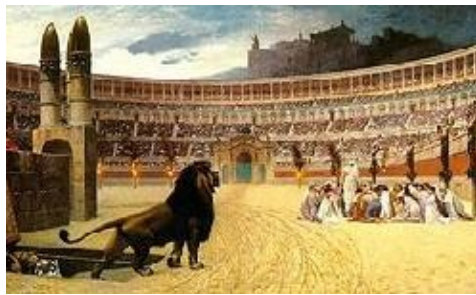


Day at the Colosseum

By : Matthew Bissonette

A man spends the day watching the violence of the Roman games, but what he will witness will change everything.



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Day at the Colosseum

A Day At the Colosseum

by Matthew Bissonnette

The year is 61 AD. The Roman Empire rules much of the Mediterranean, with influence stretching from the deserts of Egypt to the frigid wilderness of Gaul and Britain. The empire is ruled by Nero, who holds on to power with an iron grip. Yet for most of the colonies of empire it is a mostly peaceful and prosperous time later known as the Pax Romana. All throughout Europe Rome has built cities, people who had once lived in mud huts now found themselves in stone homes and living on paved streets bustling with commerce. In almost everyone of these new cities was the Colosseum, the massive arena where the people gathered to watch the Circus Maximus. A bloody and cruel event where slaves and prisoners fought to the death, where the condemned were thrown to wild animals and devoured. Anywhere where Rome's influence was present, so was the Colosseum. Games were hosted many times, and countless lives perished.

Our story begins in the city of Morini in Northern Gaul.

Morini for centuries had been prosperous port overlooking the English Channel when the legions of Julius Ceaser occupied Gaul. It had once been a community of primitive homes where small boats sailed to trade with the other tribes in the region. Then the Romans came and Morini had been changed forever, once this entire corner of Europe was controlled by the legions of the Roman Empire, they set about rebuilding Morini. Gone were the huts and cabins, now homes of marble and Roman concrete lined cobblestone streets. The port now was an extensive series docks where the massive trading barges sailed to Italy, their bellies full of grain for the hungry empire. On the edge of the town was the home of one Tacitus, a large home of polished white marble with extravagant gardens and a courtyard.

Tacitus, a man of thirty seven, was a prosperous Roman who had been raised and educated in the city of Rome itself, but then had gone to become a powerful man in one of her colonies. He owned many farms and countless slaves, he enjoyed a life of extravagance while most people lived lives of toil and hardship. Though Tacitus, even among his slaves, had a reputation as a fair and honest man. He was not known to be cruel.

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It was early in the morning as a sparrow sang melodically just beyond Tacitus's open window. His large bedroom was adorned with expensive chairs and tables as well as a bed with the finest linen. A life sized statue of the goddess Venus overlooked his bed. A chilly wind blew through the window and tussled the fine cloth drapes. Tacitus lay in bed still deeply asleep, dressed in a white toga and covering his head with a pillow. He was a burly man with dark hair and a thick beard covering his chin.

The wooden door to his room slowly opened and his slave Polyclitus entered. Polyclitus, a tall athletic man with copper hair, had once been a soldier yet his country fell to Rome and he had been forced into bondage. Tacitus found him in a slave market on the island of Sicily, and bought him. Tacitus learned quickly that Polyclitus was literate and keen minded, and now he served as Tacitus's most trusted slave. Polyclitus was dressed in a cloth garb, a brown attire which was poorly knit and cheap.

Polyclitus mutely said, "master, you asked me to wake you when sun rose."

Tacitus mumbled something and rolled over onto his stomach.

His slave slightly raised his voice and spoke again. "Tacitus, you ordered me to wake you."

Tacitus sat up in his bed and quipped, "it is a shame that all the gold in the known world will not stay the morning another hour."

Polyclitus then went to the window and pulled back the drapes. He asked, "so are you looking forward to today's games at the Colosseum?"

Tacitus shook his head. "Unlike most who relish in that grim circus of misery these days, I prefer to spend my time on more important things. Besides, this is the second game Emperor Nero has called for in the past month. The more games, the more it means that the people are restless."

