

# Caesar Dies eBook

## Caesar Dies by Talbot Mundy

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# Page 1

## I. IN THE REIGN OF THE EMPEROR COMMODUS

Golden Antioch lay like a jewel at a mountain's throat. Wide, intersecting streets, each nearly four miles long, granite-paved, and marble-colonnaded, swarmed with fashionable loiterers. The gay Antiochenes, whom nothing except frequent earthquakes interrupted from pursuit of pleasure, were taking the air in chariots, in litters, and on foot; their linen clothes were as riotously picturesque as was the fruit displayed in open shop-fronts under the colonnades, or as the blossom on the trees in public gardens, which made of the city, as seen from the height of the citadel, a mosaic of green and white.

The crowd on the main thoroughfares was aristocratic; opulence was accented by groups of slaves in close attendance on their owners; but the aristocracy was sharply differentiated. The Romans, frequently less wealthy (because those who had made money went to Rome to spend it)—frequently less educated and, in general, not less dissolute—despised the Antiochenes, although the Romans loved Antioch. The cosmopolitan Antiochenes returned the compliment, regarding Romans as mere duffers in depravity, philistines in art, but capable in war and government, and consequently to be feared, if not respected. So there was not much mingling of the groups, whose slaves took example from their masters, affecting in public a scorn that they did not feel but were careful to assert. The Romans were intensely dignified and wore the toga, pallium and tunic; the Antiochenes affected to think dignity was stupid and its trappings (forbidden to them) hideous; so they carried the contrary pose to extremes. Patterning herself on Alexandria, the city had become to all intents and purposes the eastern capital of Roman empire. North, south, east and west, the trade-routes intersected, entering the city through the ornate gates in crenelated limestone walls. From miles away the approaching caravans were overlooked by legionaries brought from Gaul and Britain, quartered in the capitol on Mount Silpius at the city's southern limit. The riches of the East, and of Egypt, flowed through, leaving their deposit as a river drops its silt; were ever-increasing. One quarter, walled off, hummed with foreign traders from as far away as India, who lodged at the travelers' inns or haunted the temples, the wine-shops and the lupanars. In that quarter, too, there were barracks, with compounds and open-fronted booths, where slaves were exposed for sale; and there, also, were the caravanserais within whose walls the kneeling camels grumbled and the blossomy spring air grew fetid with the reek of dung. There was a market-place for elephants and other oriental beasts.

Each of Antioch's four divisions had its own wall, pierced by arched gates. Those were necessary. No more turbulent and fickle population lived in the known world—not even in Alexandria. Whenever an earthquake shook down blocks of buildings—and that happened nearly as frequently as the hysterical racial riots—the Romans rebuilt with a view to making communications easier from the citadel, where the great temple of Jupiter Capitolinus frowned over the gridironed streets.



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Roman officials and the wealthier Macedonian Antiochenes lived on an island, formed by a curve of the River Orontes at the northern end within the city wall. The never-neglected problem of administration was to keep a clear route along which troops could move from citadel to island when the rioting began.

On the island was the palace, glittering with gilt and marble, gay with colored awnings, where kings had lived magnificently until Romans saved the city from them, substituting a proconsular paternal kind of tyranny originating in the Roman patria potestas. There was not much sentiment about it. Rome became the foster-parent, the possessor of authority. There was duty, principally exacted from the governed in the form of taxes and obedience; and there were privileges, mostly reserved for the rulers and their parasites, who were much more numerous than anybody liked. Competition made the parasites as discontented as their prey.

But there were definite advantages of Roman rule, which no Antiochene denied, although their comic actors and the slaves who sang at private entertainments mocked the Romans and invented accusations of injustice and extortion that were even more outrageous than the truth. Not since the days when Antioch inherited the luxury and vices of the Greeks and Syrians, had pleasure been so organized or its commercial pursuit so profitable. Taxes were collected rigorously. The demands of Rome, increased by the extravagance of Commodus, were merciless. But trade was good. Obedience and flattery were well rewarded. Citizens who yielded to extortion and refrained from criticism within hearing of informers lived in reasonable expectation of surviving the coming night.

But the informers were ubiquitous and unknown, which was another reason why the Romans and Antiochenes refrained from mixing socially more than could be helped. A secret charge of treason, based on nothing more than an informer's malice, might set even a Roman citizen outside the pale of ordinary law and make him liable to torture. If convicted, death and confiscation followed. Since the deification of the emperors it had become treason even to use a coarse expression near their images or statues; images were on the coins; statues were in the streets. Commodus, to whom all confiscated property accrued, was in ever-increasing need of funds to defray the titanic expense of the games that he lavished on Rome and the "presents" with which he studiously nursed the army's loyalty. So it was wise to be taciturn; expedient to choose one's friends deliberately; not far removed from madness to be seen in company with those whose antecedents might suggest the possibility of a political intrigue. But it was also unwise to woo solitude; a solitary man might perish by the rack and sword for lack of witnesses, if charged with some serious offense.

So there were comradeships more loyal the more that treachery stalked abroad. Because seriousness drew attention from the spies, the deepest thoughts were masked beneath an air of levity, and merrymaking hid such counsels as might come within the vaguely defined boundaries of treason.

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Sextus, son of Maximus, rode not alone. Norbanus rode beside him, and behind them Scylax on the famous Arab mare that Sextus had won from Artaxes the Persian in a wager on the recent chariot races. Scylax was a slave but no less, for that reason, Sextus' friend.

Norbanus rode a skewbald Cappadocian that kicked out sidewise at pedestrians; so there was opportunity for private conversation, even on the road to Daphne of an afternoon in spring, when nearly all of fashionable Antioch was beginning to flow in that direction. Horses, litters and chariots, followed by crowds of slaves on foot with the provisions for moonlight banquets, poured toward the northern gate, some overtaking and passing the three but riding wide of the skewbald Cappadocian stallion's heels.

"If Pertinax should really come," said Sextus.

"He will have a girl with him," Norbanus interrupted. He had an annoying way of finishing the sentences that other folk began.

"True. When he is not campaigning Pertinax finds a woman irresistible."

"And naturally, also, none resists a general in the field!" Norbanus added. "So our handsome Pertinax performs his vows to Aphrodite with a constancy that the goddess rewards by forever putting lovely women in his way! Whereas Stoics like you, Sextus, and unfortunates like me, who don't know how to amuse a woman, are made notorious by one least lapse from our austerity. The handsome, dissolute ones have all the luck. The roisterers at Daphne will invent such scandalous tales of us tonight as will pursue us for a lustrum, and yet there isn't a chance in a thousand that we shall even enjoy ourselves!"

"Yes. I wish now we had chosen any other meeting place than Daphne," Sextus answered gloomily. "What odds? Had we gone into the desert Pertinax would have brought his own last desperate adorer, and a couple more to bore us while he makes himself ridiculous. Strange—that a man so firm in war and wise in government should lose his head the moment a woman smiles at him."

"He doesn't lose his head—much," Sextus answered. "But his father was a firewood seller in a village in Liguria. That is why he so loves money and the latest fashions. Poverty and rags—austerity inflicted on him in his youth—great Jupiter! If you and I had risen from the charcoal-burning to be consul twice and a grammarian and the friend of Marcus Aurelius; if you and I were as handsome as he is, and had experienced a triumph after restoring discipline in Britain and conducting two or three successful wars; and if either of us had such a wife as Flavia Titiana, I believe we could besmirch ourselves more constantly than Pertinax does! It is not that he delights in women so much as that he thinks debauch is aristocratic. Flavia Titiana is unfaithful to him. She is also a patrician and unusually clever. He has never understood her, but she is witty, so



he thinks her wonderful and tries to imitate her immorality. But the only woman who really sways him is the proudish Cornificia, who is almost as incapable of treachery as Pertinax himself. He is the best governor the City of Rome has had in our generation. Can you imagine what Rome would be like without him? Call to mind what it was like when Fuscianus was the governor!"



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“These are strange times, Sextus!”

“Aye! And it is a strange beast we have for emperor!”

“Be careful!”

Sextus glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Scylax followed closely and prevented any one from overhearing. There was an endless procession now, before and behind, all bound for Daphne. As the riders passed under the city gate, where the golden cherubim that Titus took from the Jews’ temple in Jerusalem gleamed in the westering sun, Sextus noticed a slave of the municipium who wrote down the names of individuals who came and went.

“There are new proscriptions brewing,” he remarked. “Some friends of ours will not see sunrise. Well—I am in a mood to talk and I will not be silenced.”

“Better laugh then!” Norbanus advised. “The deadliest crime nowadays is to have the appearance of being serious. None suspects a drunken or a gay man.”

Sextus, however, was at no pains to appear gay. He inherited the moribund traditions that the older Cato had typified some centuries ago. His young face had the sober, chiseled earnestness that had been typically Roman in the sterner days of the Republic. He had blue-gray eyes that challenged destiny, and curly brown hair, that suggested flames as the westering sun brought out its redness. Such mirth as haunted his rebellious lips was rather cynical than genial. There was no weakness visible. He had a pugnacious neck and shoulders.

“I am the son of my father Maximus,” he said, “and of my grandsire Sextus, and of his father Maximus, and of my great-great-grandsire Sextus. It offends my dignity that men should call a hog like Commodus a god. I will not. I despise Rome for submission to him.”

“Yet what else is there in the world except to be a Roman citizen?” Norbanus asked.

“As for being, there is nothing else,” said Sextus. “I would like to speak of doing. It is what I do that answers what I am.”

“Then let it answer now!” Norbanus laughed. He pointed to a little shrine beside the road, beneath a group of trees, where once the image of a local deity had smiled its blessing on the passer-by. The bust of Commodus, as insolent as the brass of which the artist-slaves had cast it, had replaced the old benign divinity. There was an attendant near by, costumed as a priest, whose duty was to see that travelers by that road did their homage to the image of the human god who ruled the Roman world. He struck a gong. He gave fair warning of the deference required. There was a little guard-house, fifty paces distant, just around the corner of the clump of trees, where the

police were ready to execute summary justice, and floggings were inflicted on offenders who could not claim citizenship or who had no coin with which to buy the alternative reprimand. Roman citizens were placed under arrest, to be submitted to all manner of indignities and to think themselves fortunate if they should escape with a heavy fine from a judge who had bought his office from an emperor's favorite.

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Most of the riders ahead dismounted and walked past the image, saluting it with right hands raised. Many of them tossed coins to the priest's attendant slave. Sextus remained in the saddle, his brow clouded with an angry scowl. He drew rein, making no obeisance, but sent Scylax to present an offering of money to the priest, then rode on.

"Your dignity appears to me expensive!" Norbanus remarked, grinning. "Gold?"

"He may have my gold, if I may keep my self-respect!"

"Incorrigible stoic! He will take that also before long!"

"I think not. Commodus has lost his own and destroyed Rome's, but mine not yet. I wish, though, that my father were in Antioch. He, too, is no cringer to images of beasts in purple. I wrote to my father recently and warned him to leave Rome before Commodus's spies could invent an excuse for confiscating our estates. I said, an absent man attracts less notice, and our estates are well worth plundering. I also hinted that Commodus can hardly live forever, and reminded him that tides flow in and out—by which I meant him to understand that the next emperor may be another such as Aurelius, who will persecute the Christians but let honest men live in peace, instead of favoring the Christians and ridding Rome of honest men."

Norbanus made a gesture with his right hand that sent the Cappadocian cavorting to the road's edge, scattering a little crowd that was trying to pass.

"Why be jealous of the Christians?" he laughed. "Isn't it their turn for a respite? Think of what Nero did to them; and Marcus Aurelius did little less. They will catch it again when Commodus turns on his mistress Marcia; he will harry them all the more when that day comes— as it is sure to. Marcia is a Christian; when he tires of her he will use her Christianity for the excuse and throw the Christians to the lions by the thousand in order to justify himself for murdering the only decent woman of his acquaintance. Sic semper tyrannus. Say what you will about Marcia, she has done her best to keep Commodus from making a public exhibition of himself."

"With what result? He boasts he has killed no less than twelve hundred poor devils with his own hand in the arena. True, he takes the pseudonym of Paulus when he kills lions with his javelin and drives a chariot in the races like a vulgar slave. But everybody knows, and he picks slaves for his ministers—consider that vile beast Cleander, whom even the rabble refused to endure another day. I don't see that Marcia's influence amounts to much."

"But Cleander was executed finally. You are in a glum mood, Sextus. What has happened to upset you?"



“It is the nothing that has happened. There has come no answer to that letter I wrote to my father in Rome. Commodus’s informers may have intercepted it.”

Norbanus whistled softly. The skewbald Cappadocian mistook that for a signal to exert himself and for a minute there were ructions while his master reined him in.



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“When did you write?” he demanded, when he had the horse under control again.

“A month ago.”

Norbanus lapsed into a moody silence, critically staring at his friend when he was sure the other was not looking. Sextus had always puzzled him by running risks that other men (himself, for instance) steadfastly avoided, and avoiding risks that other men thought insignificant. To write a letter critical of Commodus was almost tantamount to suicide, since every Roman port and every rest-house on the roads that led to Rome had become infested with informers who were paid on a percentage basis.

“Are you weary of life?” he asked after a while.

“I am weary of Commodus—weary of tyranny—weary of lies and hypocrisy— weary of wondering what is to happen to Rome that submits to such bestial government—weary of shame and of the insolence of bribe-fat magistrates—”

“Weary of your friends?” Norbanus asked. “Don’t you realize that if your letter fell into the hands of spies, not only will you be proscribed and your father executed, but whoever is known to have been intimate with you or with your father will be in almost equal danger? You should have gone to Rome in person to consult your father.”

“He ordered me to stay here to protect his interests. We are rich, Norbanus. We have much property in Antioch and many tenants to oversee. I am not one of these modern irreligious wastrels; I obey my father—”

“And betray him in an idiotic letter!”

“Very well! Desert me while there is time!” said Sextus angrily.

“Don’t be a fool! You are not the only proud man in the empire, Sextus. I don’t desert my friend for such a coward’s reason as that he acted thoughtlessly. But I will tell you what I think, whether or not that pleases you, if only because I am your true friend. You are a rash, impatient lover of the days gone by, possessed of genius that you betray by your arrogant hastiness. So now you know what I think, and what all your other friends think. We admire—we love our Sextus, son of Maximus. And we confess to ourselves that our lives are in danger because of that same Sextus, son of Maximus, whom we prefer above our safety. After this, if you continue to deceive yourself, none can blame me for it!”

Sextus smiled and waved a hand to him. It was no new revelation. He understood the attitude of all his friends far better than he did his own strange impulses that took possession of him as a rule when circumstances least provided an excuse.



“My theory of loyalty to friendship,” he remarked, “is that a man should dare to do what he perceives is right, and thus should prove himself entitled to respect.”

“And your friends are, in consequence, to enjoy the privilege of attending your crucifixion one of these days!” said Norbanus.

“Nonsense. Only slaves and highwaymen are crucified.”



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“They call any one a highwayman who is a fugitive from what our ‘Roman Hercules’ calls justice,” Norbanus answered with a gesture of irritation. His own trick of finishing people’s sentences did not annoy Sextus nearly as much as Sextus’s trick of pounding on inaccuracies irritated him. He pressed his horse into a canter and for a while they rode beside the stream called the “Donkey-drowner” without further conversation, each man striving to subdue the ill-temper that was on the verge of outbreak.

Romans of the old school valued inner calm as highly as they did the outer semblances of dignity; even the more modern Romans imitated that distinctive attitude, pretending to Augustan calmness that had actually ceased to be a part of public life. But with Sextus and Norbanus the inner struggle to be self-controlled was genuine; they bridled irritation in the same way that they forced their horses to obey them— captains of their own souls, as it were, and scornful of changefulness.

Sextus, being the only son of a great landowner, and raised in the traditions of a secluded valley fifty leagues away from Rome, was almost half a priest by privilege of ancestry. He had been educated in the local priestly college, had himself performed the daily sacrifices that tradition imposed on the heads of families and, in his father’s frequent absence, had attended to all the details and responsibilities of managing a large estate. The gods of wood and stream and dale were very real to him. The daily offering, from each meal, to the manes of his ancestors, whose images in wax and wood and marble were preserved in the little chapel attached to the old brick homestead, had inspired in him a feeling that the past was forever present and a man’s thoughts were as important as his deeds.

Norbanus, on the other hand, a younger son of a man less amply dowered with wealth and traditional authority, had other reasons for adopting, rather than inheriting, an attitude toward life not dissimilar from that of Sextus. Gods of wood and stream to him meant very little, and he had not family estates to hold him to the ancient views. To him the future was more real than the past, which he regarded as a state of ignorance from which the world was tediously struggling. But inherently he loved life’s decencies, although he mocked their sentimental imitations; and he followed Sextus—squandered hours with him, neglecting his own interests (which after all were nothing too important and were well enough looked after by a Syracusan slave), simply because Sextus was a manly sort of fellow whose friendship stirred in him emotions that he felt were satisfying. He was a born follower. His ugly face and rather mirth-provoking blue eyes, the loose, beautifully balanced seat on horseback and the cavalry-like carriage of his shoulders, served their notice to the world at large that he would stick to friends of his own choosing and for purely personal reasons, in spite of, and in the teeth of anything.



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“As I said,” remarked Sextus, “if Pertinax comes—”

“He will show us how foolish a soldier can be in the arms of a woman,” Norbanus remarked, laughing again, glad the long silence was broken.

“Orcus (the messenger of Dis, who carried dead souls to the underworld. The masked slaves who dragged dead gladiators out of the arena were disguised to represent Orcus) take his women! What I was going to say was, we shall learn from him the real news from Rome.”

“All the names of the popular dancers!”

“And if Galen is there we shall learn—”

“About Commodus’ health. That is more to the point. Now if we could get into Galen’s chest of medicines and substitute—”

“Galen is an honest doctor,” Sextus interrupted. “If Galen is there we will find out what the philosophers are discussing in Rome when spies aren’t listening. Pertinax dresses himself like a strutting peacock and pretends that women and money are his only interests, but what the wise ones said yesterday, Pertinax does today; and what they say today, he will do tomorrow. He can look more like a popinjay and act more like a man than any one in Rome.”

“Who cares how they behave in Rome? The city has gone mad,” Norbanus answered. “Nowadays the best a man can do is to preserve his own goods and his own health. Ride to a conference do we? Well, nothing but words will come of it, and words are dangerous. I like my danger tangible and in the open where it can be faced. Three times last week I was approached by Glyco—you remember him?—that son of Cocles and the Jewess—asking me to join a secret mystery of which he claims to be the unextinguishable lamp. But there are too many mysteries and not enough plain dealing. The only mystery about Glyco is how he avoids indictment for conspiracy—what with his long nose and sly eyes, and his way of hinting that he knows enough to turn the world upside down. If Pertinax talks mystery I will class him with the other foxes who slink into holes when the agenda look like becoming acta. Show me only a raised standard in an open field and I will take my chance beside it. But I sicken of all this talk of what we might do if only somebody had the courage to stick a dagger into Commodus.”

“The men who could persuade themselves to do that, are persuaded that a worse brute might succeed him,” Sextus answered. “It is no use killing a Commodus to find a Nero in his shoes. If the successor were in sight—and visibly a man not a monster—there are plenty of men brave enough to give the dagger-thrust. But the praetorian guard, that makes and unmakes emperors, has been tasting the sweets of tyranny ever since



Marcus Aurelius died. They despise their 'Roman Hercules' (Commodus' favorite name for himself)—who doesn't? But they grow fat and enjoy themselves under his tyranny, so they would never consent to leaving him unguarded, as happened to Nero, for instance, or to replacing him with any one of the caliber of Aurelius, if such a man could be found."

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“Well, then, what do we go to talk about?” Norbanus asked.

“We go for information.”

“Dea dia! (the most mysterious of all the Roman deities) We inform ourselves that Rome has been renamed 'The City of Commodus'—that offices are bought and sold—that there were forty consuls in a year, each of whom paid for the office in turn—that no man's life is safe— that it is wiser to take a cold in the head to Galen than to kiss a mule's nose (it was a common superstition that a cold in the head could be cured by kissing a mule's nose)—and then what? I begin to think that Pertinax is wiser to amuse himself with women after all!”

Sextus edged his horse a little closer to the skewbald and for more than a minute appeared to be studying Norbanus' face, the other grinning at him and making the stallion prance.

