five hundred yards.'

'You call that sport?'

'Certainly!'

'Then you'd better watch a Roman race this afternoon, and improve your education. Take charge of him, Glabrio, will you? See he gets a seat with the Family.'

I said I would. Then along came a crowd of young noblemen, all wearing blue favours, caught sight of Scorpus, lifted him on their shoulders, cheering madly, and bore him off.

'With what paragon of men have I had the honour to converse?' exclaimed the philosopher.

'With Scorpus: our greatest charioteer for generations. He's turned the tide of fortune from the Green faction to the Blue -- won us over eleven hundred victories since the Emperor's accession. Worth nearly two million in gold! If he'd slit your throat just now, when you talked of charioteers as though they were country carters, would any Roman have dared inform against him? Not one! So far as he's concerned, police and magistrates can go to Hell. He hobnobs with the Emperor Domitian himself. Senators' wives and daughters pant for him, but he brushes them off like flies.'

'This Scorpus comes of noble stock?'

'Noble? His father was a slave from York, employed in the Imperial stables. And if you want to know why he despises the Olympic chariot race no less than you philosophers do, it's because his course is seven times round the Great Circus, with bloody murder lurking at each post. Few charioteers escape a broken leg or arm for long. Ten races; twenty perhaps, if they're lucky: then, crash!... Scorpus's luck has been phenomenal; only three serious accidents in five years. Everyone wonders why he doesn't retire on the winnings.'

'Why doesn't he?'

'Says he mustn't fail his public. But I don't think it's quite that. In his heart he despises the public; all experienced charioteers do. I guess he just gets a kick out of playing

with death. Besides, if he retired, tell me some other job he could take and still feel a man -- short of turning gladiator?'

A poster on the wineshop wall announced that one of Menander's comedies would be playing that afternoon in Pompey's Theatre. The philosopher wanted to see it. 'No,' I said, 'you're not going!'

'Why not?' he asked, rebelliously.

'For three good reasons. First, because it's in Latin translation; and you're short on Latin.'

'I'll risk that.'

'Second, because you'll find the Theatre's altogether too big. I've been around in Greece; I've seen plays acted there... Audiences of two thousand at the most. Here, they're nearer sixty thousand! Against all that talking and coughing and shuffling, how can dialogue be followed, even with a wind blowing from the right quarter? And the back rows can't easily distinguish between the players. So prostitutes always wear yellow; old men wear white; the hero wears mixed colours; merchants, purple; beggars, red; etcetera... And all you get of the comedy, besides madly expensive sets, are fragments of shouted dialogue, and theme songs. Theme songs played by the orchestra, sung by the choir, and danced by Paris.'

'Who may Paris be?'

'The leading man, whom our women dote on. As he cavorts across the stage he registers terror, anguish, obscene passion, filial tenderness, corny humour, bestial cunning -- the whole works! Does it all with gestures. Menander would turn in his grave to see what's happened to his lines; and I gather you respect Menander? Our actresses strip to the buff in aid of greater realism. And no holds barred. It's a liberal education, sometimes... Why, recently the Emperor let a convict be substituted for the brigand chief in the last act of Laureolus, and actually be crucified onstage!'

'What is your third reason?'

'The most important one! It's that Scorpus expects you to watch the chariot-racing in the Great Circus. See?'

We ate lunch -- bread and black puddings -- at another wineshop, near the Citadel. The big race wouldn't be run for another two hours; which left us plenty of time to visit the late Emperor Titus's Amphitheatre, commonly called The Colosseum. I own a couple of good seats there, on the shady side; and even if I forget my tickets, I can always get in as a member of Scorpus's 'family'. I'm his saddle-master: the man solely responsible

for his reins, traces and harness...

We strolled past the Forum. A pretty girl in a violet silk gown, wearing half a pound of bangles and necklaces, linked the philosopher's arm endearingly in hers. 'Coming for a walk, Socrates?' she inquired. 'I could ask you some tough questions.'

I firmly unhooked them, and shooed her away.