Polyclitus looked at his master. "I see that you have become less vocal in your condemnation of Nero. Surely your silence will prolong your life."

Tacitus began to laugh when he heard mention of Nero's name. Tacitus laughed as he said, "Nero is a joke. Coins minted with his face on one side, and his mother's on the other. Of course she is the only one with any ambition, it is said that Nero would rather be a actor then a Emperor."

Polyclitus asked, "so why are you attending the games at the Colosseum today?"

Tacitus nodded. "I must. I must be present because it is required, every noble in Morini must be present. Though I won't watch, I probably just listen to Legatus ramble on about the loss of morality in the Empire all day."

Polyclitus then went to leave the room but spoke as he left. "I will prepare your breakfast."

Tacitus ordered, "also prepare me some wine. If I must listen to noblemen speak all day of issues which bore me, then I shall do so drunk."

Polyclitus left and Tacitus was alone. Tacitus muttered, "this is going to be a most long and thoroughly unsatisfying day."

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In the center of Morini was the Colosseum. The giant circular arena dominated the city as the people crowded into it, within the theater where row upon row of stone ledges where the commoners sat and watched the games from. As noon began, throngs anxious spectators waited in the stands and seemed impatient for the spectacle to begin. To the southern end of the Colosseum was the area where the nobles watched. Several rows of chairs covered by a cloth canopy where the influential and prosperous gathered. Now it was full of men in toga's talking. In the back was Tacitus, looking at the sandals upon his feet as Legatus spoke.

Legatus, a man in his forties who was obese and had balding hair, looked at the rest of the gatherers at the arena. He sneered as he said, "look at that rabble. I hope they appreciate that Rome has decided civilize these barbaric savages."

Tacitus then glanced down at the ground of the dirt floor of the arena. Much of it was slightly red from old blood shedding. Tacitus replied, "one does not need look far to see the civilized nature of Rome. I appreciate that now they spray perfume to cover up the stench of death in the Colosseum."

Legatus then glanced towards Tacitus. "Do you miss the great city of Rome?"

"Not really," Tacitus replied, "things move fast in Rome, here in the northern colonies life passes by much more serenely."

Legatus seemed offended. "You prefer this outpost of Roman civility amongst the illiterate barbarians to the greatest city in the world?"

Tacitus shrugged. "I need not be in the city of Rome to enjoy the privileges of empire."

Legatus then looked back at the commoners. "I must admit sometimes I share your cynicism Tacitus, our Empire has become rife with decadence and sexual immorality lately. These savages, primitive as they might be, have never engaged in such tirades of debauchery and excess like Tiberius and Caligula. The days of the great Augustus are sadly history now."

Tacitus said, "Rome's prosperity relies not on her Emperor but on her legions."

Then a trumpet from somewhere bellowed and the crowd cheered as two men stood in the center of the Colosseum. One man was armed with a short sword and shield, the other wore a helmet and was wielding a trident and net. They circled each other then began to fight.

Legatus smiled as he watched. "Care to wager on who will prevail?"

Tacitus did not look at the fight. "I do not wish to wager my gold on a man's life."

Legatus seemed angry as he watched them fight. "The lives of slaves and criminals are worth nothing."

Tacitus replied, "I guess the value of a man's life is low in your opinion?"

Legatus chuckled. "There are men, and there are beasts. We watch beasts fight here, I value the life of my horse more."

Tacitus, longing to change the subject, said, "I have not been to Rome in ages, how was your last visit Legatus?"

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Legatus pondered the question and answered. "Well, there is much talk of these Christians. Have you heard of them?"

Tacitus shook his head. "All I know is that it is some strange religious cult from the East."

Legatus explained, "strange group, they reject all gods but for theirs. Of course now Nero is having them hunted and punished, but it is said that some of the nobles themselves are secretly Christian."

Tacitus asked, "why are they punished? In Rome any religion is permitted if they pay regular tributes to our Gods, why is it allowed?"

Legatus told him, "because these fanatics will pay tribute to no God but their own. Actually, later today, a woman is being thrown to the animals; I believe she is Christian."

"Know her name?"

Legatus nodded. "Yes, Domitia."