“Are you never serious?” asked Sextus.

“Always and forever, melancholy friend of mine! I seriously dread the consequences of that letter that you wrote to Rome! Unlike you, I have not much more than life to lose, but I value it all the more for being less encumbered. Like Apollonius, I pray for few possessions and no needs! But what I have, I treasure; I propose to live long and make use of life!”

“And I!” retorted Sextus.

With a gesture of disgust, he turned to stare behind him at the crowd on its way to Daphne, making such a business of pleasure as reduced the pleasure to a toil of Sisyphus (who had to roll a heavy stone perpetually up a steep hill in the underworld. Before he reached the top the stone always rolled down again).

“I have more than gold,” said Sextus, “which it seems to me that any crooked-minded fool may have. I have a spirit in me and a taste for philosophies; I have a feeling that a man's life is a gift entrusted to him by the gods—for use—to be preserved—”

“By writing foolish letters, doubtless!” said Norbanus. “Come along, let us gallop. I am weary of the backs of all these roisterers.”

And so they rode to Daphne full pelt, greatly to the anger of the too well dressed Antiochenes, who cursed them for the mud they splashed from wayside pools and for the dung and dust they kicked up into plucked and penciled faces.



## II. A CONFERENCE AT DAPHNE

It was not yet dusk. The sun shone on the bronze roof of the temple of Apollo, making such a contrast to, and harmony with, marble and the green of giant cypresses as only music can suggest. The dying breeze stirred hardly a ripple on the winding ponds, so marble columns, trees and statuary were reflected amid shadows of the swans in water tinted by the colors of the sinking sun. There was a murmur of wind in the tops of the trees and a stirring of linen-clad girls near the temple entrance—voices droning from the near-by booths behind the shrubbery— one flute, like the plaint of Orpheus summoning Eurydice—a blossom-scented air and an enfolding mystery of silence.

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Pertinax, the governor of Rome, had merely hinted at Olympian desire, whereat some rich Antiochenes, long privileged, had been ejected with scant ceremony from a small marble pavilion on an islet, formed by a branch of the River Ladon that had been guided twenty years ago by Hadrian's engineers in curves of exquisitely studied beauty. From between Corinthian columns was a view of nearly all the temple precincts and of the lawns where revelers would presently forget restraint. The first night of the Daphne season usually was the wildest night of all the year, but they began demurely, and for the present there was the restraint of expectation.

Because there was yet snow on mountain-tops and the balmy air would carry a suggestion of a chill at sunset, there were cunningly wrought charcoal braziers set near the gilded couches, grouped around a semicircular low table so as to give each guest an unobstructed view from the pavilion. Pertinax—neither guest nor host, but a god, as it were, who had arrived and permitted the city of Antioch to ennoble itself by paying his expenses—stretched his long length on the middle couch, with Galen the physician on his right hand, Sextus on his left. Beyond Galen lay Tarquinius Divius and Sulpicius Glabrio, friends of Pertinax; and on Sextus' left was Norbanus, and beyond him Marcus Fabius a young tribune on Pertinax' staff. There was only one couch unoccupied.

Galen was an older man than Pertinax, who was already graying at the temples. Galen had the wrinkled, smiling, shrewd face of an old philosopher who understood the trick of making himself socially prominent in order to pursue his calling unimpeded by the bitter jealousies of rivals. He understood all about charlatanry, mocked it in all its disguises and knew how to defeat it with sarcastic wit. He wore none of the distinguishing insignia that practising physicians usually favored; the studied plainness of his attire was a notable contrast to the costly magnificence of Pertinax, whose double-purple-bordered and fringed toga, beautifully woven linen and jeweled ornaments seemed chosen to combine suggestions of the many public offices he had succeeded to.

He was a tall, lean, handsome veteran with naturally curly fair hair and a beard that, had it been dark, would have made him look like an Assyrian. There was a world of humor in his eyes, and an expression on his weathered face of wonder at the ways of men—an almost comical confession of his own inferiority of birth, combined with matter-of-fact ability to do whatever called for strength, endurance and mere ordinary common sense.

"You are almost ashamed of your own good fortune," Galen told him. "You wear all that jewelry, and swagger like the youngest tribune, to conceal your diffidence. Being honest, you are naturally frugal; but you are ashamed of your own honesty, so you imitate the court's extravagance and made up for it with little meannesses that comfort your sense of extremes. The truth is, Pertinax, you are a man with a boy's enthusiasms, a boy with a man's experience."



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“You ought to know,” said Pertinax. “You tutored Commodus. Whoever could take a murderer at the age of twelve and keep him from breaking the heart of a Marcus Aurelius knows more about men and boys than I do.”

“Ah, but I failed,” said Galen. “The young Commodus was like a nibbling fish; you thought you had him, but he always took the bait and left the hook. The wisdom I fed to him fattened his wickedness. If I had known then what I have learned from teaching Commodus and others, not even Marcus Aurelius could have persuaded me to undertake the task—medical problem though it was, and promotion though it was, and answer though it was to all the doctors who denounced me as a charlatan. I bought my fashionable practise at the cost of knowing it was I who taught young Commodus the technique of wickedness by revealing to him all its sinuosities and how, and why, it floods a man’s mind.”

“He was a beast in any case,” said Pertinax.

“Yes, but a baffled, blind beast. I removed the bandage from his eyes.”

“He would have pulled it off himself.”

“I did it. I turned a mere golden-haired savage into a criminal who knows what he is doing.”

“Well, drink and forget it!” said Pertinax. “I, too, have done things that are best forgotten. We attain success by learning from defeat, and we forget defeat in triumph. I know of no triumph that did not blot out scores of worse things than defeat. When I was in Britain I subdued rebellion and restored the discipline of mutinying legions. How? I am not such a fool as to tell you all that happened! When I was in Africa men called me a great proconsul. So I was. They would welcome me back there, if all I hear about the present man is true. But do you suppose I did not fail in certain instances? They praise me for the aqueducts I built, and for the peace I left along the border. But I also left dry bones, and sons of dead men who will teach their grandsons how to hate the name of Rome! I sent a hundred thousand slaves from Africa. Sometimes, when I have dined unwisely and there is no Galen near to freshen up my belly juices, I have nightmares, in which men and women cry to me for water that I took from them to pour into the cities. I have learned this, Galen: Do one thing wisely and you will commit ten follies. You are lucky if you have but ten failures to detract from one success—as lucky as a man who has but ten mistresses to interfere with his enjoyment of his wife!”

He spoke of mistresses because the girls were coming down the temple steps to take part in the sunset ceremony. The torches they carried were unlighted yet; their figures, draped in linen, looked almost super-humanly lovely in the deepening twilight, and as they laid their garlands on the marble altar near the temple steps and grouped themselves again on either side of it their movements suggested a phantasmagoria

fading away into infinite distance, as if all the universe were filled with women without age or blemish. There began to be a scent of incense in the air.

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“We only imitate this kind of thing in Rome,” said Pertinax. “A larger scale, a coarser effect. What I find thrilling is the sensation they contrive here of unseen mysteries. Whereas—”

“There won’t be any mystery left presently! They’ll strip your last veil from imagination!” Sextus interrupted, laughing. “Men say Hadrian tried to chasten this place, but he only made them realize the artistic value of an appearance of chastity, that can be thrown off. Hark! The evening hymn.”

The torches suddenly were lighted by attendant slaves. The stirring, shaken sistra wrought a miracle of sound that set the nerves all tingling as the high priest, followed by his boys with swinging censers and the members of the priestly college, four by four, came chanting down the temple steps. To an accompanying pleading, sobbing note of flutes the high priest laid an offering of fruit, milk, wine and honey in the midst of the heaped-up garlands (for Apollo was the god of all fertility as well as of healing and war and flocks and oracles). Then came the grand Homeric hymn to Glorious Apollo, men’s and boys’ and women’s voices blending in a surging paean like an ocean’s music.

The last notes died away in distant echoes. There was silence for a hundred breaths; then music of flute and lyre and sistra as the priests retreated up the temple steps followed by fanfare on a dozen trumpets as the door swung to behind the priests. Instantly, then, shouts of laughter—torchlight scattering the shadows amid gloom—green cypresses—fire—color splurging on the bosom of the water—babel of hundreds of voices as the gay Antiochenes swarmed out from behind the trees—and a cheer, as the girls by the altar threw their garments off and scampered naked along the river-bank toward a bridge that joined the temple island to the sloping lawns, where the crowd ran to await them.

“Apollo having healed the world of sin, we now do what we like!” said Sextus. “Pertinax, I pledge you continence for this one night! Good Galen, may Apollo’s wisdom ooze from you like sweat; for all our sakes, be you the arbiter of what we drink, lest drunkenness deprive us of our reason! Comites, let us eat like warriors—one course, and then discussion of tomorrow’s plan.”

“Your military service should have taught you more respect for your seniors, as well as how to eat and drink temperately,” said Pertinax. “Will you teach your grandmother to suck eggs? I was the first grammarian in Rome before you were born and a tribune before you felt down on your cheek. I am the governor of Rome, my boy. Who are you, that you should lecture me?”

“If you call that a lecture, concede that I dared,” Sextus answered. “I did not flatter you by coming here, or come to flatter you. I came because my father tells me you are a Roman beyond praise. I am a Roman. I believe praise is worthless unless proven to

the hilt—as for instance: I have come to bare my thoughts to you, which is a bold compliment in these days of treachery.”

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“Keep your thoughts under cover,” said Pertinax, glancing at the steward and the slaves who were beginning to carry in the meal. But he was evidently pleased, and Sextus’s next words pleased him more:

“I am ready to do more than think about you, I will follow where you lead—except into licentiousness!”

He lay on both elbows and stared at the scene with disgust. Naked girls, against a background of the torchlit water and the green and purple gloom of cypresses, was nothing to complain of; statuary, since it could not move, was not as pleasing to the eye; but shrieks of idiotic laughter and debauchery of beauty sickened him.

There came a series of sounds at the pavilion entrance, where a litter was set down on marble pavement and a eunuch’s shrill voice criticized the slow unrolling of a carpet.

“What did I warn you?” Norbanus whispered, laughing in Sextus’s ear.

Pertinax got to his feet, long-leggedly statuesque, and strode toward the antechamber on his right, whence presently he returned with a woman on his arm, he stroking her hand as it rested on his. He introduced Sextus and Norbanus; the others knew her; Galen greeted her with a wrinkled grin that seemed to imply confidence.

“Now that Cornificia has come, not even Sextus need worry about our behavior!” said Galen, and everybody except Sextus grinned. It was notorious that Cornificia refined and restrained Pertinax, whereas his lawful wife Flavia Titiana merely drove him to extremes.

This Roman Aspasia had an almost Grecian face, beneath a coiled extravagance of dark brown hair. Her violet eyes were quietly intelligent; her dress plain white and not elaborately fringed, with hardly any jewelry. She cultivated modesty and all the older graces that had grown unfashionable since the Emperor Marcus Aurelius died. In all ways, in fact, she was the opposite of Flavia Titiana—it was hard to tell whether from natural preference or because the contrast to his wife’s extremes of noisy gaiety and shameless license gave her a stronger hold on Pertinax. Rome’s readiest slanderers had nothing scandalous to tell of Cornificia, whereas Flavia Titiana’s inconstancies were a by-word.

She refused to let Galen yield the couch on Pertinax’s right hand but took the vacant one at the end of the half-moon table, saying she preferred it—which was likely true enough; it gave her a view of all the faces without turning her head or appearing to stare.

For a long time there was merely desultory conversation while the feast, restricted within moderate proportions by request of Pertinax, was brought on.



There were eels, for which Daphne was famous; alphests and callichthys; pompilos, a purple fish, said to have been born from sea-foam at the birth of Aphrodite; boops and bedradones; gray mullet; cuttle-fish; tunny-fish and mussels. Followed in their order pheasants, grouse, swan, peacock and a large pig stuffed with larks and mincemeat. Then there were sweetmeats of various kinds, and a pudding invented in Persia, made with honey and dates, with a sauce of frozen cream and strawberries. By Galen's order only seven sorts of wine were served, so when the meal was done the guests were neither drunk nor too well fed to carry on a conference.



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No entertainers were provided. Normally the space between the table and the front of the pavilion would have been occupied by acrobats, dancers and jugglers; but Pertinax dismissed even the impudent women who came to lean elbows on the marble railing and sing snatches of suggestive song. He sent slaves to stand outside and keep the crowd away, his lictor and his personal official bodyguard being kept out of sight in a small stone house near the pavilion kitchen at the rear among the trees, in order not to arouse unwelcome comment. It was known he was in Daphne; there was even a subdued expectation in Antioch that his unannounced visit portended the extortion of extra tribute. The Emperor Commodus was known to be in his usual straits for money. Given a sufficient flow of wine, the sight of bodyguard and lictor might have been enough to start a riot, the Antiochenes being prone to outbreak when their passions were aroused by drink and women.

There was a long silence after Pertinax had dismissed the steward. Galen's old personal attendant took charge of the amphora of snow-cooled Falernian; he poured for each in turn and then retired into a corner to be out of earshot, or at any rate to emphasize that what he might hear would not concern him. Pertinax strolled to the front of the pavilion and looked out to make sure there were no eavesdroppers, staring for a long time at the revelry that was warming up into an orgy. They were dancing in rings under the moon, their shadowy figures rendered weird by smoky torchlight. Cornificia at last broke on his reverie:

"You wish to join them, Pertinax? That would dignify even our Roman Hercules—to say nothing of you!"

He shrugged his shoulders, but his eyes were glittering.

"If Marcia could govern Commodus as you rule me, he would be safer on the throne!" he answered, coming to sit upright on the couch beside her. It was evident that he intended that speech to release all tongues; he looked from face to face expectantly, but no one spoke until Cornificia urged him to protect himself against the night breeze. He threw a purple-bordered cloak over his shoulders. It became him; he looked so official in it, and majestic, that even Sextus—rebel that he was against all modern trumpery—forebore to break the silence. It was Galen who spoke next:

"Pertinax, if you might choose an emperor, whom would you nominate? Remember: He must be a soldier, used to the stench of marching legions. None could govern Rome whose nose goes up in the air at the smell of sweat and garlic."

There was a murmur of approval. Cornificia stroked the long, strong fingers of the man she idolized. Sextus gave rein to his impulse then, brushing aside Norbanus' hand that warned him to bide his time:



“Many more than I,” he said, “are ready to throw in our lot with you, Pertinax—aye, unto death! You would restore Rome’s honor. I believe my father could persuade a hundred noblemen to take your part, if you would lead. I can answer for five or six men of wealth and influence, not reckoning a friend or two who—”



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“Why talk foolishness!” said Pertinax. “The legions will elect Commodus’ successor. They will sell Rome to the highest bidder, probably; and though they like me as a soldier they dislike my discipline. I am the governor of Rome and still alive in spite of it because even Commodus’ informers know it would be silly to accuse me of intrigue. Not even Commodus would listen to such talk. I lead the gay life, for my own life’s sake. All know me as a roisterer. I am said to have no ambition other than to live life sensuously.”

Galen laughed.

“That may deceive Commodus,” he said. “The thoughtful Romans know you as a frugal governor, who stamped out plague and—”

“You did that,” said Pertinax.

“Who enabled me?”

“It was a simple thing to have the tenements burned. Besides, it profited the city—new streets; and there was twice the amount of tax on the new tenements they raised. I, personally, made a handsome profit on the purchase of a few burned houses.”

“And as the governor who broke the famine,” Galen continued.

“That was simple enough, but you may as well thank Cornificia. She found out through the women who the men were who were holding corn for speculation. All I did was to hand their names to Commodus; he confiscated all the corn and sold it—at a handsome profit to himself, since it had cost him nothing!”

“While we sit here and cackle like Asian birds, Commodus renames Rome the City of Commodus and still lives!” Sextus grumbled.

“Nor can he be easily got rid of,” remarked Daedalus the tribune. “He goes to and fro from the palace through underground tunnels. Men sleep in his room who are all involved with him in cruelties and infamy, so they guard him carefully. Besides, whoever tried to murder him would probably kill Paulus by mistake! The praetorian guard is contented, being well paid and permitted all sorts of privileges. Who can get past the praetorian guard?”

“Any one!” said Pertinax. “The point is not, who shall kill Commodus? But who shall be raised in his place? There are thirty thousand ways to kill a man. Ask Galen!”

Old Galen laughed at that.

“As many ways as there are stars in heaven; but the stars have their say in the matter! None can kill a man until his destiny says yes to it. Not even a doctor,” he added,



chuckling. “Otherwise the doctors would have killed me long ago with jealousy! A man dies when his inner man grows sick and weary of him. Then a pin-prick does it, or a sudden terror. Until that time comes you may break his skull, and do not more than spoil his temper! As a philosopher I have learned two things: respect many, but trust few. But as a doctor I have learned only one thing for certain: that no man actually dies until his soul is tired of him.”

“Whose soul should grow sick sooner than that of Commodus?” asked Sextus.



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“Not if his soul is evil and delights in evil—as his does!” Galen retorted. “If he should turn virtuous, then perhaps, yes. But in that case we should wish him to live, although his soul would prefer the contrary and leave him to die by the first form of death that should appear—in spite of all the doctors and the guards and tasters of the royal food.”

“Some one should convert him then!” said Sextus. “Cornificia, can’t Marcia make a Christian of him; Christians pretend to oppose all the infamies he practises. It would be a merry joke to have a Christian emperor, who died because his soul was sick of him! It would be a choice jest—he being the one who has encouraged Christianity by reversing all Marcus Aurelius’ wise precautions against their seditious blasphemy!”

“You speak fanatically, but you have touched the heart of the problem,” said Cornificia. “It is Marcia who makes life possible for Commodus— Marcia and her Christians. They help Marcia protect him because he is the only emperor who never persecuted them, and because Marcia sees to it that they are free to meet together without having even to bribe the police. There is only one way to get rid of Commodus: Persuade Marcia that her own life is in danger from him, and that she will have a full voice in nominating his successor.”

“Probably true,” remarked Pertinax. “Whom would she nominate? That is the point.”

“It would be simpler to kill Marcia,” said Daedalus. “Thereafter let things take their course. Without Marcia to protect him—”

“No man knows much,” Galen interrupted. “Marcia’s soul may be all the soul Commodus has! If she should grow sick of him—!”

“She grew sick long ago,” said Cornificia. “But she is forever thinking of her Christians and knows no other way to protect them than to make Commodus love her. Ugh! It is like the story of Andromeda. Who is to act Perseus?”

(In the fable, Andromeda had to be chained to a cliff to be devoured by a monster, in order to save her people from the anger of the god Poseidon. Perseus slew the monster.)

“There are thirty thousand ways of killing,” Pertinax repeated, “but if we kill one monster, four or five others will fight for his place, unless, like Perseus, we have the head of a Medusa with which to freeze them into stone! There is no substitute for Commodus in sight. The only man whose face would freeze all rivals is Severus the Carthaginian!”

“We are none of us blind,” said Cornificia.

“You mean me? I am too old,” answered Pertinax. “I don’t like tyranny, and people know it. It is something they should not know. An old man may be all very well when he has reigned for twenty years and men are used to him, and he used to the task, as was



Augustus; but an old man new to the throne lacks energy. And besides, they would never endure a man whose father was a charcoal-seller, as mine was. I have made my way in life by looking at facts and refusing to deceive myself; with the exception of that, I have no especial wisdom, nor any unusual ability.”



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“If wisdom were all that is needed,” said Sextus, “we should put good Galen on the throne!”

“He is too old and wise to let you try to do it!” Galen answered. “But you spoke about the head of a Medusa, Pertinax, and mentioned Lucius Septimius Severus. He commands three legions at Caruntum in Pannonia. (Roughly speaking, the S.W. portion of modern Hungary whose frontiers were then occupied by very warlike tribes.) If there is one man living who can freeze men’s blood by scowling at them, it is he! And he is not as old as you are.”

“I have thought of him only to hate him,” said Pertinax. “He would not follow me, nor I him. He is one of three men who would fight for the throne if somebody slew Commodus, although he would not run the risk of slaying him himself, and he would betray us if we should take him into confidence. I know him well. He is a lawyer and a Carthaginian. He would never ask for the nomination; he is too crafty. He would say his legions nominated him against his will and that to have disobeyed them would have laid him open to the punishment for treason. (This is what Severus actually did, later on, after Pertinax’s death.) The other two are Pescennius Niger, who commands the legions in Syria, and Clodius Albinus who commands in Britain. We must find a man who can forestall all three of them by winning, first, the praetorian guard, and then the senate and the Romans by dint of sound reforms and justice.”