'Why did you do that?' he bleated.

'I'd hate my friends to find me arm in arm with a philosopher and a prostitute...'

'But I thought prostitutes always wore yellow?' he sighed. What superb innocence! I must remember to tell Scorpus!

This being the noon interval, we found the Colosseum less than half-full: a mere thirty thousand spectators. During the interval, second-class entertainment is the rule -- animal turns or acrobatics; but I'm glad we went, because a 'No-reprieve' show was put on. 'No-reprieve' is an amusing alternative to crucifixion -- and the criminals appreciate it: death comes quick, and most of them get the pleasure of killing as well as the misfortune of getting killed. Ten criminals were announced that day: among them bandits, men convicted of incest or arson, and parricides. A villainous lot, except for one fine-looking Sicilian bandit, by name Julius Ferox. Every woman in the audience waved her scarf at him on hearing that, before his capture, he'd flattened three soldiers and their sergeant. Julius would appear third.

A roll of kettle-drums, and the parricide was led in, naked. He glanced wildly about: gates shut and barriers too high to scramble over. Then in strutted another criminal in full armour, with shield and sword -- a mad Moor from Tangiers, who had burned down an apartment house, causing considerable loss of life. He caught his man after a long chase which ended rather tamely, because the desperate parricide took a leap at the barrier and knocked himself out. Then the Moor was himself disarmed by two guards, who gave his gear to Julius Ferox. The Moor had not run three paces before Julius thrust him through the lungs.

Poor sport; but now came Julius's turn to be disarmed, and a ruffian from the Sabine Hills had the chance to murder him. Julius showed no dismay. Though mother-naked, he met the rush, flung back his head and dealt a violent kick at the Sabine's wrist. Away flew the sword; Julius tackled low, got hold of the shield, and drove its sharp boss through his enemy's temple. He rose, walked up to the guards, and remarking carelessly: 'I'll fight without these,' handed over the arms. 'Next customer!'

The crowd cheered his bravado. He now confronted a tough cut-throat from Naples, cleverly working him round to face the midday sun; then, stooping, he threw a handful

of sand in his eyes and took a running kick at his genitals. In no time at all he'd won a third victory.

'Next customer!'

Terrific applause; and the lady below me screamed at her husband: 'Oh, Tullius, if only you had that bandit's physique, what a happy woman I should be!'

'And if only I had his kick,' growled Tullius, 'I'd soon cure your itch!'

Julius had little trouble with the miserable Tuscan dandy, convicted of raping his niece. No gladiator, this one! Julius went up, saying: 'Your sword, lad!', calmly borrowed it and cut off his head at a stroke.

'Next customer!'

His new opponent was a fellow-bandit, formerly his lieutenant, who'd betrayed him to the authorities in the vain hope of winning a pardon. While tussling for the sword, Julius was gashed and stabbed in three places; but then used it mercilessly, lopping off the traitor's ears, nose and hands before dispatching him. The crowd stood up, roaring delightedly, and appealed for pardon; but this was a 'No-reprieve' show. So Julius committed suicide. He didn't seem to mind, now that suitable vengeance had been taken.

'Congratulations!' I said to the philosopher. 'Beginner's luck. Best show this year; and in the Interval, too! The regular fights will seem flat after this... Of course, if Hermes were on, that would be another kettle of fish! A wonderful gladiator; but he's in hospital just now -- jabbed in the thigh by a net-and-trident expert. An all-round man is Hermes: trident, spear, sword, on horseback, or on foot. Fills all the tiers. Well, what about getting along? The next numbers will only be a negro tight-rope walker, a dwarf riding a goat over a row of obstacles, and a duel between two delinquent housewives armed with cleavers.'

The philosopher's face had turned green, and he'd shut his eyes tight so as not to see the remaining criminals done in.

I nudged him again: 'Coming?'

'Where can I vomit?' he gasped.

'You talk of manliness,' I said, leading him out, 'and yet you want to vomit! How was that for a display of manliness? If a bandit can prove himself a hero, what do you think the rest of us are like?'

