

A Death in the Stadium

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My friend approached me with these words: "How are you?" Before I could reply, he exclaimed: "I am on my way to attend the public death of Principus, the great actor, at the stadium. Come, we will go together, for it is sure to be an interesting spectacle." And he added: "He was the greatest actor in the world."

I turned and went with him, for I had heard of this affair. Indeed, it seemed as if the whole city were hurrying in that direction; nevertheless, we managed to squeeze ourselves into the subway. As we jogged slowly up-town, with many stops and waits, my friend told me a little more about Principus, whose death was **convulsing** the entire nation. "He was a great lover," said my friend; "he always played the part of the hero. Now he is dying; with a showman's instinct, and also in order to provide for his family, he has determined to die in public, comforted during his last moments by the groans of his admirers."

It was a peaceful evening; the roof-tops of the city towered upward into the sky stained by the sunset and lighted by a few pale stars. The great actor lay dying in a field ordinarily given over to prizefights or baseball, and rented for this occasion; the seats which rose in concrete **tiers** all about him were entirely filled, while crowds of men and women at the gates gazed with **gloomy** interest at the ushers, who gazed back at them with a **lofty** expression.

After some delay, due to the crowds, we bought our tickets, and also two small straw mats to sit on, and ascended to our seats. Next to us sat an Englishman, an acquaintance of my friend's. "How do you do?" he said; "this is extraordinary."

The death-bed was in the centre of the field, under a bright light, and surrounded by doctors, nurses, reporters, and newspaper photographers. We were a little late; when we arrived, the mayor had already been there: assisted by the doctors, he had given Principus the first injection of strychnine, after which he had **retired** amid applause. Thereafter the dying man had received visits from the Fire Commissioner, a committee from the Actor's Equity, three State senators, and a Mr. Cohen, of HoU3rwood. The President of the United States had been invited, and had sent a small cake.

The audience gazed at the dying man with anxious enthusiasm. Now and then a sigh, like a gust of wind on a hill, **rippled** up and down the aisles where venders of lemonade, peanuts, sausages, and pennants moved about, calling their **wares**. On the **pennants**, which were arranged with black mourning borders, were printed the names of the most important plays in which Principus had taken the part of hero. Spectators bought their favorites, and waved them at the dying man.

"Ah!" they cried. "Oh!"

"Principus."

"Don't let them kill you."

And they shouted advice, **interspersed** with **jeers** at the doctors.

Suddenly, in the row in front of us, a man stood up, and turned around to glare at me. "I am a friend of his," he exclaimed with energy. "I am also a member of the Rotary Club of Syracuse, N.Y. Who are you pushing? "

"Nobody," I answered firmly; and after some hesitation he sat down again.

The Englishman gave me a gloomy glance. "The trouble with America," he said, "is that you do nothing original. This reminds me of the ancient festivals at Rome under Diocletian. You are always borrowing something. Why don't you strike out for yourself?"

He had hardly finished speaking when a woman rose in her seat in a far corner of the stadium, gave a scream and fell forward on her face. At once there was a rush for her, she was lifted up, examined by some police matrons, photographed, and her name and address taken; after which she was carried out, with an expression of satisfaction on her face. A moment later, in another part of the great circle, another woman repeated this performance. She also was photographed and carried out, looking very pleased. As a result of this incident, all over the stadium women rose screaming, and fell in various attitudes, some with their noses pointed to the sky, others on their stomachs. These, however, were left where they fell, and presently got up again and sat down, waving their flags.

"You Americans," said the Briton, "you are like everybody else. Why should I watch this sort of thing, which was done very much better by the Druids in England centuries ago?" And leaning forward with a **strained** expression, he shouted: "Look here, are you going to die, or not?"

The sick actor lay gazing at his public with weary eyes. In the bright light above his bed, he looked pale and thin; I wondered how it felt to die. The doctors moved anxiously about the bedside, **conferring** with the nurses and with each other; but they did not seem to agree with each other, or to notice the cheers with which the audience greeted each **bulletin**, regardless of its content.

An hour later extras were for sale in the aisles. "Woman Swoons at Principus' Death," shouted the newsboys. "All about the big death." These editions already had photographs of the first woman to faint, whose pet name was Pinky. The Englishman bought one.

"We also," he observed, "have women in England. "

"They have also been known to faint."

The man in front of us looked back at him angrily. "This is the largest death," he said, "There has ever been."

"It is a triumph," agreed my friend.

All at once a hush fell upon the stadium. All eyes were directed at the doctors; **huddled** around the bedside of the dying actor, they made it plain by their expressions that a crisis had arrived. The audience held its breath; the lemonade venders were silent. At last the head doctor stepped back, and held up his hand. Pale, but with a noble look, he exclaimed: "He will live."

A few cheers broke out, but they were immediately drowned in a storm of hisses. Men and women rose to their feet; flags were waved, peanuts, sausages, and pop bottles were **hurled** at the doctors and at the dying man. "We want to see him die," shouted the crowds who had bought tickets for this event. Led by the two women who had been photographed, they broke into jeers and catcalls.

"Cowards," they shrieked; "idiots."

"Let us have some new doctors."

The dying man raised himself **wearily**; he seemed to be searching for the sky, already dark with night. His eyes **scanned** with amazement the stormy sea of faces around him and above him. The desire of so many people for his death descended upon him in an overwhelming **compulsion** fell upon him in an irresistible wave; with a sigh he lay down and died. At once flash-lights went off, a procession was formed with Pinky at the head, and pieces of the bed were broken off for souvenirs. Several men threw their hats into the air; and an old woman who happened to fall down in the excitement, was **trampled upon**.

"We also die in England," said the Englishman bitterly. "Can't you be original?"

And he went home, first stopping to buy a small piece of cotton cloth from the death-sheet of Principus, the world's greatest lover. 