“You are he! Rome trusts you. So does the senate,” said Cornificia. “Marcia trusts me. The praetorian guard trusts her. If I can persuade Marcia that her life is in danger from Commodus—”

“But how?” Daedalus interrupted.

“We can take the praetorian guard by surprise,” Cornificia went on, ignoring him. “They can be tricked into declaring for the man whom Marcia’s friends nominate. Having once declared for him they will be too proud of having made an emperor, and too unwilling to seem vacillating, to reverse themselves in any man’s favor, even though he should command six legions. The senate will gladly accept one who has governed Rome as frugally as Pertinax has done. If the senate confirms the nominee of the praetorian guard, the Roman populace will do the rest by acclamation. Then, three months of upright government—deification by the senate—”

Pertinax laughed explosively—an honest, chesty laugh, unqualified by any subtleties, suggesting a trace of the peasantry from which he sprang. It made Cornificia wince.

“Can you imagine me a god?” he asked.



“I can imagine you an emperor,” said Sextus. “It is true; you have no following among the legions just at present. But I make one, and there are plenty of energetic men who think as I do. My friend Norbanus here will follow me. My father—”

Noises near the open window interrupted him. An argument seemed to be going on between the slaves whom Pertinax had set to keep the roisterers away and some one who demanded admission. Near at hand was a woman’s voice, shrilling and scolding. Then another voice—Scylax, the slave who had ridden the red mare. Pertinax strode to the window again and leaned out. Cornificia whispered to Galen:



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"If the truth were known, he is afraid of Flavia Titiana. As a wife she is bad enough, but as an empress—"

Galen nodded.

"If you love your Pertinax," he answered, "keep him off the throne! He has too many scruples."

She frowned, having few, which were firm and entirely devoted to Pertinax' fortune.

"Love him? I would give him up to see him deified!" she whispered; and again Galen nodded, deeply understanding.

"That is because you have never had children," he assured her, smiling. "You mother Pertinax, who is more than twice your age—just as Marcia has mothered that monster Commodus until her heart is breaking."

"But I thought you were Pertinax' friend?"

"So I am."

"And his urgent adviser to—"

"Yes, so I was. I have changed my opinion; only the maniacs never do that. Pertinax would make a splendid minister for Lucius Severus; and the two of them could bring back the Augustan days. Persuade him to it. He must forget he hates him."

"Let him come!" said the voice of Pertinax. He was still leaning out, with one hand on a marble pillar, much more interested in the moonlit view of revelry than in the altercation between slaves. He strolled back and stood smiling at Cornificia, his handsome face expressing satisfaction but a rather humorous amusement at his inability to understand her altogether.

"Are you like all other women?" he asked. "I just saw a naked woman stab a man with her hairpin and kick his corpse into the shrubbery before the breath was out of it!"

"Galen has deserted you," said Cornificia. The murder was uninteresting; nobody made any comment.

"Not he!" Pertinax answered, and went and sat on Galen's couch. "You find me not man enough for the senate to make a god of me—is that it, Galen?"

"Too much of a man to be an emperor," said Galen, smiling amid wrinkles. "By observing a man's virtues one may infer what his faults are. You would try to rule the empire honestly, which is impossible. A more dishonest man would let it rule itself and



claim the credit, whereas you would give the praise to others, who would shoulder off the work and all the blame on to you. An empire is like a human body, which heals itself if the head will let it. Too many heads—a conference of doctors—and the patient dies! One doctor, doing nothing with an air of confidence, and the patient gets well! There, I have told you more than all the senate knows!”

Came Scylax, out of breath, less menial than most men’s slaves, his head and shoulders upright and the hand that held a letter thrust well forward as if what he had to do were more important than the way he did it.

“This came,” he said, standing beside Sextus’ couch. “Cadmus brought it, running all the way from Antioch.”

His hand was trembling; evidently Cadmus had by some means learned the contents of the letter and had told.

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“I and Cadmus—” he said, and then hesitated.

“What?”

“—are faithful, no matter what happens.”

Scylax stood erect with closed lips. Sextus broke the seal, merely glancing at Pertinax, taking permission for granted. He frowned as he read, bit his lip, his face growing crimson and white alternately. When he had mastered himself he handed the letter to Pertinax.

“I always supposed you protected my father,” he said, struggling to appear calm. But his eyes gave the story away—grieved, mortified, indignant. Scylax offered him his arm to lean on. Norbanus, setting both hands on his shoulders from behind, obliged him to sit down.

“Calm!” Norbanus whispered, “Calm! Your friends are your friends. What has happened?”

Pertinax read the letter and passed it to Cornificia, then paced the floor with hands behind him.

“Is that fellow to be trusted?” he asked with a jerk of his head toward Scylax. He seemed nearly as upset as Sextus was.

Sextus nodded, not trusting himself to speak, knowing that if he did he would insult a man who might be guiltless in spite of appearances.

“Commodus commanded me to visit Antioch, as he said, for a rest,” said Pertinax. “The public excuse was, that I should look into the possibility of holding the Olympic games here. Strangely enough, I suspected nothing. He has been flatteringly friendly of late. Those whom I requested him to spare, he spared, even though their names were on his proscription list and I had not better excuse than that they had done no wrong! The day before I left I brought a list to him of names that I commended to his favor—your father’s name among them, Sextus.”

Pertinax turned his back again and strode toward the window, where he stood like a statue framed in the luminous gloom. The only part of him that moved was his long fingers, weaving together behind him until the knuckles cracked.

Cornificia, subduing her contralto voice, read the letter aloud:

“To Nimius Secundus Sextus, son of Galienus Maximus, the freedman Rufus Glabrio sends humble greeting.



“May the gods give solace and preserve you. Notwithstanding all your noble father’s piety—his respect for elders and superiors—he was accused of treason and of blasphemy toward the emperor, by whose orders he was seized yesterday and beheaded the same day. The estates have already been seized. It is said they will be sold to Asinus Sejanus, who is probably the source of the accusation against your father.

“I and three other freedmen made our escape and will attempt to reach Tarentum, where we will await instructions from you. Titus, the son of the freedman Paulinus, will convey this letter to Brundisium and thence by boat to Dyrrachium, whence he will send it by post in the charge of a Jew whom he says he can trust.

“It is a certainty that orders will go forth to seize yourself, since the estates in Antioch are known to be of great value. Therefore, we your true friends and devoted servants, urge you to make all speed in escaping. Stay not to make provision for yourself, but travel without encumbrances. Hide! Hasten!

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“We commend this letter to you as a sure proof that we ourselves are to be trusted, since, if it should fall into the hands of an informer by the way, our lives undoubtedly would pay the forfeit. We have not much money, but enough for the expenses of a journey to a foreign land. The place where we will hide near Tarentum is known to you. In deep anxiety, and not without such sacrifices to the gods and to the manes of your noble ancestors as means permit, we will await your coming.” —*Rufus Glabrio*  
“Freedman of the illustrious Galienus Maximus.”

Pertinax turned from the window. “The Jews have a saying,” he said, “that who keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from trouble. Often I warned Maximus that he was too free with his speech. He counted too much on my protection. Now it remains to be seen whether Commodus has not proscribed me!”

Sextus and Norbanus stood together, Scylax behind them, Norbanus whispering; plainly enough Norbanus was urging patience—discretion—deliberate thought, whereas Sextus could hardly think at all for anger that reddened his eyes.

“What can I do for you? What can I do?” wondered Pertinax.

Then Cornificia was on her feet.

“There is nothing—nothing you can do!” she insisted. She avoided Galen’s eyes; the old philosopher was watching her as if she were the subject of some new experiment. “Let Commodus learn as much as that Sextus was here in this pavilion and—”

Sextus interrupted, very proudly:

“I will not endanger my friends. Who will lend me a dagger? This toy that I wear is too short and not sharp. You may forget me, Pertinax. My slaves will bury me. But play you the man and save Rome!”

Then the tribune spoke up. He was younger than all of them.

“Sextus is right. They will know he was here. They will probably torture his slaves and learn about that letter that has reached him. If he runs and hides, we shall all be accused of having helped him to escape; whereas—”

“What?” Galen asked him as he hesitated.

“If he dies by his own hand, he will not only save all his slaves from the torture but remove the suspicion from us and we will still be free to mature our—”

“Cowardice!” Norbanus finished the sentence for him.



“Aye, some of us would hardly feel like noble Romans!” Pertinax said grimly. “Possibly I can protect you, Sextus. Let us think of some great favor you can do the emperor, providing an excuse for me to interfere. I might even take you to Rome with me and—”

Galen laughed, and Cornificia drew in her breath, bit her lip.

“Why do you laugh, Galen?” Pertinax strode over to him and stood staring.

“Because,” said Galen, “I know so little after all. I cannot tell a beast’s blood from a man’s. Our Commodus would kill you with all the more peculiar enjoyment because he has flattered you so often publicly and called you ‘father Pertinax.’ He poisoned his own father; why not you? They will tell him you have frequently befriended Sextus. They will show him Sextus’ father’s name on that list of names that you commended to his favor. Do you follow me?”



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“By Jupiter, not I!” said Pertinax.

“He is sure to learn about this letter that has come.” said Galen. “If you, in fearful loyalty to Commodus, should instantly attempt to make a prisoner of Sextus; if, escaping, he is killed, and you bear witness—that would please Commodus almost as much as to see gladiators killed in the arena. If you wept over the death of Sextus, that would please him even more. He would enjoy your feelings. Do you remember how he picked two gladiators who were brothers twins they were—and when the slayer of his twin-brother saluted, Commodus got down into the arena and kissed him? You yourself must announce to him the news of Sextus’ death, and he will kiss you also!”

“Vale!” remarked Sextus. “I die willingly enough.”

“You are dead already,” Galen answered. “Didn’t Pertinax see some one’s body kicked into the bushes?”

There was silence. They all glanced at one another. Only Galen, sipping at his wine, seemed philosophically calm.

“I personally should not be an eye-witness,” Galen remarked. “I am a doctor, whose certificate of death not even Commodus would doubt. In the dark I might recognize Sextus’ garments, even though I could not see his features. And—” he added pointedly—“neither I nor any one can tell a beast’s blood from a man’s.”

“Daedalus!” said Pertinax with sudden resolution. “Get my purse. My slave has it. Sextus shall not go empty-handed.”

### III. MATERNUS-LATRO

Sorbanus brought the skewbald stallion. Not far away a group of women danced around a dozen drunken men, who sang uproariously. Seen against the background of purple and dark-green gloom, with crimson torchlight flaring on the quiet water and the moon descending behind trees beyond them, they were mystically beautiful—seemed not to belong to earth, any more than the pan-pipe music did.

“Ride into their midst!” Norbanus urged, pointing. “Tickle the stallion thus.”

The Cappadocian lashed out savagely.

“Here is a bottle of goat’s blood. I will bring weapons, and I will join you as soon as possible after I have made sure that the temple priests, and all Daphne, are positive about your death. Now mount and ride!”



Sextus swung on to the stallion's back as if a catapult had thrown him. Until then he had let others do the ordering; he had preferred to let them take their own precautions, form their own plans and subject himself to any course they wished, after which he should be free to face his destiny and fight it without feeling he had handicapped his friends by wilfulness. He had not even issued a direct command to Scylax, his own slave. That was characteristic of him. Nor was it at his suggestion that Norbanus volunteered to share his outlawry. But it was also characteristic that he made no gesture of dissent; he accepted Norbanus' loyalty with a quiet smile that rather scorned words as unnecessary.



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Now he drove his heels into the Cappadocian with vigor, for the die was cast. The stallion, impatient of new mastery, reared and plunged, snorted, came back on the bit in an attempt to get it in his teeth, and bolted straight for the group of roisterers, who scattered away, men swearing, women screaming. Throwing back his weight against the reins, he brought the stallion to a plunging, snorting, wheeling halt in the midst of men and women—a terrifying monster blowing clouds of mist out of his nostrils! As they ran he let the brute rear—pulled him over—rolled from under him, and lay still, with goat's blood from the broken bottle splashed around his face and seeming to flow from his mouth. One woman stooped to look, groped for a purse or anything of value, screamed and ran.

"Sextus!" she yelled. "Sextus who was dining in the white pavilion!"

Sextus crawled among the oleanders. Presently Norbanus came, hurrying out of gloom, accompanied by Cadmus, the slave who had brought from Antioch the letter that came from Rome. They were dragging a body between them. They laid it down exactly where Sextus had fallen from the horse. There was a sickening thwack as Cadmus made the face unrecognizable. Then came the lanky, hurrying figure of Pertinax leading a group of people, Cornificia among them—Galen last.

Sextus lay still until all their backs were toward him. Then he crept out of the oleanders and walked along the river-bank in no haste, masking his face with a fold of his toga. He chose a path that wound amid the shrubbery, where marble satyrs grinned in colored lantern light. He had to avoid couples here and there. A woman followed him, laying a hand on his arm; he struck her, and she ran off, screaming for her bully.

Presently he reached the winding track that led toward the high-road, with the gloom of cypresses on either hand and, beyond that, the glow of the lights in the caterers' booths. He was as safe now as if he were fifty miles away; none noticed him except the beggars at the bridges, who exposed maimed limbs and whined for charity. A leper, banking on his only stock in trade—the dread men had of his affliction—cursed him.

"You waste breath," said Sextus and passed on. He was smiling to himself—sardonically. "Lepers live by threats—" he thought.

No more than any leper now could he expect protection from society beyond what he could force society to yield. He had no name, for he was dead; that thought amused him. Suddenly it dawned on him how safe he was, since none in Antioch would dare to question the word of Pertinax, backed by Galen and all the witnesses whom Pertinax would be sure to summon. He remembered then to protect the honest freedmen who had sent him warning—strode to a fire near a caterer's booth and burned the letter, stared at by the slaves who warmed their shins around the embers.

One of those might have recognized him, in spite of the toga drawn over his face.

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“If any one should ask which way Maternus went, say I have gone home,” he commanded, and strode away into the gloom.

He wondered why he had chosen the name Maternus. Not even his remotest ancestor had borne it, yet it came to his lips as naturally, instantly, as if it were his own by right. But as he walked away it came to mind that ten, or possibly twelve, nights ago he and his friends had all been talking of a highwayman Maternus, who had robbed the caravans on the mountain road from Tarsus. For the moment that thought scared him. Should he change the name? The slaves by the embers had stared; they showed him respect, but there was a distinct sensation mingled with it—hardly to be wondered at! Where was it he heard—who told him—that Maternus had been caught? He could not remember.

It dawned on him how difficult it is to decide what to do when the old familiar conditions and the expectations on which we habitually base decisions are all suddenly stripped away. He understood now how a general in the field can fail when suddenly confronted with the unknown. Shall he do this, or do that? There was not a habit or a circumstance to guide him. He must choose, the while the gods looked on and laughed!

Maternus. It was a strange name to adopt, and yet he liked the sound of it, nor would it pass out of his mind. He tried to think of other names, but either they had all been borne by slaves, and were distasteful, or else by famous men or by his friends, whom he did not propose to wrong; he only had to imagine his case reversed to realize how bitterly he would resent it if an outlawed man should take his own name and make it notorious.

Yet he perceived that notoriety would be his only refuge, paradox though that might be. As a mere fugitive, anonymous and having no more object than to live and avoid recognition, he would soon reach the end of his tether; there was little mercy in the world for men without a home or means. Whether recognized or not, he would become like a hunted animal—might, in fact, end as a slave unless he should prefer to prove his identity and submit to Commodus’s executioners. Suicide would be preferable to that; but it seemed almost as if the gods themselves had vetoed self-destruction by providing that roisterer’s corpse at the critical moment and putting the plan for its use into Galen’s wise old head.

He must take the field like Spartacus of old; but he must have a goal more definite and more attainable than Spartacus had had. He must avoid the mistake that weakened Spartacus, of accepting for the sake of numbers any ally who might offer himself. He would have nothing whatever to do with the rabble of runaway slaves, whose only guiding impulse would be loot and license, although he knew how easy it would be to raise such an army if he should choose to do it. Out of any hundred outlaws in the records of a hundred years, some ninety-nine had come to grief through the increasing

numbers of their following and lack of discipline; he could think of a dozen who had been betrayed by paid informers of the government, posing as friendly brigands.



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And besides, he had no intention of adopting brigandry as a profession, though he realized that he must make a reputation as a brigand if he hoped to be anything else than a helpless fugitive. As a rebel against Commodus it might be possible to raise a good-sized army in a month or two, but that would only serve to bring the Roman armies out of camp, led by generals eager for cheap victories. He must be too resourceful to be taken by police—too insignificant to tempt the legions out of camp. Brigandry was as distasteful to him and as far beneath his dignity as the pursuit of brigands was beneath the dignity of any of those Roman generals who owed their rank to Commodus. For them, as for himself, the pettiness of brigandry led nowhither. Only one object appealed to them—fame and its perquisites. Only one object appealed to himself: to redeem his estates and to avenge his father. That could be accomplished only by the death of Commodus: He laughed, as he thought of himself pitted alone against Commodus the deified, mad monster who could marshal the resources of the Roman empire!

Such thoughts filled his mind until he reached the lonely cross-road, where the narrower, tree-lined road to Daphne met the great main highway leading northward over the mountains. There was the usual row of gibbets reared on rising ground against the sky by way of grim reminder to slaves and other would-be outlaws that the arm of Rome was long, not merciful. Five of the gibbets were vacant, except for an arm on one of them, that swayed in the wind as it hung by a cord from the wrist. The sixth had a man on it—dead.

Scylax, who was waiting for him, rode out of the gloom on the mare, leading the Cappadocian, and reined in near the gibbet, not quite sure yet who it was who strode toward him. Scared by the stench, the horses became difficult to manage. The leading-rein passed around one of the gibbets. Sextus ran forward to help. The Cappadocian broke the rein and Scylax galloped after him.

So Sextus stood alone beside the rough-hewn tree-trunk, to which was tied the body of a man who had been dead, perhaps, since sunset. He had not been torn yet by the vultures. Morbid curiosity—a fellow feeling for a victim, as the man might well be, of the same injustice that had made an outlaw of himself—impelled Sextus to step closer. He could not see the face, which was drooped forward; but there was a parchment, held spread on a stick, like a sail on a spar, suspended from the man's neck by a string. He snatched it off and held it toward the moon, now low on the horizon. There were only two words, smeared with red paint by a forefinger, underneath the official letters S.P.Q.R.:

“Maternus-Latro.”

He began to wonder who Maternus might have been, and how he took the first step that had led to crucifixion. It was hard to believe that any man would run that risk unless impelled to it by some injustice that had changed pride into savagery or else shot off all



opportunity for decent living. The cruelty of the form of execution hardly troubled him; the possible injustice of it stirred him to his depths. He felt a sort of superstitious reverence for the victim, increased by the strange coincidence that he had made use, without previous reflection, of Maternus' name.



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Presently he saw Norbanus riding the horse that he himself had ridden that afternoon from Antioch to Daphne, followed on a mule by Cadmus, the slave who had brought the letter which had pulled the trigger that set the catapults of destiny in motion. Making a wide circuit, they helped Scylax catch the Cappadocian.

Norbanus came cantering back. He was dressed for the road in a brown woolen tunic contributed by some one in Pertinax' suite. He shook a bag of money.

"Cornificia was generous," he said. "Old Pertinax thought he had done well enough by you. She cried shame on him and threatened to send for her jewelry. So he borrowed money from the priests. You are as dead as that." He looked up at the tortured body of the robber. "What name will you take? We had better begin to get used to it."

"It is written here," said Sextus, showing him the parchment. But the moon had gone down in a smother of silvery cloud; Norbanus could not see to read. "I am Maternus-Latro."

"I was told they had crucified that fellow."

"This is Maternus. Being dead, he will hardly grudge me the use of his name! However, I will pay him for it. He shall have fair burial. Help me down with him."