He kept silent until we'd left the Colosseum and his nausea had passed. Then he answered: 'The heroism of a Sicilian bandit gives me no clue to the spirit of ordinary Roman citizens -- wine sellers, actors, or saddle-masters. Have you yourself taken part in a war? No? Or faced a storm at sea? No? Do you box, even with soft gloves?'

I shook my head.

'What are your sports?'

'None, now. At the Baths, I sometimes raise a sweat by joining in an aimless medicine-ball scrimmage. I used to wrestle, but not after I put my thumb out. And no self-respecting Roman boxes; we leave that to gladiators -- cauliflower ears and broken noses have no attraction for pretty ladies. Gladiators don't care; they cheerfully use spiked knuckledusters. The other day I saw Hermes taking on an enormous black bear -- killed it, too, with a left to the muzzle and a right to the jaw.'

'Then you expect slaves, criminals, and the desperately poor to display courage on your behalf?'

'Put it that way, if you like. I won't argue against a philosopher.'

'Is it true,' he asked, 'that at the Colosseum batches of Jewish mystics are daily thrown to hungry lions?'

'Yes, I believe so: in the early morning when the gates first open. They're let down in cages, by a crane. Few people attend, because there's nothing to bet on. And it's a pretty tame spectacle. These Christians, as they're called, show no fight when released from the cage; just kneel down, pray and sing. Curious, isn't it? But they can't be altogether Jewish: I hear they eat pork freely.'

As we mixed with the crowd streaming towards the Great Circus, a couple of policemen frog-marched a bedraggled fellow to the lock-up.

'Betting?' I asked.

They nodded and went on.

The philosopher exclaimed: 'Yet at the wineshop I heard one of those young noblemen openly backing Scorpus for ten thousand gold pieces to six! Is there one law for the poor, and another for the rich?'

'You've missed the point. The law forbids casual betting. If caught, you're fined four times the value of your stake, or else go to gaol. But everyone's encouraged to bet on the chariots and the gladiators. I'm sorry now that you missed seeing a Colosseum

fight. We should have stayed. It can be great fun -- if it's not rigged... Say you bet on a targeteer who's meeting a gladiator with a large shield. Say you stake a month's wages; say they fight good and hard -- without any need for the whipper to warm them up by lashing their legs. The crowd yells: "At him, the Blue!", "Murder him, the Green!" (We have Blue and Green factions here, too.) Soon it's: "Burn him, roast him, flay him, gut him, pickle him!" Or: "Hey, mind out, Green!" Then at last: "Good lad, that got him!" -- and you watch the targeteer's sword sink up to the hilt in Green's belly... You feel fine, see? It's as though you'd killed him yourself. The Blue targeteer's brought home your bacon. A grand instance of Roman sport -- manliness and money, hand in hand.'

'Well,' said the philosopher, irritably twitching his grey cloak, 'you Romans have indeed mastered the art of making poor wretches commit mutual murder for your sakes! And do you have even one native Roman out of every ten soldiers enrolled in your legions -- apart from senior officers?'

'I doubt it. That's what the poet Virgil, or maybe it was Cicero, calls being a master race,' I answered cheerfully.

II

As we walked towards the Great Circus, I pointed up at a gilt statuary group on a massive marble pedestal.

'The Sun-god?' The philosopher asked.

I grinned. 'Don't his nose and chin remind you of someone?'

'Yes, indeed! What a strange resemblance to your friend Scorpus!'

'It is Scorpus!'

The philosopher stopped dead. 'Once,' he said severely, 'it was considered a sin to honour even kings with statues. Yet today one may mistake the gilded statue of an ex-slave for a divine image!'

'Why not? The Blue faction set up that group to celebrate Scorpus's thousandth victory. If every god treated his worshippers as generously as Scorpus has treated the Blues, religion wouldn't be in such a poor way.'

He asked me to explain the factions in easy language. A difficult task for a professional like me...