Tacitus gasped and felt ill. Legatus noticed this and asked, "do you know her?"

Tacitus seemed sad as he replied, "we knew each other when we were still young."

Tacitus had fallen in love with the daughter of another noble family, Domitia. But their families were feuding and their love had to go unrequited. Tacitus had not known she was in Morini.

Legatus seemed incensed. "Imagine, a woman of noble birth choosing some cult of fanatics over Rome. She would have been spared if she renounced this god of her's, yet she has chosen to die."

As Tacitus watched one combatant plunge his sword into his opponent's chest, he then mumbled, "Domitia was always stubborn."

At that moment, Tacitus yearned to be far away from the Colosseum but all he could do was watch.

Later in the day the gladiatorial portion of the games ended. As men battled to their death, the crowd bellowed and cheered. Now they waited for the executions of the condemned, criminals would be thrown to the wild animals. Somewhere surely inside the Colosseum were half-starved lions who would soon rip people to pieces.

Tacitus, who was melancholy, looked skyward as Legatus spoke.

"Tacitus, do you still marvel at this? Rome has gathered creatures from the farthest corners of the Earth and brought them here."

Tacitus sighed. "I hope the Moraccian elephant is hard to find these days. Surely we will one day exhaust the supply of many of these creatures."

Legatus seemed ready for the coming spectacle. "It is worth it. Surely this is a theater unique in history."

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A gate at one end of the arena opened and a man, his ragged clothes showing him to be a prisoner, stumbled out. The gate snapped shut behind him and the man looked at the crowd and began to plead and yell.

“ I am a thief! Mercy, I only stole to feed myself!”

Another metal gate facing the terrified man opened. He began screaming when two large male lions burst out from the gate and charged towards the man. The beasts knocked him down and began to eat him.

Legatus watched happily. “ I guess he will not steal again.”

Tacitus glimpsed the gruesome scene then looked away, unable to listen to the man's screams. “ He will never do anything again I think.”

The crowd was cheering, Tacitus was alone in his disgust as everyone else seemed to enjoy themselves. But when Domitia entered the arena, Tacitus's disgust changed to grief and a feeling of helplessness.

Domitia stood in the center of the arena as thousands watched. The two lions walked circles around her and seemed ready to attack. She was a thin, delicate woman who wore an elegant white robe and seemed unafraid. She then fell to her knee's, yet the lions did not attack. Despite the crowds yells, the two beasts walked away from Domitia and then lay upon the ground several yards from her.

Tacitus stood up and loudly said, “ Domitia!”

A gladiator, a large man partially dressed in armor and holding a sword, entered the arena. He walked towards her and raised the sword, she remained on her knee's and did not look at him.

Tacitus gasped. “ No!”

The gladiator looked at the crowd, the sword was trembling in his hand. The entire audience seemed both stunned and upset by the events unfolding before them. Yet the gladiator's job was done for him, for upon dropping his sword Domitia grabbed it and killed herself.

Tacitus, as Legatus jumped to his feet and cheered, fell into his chair and looked at the cheering man. Tacitus hated both this and this profane spectacle, for he had to watch a woman he once loved die. More than that, but it was done for the enjoyment of these masses.

He got to his feet and walked away.

Night fell over Tacitus's home. He sat in his dining hall, sitting alone at one end of a long table upon which was a sumptuous feast which he had not touched. He just sat in his chair and sadly looked towards a window, occasionally drinking deeply from a jug of wine.

Polyclitus entered. “ Master, you have not eaten.”

Tacitus got up. “ A fine meal, but alas I have no appetite. You and the other servants can have it. I will retire to my chambers, I am not to be disturbed for the next few days.”

Polyclitus asked, “ what is wrong?”

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Tacitus did not lie. â I hate everything Roman right now. I am not to be disturbed.â

Polyclitus watched him leave.

Tacitus went on to live for almost thirty more years. He continued to prosper but also had become a fierce critic of the Circus Maximus. For the rest of his days, he would condemn the Colosseum to anyone who would listen. He would never forget the day though which led to his disillusionment with Rome and the bloody arena which it had spread across the known world.

The End

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