Norbanus beckoned to the slaves, who tied the horses to a near-by tree. They sought in the dark for a hole that would do for a grave, since they had no burying tools, stumbling on a limestone slab at last, that lay amid rank weeds near a tomb hollowed out of the rock that had been rifled, very likely, centuries ago. They lowered the already stiffened body into it, with a coin in its fingers for Charon's ferry-fare across the Styx, then set the heavy slab in place, all four of them using their utmost strength.

Then Sextus, having poured a little water from his hollowed hands on to the slab, because he had no oil, and having murmured fragments of a ritual as old as Rome, bidding the gods of earth and air and the unseen re-absorb into themselves what man no longer could perceive or cherish or destroy, turned to the two slaves.

"Scylax," he said, "Cadmus—he who was your master is as dead as that man we have buried. I am not Sextus, son of Maximus. I fare forth like a dead man on an unknown road, now being without honor on the lips of men. Nor have I any claim on you, being now an outlaw, whom the law would crucify if ill-luck should betray my feet. Nor can I set you free, since all my household doubtless is already confiscated; ye belong by law to whomsoever Commodus may have appointed to receive my goods. Do then at your own risk, of your own will, what seems good to you."

Being slaves, they knelt. He bade them rise.

"We follow you," said Scylax, Cadmus murmuring assent.

“Then the night bear witness!” Sextus turned toward the row of gibbets, pointing at them. “That is the risk we take together. If we escape that, you shall not go unrewarded from the fortune I redeem. Norbanus, you accept my leadership?”



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Norbanus chuckled.

"I insist on it!" he answered. He, too, pointed at the row of gibbets. "To be frightened will provide us with no armor against destiny! There was little I had to lose; lo, I have left that for the mice to nibble! Let us see what destiny can do to bold men! Lead on, Sextus!"

### IV. THE GOVERNORS OF ROME AND ANTIOCH

Dawn was sparkling on the mountain peaks; the misty violet of half-light crept into the passes and the sun already bathed the copper roofs of Antioch in gleaming gold above a miracle of greenery and marble. Like a sluggish, muddy stream with camel's heads afloat in it, the south-bound caravan poured up against the city gate and spread itself to await inspection by the tax-gatherers, the governor's representatives and the police. There was a tedious procedure of examination, hindered by the swarms of gossipers, the merchants' agents, smugglers, and the men to whom the latest news meant livelihood, who streamed out of the city gate and mingled with the new-comers from Asia, Bythinia, Pontus, Pisidia, Galatia and Cappadocia.

The caravan guards piled their spears and breakfasted apart, their duty done. They had the air of men to whom the constantly repeated marches to and fro on the selfsame stage of a mountainous road had grown displeasing and devoid of all romance. Two were wounded. One, with a dent in the helmet that hung from his arm by the chin-strap, lay leaning against a rock; refused food, and slowly bled to death, his white face almost comically disappointed.

A military tribune, followed by a slave with tablets, and by a mounted trooper for the sake of his official dignity, rode out from the city and took the report from the guards' decurion, a half-breed Dacian-Italian, black-bearded and taciturn, who dictated it to the slave in curt, staccato sentences, grudging the very gesture that he made toward the wounded men. The tribune glanced at the report, signed it, turned his horse and rode into the city, disregarding the decurion's salute, his military cloak a splash of very bright red, seen against the limestone and above the predominant brown of the camels and coats of their owners. He cantered his horse when he passed through the gate, and there went up a clamor of newsy excitement behind him as group after group loosed tongues in competition of exaggeration.

Being bad, the news spread swiftly. The quadruple lines of columns all along the Corso, as the four-mile-long main thoroughfare was called, began to look like pier-piles in a flowing tide of men. Yellow, blue, red, striped and parti-colored costumes, restless as the flotsam on a mill-race, swirled into patterns, and broke, and reblended. The long portico of Caesar's baths resounded to the hollow hum of voices. Streaming lines of slaves in the midst of the street were delayed by the crowd, and abused for obstructing

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it. Gossip went up like the voice of the sea to the cliffs and startled clouds of spray-white pigeons, faintly edged with pink against an azure sky; then ceased as suddenly. The news was known. Whatever Antioch knew, bored it. Nine days' wonders were departed long ago into the limbo of the days of Xerxes. Nine hours had come to be the limit of men's interest—nine minutes the crucial phase of excitement, during which the balance of emotion hovered between rioting or laughter.

Antioch grew quiet, conscious of the sunny weather and the springtime lassitude that is a luxury to masters but that slaves must overcome. The gangs went forth to clear the watercourses in advance of floods, whips cracking to inspire zeal. Wagon-loads of flowers, lowing milk-white oxen, white goats—even a white horse, a white ass—oil and wine in painted cards, whose solid wooden wheels screamed on their axles like demons in agony-threaded the streets to the temples, lest the gods forget convenience and send the floods too soon.

The Forum—gilt-edged marble, tinted statuary, a mosaic pavement like a rich-hued carpet from the looms of Babylon—began to overflow with leisured men of business. Their slaves did all the worrying. The money-changers' clerks sat by the bags of coin, with scales and shovel and the tables of exchange. The chaffering began in corn-shops, where the lawless agreements for delivery of unsown harvests changed hands ten times in the hour, and bills on Rome, scrawled over with endorsements, outsped currency as well as outwitted the revenue men. No tax-farmer's slave could keep track of the flow of intangible wealth when the bills for a million sesterces passed to and fro like cards in an Egyptian game. Men richer than the fabled Croesus carried all their wealth in leather wallets in the form of mortgages on gangs of slaves, certificates of ownership of cargoes, promises to pay and contracts for delivery of merchandise.

Nine-tenths of all the clamor was the voice of slaves, each one of them an expert in his master's business and often richer than the owners of the men he dealt with, saving his peculium—the personal savings which slaves were sometimes encouraged to accumulate—to buy his freedom when a more than usually profitable deal should put his master in a good mood.

The hall of the basilica was almost as much a place of fashion as the baths of Julius Caesar, except that there were some admitted into the basilica whose presence, later in the day, within the precincts of the baths would have led to a riot. Whoever had wealth and could afford to match wits with the sharpest traders in the world might enter the basilica and lounge amid the statuary. Thither well dressed slaves came hurrying with contracts and the news of changing prices. There, on marble benches, spread with colored cushions, at the rear under the balcony, the richer men of business sat chattering to mask their real thoughts—Jews, Alexandrians, Athenians—a Roman here

and there, cupidity more frankly written on his face, his eyes a little harder and less subtle, more abrupt in gesture and less patient with delays.



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“That is a tale which is all very well for the slaves to believe, and for the priests, if they wish, to repeat. As for me, I was born in Tarsus, where no man in his senses believes anything except a bill of sale.”

“But I tell you, Maternus was scourged, and then crucified at the place of execution nearest to where he committed his last crime. That is, where the crossroad leads to Daphne. There is no doubt about that whatever. He was nearly four days dying, and the sentries stood guard over him until he ceased to breathe, a little after sunset yesterday evening. So they say, at all events. A little before midnight, in Daphne, near one of those booths where the caterers prepare hot meals, a man strode up to where some slaves were seated around a fire. He burned a piece of parchment. All nine slaves agree that he was about Maternus’ height and build; that he strode like a man who had been hurt; that he had mud and grass stains on his knees, and covered his face with a toga. They also swear he said he was Maternus, and that he was gone before they could recover their wits. They say his voice was sepulchral. One of the slaves, who can read, declares that the words on the parchment he burned were “Maternus Latro,” and that it was the identical parchment he had seen hanging from Maternus’ neck on the cross. They tortured that slave at once, of course, to get the truth out of him, and on the rack he contradicted himself at least a dozen times, so they whipped him and let him go, because his owner said he was a valuable cook; but the fact remains that the story hasn’t been disproved.

“And there is absolutely no doubt whatever about this: The caravan from Asia came in just a little after dawn, having traveled the last stage by night, as usual, in order to arrive early and get the formalities over with. They came past the place of execution before sunrise. They had heard the news of the execution from the north-bound caravan that passed them in the mountains. They had all been afraid of Maternus because he had robbed so many wayfarers, so naturally they were interested to see his dead body. It was gone!”

“What of it? Probably the women took it down for burial. Robbers always have a troupe of women. Maternus never had to steal one, so they say. They flocked to him like Bacchanalians.”

“No matter. Now listen to this: between the time when they learned of Maternus’ execution and their passing the place of execution that is to say at the narrowest part of the pass, where it curves and begins to descend on this side of the mountain—they were attacked by robbers who made use of Maternus’ war-cry. The robbers were beaten off, although they wounded two men of the guard and got away with half-a-dozen horses and a slave-girl.”

“That means nothing—Pardon me a moment while I see what my man has been doing. What is it, Stilchio? Are you mad? You have contracted to deliver fifty bales at yesterday’s price? You want to ruin me? Oh. You are quite sure? Very well: A good



man, that—went out and met the caravan—bought low—sold high, and the price is falling. But as I was saying, your story is simply a string of coincidences. All the robbers use Maternus' war-cry, because of the terror his name inspires; they probably had not heard he had been crucified.”



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“Well, that was what the caravan folk thought, until they passed the place of execution and saw no body there.”

“The robbers possibly themselves removed it and were seeking to avenge Maternus.”

“Much more likely somebody was bribed to let him escape! We all know Maternus was scourged, for that was done in Antioch; but they did not scourge him very badly, for fear he might die on the way to the place of execution. There is no doubt he was crucified, but he was only tied, not nailed. It would have been perfectly simple to substitute some other criminal that first night—somebody who looked a little like him; they would give the substitute poppy juice to keep him from crying out to passers-by.”

“Substitution has often been done, of course. But it takes a lot of money and considerable influence to bribe the guard. They are under the authority of a centurion, who would have to look out for informers. And besides, you can't persuade me that a man who had been scourged, and crucified, if only for one day, could walk into Daphne two or three nights afterward and carry on a conversation. Why should he visit Daphne? Why should he choose that place, of all places in the world, and midnight, to destroy the identification parchment? Having destroyed it, why did he then tell the slaves who he was? It sounds like a tale out of Egypt to me.”

“Well, the priests are saying—”

“Tchutt-tchutt! Priests say anything.” “Nevertheless, the priests are saying that Maternus, after he was captured, managed to convey a message to his followers commanding them to offer sacrifices to Apollo, who accordingly intervened in his behalf. And they say he undoubtedly went to Daphne to return thanks at the temple threshold.”

“Hah-Hah! Excellent! Let us go to the baths. You need to sweat the superstition out of you! Better leave word where we are going, so that our factors will know where to find us in case any important business turns up.”

In the palace, in the office of the governor, where the lapping of water and irises could be heard through the opened windows, Pertinax sat facing the governor of Antioch across a table heaped with parchment rolls. A dozen secretaries labored in the next room, but the door between was closed; the only witnesses were leisurely, majestic swans, seen down a vista of well pruned shrubbery that flanked the narrow lawn. An awning crimsoned and subdued the sunlight, concealing the lines on the governor's face and suggesting color on his pale cheeks.

He was a fat man, pouched under the eyes and growing bald—an almost total contrast to the lean and active, although older Pertinax. His smile was cynical. His mouth curved downward. He had large, fat hands and cold, dark calculating eyes.



“I would feel more satisfied,” he said, “if I could have Norbanus’ evidence.”

“Find him then!” Pertinax answered irritably. “What is the matter with your police? In Rome, if I propose to find a man he is brought before me instantly.”



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“This is not Rome,” said the governor, “as you would very soon discover if you occupied my office. I sent a lictor and a dozen men to Norbanus’ house, but he is missing and has not been seen, although it is known, and you admit, that he dined with you last night at Daphne. He has no property worth mentioning. His house is under lien to money-lenders. He is well known to have been Sextus’ friend, and the moment this order arrived proscribing Sextus I added to it the name of Norbanus in my own handwriting, on the principle that treason keeps bad company.

“My own well known allegiance to the emperor obliges me to tear out the very roots of treason at the first suggestion of its presence in our midst. I have long suspected Sextus, who was a cross-grained, obstinate, quick-witted, proud young man—a lot too critical. I am convinced now that he and Norbanus were hatching some kind of plot between them—possibly against the sacred person of our emperor—a frightful sacrilege!—the suggestion of it makes me shudder! There is, of course, no doubt about Sextus; the emperor’s own proscription brands him as a miscreant unfit to live, and he was lucky to have died by accident instead of being torn apart by tongs. It seems to me unquestionable that Norbanus shared his guilt and took care to escape before he could be seized and brought to justice. What is in doubt, most noble Pertinax, is how you can excuse yourself to our sacred emperor for having let Sextus escape from your clutches, after you had seen that letter! How can you excuse yourself for not pouncing the letter, to be used as evidence against rascally freedmen who forewarned the miscreant Sextus about the emperor’s intentions?—and for not realizing that Norbanus was undoubtedly in league with him? How can you explain your having let Norbanus get away is something I confess I am unable to imagine.”

“Conjure your imagination!” Pertinax retorted. “I am to inquire into the suitability of Antioch or Daphne as the site of the Olympic games that the emperor proposed to preside over in person. You can imagine, I suppose, how profitable that would be for Antioch—and you. Am I to tell the emperor that robbers in the mountains and the laxity of local government make the selection of Antioch unwise?”

They stared at each other silently across the table, Pertinax erect and definite, the governor of Antioch indefinite and stroking his chin with fat, white fingers.

“It would be simplest,” said the governor of Antioch at last, “to have Norbanus executed.”

“Some one should always be executed when the emperor signs proscription lists!” said Pertinax. “Has it ever occurred to you to wonder how many soldiers in the legions in the distant provinces were certified as dead before they left Rome?”

The governor of Antioch smiled meanly. He resented the suggestions that there might be tricks he did not understand.



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“I have a prisoner,” he said, “who might be Norbanus. He has been tortured. He refused to identify himself.”

“Does he look like him?”

“That would be difficult to say. He broke into a jeweler’s and was very badly beaten by the slaves, who slashed his face, which is heavily bandaged. He appears to be a Roman and is certainly a thief, but beyond that—”

“Much depends on who is interested in him,” Pertinax suggested. “Usually a man’s relatives—”

But the governor of Antioch’s fat hand made a disparaging careless gesture. “He has no friends. He has been in the carceres (the cells in which prisoners were kept who had been sentenced to death. Under Roman law there was practically no imprisonment for crime. Fines, flogging, banishment were the substitutes for execution.) more than a month. I was reserving him for execution by the lions at the next public games. Truth to tell, I had almost forgotten him. I will write out a warrant for Norbanus’ execution and it shall be attended to this morning. And by the way—regarding the Olympic games—”

“The emperor, I think, would like to see them held in Antioch,” said Pertinax.

The merchants strolling to the baths stood curiously for a while to watch one of the rapidly increasing sect of Christians, who leaned from a balcony over the street and exhorted a polyglot crowd of freedmen, slaves and idlers. He was bearded, brown-skinned from exposure, brown-robed, scrawny, vehement.

“Peculiar times!” one merchant said. “If you and I should cause a crowd to gather while we prated about refusal to do homage to the gods—of whom mind you, the emperor is one, and not the least—”

“But let us listen,” said the other.

The man’s voice was resonant. He used no tricks of oratory such as Romans over-valued, and was not too careful in the choice of phrases. The Greek idiom he used was unadorned—the language of the market-place and harbor-front. He made his points directly, earnestly, not arguing but like a guide to far-off countries giving information:

“Slaves—freedmen—masters—all are equal before God, and on the last day all shall rise up from the dead—”

A loiterer heckled him:

“Hah! The crucified too?—what about Maternus?”



The preacher, throwing up his right hand, snatched at opportunity:

“There were two thieves crucified, one on either hand, as I have told you. To the one was said: ‘This day shalt thou be with me in paradise’; but to the other nothing. Nevertheless, all shall rise up from the dead on the last day—you, and your friends, and the wise and the fools, and the slave and the free—aye, and Maternus also—”

One merchant grinned to the other:

“Yet I think it was on the first night that Maternus rose up! They stiffen if they stay a whole night on the cross. If he could walk to Daphne three nights later, he had not been crucified many hours. Come, let us go to the baths before the crowd gets there. If one is late those insolent attendants lose one’s clothing, and there is no chance whatever of getting a good soft-handed slave to rub one down. Don’t you hate to be currycombed by a rascal with corns on his fingers?”

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### V. ROME—THE THERMAE OF TITUS

There were even birds, to fill the air with music. All the known world, and the far-away mysterious lands of which Alexander's followers had started legends multiplying centuries ago, had contributed to Rome's adornment; plunder and trade goods drifted through in spite of distances. The city had become the vortex of the energy, virility and vice of east and west—a glory of marble and gilded cornices, of domes and spires, of costumes, habits, faces, languages—of gorgeousness and squalor—license, privilege and rigid formalism—extravagance—and of innumerable gods.

There was nobility and love of virtue, cheek by jowl with beastliness, nor was it always easy to discover which was which; but the birds sang blithely in the cages in the portico, where the long seat was on which philosophers discoursed to any one who cared to listen. The baths that the Emperor Titus built were the supreme, last touch of all. From furnaces below-ground, where the whipped slaves sweated in the dark, to domed roof where the doves changed hue amid the gleam of gold and colored glass, they typified Rome, as the city herself was of the essence of the world.

The approach to the Thermae of Titus was blocked by litters, some heavy enough to be borne by eight matched slaves and large enough for company. Women oftener than men shared litters with friends; then the troupe of attendants was doubled; slaves were in droves, flocks, hordes around the building, making a motley sight of it in their liveries, which were adaptations of the every-day costumes of almost all the countries of the known world.

Under the entrance portico, between the double row of marble columns, sat a throng of fortune-tellers of both sexes, privileged because the aedile of that year had superstitious leanings, but as likely as not to be driven away, and even whipped, when the next man should succeed to office. In and out among the crowd ran tipsters, touts for gambling dens and sellers of charms; most of them found ready customers among the slaves, who had nothing to do but wait, and stare, and yawn until their masters came out from the baths. They were raw, inexperienced slaves who had not a coin or two to spend.

Within the entrance of the Thermae was a marble court, where better known philosophers discoursed on topics of the day, each to his own group of admirers. A Christian, dressed like any other Roman, held one corner with a crowd around him. There was a tremendous undercurrent of reaction against the prevalent cynical materialism and the vortex of fashion was also the cauldron of new aspirations and the battle-ground of wits.

Beyond the inner entrance were the two disrobing rooms—women to the left, men to the right where slaves, whose insolence had grown into a cultivated art, exchanged the folded garments for a bracelet with a number. Thence, stark-naked, through the bronze



doors set in green-veined marble, bathers passed into the vast frigidarium, whose marble plunge was surrounded by a mosaic promenade beneath a bronze and marble balcony.



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There men and women mingled indiscriminately, watching the divers, conversing, matching wits, exchanging gossip, some walking briskly around the promenade while others lounged on the marble seats that were interspaced against the wall between the statues.

There was not one gesture of indecency. A man who had stared at a woman would have been thrown out, execrated and forever more refused admission. But out in the street, where the litter-bearers and attendants whiled away the time, there were tales told that spread to the ends of the earth.

On a bench of black marble, between two statues of the Grecian Muses, Pertinax sat talking with Bultius Livius, sub-prefect of the palace. They were both pink-skinned from plunging in the pool, and the white scars, won in frontier wars, showed all the more distinctly. Boltius Livius was a clean-shaven, sharp-looking man with a thin-lipped air of keenness.

“This dependence on Marcia can easily be overdone,” he remarked. His eyes moved restlessly left and right. He lowered his voice. “Nobody knows how long her hold over Caesar will last. She owns him at present owns him absolutely—owns Rome. He delights in letting her revoke his orders; it’s a form of self-debauchery; he does things purposely to have her overrule him. But that has already lasted longer than I thought it would.”

“It will last as long as she and her Christians spy for him and make life pleasant,” said Pertinax.

“Exactly. But that is the difficulty,” Livius answered, moving his eyes again restlessly. There was not much risk of informers in the Thermae, but a man never knew who his enemies were. “Marcia represents the Christians, and the idiots won’t let well enough alone. By Hercules, they have it all their own way, thanks to Marcia. They are allowed to hold their meetings. All the statutes against them are ignored. They even go unpunished if they don’t salute Caesar’s image! They are allowed to preach against slavery. It has got so now that if a man condemned to death pretends he is a Christian they’re even allowed to rescue him out of the carceres! That’s Juno’s truth: I know of a dozen instances. But it’s the old story: Put a beggar on a horse and he will demand your house next. There’s no satisfying them. I am told they propose to abolish the gladiatorial combats! Laugh if you like. I have it from unquestionable sources. They intend to begin by abolishing the execution of criminals in the arena. Shades of Nero! They keep after Marcia day and night to dissuade Caesar from taking part in the spectacles, on the theory that he helps to make them popular.”