'Well,' I said, 'each faction is known by a colour, one of those that everyone's wearing

-- Green, Blue, White and Red. The four racing stables are managed by millionaire syndicates. Green has White as its partner; Blue has Red. You'll have noticed that Green and Blue favours predominate. But don't despise the minor colours: White and Red charioteers come in handy by opening up for their partners, or baulking the enemy.'

'Do these colours mean anything in particular?'

'Not that I've ever heard.'

'Yet I seem to be the only person here not wearing a favour!'

'It's quite a story,' I told him. 'A few generations back, we Romans fought one Civil War after another: all for political reasons. They lasted till the Republic broke down and Augustus made himself Emperor. Since then, discounting a spot of trouble at Nero's death, we've had continuous peace -- and no politics! So Rome's grown incredibly rich. Rich in slaves, rich in trade. This is the "Good Life" of our ancestors' dreams. Free citizens need to work only till noon. What's more, they can take every other day off, buy all they need, and still have money to jingle... Here's a novel problem: How to spend their leisure time? Every blessed afternoon, every other morning as well! I'm fortunate to be in show business; keeps me occupied.'

'I should buy books,' said the philosopher eagerly.

'Books? But then you're Greek. We Romans don't read unless we're sick. Elsewhere, idle men finding themselves without jobs or money nurse political grievances; here they're denied even that comfort. And the Emperor can't set them all to work raising colossal pyramids -- which, for all I know, may have been how the Pharaohs solved Egypt's leisure problem. He'd run a risk of assassination. Instead, he subsidizes free gladiator shows and chariot races, and lets faction politics replace party politics. Only a fool would want a change in government when the factions supply a simple means of turning his spare cash into a fortune.'

'How so?'

'By betting, of course! Anyone can join either the Blues or the Greens; and though both factions are equally crooked, the betting works well enough.'

'I should find it demoralizing to be a perpetual spectator!'

'There the Emperor agrees with you. He's just proclaimed a four-yearly "Roman Games" on the Olympic model; doubtless hoping that we'll all turn enthusiastic athletes. But even if the factions take over, which seems improbable, I can't see a future in athletics. Apart from popular music and dancing at the Theatre, Rome cares

for little except sex, gladiators, racing and betting: we don't pretend to be Greek idealists.'

A cockfight announcement, posted on a building, caught the philosopher's eye -- one of the entries was a Myconian bird. He insisted on going inside. Look-outs stood by the door of this miniature Colosseum, where one may bet only in hazel-nuts. The audience wore patched and dirty cloaks; yet the stakes were heavy. Neither the stink and vermin of the cockpit, nor its obscene wall-paintings troubled the philosopher. He forced me to sit through three fights until the Myconian cock was put in, for the main, by a bald compatriot of his.

Though a small bird, ye Gods!, what a game one... The tall Tanagran, matched against him, mauled his head to a gory mess; but he kept his stubby crest erect and fought like Jove's eagle. Pretty soon he had the Tanagran guessing, and took his revenge. Up in the air he flew and, with a single backward thrust, too quick to follow, drove a sharp spur clean through his opponent's skull. 'Great Heavens, what timing!' exulted the philosopher. He made as much fuss of that cock as if it had saved all Greece from disaster!

I teased him: 'So you're a convert to the Roman view of sport? Just now you griped because we like watching gladiators commit mutual murder for our amusement.'

He had his answer ready: 'Who needs to train cocks at a gladiatorial school? Who forces them to fight desperately, like your doomed ruffians, by way of avoiding jail or the galleys? Who stands behind them with a whip? Cocks battle to the death of their own free will, because such is their nature -- and in the barnyard as readily as in the pit.'

'Don't underestimate our gladiators,' said I. 'Hermes, for instance, leader of the Blue troop at the Colosseum: he's a born killer. Enjoys every minute of life, except when he's in hospital.'

We pushed our way into the Great Circus through Titus's Arch, and found Opimus, the stout Blue faction-chief, fuming outside his office. 'You're late, Glabrio!' he bellowed. 'Hurry off and check the harness. Hurry! There's only a quarter of an hour left.'