“What do they propose to substitute in popular esteem?” asked Pertinax.



“I don’t know. They’re mad enough for anything, and their hold over Marcia is beyond belief. The next thing you’ll know, they’ll persuade her it’s against religion to be Caesar’s mistress! They’re quite capable of sawing off the branch they’re sitting on. By Hercules, I hope they do it! Some of us might go down in the scramble, but—”



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“Does Marcia give Christian reasons to the emperor?” asked Pertinax, his forehead puzzled.

“No, no. No, by Hercules. No, no. Marcia is as skillful at managing Commodus as he is at hurling a javelin or driving horses. She talks about the dignity of Caesar and the glory of Rome—uses truth adroitly for her own ends—argues that if he continues to keep company with gladiators and jockeys, and insists on taking part in the combats, Rome may begin to despise him.”

“Rome does!” murmured Pertinax, his eyes and lips suggesting a mere flicker of a smile. “But only let Commodus once wake up to the fact and—”

Bultius Livius nodded.

“He will return the compliment and show us how to despise at wholesale, eh? Marcia’s life and yours and mine wouldn’t be worth an hour’s purchase. The problem is, who shall warn Marcia? She grows intolerant of friendly hints. I made her a present the other day of eight matched German’ litter-bearers—beauties—they cost a fortune—and I took the opportunity to have a chat with her. She told me to go home and try to manage my own wife! Friendly enough—she laughed—she meant no enmity; but shrewd though she is, and far-seeing though she is, the wine of influence is going to her head. You know what that portends. Few men, and fewer women, can drink deeply of that wine and—”

“She comes,” said Pertinax.

There was a stir near the bronze door leading to the women’s disrobing hall. Six women in a group were answering greetings, Marcia in their midst, but no man in the Thermae looked at them a moment longer than was necessary to return the wave of the hand with which Marcia greeted every one before walking down the steps into the plunge. She did not even wear the customary bracelet with its numbered metal disk; not even the attendants at the Thermae would presume to lose the clothing of the mistress of the emperor. Commodus, who at the age of twelve had flung a slave into the furnace because the water was too hot, would have made short work of any one who mislaid Marcia’s apparel.

She did not belie her reputation. It was no wonder that the sculptors claimed that every new Venus they turned out was Marcia’s portrait. Her beauty, as her toes touched water, was like that of Aphrodite rising from the wave. The light from the dome shone golden on her brown hair and her glossy skin. She was a thing of sensuous delight, incapable of coarseness, utterly untouched by the suggestion of vulgarity, and yet—

“It is strange she should take up with fancy religions,” said Pertinax under his breath.



She was pagan in every gesture, and not a patrician. That was indefinable but evident to trained eyes. Neither he, who knew her intimately, nor the newest, newly shaven son of a provincial for the first time exploring the wonders of Rome, could have imagined her as anything except a rich man's mistress.



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She plunged into the pool and swam like a mermaid, her companions following, climbed out at the farther end, where the diving-boards projected in tiers, one above the other, and passed through a bronze door into the first of the sweating rooms, evidently conscious of the murmur of comment that followed her, but taking no overt notice of it.

“Who is to be the next to try to reason with her—you?” asked Boltius Livius.

“No, not I. I have shot my bolt,” said Pertinax and closed his eyes, as if to shut out something from his memory—or possibly to banish thoughts he did not relish. There came a definite, hard glint into Livius’s eyes; he had a name for being sharper to detect intrigue and its ramifications than even the sharp outline of his face would indicate.

“You have heard of her latest indiscretion?” he asked, narrowly watching Pertinax. “There is a robber at large, named Maternus—you have heard of him? The man appears and disappears. Some say he is the same Maternus who was crucified near Antioch at about the time when you were there; some say he isn’t. He is reported to visit Rome in various disguises, and to be able to conduct himself so well that he can pass for a patrician. Some say he has a large band; some say, hardly any followers. Some say it was he who robbed the emperor’s own mail a month ago. He is reported to be here, there, everywhere; but there came at last reliable information that he lives in a cave in the woods on an estate that fell to the fiscus (the government department into which all payments were made, corresponding roughly to a modern treasury department) at the time when Maximus and his son Sextus were proscribed.”

Pertinax looked bored. He yawned.

“I think I will go in and sweat a while,” he remarked.

“Not yet. Let me finish,” said Livius. “It was reported to Caesar that the highwayman Maternus lives in a cave on this Aventine estate, and that the slaves and tenants on the place, who, of course, all passed to the new owner when the estate was sold, not only tolerate him but supply him with victuals and news. Caesar went into one of his usual frenzies, cursed half the senators by name, and ordered out a cohort from a legion getting ready to embark at Ostia. He ordered them to lay waste the estate, burn all the woods and if necessary torture the slaves and tenants, until they had Maternus. Dead or alive, they were not to dare to come without him, and meanwhile the rest of the legion was kept waiting at Ostia, with all the usual nuisance of desertions and drunkenness and what not else.”

“Everybody knows about that,” said Pertinax. “As governor of Rome it was my duty to point out to the emperor the inconvenience of keeping that legion waiting under arms so near the city. I was snubbed for my pains, but I did my duty.”



“Your duty? There were plenty of people more concerned than you,” said Livius, looking again as if he thought he had detected an intrigue. “There were the Ostian authorities, for instance, but I did not hear of their complaining.”



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“Naturally not,” said Pertinax, suppressing irritation. “Every day the legion lingered there meant money for the enterprising city fathers. I am opposed to all the petty pouching of commissions that goes on.”

“Doubtless. Being governor of Rome, you naturally—”

“I have heard of peculations at the palace,” Pertinax interrupted.

“Be that as it may, Commodus ordered out the cohort, sent it marching and amused himself inventing new ingenious torments for Maternus. Alternatively, he proposed to himself to have the cohort slaughtered in the arena, officers and all, if they should fail of their mission; so it was safe to wager they were going to bring back some one said to be Maternus, whether or not they caught the right man. Commodus was indulging in one of his storms of imperial righteousness. He was going to stamp out lawlessness. He was going to make it safe for any one to come or go along the Roman roads. Oh, he was in a fine Augustan mood. It wasn’t safe for any one but Marcia to come within a mile of him. Scowl—you know that scowl of his—it freezes the very sentries on the wall if he looks at their backs through the window! I don’t suppose there was a woman in Rome just then who would have cared to change places with Marcia! He sent for her, and half the palace betted she was ripe for banishment to one of those island retreats where Crispina (the wife of Commodus who was banished to the isle of Capreae and there secretly put to death) lived less than a week! But Marcia is fertile of surprises. She won’t surprise me if she outlives Commodus—by Hercules, she won’t surprise me if —”

He stared at Pertinax with impudently keen eyes. Pertinax looked at the bronze door leading to the sweating room, shrugging himself as if the frigidarium had grown too cool for comfort.

“Marcia actually persuaded Commodus to countermand the order!” Livius said, emphasizing each word. “Almighty Jove can only guess what argument she used, but if Maternus had been one of her pet Christians she couldn’t have saved him more successfully. Commodus sent a messenger post-haste that night to recall the cohort.”

“And a good thing too,” Pertinax remarked. “It isn’t a legion’s business to supply cohorts to do the work of the district police. There were five thousand raw men on the verge of mutiny in Ostia—”

“And—wait a minute—and,” said Livius, “don’t go yet—this is interesting: Marcia, that same night, sent a messenger of her own to find Maternus and to warn him.”

“How do you know?” Pertinax let a sign of nervousness escape him.



“In the palace, those of us who value our lives and our fortunes make it a business to know what goes on,” Livius answered with a dry laugh, “just as you take care to know what goes on in the city, Pertinax.”

The older man looked worried.

“Do you mean it is common gossip in the palace?” he demanded.



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“You are the first man I have spoken with. There are therefore only three who know, if you count the slave whom Marcia employed; four if you count Marcia. I had the great good luck not long ago to catch that slave in flagrante delicto—never mind what he was doing; that is another story altogether—and he gave me an insight into a number of useful secrets. The point is, that particular slave takes care not to run errands nowadays without informing me. There is not much that Marcia does that I don’t know about.” Livius’ eyes suggested gimlets boring holes into Pertinax’s face. Not a change of the other’s expression escaped him. Pertinax covered his mouth with his hand, pretending to yawn. He slapped his thighs to suggest that his involuntary shudder was due to having sat too long. But he did not deceive Livius. “It is known to me,” said Livius, “that you and Marcia are in each other’s confidence.”

“That makes me doubt your other information,” Pertinax retorted. “No man can jump to such a ridiculous conclusion and call it knowledge without making me doubt him on all points. You bore me, Livius. I have important business waiting; I must make haste into the sweating room and get that over with.”

But Livius’ sharp, nervous laugh arrested him.

“Not yet, friend Pertinax! Let Rome wait! Rome’s affairs will outlive both of us. I suspect you intend to tell Marcia to have my name included in the next proscription list! But I am not quite such a simpleton as that. Sit down and listen. I have proof that you plotted with the governor of Antioch to have an unknown criminal executed in place of a certain Norbanus, who escaped with your connivance and has since become a follower of the highwayman Maternus. That involves you rather seriously, doesn’t it! You see, I made sure of my facts before approaching you. And now—admit that I approached you tactfully! Come, Pertinax, I made no threats until you let me see I was in danger. I admire you. I regard you as a brave and an honorable Roman. I propose that you and I shall understand each other. You must take me into confidence, or I must take steps to protect myself.”

There was a long pause while a group of men and women came and chattered near by, laughing while one of the men tried to win a wager by climbing a marble pillar. Pertinax frowned. Livius did his best to look dependable and friendly, but his eyes were not those of a boon companion.

“You are incapable of loyalty to any one except yourself,” said Pertinax at last. “What pledge do you propose to offer me?”

“A white bull to Jupiter Capitolinus! I am willing to go with you to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, and to swear on the altar whatever solemn oath you wish.”

Pertinax smiled cynically.



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“The men who slew Julius Caesar were under oath to him,” he remarked. “Most solemn oaths they swore, then turned on one another like a pack of wolves! Octavian and Anthony were under oath; and how long did that last? My first claim to renown was based on having won the allegiance of our troops in Britain, who had broken the most solemn oath a man can take—of loyalty to Rome. An oath binds nobody. It simply is an emphasis of what a man intends that minute. It expresses an emotion. I believe the gods smile when they hear men pledge themselves. I personally, who am far less than a god and far less capable of reading men’s minds, never trust a man unless I like him, or unless he gives me pledges that make doubt impossible.”

“Then you don’t like me?” asked Livius.

“I would like you better if I knew that I could trust you.”

“You shall, Pertinax! Bring witnesses! I will commit myself before your witnesses to do my part in—”

His restless eyes glanced right and left. Then he lowered his voice.

“—in bringing about the political change you contemplate.”

“Let us go to the sweating room,” Pertinax answered. “Keep near me. I will think this matter over. If I see you holding speech not audible to me, with any one—”

“I am already pledged. You may depend on me,” said Livius. “I trust you more because you use caution. Come.”

## VI. THE EMPEROR COMMODUS

The imperial palace was a maze of splendor such as Babylon had never seen. It had its own great aqueducts to carry water for its fountains, for the gardens and for the imperial baths that were as magnificent, if not so large, as the Thermae of Titus. Palace after palace had been wrecked, remodeled and included in the whole, under the succeeding emperors, until the imperial quarters on the Palatine had grown into a city within a city.

There were barracks for the praetorian guard that lacked not much of being a fortress. Rooms and stairways for the countless slaves were like honeycomb cells in the dark foundations. There were underground passages, some of them secret, some notorious, connecting wing with wing; and there was one, for the emperor’s private use, that led to the great arena where the games were held, so that he might come and go with less risk of assassination.

Even temples had been taken over and included within the surrounding wall to make room for the ever-multiplying suites of state apartments, as each Caesar strove to outdo



the magnificence of his predecessor. Oriental marble, gold-leaf, exotic trees, silk awnings, fountains, the majestic figures of the guards, the bronze doors and the huge height of the buildings, awed even the Romans who were used to them.



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The throne-room was a place of such magnificence that it was said that even Caesar himself felt small in it. The foreign kings, ambassadors and Roman citizens admitted there to audience were disciplined without the slightest difficulty; there was no unseemliness, no haste, no crowding; horribly uncomfortable in the heavy togas that court etiquette prescribed, reminded of their dignity by colossal statues of the noblest Romans of antiquity, and ushered by magnificently uniformed past masters of the art of ceremony, all who entered felt that they were insignificant intruders into a golden mystery. The palace prefect in his cloak of cloth of gold, with his ivory wand of office, seemed a high priest of eternity; subprefects, standing in the marble antechamber to examine visitors' credentials and see that none passed in improperly attired, were keepers of Olympus.

The gilded marble throne was on a dais approached by marble steps, beneath a balcony to which a stair ascended from behind a carved screen. Trumpets announced the approach of Caesar, who could enter unobserved through a door at the side of the dais. From the moment that the trumpet sounded, and the guards grew as rigid as the basalt statues in the niches of the columned walls, it was a punishable crime to speak or even to move until Caesar appeared and was seated.

Nor was Caesar himself an anticlimax. Even Nero, nerveless in his latter days, when self-will and debauchery had pouched his eyes and stomach, had possessed the Roman gift of standing like a god. Vespasian and Titus, each in turn, was Mars personified. Aurelius had typified a gentler phase of Rome, a subtler dignity, but even he, whose worst severity was tempered by the philosophical regret that he could not kill crime with kindness, had worn the imperial purple like Olympus' delegate.

Commodus, in the minutes that he spared from his amusements to accept the glamor of the throne, was perfect. Handsomest of all the Caesars, he could act his part with such consummate majesty that men who knew him intimately half-believed he was a hero after all. Athletic, muscular and systematically trained, his vigor, that was purely physical, passed readily for spiritual quality within that golden hall, where the resources of the world were all put under tribute to provide a royal setting. He emerged. He smiled, as if the sun shone. He observed the rolled petitions, greetings, testimonials of flattery from private citizens and addresses of adulation from distant cities, being heaped into a gilded basket as the silent throng filed by beneath him. He nodded. Now and then he scowled, his irritation growing as the minutes passed. At each gesture of impatience the subprefects quietly impelled the crowd to quicker movement. But at the end of fifteen minutes Commodus grew tired of dignity and his ferocious scowl clouded his face like a thunderstorm.

"Am I to sit here while the whole world makes itself ridiculous by staring at me?" he demanded, in a harsh voice. It was loud enough to fill the throne-room, but none knew whether it was meant for an aside or not and none dared answer him. The crowd

continued flowing by, each raising his right hand and bowing as he reached the square of carpet that was placed exactly in front of Caesar's throne.



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Commodus rose to his feet. All movement ceased then and there was utter silence. For a moment he stood scowling at the crowd, one hand resting on the golden lion's head that flanked the throne. Then he laughed.

"Too many petitions!" he sneered, pointing at the overflowing basket; and in another moment he had vanished through the door behind the marble screen. Met and escorted up the stairs by groups of cringing slaves, he reached a columned corridor. Rich carpets lay on the mosaic floor; sunlight, from under; the awnings of a balcony glorious with potted flowers, shone on the colored statuary and the Grecian paintings.

"What are all these women doing?" he demanded. There were girls, half-hidden behind the statues, each one trying, as he passed her, to divine his mood and to pose attractively.

"Where is Marcia? What will she do to me next? Is this some new scheme of hers to keep me from enjoying my manhood? Send them away! The next girl I catch in the corridor shall be well whipped. Where is Marcia?"

Throwing away his toga for a slave to catch and fold he turned between gilded columns, through a bronze door, into the antechamber of the royal suite. There a dozen gladiators greeted him as if he were the sun shining out of the clouds after a month of rainy weather.

"This is better!" he exclaimed. "Ho, there, Narcissus! Ho, there, Horatius! Ha! So you recover, Albinus? What a skull the man has! Not many could take what I gave him and be on their feet again within the week! You may follow me, Narcissus. But where is Marcia?"

Marcia called to him through the curtained door that led to the next room—

"I am waiting, Commodus."

"By Jupiter, when she calls me Commodus it means an argument! Are some more of her Christians in the carceres, I wonder? Or has some new highwayman—By Juno's breasts, I tremble when she calls me Commodus!"

The gladiators laughed. He made a pass at one of them, tripped him, scuffled a moment and raised him struggling in the air, then flung him into the nearest group, who broke his fall and set him on his feet again.

"Am I strong enough to face my Marcia?" he asked and, laughing, passed into the other room, where half a dozen women grouped themselves around the imperial mistress.

"What now?" he demanded. "Why am I called Commodus?"



He stood magnificent, with folded arms, confronting her, play-acting the part of a guiltless man arraigned before the magistrate.

“O Roman Hercules,” she said, “I spoke in haste, you came so much sooner than expected. What woman can remember you are anything but Caesar when you smile at her? I am in love, and being loved, I am—”

“Contriving some new net for me, I’ll wager! Come and watch the new men training with the caestus; I will listen to your plan for ruling me and Rome while the sight of a good set-to stirs my genius to resist your blandishments!”



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“Caesar,” she said, “speak first with me alone.” Instantly his manner changed. He made a gesture of impatience. His sudden scowl frightened the women standing behind Marcia, although she appeared not to notice it, with the same peculiar trick of seeming not to see what she did not wish to seem to see that she had used when she walked naked through the Thermae.

“Send your scared women away then,” he retorted. “I trust Narcissus. You may speak before him.”

Her women vanished, hurrying into another room, the last one drawing a cord that closed a jingling curtain.

“Do you not trust me?” asked Marcia. “And is it seemly, Commodus, that I should speak to you before a gladiator?”

“Speak or be silent!” he grumbled, giving her a black look, but she did not seem to notice it. Her genius—the secret of her power—was to seem forever imperturbable and loving.

“Let Narcissus bear witness then; since Caesar bids me, I obey! Again and again I have warned you, Caesar. If I were less your slave and more your sycophant I would have tired of warning you. But none shall say of Marcia that her Caesar met Nero’s fate, whose women ran away and left him. Not while Marcia lives shall Commodus declare he has no friends.”

“Who now?” he demanded angrily. “Get me my tablet! Come now, name me your conspirators and they shall die before the sun sets!”

When he scowled his beauty vanished, his eyes seeming to grow closer like an ape’s. The mania for murder that obsessed him tautened his sinews. Cheeks, neck, forearms swelled with knotted strength. Ungovernable passion shook him.

“Name them!” he repeated, beckoning unconsciously for the tablet that none dared thrust into his hand.

“Shall I name all Rome?” asked Marcia, stepping closer, pressing herself against him. “O Hercules, my Roman Hercules—does love, that makes us women see, put bandages on men’s eyes? You have turned your back upon the better part of Rome to —”

“Better part?” He shook her by the shoulders, snorting. “Liars, cowards, ingrates, strutting peacocks, bladders of wind boring me and one another with their empty phrases, cringing lick-spittles—they make me sick to look at them! They fawn on me like hungry dogs. By Jupiter, I make myself ridiculous too often, pandering to a lot of courtiers! If they despise me then as I despise myself, I am in a bad way! I must make



haste and live again! I will get the stench of them out of my nostrils and the sickening sight of them out of my eyes by watching true men fight! When I slay lions with a javelin, or gladiators—”

“You but pander to the rabble,” Marcia interrupted. “So did Nero. Did they come to his aid when the senate and his friends deserted him?”

“Don’t interrupt me, woman! Senate! Court!” he snorted. “I can rout the senate with a gesture! I will fill my court with gladiators! I can change my ministers as often as I please—aye, and my mistress too,” he added, glaring at her. “Out with the names of these new conspirators who have set you trembling for my destiny!”



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“I know none—not yet,” she said. “I can feel, though. I hear the whispers in the Thermae—”

“By Jupiter, then I will close the Thermae.”

“When I pass through the streets I read men’s faces—”

“Snarled, have they? My praetorian guard shall show them what it is to be bitten! Mobs are no new things in Rome. The old way is the proper way to deal with mobs! Blood, corn and circuses, but principally blood! By the Dioscuri, I grow weary of your warnings, Marcia!”