'Checked it before lunch, Sir. Scorpus was with me. Ask him! Zeno's been keeping an eye on it meanwhile.'

'Zeno! What do I care about him?' Opimus stormed. 'How can I tell he's not been got at? Zeno's a Red, and no employee of mine. Don't you know that a million in gold hangs on this race? Check everything again! And hurry, I say!'

I went to the Harness Room, a stable-guard at my side, unlocked the door, and

checked again. The gold-plated chariot, inlaid with lapis lazuli and turquoise, was not my concern -- not even the harness rings. But the traces, yes! I paid them out slowly -- thirty flawless yards of new bull's hide, tough and supple, every inch of it; the splices sewn and oversewn with fox-gut! Then the reins: also brand-new. Harness: sound, though too lavishly decorated. I hate seeing good leather spoiled by plaques and jewels and amulets; however, if the crowd admires that sort of nonsense... Finally, the bronze bits. I'm expected to wash these before each race, for fear someone may have doped them, and to use water from a sealed jar. The stable-guard keeps a beady eye on me.

'All correct, Sir!' I told Opimus.

The grooms wheeled out Scorpus's chariot, fastened the yoke, and threw the harness over the waiting stallions. First the team, a matched pair of Thessalian duns, on either side of the shaft. Then the two bay tracers: this course is always taken counter-sunwise, so the tracers are made fast to rail-rings on the offside. A posse of stable-guards watched sullenly. No one in the Circus trusts anyone.

Now cock your ear for a stable secret! We Blues pamper our stallions on barley mash doctored with raw, chopped horseflesh -- which makes cannibals of them! Remember how King Diomedes, whom Hercules slew, fed his mares on human flesh? I once laughed at that as a poetic fable; now I know that horses are gluttons for meat. The Greens haven't yet discoveredwhy Scorpus, apart from his wonderful driving, gets an extra half-length out of his team in every lap. They've tried most known stimulants on their beasts, even peppered oysters! But raw meat's the answer, either beef or horseflesh.

Scorpus emerges from his dressing-room -- in a sky-blue silk tunic, with long strips of buckskin swathed around his legs, crash-helmet, dagger and whip. His nose and chin jut magisterially. 'All set?' he asks Opimus.

'All set, champion. How do you feel?'

'As I look.'

I prod the philosopher out of his dreams. 'Aren't you betting?'

'I never laid a bet in my life -- not even on the cocks.'

'What? You're still a virgin? Lend me your luck, in Heaven's name: lay a maiden bet for me! I'll give you half the winnings, I swear.'

'It goes against my principles.'

'To the crows with your principles! Take this purse: there should be ninety-six gold pieces in it. Run across to the Greens at once, and put the lot on Scorpus! Lodge your bet at the corner bookmaker's. The Greens somehow fancy Thallus to win; so don't accept less than evens! A maiden bet, ye Gods! I've never once known a maiden bet go astray. If you won't help me, Myconian, I'll beat you till you sneeze!'

Most reluctantly, he took the purse and placed the bet, getting evens all right. I could have done better, probably, because Thallus and Scorpus were almost equally fancied, and five to one was being quoted against the field. Five to one may seem short odds, but think how many eager punters back the field!

There we sat, in marble seats, up front, beside the rest of Scorpus's 'family' -- his trainer, chariot-master, head stable-lad, veterinary, and his green-eyed girl friend Bufotilla. It's 'First come, first get' here with all seats except the Imperial Enclosure and the rows reserved for Senators, Knights, and faction officials like ourselves. That's why thousands of sportsmen queue up, the evening before, to grab good seats when the gates open at daybreak. An hour later they'd find standing-room only. You never know whom you'll be next to; I first met my Syrian wife in a Circus queue...

Thallus's 'family' sat near us, across a gangway. The philosopher's grey cloak puzzled them. 'What business has Scorpus with philosophy?' they wondered. 'Philosophy's something that generals and statesmen take up in retirement. Can Scorpus be retiring?'