He thrust her away from him and went growling like a bear into his own apartment, where his voice could be heard cursing the attendants whose dangerous duty it was to divine in an instant what clothes he would wear and to help him into them. He came out naked through the door, saw Marcia talking to Narcissus, laughed and disappeared again. Marcia raised her voice:

“Telamonion! Oh, Telamonion!”

A curly-headed Greek boy hardly eight years old came running from the outer corridor—all laughter—one of those spoiled favorites of fortune whom it was the fashion to keep as pets. Their usefulness consisted mainly in retention of their innocence.

“Telamonion, go in and play with him. Go in and make him laugh. He is bad tempered.”

Confident of everybody’s good-will, the child vanished through the curtains where Commodus roared him a greeting. Marcia continued talking to Narcissus in a low voice.

“When did you see Sextus last?” she asked.

“But yesterday.”

“And what has he done, do you say? Tell me that again.”

“He has found out the chiefs of the party of Lucius Septimius Severus. He has also discovered the leaders of Pescennius Niger’s party. He says, too, there is a smaller group that looks toward Clodius Albinus, who commands the troops in Britain.”

“Did he tell you names?”

“No. He said he knew I would tell you, and you might tell Commodus, who would write all the names on his proscription list. Sextus, I tell you, reckons his own life nothing, but he is extremely careful for his friends.”



“It would be easy to set a trap and catch him. He is insolent. He has had too much rein,” said Marcia. “But what would be the use?” Narcissus answered. “There would be Norbanus, too, to reckon with. Each plays into the other’s hands. Each knows the other’s secrets. Kill one, and there remains the other—doubly dangerous because alarmed. They take turns to visit Rome, the other remaining in hiding with their following of freedmen and educated slaves. They only commit just enough robbery to gain themselves an enviable reputation on the countryside. They visit their friends in Rome in various disguises, and they travel all over Italy to plot with the adherents of this faction or the other. Sextus favors Pertinax—says he would make a respectable emperor— another Marcus Aurelius. But Pertinax knows next to nothing



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of Sextus' doings, although he protects Sextus as far as he can and sees him now and then. Sextus' plan is to keep all three rival factions by the ears, so that if anything should happen—" he nodded toward the curtain, from behind which came the sounds of childish laughter and the crashing voice of Commodus encouraging in some piece of mischief—"they would be all at odds and Pertinax could seize the throne."

"I wonder whether I was mad that I protected Sextus!" exclaimed Marcia. "He has served us well. If I had let them catch and crucify him as Maternus, we would have had no one to keep us informed of all these cross-conspiracies. But are you sure he favors Pertinax?"

"Quite sure. He even risked an interview with Flavia Titiana, to implore her influence with her husband. Sextus would be all for striking now, this instant; he has assured himself that the world is tired of Commodus, and that no faction is strong enough to stand in the way of Pertinax; but he knows how difficult it will be to persuade Pertinax to assert himself. Pertinax will not hear of murdering Caesar; he says: 'Let us see what happens—if the Fates intend me to be Caesar, let the Fates show how!'"

"Aye, that is Pertinax!" said Marcia. "Why is it that the honest men are all such delayers! As for me, I will save my Commodus if he will let me. If not, the praetorian guard shall put Pertinax on the throne before any other faction has a chance to move. Otherwise we all die—all of us! Severus—Pescennius Niger—Clodius Albinus—any of the others would include us in a general proscription. Pertinax is friendly. He protects his friends. He is the safest man in all ways. Let Pertinax be acclaimed by all the praetorian guard and the senate would accept him eagerly enough. They would feel sure of his mildness. Pertinax would do no wholesale murdering to wipe out opposition; he would try to pacify opponents by the institution of reforms and decent government."

"You must beware you are not forestalled," Narcissus warned her. "Sextus tells me there is more than one man ready to slay Commodus at the first chance. Severus, Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus keep themselves informed as to what is going on; their messengers are in constant movement. If Commodus should lift a hand against either of those three, that would be the signal for civil war. All three would march on Rome."

"Caesar is much more likely to learn of the plotting through his own informers, and to try to terrify the generals by killing their supporters here in Rome," said Marcia. "What does Sextus intend? To kill Caesar himself?"

Narcissus nodded.



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“Well, when Sextus thinks that time has come, you kill him! Let that be your task. We must save the life of Commodus as long as possible. When nothing further can be done, we must involve Pertinax so that he won’t dare to back out. It was he, you know, who persuaded me to save Maternus the highwayman’s life; it was he who told me Maternus is really Sextus, son of Maximus. His knowledge of that secret gives me a certain hold on Pertinax! Caesar would have his head off at a word from me. But the best way with Pertinax is to stroke the honest side of him—the charcoal-burner side of him—the peasant side, if that can be done without making him too diffident. He is perfectly capable of offering the throne to some one else at the last minute!”

A step sounded on the other side of the curtain. “Caesar!” Narcissus whispered. As excuse for being seen in conversation with her he began to show her a charm against all kinds of treachery that he had bought from an Egyptian. She snatched it from him.

“Caesar!” she exclaimed, bounding toward Commodus and standing in his way. Not even she dared lay a hand on him when he was in that volcanic mood. “As you love me, will you wear this?”

“For love of you, what have I not done?” he retorted, smiling at her. “What now?”

She advanced another half-step, but no nearer. There was laughter on his lips, but in his eye cold cruelty.

“My Caesar, wear it! It protects against conspiracy.”

He showed her a new sword that he had girded on along with the short tunic of a gladiator.

“Against the bellyache, use Galen’s pills; but this is the right medicine against conspiracy!” he answered. Then he took the little golden charm into his left hand, tossing it on his palm and looked at her, still smiling.

“Where did you get this bauble?”

“Not I. One of those magicians who frequent that Forum sold it to Narcissus.”

“Bah!” He flung it through the window. “Who is the magician? Name him! I will have him thrown into the carceres. We’ll see whether the charms he sells so cheap are any good! Or is he a Christian?” he asked, sneering.

“The Christians, you know, don’t approve of charms,” Marcia answered.

“By Jupiter, there’s not much that they do approve of!” he retorted. “I begin to weary of your Christians. I begin to think Nero was right, and my father, too! There was a wisdom in treating Christians as vermin! It might not be a bad thing, Marcia, to warn



your Christians to procure themselves a charm or two against my weariness of their perpetual efforts to govern me! The Christians, I suppose, have been telling you to keep me out of the arena? Hence this living statuary in the corridor, and all this talk about the dignity of Rome! Tscharr-rrh! There's more dignity about one gladiator's death than in all Rome outside the arena! Woman, you forget you are only a woman. I remember that! I am a god! I have the blood of Caesar in my veins. And like the unseen gods, I take my pleasure watching men and women die! I loose my javelins like thunderbolts—like Jupiter himself! Like Hercules—”

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He paused. He noticed Marcia was laughing. Only she, in all the Roman empire, dared to mock him when he boasted. Not even she knew why he let her do it. He began to smile again, the frightful frown that rode over his eyes dispersing, leaving his forehead as smooth as marble.

“If I should marry you and make you empress,” he said, “how long do you think I should last after that? You are clever enough to rule the fools who squawk and jabber in the senate and the Forum. You are beautiful enough to start another siege of Troy! But remember: You are Caesar’s concubine, not empress! Just remember that, will you! When I find a woman lovelier than you, and wiser, I will give you and your Christians a taste of Nero’s policy. Now—do you love me?”

“If I did not, could I stand before you and receive these insults?” she retorted, trusting to the inspiration of the moment; for she had no method with him.

“I would willingly die,” she said, “if you would give the love you have bestowed on me to Rome instead, and use your godlike energy in ruling wisely, rather than in killing men and winning chariot races. One Marcia does not matter much. One Commodus can—”

“Can love his Marcia!” he interrupted, with a high-pitched laugh. He seized her, nearly crushing out her breath. “A Caius and a Caia we have been! By Jupiter, if not for you and Paulus I would have left Rome long ago to march in Alexander’s wake! I would have carved me a new empire that did not stink so of politicians!”

He strode into the anteroom where all the gladiators waited and Narcissus had to follow him—well named enough, for he was lithe and muscular and beautiful, but, nonetheless, though taller, not to be compared with Commodus—even as the women, chosen for their good looks and intelligence, who hastened to reappear the moment the emperor’s back was turned, were nothing like so beautiful as Marcia.

In all the known world there were no two finer specimens of human shapeliness than the tyrant who ruled and the woman whose wits and daring had so long preserved him from his enemies.

“Come to the arena,” he called back to her. “Come and see how Hercules throws javelins from a chariot at full pelt!”

But Marcia did not answer, and he forgot her almost before he reached the entrance of the private tunnel through which he passed to the arena. She had more accurately aimed and nicely balanced work to do than even Commodus could do with javelins against a living target.

## VII. MARCIA



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In everything but title and security of tenure Marcia was empress of the world, and she had what empresses most often lack—the common touch. She had been born in slavery. She had ascended step by step to fortune, by her own wits, learning by experience. Each layer of society was known to her—its virtues, prejudices, limitations and peculiar tricks of thought. Being almost incredibly beautiful, she had learned very early in life that the desired (not always the desirable) is powerful to sway men; the possessed begins to lose its sway; the habit of possession easily succumbs to boredom, and then power ceases. Even Commodus, accordingly, had never owned her in the sense that men own slaves; she had reserved to herself self-mastery, which called for cunning, courage and a certain ruthlessness, albeit tempered by a reckless generosity.

She saw life skeptically, undeceived by the fawning flattery that Rome served up to her, enjoying it as a cat likes being stroked. They said of her that she slept with one eye open.

Livius had complained in the *Thermae* to Pertinax that the wine of influence was going to Marcia's head, but he merely expressed the opinion of one man, who would have liked to feel himself superior to her and to use her for his own ends. She was not deceived by Livius, or by anybody else. She knew that Livius was keeping watch on her, and how he did it, having shrewdly guessed that a present of eight matched litter-bearers was too extravagant not to mask ulterior designs. She watched him much more artfully than he watched her. Her secret knowledge that he knew her secret was more dangerous to him than anything that he had found out could be dangerous to her.

The eight matched litter-bearers waited with the gilded litter near a flight of marble steps that descended from the door of Marcia's apartments in the palace to a sunlit garden with a fountain in the midst. There was a crowd of servants and four Syrian eunuchs, sleek offensive menials in yellow robes; two lictors besides, with fasces and the Roman civic uniform—a scandalous abuse of ancient ceremony—ready to conduct a progress through the city. But they all yawned. Marcia and her usual companion did not come; there was delay—and gossip, naturally.

A yawning eunuch rearranged the bowknot of his girdle.

“What does she want with Livius? He usually gets sent for when somebody needs punishing. Who do you suppose has fallen foul of her?”

“Himself! He sent her messenger back with word he was engaged on palace business. I heard her tell the slave to go again and not return without him! Bacchus! But it wouldn't worry me if Livius should lose his head! For an aristocrat he has more than his share of undignified curiosity— forever poking his sharp nose into other people's business. Marcia may have found him out. Let's hope!”



At the foot of the marble stairway, in the hall below Marcia's apartment, Livius stood remonstrating, growing nervous. Marcia, dressed in the dignified robes of a Roman matron, that concealed even her ankles and suggested the demure, self-conscious rectitude of olden times, kept touching his breast with her ivory fan, he flinching from the touch, subduing irritation.



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“If the question is, what I want with you, Livius, the answer is, that I invite you. Order your litter brought.”

“But Marcia, I am subprefect. I am responsible to—”

“Did you hear?”

“But if you will tell where we are going, I might feel justified in neglecting the palace business. I assure you I have important work to do.”

“There are plenty who can attend to it,” said Marcia. “The most important thing in your life, Livius, is my good-will. You are delaying me.”

Livius glared at Caia Poppeia, the lady-in-waiting, who was smiling, standing a little behind Marcia. He hoped she would take the hint and withdraw out of earshot, but she had had instructions, and came half a step closer.

“Will you let me go back to my office and—”

“No!” answered Marcia.

He yielded with a nervous gesture, that implored her not to make an indiscretion. A subprefect, in the nature of his calling, had too many enemies to relish repetition in the palace precincts of a threat from Marcia, however baseless it might be. And besides, it might be something serious that almost had escaped her lips. Untrue or true, it would be known all over the palace in an hour; within the day all Rome would know of it. There were two slaves by the front door, two more on the last step of the stairs.

“I will come, of course,” he said. “I am delighted. I am honored. I am fortunate!”

She nodded. She sent one of her own slaves to order his private litter brought, while Livius attempted to look comfortable, cudgeling his brains to know what mischief she had found out. It was nothing unusual that his litter should follow hers through the streets of Rome; in fact, it was an honor coveted by all officials of the palace, that fell to his share rather frequently because of his distinguished air of a latter-day man of the world and his intimate knowledge of everybody’s business and ancestry. He was often ordered to go with her at a moment’s notice. But this was the first time she had refused to say where they were going, or why, and there was a hint of malice in her smile that made his blood run cold. He was a connoisseur of malice.

Marcia leaned on his arm as she went down the steps to her litter. She permitted him to help her in. But then, while her companion was following through the silken curtains, she leaned out at the farther side and whispered to the nearest eunuch. Livius, climbing into his own gilt vehicle and lifted shoulder-high by eight Numidians, became aware that

Marcia's eunuchs had been told to keep an eye on him; two yellow-robed, insufferably impudent inquisitors strode in among his own attendants.



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An escort of twenty praetorian guards and a decurion was waiting at the gate to take its place between the lictors and Marcia's litter, but that did not in any way increase Livius' sense of security. The praetorian guard regarded Marcia as the source of its illegal privileges. It looked to her far more than to the emperor for favors, buying them with lawless loyalty to her. She ruined discipline by her support of every plea for increased perquisites. No outraged citizen had any hope of redress so long as Marcia's ear could be reached (although Commodus got the blame for it). It was the key to Marcia's system of insurance against unforeseen contingencies. The only regularly drilled and armed troops in the city were as loyal to her, secretly and openly, as Livius himself was to the principle of cynical self-help.

He began to feel thoroughly frightened, as he told himself that the escort and their decurion would swear to any statement Marcia might make. If she had learned that he was in the habit of receiving secret information from her slave, there were a thousand ways she might take to avenge herself; a very simple way would be to charge him with improper overtures and have him killed by the praetorians—a way that might particularly interest her, since it would presumably increase her reputation for constancy to Commodus.

The eunuchs watched him. The lictors and praetorians cleared the way, so there were no convenient halts that could enable him to slip unnoticed through the crowd. His own attendants seemed to have divined that there was something ominous about the journey, and he was not the kind of man whose servants are devotedly attached to him. He knew it. He noticed sullenness already in the answers his servant gave him through the litter curtains, when he asked whether the man knew their destination.

"None knows. All I know is, we must follow Marcia."

The slave's voice was almost patronizing. Livius made up his mind, if he should live the day out, to sell the rascal to some farmer who would teach him with a whip what service meant. But he said nothing. He preferred to spring surprises, only hoping he himself might not be overwhelmed in one.

By the time they reached Cornificia's house he was in such a state of nervousness, and so blanched, that he had to summon his servant into the litter to rub cosmetic on his cheeks. He took one of Galen's famous strychnine pills before he could prevent his limbs from trembling. Even so, when he rolled out of the litter and advanced with his courtliest bow to escort Marcia into the house, she recognized his fear and mocked him:

"You are bilious? Or has some handsomer Adonis won your Venus from you? Is it jealousy?"

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He pretended that the litter-bearers needed whipping for having shaken him. It made him more than ever ill at ease that she should mock him before all the slaves who grouped themselves in Cornificia's forecourt. Hers was one of those houses set back from the street, combining an air of seclusion with such elegance as could not possibly escape the notice of the passer-by. The forecourt was adorned with statuary and the gate left wide, affording a glimpse of sunlit greenery and marble that entirely changed the aspect of the narrow street. There were never less than twenty tradesmen at the gate, imploring opportunity to show their wares, which were in baskets and boxes, with slaves squatting beside them. All Rome would know within the hour that Marcia had called on Cornificia, and that Livius, the subprefect, had been mocked by Marcia in public.

A small crowd gathered to watch the picturesque ceremony of reception— Cornificia's house steward marshaling his staff, the brightly colored costumes blending in the sunlight with the hues of flowers and the rich, soft sheen of marble in the shadow of tall cypresses. The praetorians had to form a cordon in front of the gate, and the street became choked by the impeded traffic. Rome loved pageantry; it filled its eyes before its belly, which was nine-tenths of the secret of the Caesar's power.

Within the house, however, there was almost a stoical calm—a sensation of cloistered chastity produced by the restraint of ornament and the subdued light on gloriously painted frescoes representing evening benediction at a temple altar, a gathering of the Muses, sacrifice before a shrine of Aesculapius and Jason's voyage to Colchis for the Golden Fleece. The inner court, where Cornificia received her guests, was like a sanctuary dedicated to the decencies, its one extravagance the almost ostentatious restfulness, accentuated by the cooing of white pigeons and the drip and splash of water in the fountain in the midst.

The dignity of drama was the essence of all Roman ceremony. The formalities of greeting were observed as elegantly, and with far more evident sincerity, in Cornificia's house than in Caesar's palace. Cornificia, dressed in white and wearing very little jewelry, received her guests more like an old-time patrician matron than a notorious modern concubine. Her notoriety, in fact, was due to Flavia Titiana, rather than to any indiscretions of her own. To justify her infidelities, which were a byword, Pertinax' lawful wife went to ingenious lengths to blacken Cornificia's reputation, regaling all society with her invented tales about the lewd attractions Cornificia staged to keep Pertinax held in her toils.

That Cornificia did exercise a sway over the governor of Rome was undeniable. He worshiped her and made no secret of it. But she held him by a method diametrically contrary to that which rumor, stirred by Flavia Titiana, indicated; Cornificia's house was a place where he could lay aside the feverish activities of public life and revel in the intellectual and philosophical amusements that he genuinely loved.



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But Livius loathed her. Among other things, he suspected her of being in league with Marcia to protect the Christians. To him she represented the idealism that his cynicism bitterly rejected. The mere fact of her unshakable fidelity to Pertinax was an offense in his eyes; she presented what he considered an impudent pose of morality, more impudent because it was sustained. He might have liked her well enough if she had been a hypocrite, complaisant to himself.

She understood him perfectly—better, in fact, than she understood Marcia, whose visits usually led to intricate entanglements for Pertinax. When she had sent the slaves away and they four lay at ease on couches in the shade of three exotic potted palms, she turned her back toward Livius, suspecting he would bring his motives to the surface if she gave him time; whereas Marcia would hide hers and employ a dozen artifices to make them undiscoverable.

“You have not brought Livius because you think he loves me!” she said, laughing. “Nor have you come, my Marcia, for nothing, since you might have sent for me and saved yourself trouble. I anticipate intrigue! What plot have you discovered now? Is Pertinax its victim? You can always interest me if you talk of Pertinax.”

“We will talk of Livius,” said Marcia.

Leaning on his elbows, Livius glared at Caia Poppeia, Marcia’s companion. He coughed, to draw attention to her, but Marcia refused to take the hint. “Livius has information for us,” she remarked.

Livius rose from the couch and came and stood before her, knitting his fingers together behind his back, compelling himself to smile. His pallor made the hastily applied cosmetics look ridiculous.

“Marcia,” he said, “you make it obvious that you suspect me of some indiscretion.”

“Never!” she retorted, mocking. “You indiscreet? Who would believe it? Give us an example of discretion; you are Paris in the presence of three goddesses. Select your destiny!”

He smiled, attempted to regain his normal air of tolerant importance—glanced about him—saw the sunlight making iridescent pools of fire within a crystal ball set on the fountain’s edge—took up the ball and brought it to her, holding it in both hands.

“What choice is there than that which Paris made?” he asked, kneeling on one knee, laughing. “Venus rules men’s hearts. She must prevail. So into your most lovely hands I give my destiny.”

“You mean, you leave it there!” said Marcia. “Could you ever afford to ignore me and intrigue behind my back?”



“I am the least intriguing person of your acquaintance, Marcia,” he answered, rising because the hard mosaic pavement hurt his knee, and the position made him feel undignified. But more than dignity he loved discretion; he wished there were eyes in the back of his head, to see whether slaves were watching from the curtained windows opening on the inner court. “It is my policy,” he went on, “to know much and say little; to observe much, and do nothing! I am much too lazy for intrigue, which is hard work, judging by what I have seen of those who indulge in it.”



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“Is that why you sacrificed a white bull recently?” asked Marcia.

Livius glanced at Cornificia, but her patrician face gave no hint. Caia Poppeia’s was less under control, for she was younger and had nothing to conceal; she was inquisitively enjoying the entertainment and evidently did not know what was coming.

“I sacrificed a white bull to Jupiter Capitolinus, as is customary, to confirm a sacred oath,” he answered.

“Very well, suppose you break the oath!” said Marcia.

He managed to look scandalized—then chuckled foolishly, remembering what Pertinax had said about the value of an oath; but his own dignity obliged him to protest.

“I am not one of your Christians,” he answered, stiffening himself. “I am old-fashioned enough to hold that an oath made at the altar of our Roman Jupiter is sacred and inviolable.”

“When you took your oath of office you swore to be in all things true to Caesar,” Marcia retorted. “Do you prefer to tell Caesar how true you have been to that oath? Which oath holds the first one or the second?”

“I could ask to be released from the second one,” said Livius. “If you will give me time —”

Marcia’s laugh interrupted him. It was soft, melodious, like wavelets on a calm sea, hinting unseen reefs.

“Time,” she said, “Is all that death needs! Death does not wait on oaths; it comes to us. I wish to know just how far I can trust you, Livius.”

Nine Roman nobles out of ten in Livius’ position would have recognized at once the deadliness of the alternatives she offered and, preserving something of the shreds of pride, would have accepted suicide as preferable. Livius had no such stamina. He seized the other horn of the dilemma.

“I perceive Pertinax has betrayed me,” he sneered, looking sharply at Cornificia; but she was watching Marcia and did not seem conscious of his glance. “If Pertinax has broken his oath, mine no longer binds me. This is the fact then: I discovered how he helped Sextus, son of Maximus, to avoid execution by a ruse, making believe to be killed. Pertinax was also privy to the execution of an unknown thief in place of Norbanus, a friend of Sextus, also implicated in conspiracy. Pertinax has been secretly negotiating with Sextus ever since. Sextus now calls himself Maternus and is notorious as a highwayman.”



“What else do you know about Maternus?” Marcia inquired. There was a trace at last of sharpness in her voice. A hint conveyed itself that she could summon the praetorians if he did not answer swiftly.

“He plots against Caesar.”

“You know too little or too much!” said Marcia. “What else?”

He closed his lips tight. “I know nothing else.”

“Have you had any dealings with Sextus?”

“Never.”

He was shifting now from one foot to the other, hardly noticeably, but enough to make Marcia smile. “Shall we hear what Sextus has to say to that?” asked Cornificia, so confidently that there was no doubt Marcia had given her the signal.



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Marcia moved her melting, lazy, laughing eyes and Cornificia clapped her hands. A slave came.

“Bring the astrologer.”

Sextus must have been listening, he appeared so instantly. He stood with folded arms confronting them, his weathered face in sunlight. Pigment was not needed to produce the healthy bronze hue of his skin; his curly hair, bound by a fillet, was unruly from the outdoor life he had been leading; the strong sinews of his arms and legs belied the ease of his pretended calling and the starry cloak he wore was laughable in its failure to disguise the man of action. He saluted the three women with a gesture of the raised right hand that no man unaccustomed to the use of arms could imitate, then turning slightly toward Livius, acknowledged his nod with a humorous grin.

“So we meet again, Bultius Livius.”

“Again?” asked Marcia.

“Why yes, I met him in the house of Pertinax. It is three days since we spoke together. Three, or is it four, Livius? I have been busy. I forget.”

“Can Livius have lied?” asked Marcia. She seemed to be enjoying the entertainment.

Livius threw caution to the winds.

“Is this a tribunal?” he demanded. “If so, of what am I accused?” He tried to speak indignantly, but something caught in his throat. The cough became a sob and in a moment he was half-hysterical. “By Hercules, what judges! What a witness! Is he a two-headed witness who shall swear my life away? I understand you, Marcia!”

(At least two witnesses were necessary under Roman law.)

“You?” she laughed. “You understand me?”

He recovered something of his self-possession, a wave of virility returning. High living and the feverish excitement of the palace regime had ruined his nerves but there were traces still of his original astuteness. He resumed his air of dignity.

“Pardon me,” he said. “I have been overworked of late. I must see Galen about this jumpiness. When I said I understand you I meant, I realize that you are joking. Naturally you would not receive a highwayman in Cornificia’s house, and at the same time accuse me of treason! Pray excuse my outburst—set it to the score of ill-health. I will see Galen.”

“You shall see him now!” laughed Marcia, and Cornificia clapped her hands.



Less suddenly than Sextus had appeared, because his age was beginning to tell on him, Galen entered the court through a door behind the palm-trees and stood smiling, making his old-world, slow salute to Marcia. His bright eyes moved alertly amid wrinkles. He looked something like the statues of the elder Cato, only with a kindlier humor and less obstinacy at the corners of the mouth. Two slaves brought out a couch for him and vanished when he had taken his ease on it after fussing a little because the sun was in his eyes.



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“My trade is to oppose death diplomatically,” he remarked. “I am a poor diplomatist. I only gain a little here and there. Death wins inevitably. Nevertheless, they only summon me for consultation when they hope to gain a year or two for somebody. Marcia, unless you let Bultius Livius use that couch he will swoon. I warn you. The man’s heart is weak. He has more brain than heart,” he added. “How is our astrologer?”

He greeted Sextus with a wrinkled grin and beckoned him to share his couch. Sextus sat down and began chafing the old doctor’s legs. Marcia took her time about letting Livius be seated.

“You heard Galen?” she asked. “We are here to cheat death diplomatically.”

“Whose death?” Livius demanded.

“Rome’s!” said Marcia, her eyes intently on his face. “If Rome should split in three parts it would fall asunder. None but Commodus can save us from a civil war. We are here to learn what Bultius Livius can do to preserve the life of Commodus.”

Livius’ face, grotesque already with its hastily smeared carmine, assumed new bewilderment.

“I have seen men tortured who were less ready to betray themselves,” said Galen. “Give him wine—strong wine, that is my advice.”

But Marcia preferred her victim thoroughly subjected.

“Fill your eyes with sunlight, Livius. Breathe deep! You look and breathe your last, unless you satisfy me! This astrologer, who is not Sextus—mark that! I have said he is not Sextus. Galen certified to Sextus’ death and there were twenty other witnesses. Nor is he Maternus the highwayman. Maternus was crucified. That other Maternus, who is rumored to live in the Aventine Hills, is an imaginary person—a mere name used by runaways who take to robbery. This astrologer, I say, reports that you know all the secrets of the factions that are separately plotting to destroy our Commodus.”

Livius did not answer, although she paused to give him time.

“You said you understood me, Livius. But it is I who understand you—utterly! To you any price is satisfactory if your own skin and perquisites are safe. You are as crafty a spy as any rat in the palace cellars. You have kept yourself informed in order to get the pickings when you see at last which side to take. Careful, very clever of you, Livius! But have you ever seen an eagle rob a fish-hawk of its catch?”

“Why waste time?” Cornificia asked impatiently. “He forced himself on Pertinax, who should have had him murdered, only Pertinax is too indifferent to his own—”



“Too philosophical!” corrected Galen.

Then Caia Poppeia spoke up, in a young, hard voice that had none of Marcia’s honeyed charm. No doubt of her was possible; she could be cruel for the sake of cruelty and loyal for the sake of pride. Her beauty was a mere means to an end—the end intrigue, for the impassionate excitement of it. She was straight-lipped, with a smile that flickered, and a hard light in her blue eyes.



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“It was I who learned you spy on Marcia. I know, too, that you keep a spy in Britain,—one in Gaul, another in Severus’ camp. I read the last nine letters they sent you. I showed them to Marcia.”

“I kept one,” Marcia added. “It came yesterday. It compromises you beyond—”

“I yield!” said Livius, his knees beginning to look weak.

“To whom? To me?” asked Sextus, standing up abruptly and confronting him with folded arms. “Who stole the list I sent to Pertinax, of names of the important men who are intriguing for Severus, and for Pescennius Niger, and for Clodius Albinus?”

“Who knows?” Livius shrugged his shoulders.

“None knew of that list but you!” said Sextus. “You heard me speak of it to Pertinax. You heard me promise I would send it to him. None but you and he and I knew who the messenger would be. Where is the messenger?”

“In the sewers probably!” said Marcia. “The list is more important.”

“If it isn’t in the sewers, too,” said Livius, snatching at a straw. “By Hercules, I know nothing of a list.”

“Then you shall drown with Sextus’ slave in the Cloaca Maxima, the great sewer of Rome,” said Marcia. “Not that I need the list. I know what names are written on it. But if it should have fallen into Caesar’s hands—”

She shuddered, acting horror perfectly, and Livius, like a drowning man who thinks he sees the shore, struck out and sank!

“You threaten me, but I am no such fool as you imagine! I know all about you! I perceive you have crossed your Rubicon. Well—”

“Summon the decurion and two men!” Marcia interrupted, glancing at Cornificia. But she made a gesture with her hand that Cornificia interpreted to mean “do nothing of the kind!”

Livius did not see the gesture. Rage, shame, terror overwhelmed him and he blurted out the information Marcia was seeking—hurled it at her in the form of silly, useless threats:

“You wanton! You can kill me but my journal is in safe hands! Harm me— cause me to be missing from the palace for a few hours, and they may light your funeral fires! My journal, with the names of the conspirators, and all the details of your daily intriguing, goes straight into Caesar’s hands!”



The climax he expected failed. There was no excitement. Nobody seemed astonished. Marcia settled herself more comfortably on the couch and Galen began whispering to Sextus. The two other women looked amused. Reaction sweeping over him, his senses reeled and Livius stepped backward, staggering to the fountain, where he sat down.

“Bona dea! But the man took time to tell his secret!” Marcia exclaimed. “Popeia, you had better take my litter to the palace and bring that minx Cornelia. I suspected it was she but wasn’t sure of it. Don’t give her an inkling of what you know. Go with her to her apartment and watch her dress; then make an excuse to keep her waiting in your room while you go back and search hers. Have help if you need it; take two of my eunuchs, but watch that they don’t read the journal. Look under her mattress. Look everywhere. If you can’t find the journal, bring Cornelia without it. I will soon make her tell us where it is.”



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### VIII. NARCISSUS

"A gladiator's life is not so bad if he behaves himself, and while it lasts," Narcissus said.

He was sitting beside Sextus, son of Maximus, in the ergastulum beneath the training school of Bruttius Marius, which was well known to be the emperor's establishment, although maintained in the name of a citizen. There was a stone seat at the end where sunlight poured through a barred window high up in the wall. To right and left facing a central corridor were cells with doors of latticed iron. Each cell had its own barred window, hardly a foot square, set high out of reach and the light, piercing the latticed doors, made criss-cross patterns on the white wall of the corridor. Narcissus got up, glanced into each cell and sat down again beside Sextus.

"The trouble is, they don't," he went on. "If you let them out, they drink and get into poor condition; and if you keep them in, they kill themselves unless they're watched. These men are reserved for Paulus, and they know they haven't a chance against him."

"Paulus' luck won't last forever," Sextus remarked grimly.

"No, nor his skill, I suppose. But he doesn't debauch himself, so he's always in perfect condition."

"Haven't you a man in here who might be made nery enough to kill him?" Sextus asked. "They would kill the man himself, of course, directly afterward, but we might undertake to enrich his relatives."

Narcissus shook his head.

"One might have a chance with the sword or with the net and trident, though I doubt it. But Paulus uses a javelin and his aim is like lightning. Only yesterday at practise they loosed eleven lions at him from eleven directions at the same moment. He slew them with eleven javelins, and each one stone dead. Some of these men saw him do it, which hasn't encouraged them, I can tell you. In the second place, they know Paulus is Commodus. He might just as well go into the arena frankly as the emperor, for all the secret it is. That substitute who occupies the royal pavilion when Commodus himself is in the arena no longer looks very much like him; he is getting too loose under the chin, although a year ago you could hardly tell the two apart. Even the mob knows Paulus is Commodus, although nobody dares to acclaim him openly. Send a gladiator in against another gladiator and even though he may know that the other man can split a stick at twenty yards, he will do his best. But let him know he goes against the emperor and he has no nerve to start with; he can't aim straight; he suspects his own three javelins and his shield and helmet have been tampered with. I myself would be afraid to face Paulus, being not much good with the javelin in any case, besides being superstitious about killing emperors, who are gods, not men, or the senate and priests wouldn't say

so. It is the same in the races: setting aside Caesar's skill, which is simply phenomenal, the other charioteers are all afraid of him."



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"If he isn't killed soon, Severus or one of the others will forestall us all," said Sextus. "Pertinax has only one chance: to be on the throne before the other candidates know what is happening."

Narcissus' bronze face lighted with a sudden smile that rippled all around the corners of his mouth, so that he looked like a genial satyr.

"Speaking of killing," he said, "Marcia has ordered me to kill you the moment you make up your mind the time has come to strike!"

"You promised her, of course?"

"No, as it happens we were interrupted. But she relies on me and if she ever begins to suspect me I would rather die in the arena than be racked and burned!"

"Why not then? How is this for a proposal?" Sextus touched him on the shoulder. "Substitute yourself and me for two of these men! Send me in against him first. If he kills me, you next. One of us might get him. I am lucky. I believe the gods are interested in me, I have had so many escapes from death."

"I haven't much faith in the gods," said Narcissus. "They may be all like Commodus. I heard Galen say that men created gods in their own image."

Sextus smiled at him.

"You have been listening, I suppose, to Marcia and her Christians."

"Listening, yes, but I don't lean either way. It doesn't seem to me that Christianity can do much for a man when javelins are in the air. And besides, to be frank with you, Sextus, I rather hope to make a little something for myself. God though he is said to be, I would like to see Commodus killed for I loathe him. But I hope to survive him and obtain my freedom. Pertinax would manumit me. That is why I applied for the post of trainer in this beastly ergastulum. It is bad enough to have to endure the gloom of men virtually condemned to death and looking for a chance to kill themselves, but it is better than treading the sand to have one's liver split, one's throat cut, and be dragged out with the hooks. I have fought many a fight, but I liked each one less than the last."

He got up and strode again along the corridor, glancing into the cells, where gladiators sat fettered to the wall.

"This whole business is getting too confused for me," he grumbled, sitting down again. "You want to kill Commodus, as is reasonable. Marcia has ordered me to kill you, which is unreasonable! Yet for the present she protects you. Why? She knows you are Commodus' enemy. She seems anxious to save Commodus. Yet she encourages Pertinax, who doesn't want to be emperor; he only dallies with the thought because



Marcia helps Cornificia to persuade him! Isn't that a confusion for you? And now there's Bultius Livius. As I understand it, Marcia caught him spying on her. No woman in her senses would trust Livius; the man has snowbroth in his veins and slow fire in his head. Yet Marcia now heaps favors on him!"



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"That is my doing," said Sextus.

"Are you mad then, too?"

"Maybe! I have persuaded Marcia that, now she has possession of the journal Livius was keeping, she can henceforth hold that over him and use him to advantage. She can win his gratitude—"

"He has none!"

"—and at the same time hold over him the threat of exposure for connection with the Severus faction, and the Pescennius faction, and the Clodius Albinus faction. He had it all down in his journal. He can easily be involved in those conspiracies if Marcia isn't satisfied with his spying in her behalf."

"Gemini! The man will break down under the strain. He has no stamina. He will denounce us all."

"Let us hope so," Sextus answered. "I am counting on it. Nothing but sudden danger will ever bring Pertinax up to the mark! I gave a bond to Marcia for Livius' life."

"Jupiter! What kind of bond? And what has come over Marcia that she accepted it?"

"I guaranteed to her that I will not denounce herself to Commodus! She saw the point. She could never clear herself."

"But how could you denounce her? She can have you seized and silenced any time! Weren't you in Cornificia's house, with the guard at the gate? Why didn't she summon the praetorians and hand you over to them?"

"Because Galen was there, too. She loves him, trusts him, and Galen is my friend. Besides, Pertinax would turn on her if she should have me killed. Pertinax was my father's friend, and is mine. Marcia's only chance, if Commodus should lose his life, is for Pertinax to seize the throne and continue to be her friend and protect her. Any other possible successor to Commodus would have her head off in the same hour."

"Well, Sextus, that argument won't keep her from having you murdered. I am only hoping she won't order me to do it, because the cat will be out of the bag then. I will not refuse, but I will certainly not kill you, and that will mean—"

"You forget Norbanus and my freedmen," Sextus interrupted. "She knows very well that they know all my secrets. They would avenge me instantly by sending Commodus full information of the plot, involving Marcia head over heels. She is ready to betray Commodus if that should seem the safest course. If she is capable of treachery to him, she is equally sure to betray all her friends if she thought her own life were in danger!"



“Now listen, Sextus, and don’t speak too loud or they’ll hear you in the cells; any of these poor devils would jump at a chance to save his own skin by betraying you and me. Talk softly. I say, listen! There isn’t any safety anywhere with all these factions plotting each against the other, none knowing which will strike first and Commodus likely to pounce on all of them at any minute. I don’t know why he hasn’t heard of it already.”

“He is too busy training his body to have time to use his brain,” said Sextus. “However, go on.”



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"I think Commodus is quite likely to have the best of it!" Narcissus said, screwing up his eyes as if he gazed at an antagonist across the dazzling sand of the arena. "Somebody—some spy—is sure to inform him. There will be wholesale proscriptions. Commodus will try to scare Severus, Niger and Albinus by slaughtering their supporters here in Rome. I can see what is coming."

"Are you, too, a god—like Commodus—that you can see so shrewdly?"

"Never mind. I can see. And I can see a better way for you, and for me also. You have made yourself a great name as Maternus, less, possibly, in Rome than on the countryside. You have more to begin with than ever Spartacus had—"

"Aye, and less, too," Sextus interrupted. "For I lack his confidence that Rome can be brought to her knees by an army of slaves. I lack his willingness to try to do it. Rome must be saved by honorable Romans, who have Rome at heart and not their own personal ambition. No army of runaway slaves can ever do it. Nothing offends me more than that Commodus makes slaves his ministers, and I mean by that no offense to you, Narcissus, who are fit to rank with Spartacus himself. But I am a republican. It is not vengeance that I seek. I will reckon I have lived if I have ridded Rome of Commodus and helped to replace him with a man who will restore our ancient liberties."

"Liberties?" Narcissus wore his satyr-smile again. "It makes small difference to slaves and gladiators how much liberty the free men have! The more for them, the less for us! Let us live while the living is good, Sextus! Let us take to the mountains and help ourselves to what we need while Pertinax and all these others fight for too much! Let them have their too much and grow sick of it! What do you and I need beyond clothing, a weapon, armor, a girl or two and a safe place for retreat? I have heard Sardinia is wonderful. But if you still think you would rather haunt your old estates, where you know the people and they know you, so that you will be warned of any attempt to catch you, that will be all right with me. We can swoop down on the inns along the main roads now and then, rob whom it is convenient to rob, and live like noblemen!"

"Three years I have lived an outlaw's life," Sextus answered, "sneaking into Rome to borrow money from my father's friends to save me the necessity of stealing. It is one thing to pretend to be a robber, and another thing to rob. The robber's name makes nine men out of ten your secret well-wishers; the deed makes you all men's enemy. How do you suppose I have escaped capture? It was simple enough. Every robber in Italy has called himself Maternus, so that I have seemed to be here, there, everywhere, aye, and often in three or four places at once! I have been caught and killed at least a dozen times! But all the while my men and I were safe because we took care to harm nobody. We let others do the murdering and robbing. We have lived like hermits, showing ourselves only often enough to keep alive the Maternus legend."



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“Well, isn’t that better than risking your neck trying to make and unmake emperors?” Narcissus asked.

“I risk my neck each hour I linger in Rome!”

“Well then, by Hercules, take payment for the risk, and cut the risk and vanish!” exclaimed Narcissus. “Help yourself once and for all to a bag full of gold in exchange for your father’s estates that were confiscated when they cut his head off. Then leave Italy, and let us be outlaws in Sardinia.”

Sextus laughed.