We let them wonder. Jokes and insults flew between the rival families.

The philosopher had been enormously impressed by the Colosseum audience; but at the Great Circus he doubted his eyes. 'How many! How many!' he groaned, gazing around him.

'Almost a full house,' I said. 'Above a quarter of a million people. Including the Emperor Domitian himself -- over there in scarlet! With the purple cloak, the golden wreath, and his favourite dwarf.'

I remember the veterinary saying he felt worried. Something he'd heard in the crowd suggested that Blue had been got at.

We took him up on this at once. 'What do you mean "got at"? By whom? Let's have it! Together, we five are responsible for the whole turnout -- except for Scorpus. And that's Bufotilla's job. Got anything against Bufotilla?'

'He better hadn't!' said Bufotilla fiercely.

'No, no, don't talk that way,' protested the veterinary. 'It's just something in the air.

Those Greens look so damnably cocksure.'

Trumpets blew and, amid tempestuous cheers, the four teams entered at a trot and lined up behind the starting-rope. The draw for places had been unfortunate. Scorpus got the outer berth; his Red partner got the inner; and between them Green and White -- so that from inside to outside the colours ran Red, White, Green, Blue.

A beautiful, warm, windless day; the vast, tight-packed Circus; the fine yellow sand; the charioteers poised like gods, leaning back a little, with the reins wound fast about their waists; the horses pawing, snorting, and flaunting coloured favours. Above them, on the long, narrow embankment around which the course ran, towered the immense obelisk brought by Augustus from Egypt; and on either side of it stood marble images of Neptune, Hercules and the Heavenly Twins. Also bronzes of deified Caesars: Augustus, Claudius and Vespasian -- each of whom in his lifetime had generously patronized this Circus.

The Emperor waved his napkin to signal 'Begin!' Another trumpet flourish: the taut rope fell, four whips cracked as one, and the chariots were off, scattering clouds of sand.

Blue's partner, Red, having drawn the best berth, should have gone hell for leather to reach the turning-post first, then rounded it in a wide enough sweep to hold White and Green securely on his flank, while letting his partner, Blue, nip in behind and steal the turn. I've watched that manoeuvre often; but it needs judgement. On this occasion Red got away to a slow start, let White crowd him into the embankment, four lengths before the post, and thus open the inner berth for Thallus. Scorpus, counting on Red to reach the post unchallenged, hadn't let his team go full out; by the time he'd whisked around White at the turn, Green was well ahead. (These two posts, at either end of the embankment, are pillars of gilt bronze; seven huge wooden eggs rest on a frame above them. An Imperial slave takes one egg down as soon as the leading chariot has gone past; and another at each lap, until all seven eggs have disappeared. It saves charioteers and spectators the trouble of keeping count.)

A bad beginning. Thallus kept his lead of three lengths, and completed the first lap with so sharp a turn that I'd swear his wheel shaved the gilt off both sides of the bronze! After him shot Scorpus, now far enough away from White not to be worried by him; though plainly worried by the Green tunic in front. Later we heard that our near team-horse had not been in top condition.

Three very fast laps, no change in position, and towards the end of the fourth lap Scorpus challenged; he ran neck to neck with Green for a while, but failed to make that inner berth at the turn.

Four eggs down! Five eggs down!

Scorpus didn't challenge again; he waited, despite jeers, protests, whistles and encouraging yells. He waited patiently, until Red had lost a whole lap and was hugging the embankment, some lengths in the rear of White, with Green threatening to pass him at the post. 'Ag'ut primä debebas!' Scorpus shouted -- he lay a little behind and beyond Green -- 'Do what you should have done at the first post!'

Red understood; he flogged blood and sweat out of his nags, and this time rounded the turn wide enough to carry Green with him. Scorpus, wheeling almost at right angles, nipped in behind so neatly that his off-tracer's shoulder grazed the Red chariot-tail: he'd beaten Green to the inner berth and won three lengths.

'Success t t et vicet!' the Blues roared -- 'He's gained the lead, and he'll keep it!'

Six eggs down!

Now White, just ahead of Scorpus, though still in the fifth lap, was weaving in and out to hamper him; Green ran a close third. Caught between his two rivals, Scorpus made a bold decision. He forced his tracers to take the last turn wide; whereupon White lost his whip, as well as his head. Mistaking Thallus's team for Scorpus's -- the Green tracers being also bays -- he baulked him at the critical moment. Thallus's wheel struck the post, square, the chariot broke up. In the nick of time he used his dagger to cut himself free from the reins. On rushed the horses, hauling the wreckage after them.

A thunderstorm of cheers and curses. It was Blue's race all right -- Scorpus could have finished at a walk. But as he walloped his triumphant Thessalians at high speed down the stretch, a small, ragged-shirted figure leaped the barrier and ran across the sand, shaking his puny fists. There he stood -- directly in the chariot's path! Expecting him to lose his nerve and dart back, Scorpus neither reined in nor swerved. The intruder sprang at the duns' heads, then fell with a scream under their iron hooves. The tracers, meanwhile, had shied and plunged, slewing the chariot around. Scorpus was thrown, and his helmet struck sickeningly against the marble embankment. He was dragged past the winning-post -- one lap and five lengths ahead of White.

An indescribable hubbub. I heard the chariot-master's gasp of horror. In a nightmare, I heard my own groans, as if heaved from some other man's guts. Scorpus, our great Scorpus! Down at last with a smashed skull and broken neck! The long play had ended. We wept like orphan children.

Bufotilla fainted; the veterinary took charge of her. I was glad she'd fainted. We all thought the world of her. She and Scorpus were to have married in the New Year. One can find no words of comfort on such occasions...

Further hubbub. The judges were signalling a Blue victory. Someone tugged at my sleeve. 'You've won your ninety-six gold pieces!' said the philosopher. 'I renounce my share. It would be disgraceful to profit from a man's death.'

He was being illogical. Dead men don't win races, and the judges' decision clearly showed that Scorpus had been dragged alive past the mark. But why argue?

'What pain! What misery!' I mourned. 'Scorpus is gone! Those murderous Greens must have been counting on Ragged Shirt to save their bets. A suicidal wretch, who'd bet against Scorpus once too often? But I won't believe a man could have scrambled over that barrier without help!'

Just then the Imperial catapults opened up: a volley of metal vouchers scattering in showers among the seats. Some were for money, anything from a single gold piece to a hundred; some had even higher value, gifts of farms, houses, shops -- properties confiscated by the Emperor from banished noblemen, or left him in wills.

'I can stand no more!' the philosopher exclaimed shrilly. 'Tomorrow I shall return to Myconos, if the kind Gods will arrange my passage.' And that the Gods were kind, and very kind, a most curious coincidence proved. A voucher struck the head of some woman sitting behind us and bounced into the philosopher's lap. It entitled him to 'a fifty-ton merchant vessel, the Good Fortune, at present lying off Naples; warranted sound and well found.' How's that for maiden luck? And only five days later an Imperial Edict banished all philosophers from Rome!

Not since the Emperor Titus died have I seen a better attended funeral. The Spanish poet Martial wrote a graceful dirge: 'Let Victory sadly break her palm, etcetera, etcetera...' Also an epitaph: to the effect that an envious Fate having counted Scorpus's victories, decided that at twenty-seven years he'd won enough for a lifetime; then took up her shears and snipped his vital thread. I'm no judge of verse, but I admired the sentiment.

Thallus has succeeded to Scorpus's throne; and we Blues seldom win these days. Besides, racing isn't what it was: the Emperor, for inscrutable reasons of State, has formed two new factions -- Purple and Gold. Our harassed bookmakers never know how to figure the odds.

And I'm sick of the Colosseum as well. Hermes, my favourite gladiator, left hospital too soon and got chopped in his first show. Talk of the Good Life! If things don't improve soon, and if I get any balder from worry, I'm half inclined to sail for Myconos myself and open a quiet little cockpit there.