“That probably sounds glorious to one in your position. I, too, rather enjoyed the prospect when I first made my escape from Antioch and discovered how easy the life was. But though I owe it to my father’s memory to win back his estates, even that, and present outlawry is small compared to the zeal I have for restoring Rome’s ancient liberties. But I don’t deceive myself; I am not the man who can accomplish that; I can only help the one who can, and will. That one is Pertinax. He will reverse the process that has been going on since Julius Caesar overthrew the old republic. He will use a Caesar’s power to destroy the edifice of Caesar and rebuild what Caesar wrecked!”

Narcissus pondered that, his head between his hands.

“I haven’t Rome at heart,” he said at last. “Why should I have? There are girls, whom I have forgotten, whom I loved more than I love Rome. I am a slave gladiator. I have been applauded by the crowds, but know what that means, having seen other men go the same route. I am an emperor’s favorite, and I know what that means too; I saw Cleander die; I have seen man after man, and woman after woman lose his favor suddenly. Banishment, death, the ergastulum, torture—and, what is much worse, the insults the brute heaps on any one he turns against—I am too wise to give that—” he spat on the flag-stones—“for the friendship of Commodus. And Commodus is Rome; you can’t persuade me he isn’t. Rome turns on its favorites as he does—scorns them, insults them, throws them on dung-heaps. That for Rome!” He spat again. “They even break the noses off the statues of the men they used to idolize! They even throw the statues on a dung-heap to insult the dead! Why should I set Rome above my own convenience?”

“Well, for instance, you could almost certainly buy your freedom by betraying me,” said Sextus. “Why don’t you?”

“Jupiter! How shall a man answer that? I suppose I don’t betray you because if I did I should loathe myself. And I prefer to like myself, which I contrive to do at intervals. Also, I enjoy the company of honest men, and I think you are honest, although I think you are also an idealist—which, I take it, is the same thing as a born fool, or so I have

begun to think, since I attend on the emperor and have to hear so much talk of philosophy. Look you what philosophy has made of Commodus! Didn't Marcus Aurelius beget him from his own

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loins, and wasn't Marcus Aurelius the greatest of all philosophers? Didn't he surround young Commodus with all the learned idealists he could find? That is what I am told he did. And look at Commodus! Our Roman Commodus! God Commodus! I haven't murdered him because I am afraid, and because I don't see how I could gain by it. I don't betray you because I would despise myself if I did."

"I would despise myself if I should be untrue to Rome," Sextus answered after a moment. "Commodus is not Rome. Neither is the mob Rome."

"What is then?" Narcissus asked. "The bricks and mortar? The marble that the slaves must haul under the lash? The ponds where they feed their lampreys on dead gladiators? The arena where a man salutes a dummy emperor before a disguised one kills him? The senate, where they buy and sell the consulates and praetorships and quaestorships? The tribunals where justice goes by privilege? The temples where as many gods as there are, Romans yell for sacrifices to enrich the priests? The farms where the slave-gangs labor like poor old Sisyphus and are sold off in their old age to the contractors who clear the latrines, or to the galleys, or, if they're lucky, to the lime-kilns where they dry up like sticks and die soon? There is a woman in a side-street near the fish-market, who is very rich and looks like Rome to me. She has so many gold rings on her fingers that you can't see the dirt underneath; and she owns so many brothels and wine-shops that she can even buy off the tax-collectors. Do I love her? Do I love Rome? No! I love you, Sextus, son of Maximus, and I will go with you to the world's end if you will lead the way."

"I love Rome," Sextus answered. "Possibly I want to see her liberties restored because I love my own liberty and can't imagine myself honorable unless Rome herself is honored first. When you and I are sick we need a Galen. Rome needs Pertinax. You ask me what is Rome? She is the cradle of my manhood."

"A befouled nest!" said Narcissus.

"An Augean stable with a Hercules who doesn't do his work, I grant you! But we can substitute another Hercules."

"Pertinax is too old," Narcissus objected, weakening, a trifle sulkily.

"He is old enough to wish to die in honor rather than dishonor. You and I, Narcissus, have no honor—you a slave and I an outlaw. Let us win, then, honor for ourselves by helping to heal Rome of her dishonor!"

"Oh well, have it your own way," said Narcissus, unconvinced. "A brass as for your honor! The alternative is death or liberty in either case, and as for me, I prefer



friendship to religion, so I will follow you, whichever road you take. Now go. These fellows mustn't recognize you. It is time to take them one by one into the exercising yard. I daren't take more than one at a time or they'd kill me even with the blunted practise-weapons. I wish they might face Commodus as boldly as they tackle me! I am a weary man, and many times a bruised one, I can tell you, when the night comes, after putting twenty of them through their paces."



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### IX. STEWED EELS

The training arena where Commodus worked off energy and kept his Herculean muscles in condition was within the palace grounds, but the tunnel by which he reached it continued on and downward to the Circus Maximus, so that he could attend the public spectacles without much danger of assassination.

Nevertheless, a certain danger still existed. One of his worst frenzies of proscription had been started by a man who waited for him in the tunnel, and lost his nerve and then, instead of killing him, pretended to deliver an insulting message from the senate. Since that time the tunnel had been lined with guards at regular intervals, and when Commodus passed through his mysterious "double" was obliged to walk in front of him surrounded by enough attendants to make any one not in the secret believe the double was the emperor himself.

No man in the known world was less incapable than Commodus of self-defense against an armed man. There was no deception about his feats of strength and skill; he was undoubtedly the most terrific fighter and consummate athlete Rome had ever seen, and he was as proud of it as Nero once was of his "golden voice." But, as he explained to the fawning courtiers who shouldered one another for a place beside him as he hurried down the tunnel:

"How could Rome replace me? Yesterday I had to order a slave beaten to death for breaking a vase of Greek glass. I can buy a hundred slaves for half what that glass cost Hadrian. And I could have a thousand better senators tomorrow than the fools who belch and stammer in the curia, the senate house. But where would you find another Commodus if some lurking miscreant should stab me from behind? It was the geese that saved the capitol. You cacklers can preserve your Commodus."

They agreed in chorus, it would be Rome's irreparable loss if he should die, and certain senators, more fertile than the others in expedients for drawing his attention to themselves, paused ostentatiously to hold a little conversation with the guards and promise them rewards if they should catch a miscreant lurking in wait to attack "our beloved, our glorious emperor."

Commodus overheard them, as they meant he should.

"And such fulsome idiots as those expect me to believe they can frame laws!" He scowled over-shoulder. "Write down their names for me, somebody. The senate needs pruning! I will purge it the way Galen used to purge me when I had the colic! Cioscuri! But these leaky babblers suffocate me!"

He was true to the Caesarian tradition. He believed himself a god. He more than half-persuaded other men. His almost superhuman energy and skill with weapons, his



terrific storms of anger and his magnetism overawed courtiers and politicians as they did the gladiators whom he slew in the arena. The strain of madness in his blood provided cunning that could mask itself beneath a princely bluster of indifference to consequences. He could fear with an extravagance coequal to the fury of his love of danger, and his fear struck terror into men's hearts, as it stirred his mad brain into frenzies.



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He made no false claim when he called Rome the City of Commodus and himself the Roman Hercules. The vast majority of Romans were unfit to challenge his contempt of them, and his contempt was never under cover for a moment.

Debauchery, of wine and women, entered not at all into his private life although, in public, he encouraged it in others for the simple reason that it weakened men who otherwise might turn on him. He was never guilty of excesses that might undermine his strength or shake his nerves; there was an almost superhuman purity about his worship of athletic powers. He outdid the Greeks in that respect. But he allowed the legend of his monstrous orgies in the palace to gain currency, partly because that encouraged the Romans to debauch themselves and render themselves incapable of overthrowing him, and partly because it helped to cover up his trick of employing a substitute to occupy the royal pavilion at the games when he himself drove chariots in the races or fought in the arena as the gladiator Paulus.

Men who had let wine and women ruin their own nerves knew it was impossible that any one, who lived as Commodus was said to do, could drive a chariot and wield a javelin as Paulus did. Whoever faced a Roman gladiator under the critical gaze of a crowd that knew all the points of fighting and could instantly detect, and did instantly resent pretense, fraud, trickery, the poor condition of one combatant or the unwillingness of one man to have at another in deadly earnest, had to be not only in the pink of bodily condition but a fighter such as no drunken sensualist could ever hope to be. So it was easy to suppress the scandal that the gladiator Paulus was the emperor himself, although half Rome half-believed it; and the substitute who occupied the seat of honor at the games—ageing a little, growing a little pouchy under eyes and chin—was pointed to as proof that Commodus was being ruined by the life he led.

The trick of making use of the same substitute to save the emperor the boredom of official ceremony, whenever there was no risk of the public coming close enough to detect the fraud, materially helped to strengthen the officially fostered argument that Commodus could not be Paulus.

So the mystery of the identity of Paulus was like all court secrets and most secrets of intriguing governments, no mystery at all to hundreds, but to thousands an insoluble conundrum. The official propagandists of the court news, absolutely in control of all the channels through which facts could reach the public, easily offset the constant leakage from the lips of slaves and gladiators by disseminating artfully concocted news. Those actually in the secret, flattered by the confidence and fearful for their own skins, steadfastly denied the story when it cropped up. Last, but not least, was the law, that made it sacrilege to speak in terms derogatory to the emperor. A gladiator, though the crowd might almost deify him, was a casteless individual, unprivileged before the law, whom any franchised citizen would rate as socially far beneath himself. To have identified the emperor with Paulus in a voice above a whisper would have made the culprit liable to death and confiscation of his goods.



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The substitute himself, a man of mystery, was kept in virtual imprisonment. He was known as "Pavonius Nasor," not because that was his real name, which was known to very few people, but because of an old legend that the ghost of a certain Pavonius Nasor, murdered centuries ago and never buried, still walked in the neighborhood of that part of the palace where the emperor's substitute now led his mysterious, secret existence.

There were plenty of whispered stories current as to his true identity. Some said he was an impoverished landholder whom Commodus had met by accident when traveling in Northern Italy. But it was much more commonly believed he was the emperor's twin brother, spirited away at birth by midwives, and the stories told to account for that were as remarkably unlikely as the tale itself; as for instance, that a soothsayer had prophesied how Commodus should one day mount the throne and that he and his twin brother would wreck Rome in civil war—a warning hardly likely to have had much weight with the father, Marcus Aurelius, although the mother was more likely to have given credence to it.

Whatever the truth of his origin, Pavonius Nasor never ran the risk of telling it. He kept his sinecure by mastering his tongue, preserving almost bovine speechlessness. When he and Commodus met face to face he never seemed to see the joke of the resemblance, never laughed at Commodus' obscenely vivid jibes at his expense, nor once complained of his anomalous position. He appeared to be a man of no ambition other than to get through life as easily as might be—of no personal dignity, no ruling habits, but possessed of imitative talent that enabled him, without the slightest trouble, to adopt the very gait and gesture of the emperor whom he impersonated.

As he strode ahead along the tunnel he received the guards' salute with merely enough nod of recognition to deceive an onlooker not in the secret. (It was Pavonius Nasor's half-indulgent, rather lazy smile that had persuaded Rome and even the praetorian guards that Commodus was an easy-going, sensual, good humored man.)

There was a box at one end of the private arena, over the gate where the horses entered, so placed as to avoid the sun's direct rays. It was reached by a short stairway from an anteroom that opened on the tunnel. There was no other means of access to the box. It's wooden sidewalls, finished to resemble gilded eagle's wings, projected over the arena so that it was well screened and in shadow. There was none, observing from below, who could have sworn it had not been the emperor himself who sat in the box and watched Paulus the gladiator showing off his skill.

The assembled gladiators, perfectly aware of Paulus' true identity, went through the farce of solemnly saluting as the emperor the man who stared down at them from beneath an awning's shadow between golden eagle's wings, and who returned the salute with a wave of the arm that all Rome could have recognized.



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Commodus, nearly as naked as when he was born, came running from a dressing room and pranced and leaped over the sand to bring the sweat-beads to his skin; then, snatching at the nearest gladiator, wrestled with him until the breathless victim cried for mercy; dropped him then, as crushed as if a python had left a job half-finished, and shouted for the ashen sword-sticks. In a minute, with a leather buckler on his left arm, he was parrying the thrusts and blows of six men, driving and so crowding them on one another's toes that only two could seriously answer the terrific flailing of his own ash stick. He named them, named his blow, and laid them one by one, half-stunned and bleeding on the sand, until the last one by a quick feint landed on him, raising a great crimson welt across his shoulders.

"Well done!" Commodus exclaimed and smote him on the skull so fiercely that he broke the sword-stick. "You have killed him," said a senator as two men promptly seized the victim's arms to drag him out.

"Possibly," said Commodus. "That blow I landed on him would have killed a horse. But he is fortunate. He dies proud—prouder than you ever will, Varronius! He got past Paulus' guard! Would you like to attempt it? Woman! How I loathe you soft, effeminate, sleek senators! You fear death and you fear life equally! Where is Narcissus? Where are those men who are to try to kill me at my birthday games?"

There was no answer from Narcissus. Commodus forgot him in a moment, called for javelins and hurled them at a target, then at half-a-dozen targets, hitting all six marks exactly in the middle as he spun himself on one heel.

"I am in fettle!" he exclaimed, clapping the back of the senator whom he had scurrilously insulted a moment ago. If he was conscious of applause from the group of courtiers and gladiators he gave no sign of it. What pleased him was his own ability, not their praises.

"Lions!" he said. "Loose that big one!"

"Paulus," a scarred veteran answered (they were all forbidden to address him by any other name in that arena), "you have ordered us to keep that fellow for the birthday games. If you keep killing all the best ones off at practise, what shall we do when the day comes? The last ship-load has arrived from Africa and already you have used up nearly half of them. There is no chance of another cargo arriving in time for the games. And besides, we have lacked corpses recently; that big one hasn't tasted man's flesh. He is hungry now. He will eat whatever we throw in, so let him taste the right meat that will make him savage."

"Loose a leopard then."



The veteran went off without a word to give his orders to the men below-ground, whose duty it was to drag the cages to the openings of tunnels in the masonry through which the animals emerged into the sunlight. There were ten such openings on either side of the arena, closed by trapdoors, set in grooves, that could be raised by ropes from overhead.



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Commodus picked up one javelin and poised it. Half-a-dozen gladiators watched him, paying no attention to the doors, through any one of which the animal might come. They knew their Paulus, and were trained, besides, to look at death or danger with a curious, contemptuous calm. But the courtiers were nervous, grouping themselves where the sunlight threw a V-shaped shadow on the sand, as if they thought that semi-twilight would protect them.

A wooden door rose squeaking in its grooves but Commodus kept his back toward it.

“Women!” he exclaimed.

His sudden scowl transformed his handsome face into a thing of horror. He began to mutter savagely obscene abuse. A leopard crept into the sunlight, tried to turn again but was prevented by the closing trap, and crouched against the arena wall.

“Beware! The beast comes!” said a gladiator.

“Hold your presumptuous tongue, you slave-born rascal!” Commodus retorted. “Take that yapping dog away and have him whipped!”

A man stepped from the entrance gate to beckon the offending gladiator, who walked out with a look of hatred on his face. He paused once, hesitating whether to ask mercy, and thought better of it, shrugging his fine bronzed shoulders. The leopard left the wall and crept toward the center of the sand, his black and yellow beauty rippling in the sunlight and his shadow looking like death’s trailing cloak. The courtiers seemed doubtful which of the two beasts to watch, leopard or emperor.

“A spear!” said Commodus. A gladiator put it in his hand.

“Varronius! It irks me to have cowards in the senate! Let me see you try to kill that leopard!”

Decadent and grown effeminate though Rome was, there was no patrician who had not received some training in the use of arms. Varronius took the spear at once, his white hands closing on the shaft with military firmness. But his white face gave the lie to the alacrity with which he strode out of the shadow.

“Kill him, and you shall have the consulate next year!” said Commodus. “Be killed, and there will be one useless bastard less to clutter up the curia!”

A flush of anger swept over the senator’s pale face. For a moment he looked almost capable of lunging with the spear at Commodus—but Commodus was toying with the javelin. Varronius strode out to face the leopard, and the lithe beast did not wait to feel the spear-point. It began to stalk its adversary in irregular swift curves. Its body almost



pressed the sand. Its eyes were spots of sunlit topaz. Commodus' frown vanished. He began to gloat over the leopard's subtlety and strength.

“He is a lovelier thing than you, Varronius! He is a better fighter! He is manlier! He is worth more! He has kept his body stronger and his wits more nimble! He will get you! By the Dioscuri, he will get you! I will bet a talent that he gets you—and I hope he does! You hold your spear the way a woman holds a distaff—but observe the way he gathers all his strength in readiness to leap instantly in any direction! Ah!”



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The leopard made a feint, perhaps to test the swiftness of the spear-point. Leaping like a flash of light, he seemed to change direction in mid-air, the point missing him by half a hand's breadth. One terrific claw, outreaching as he turned, ripped open Varronius' tunic and brought a little stream of crimson trickling down his left arm.

"Good!" Commodus remarked. "First blood to the braver! Who would like to bet with me?"

"I!" Varronius retorted from between set teeth, his eyes fixed on the leopard that had recommenced his swift strategic to-and-fro stalking movement.

"I have betted you the consulship already. Who else wants to bet?" asked Commodus.

Before any one could answer the leopard sprang in again at Varronius, who stepped aside and drove his spear with very well timed accuracy. Only force enough was lacking. The point slit the leopard's skin and made a stinging wound along the beast's ribs, turning him the way a spur-prick turns a horse. His snarl made Varronius step back another pace or two, neglecting his chance to attack and drive the spear-point home. The infuriated leopard watched him for a moment, ears back, tail spasmodically twitching, then shot to one side and charged straight at the group of courtiers.

They scattered. They were almost unarmed. There were three of them who stumbled, interfering with each other. The nearest to the leopard drew a dagger with a jeweled hilt, a mere toy with a light blade hardly longer than his hand. He threw his toga over his left forearm and stood firm to make a fight for it, his white face rigid and his eyes ablaze. The leopard leaped—and fell dead, hardly writhing. Commodus' long javelin had caught him in the middle of his spring, exactly at the point behind the shoulder-bone that leaves a clear course to the heart.

"I would not have done that for a coward, Tullius! If you had run I would have let him kill you!"

Commodus strode up and pulled out the javelin, setting one foot on the leopard and exerting all his strength.

"Look here, Varronius. Do you see how deep my blade went? Pin-pricks are no use against man or animal. Kill when you strike, like great Jove with his thunderbolts! Life isn't a game between Maltese kittens; it's a spectacle in which the strong devour the weak and all the gods look on! Loose another leopard there! I'll show you!"

He took the spear from Varronius, balanced it a moment, discarded it and chose another, feeling its point with his thumb. There was a squeak of pulleys as they loosed a leopard near the end of the arena. He charged the animal, leaping from foot to foot. He made prodigious leaps; there was no guessing which way he would jump next. He



was not like a human being. The leopard, snarling, slunk away, attempting to avoid him, but he crowded it against the wall. He forced it to turn at bay. No eye was quick enough to see exactly how he killed it, save that he struck when the leopard sprang. The next thing that anybody actually saw, he had the writhing creature on the spear, in air, like a legion's standard.

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Then the madness surged into his brain.

“So I rule Rome!” he exclaimed, and threw the leopard at the gladiators’ feet. “Because I pity Rome that could not find another Paulus! I strike first, before they strike me!”

They flattered him—fawned on him, but he was much too genuinely mad for flattery to take effect. “If you were worth a barrelful of rats I’d have a senate that might save me trouble! Then like Tiberius I might remain away from Rome and live more like a god. I’ve more than half a mind to let my dummy stay here to amuse you wastrels!” He glanced up at the box, where his substitute lolled and yawned and smiled. “All you degenerates need is some one you can rub yourselves against like fat cats mewing for a bowl of milk! By Hercules, now I’ll show you something that will make your blood leap. Bring out the new Spanish team.”

With an imperious gesture he sent senators and gladiators to scatter themselves all over the arena. Not yet satisfied, he ordered all the guards fetched from the tunnel and arranged them in a similar disorder, so that finally no stretch of fifty yards was left without a man obstructing it. There was no spina down the midst, nor anything except the surrounding wall to suggest to a team of horses which the course might be.

“Let none move!” he commanded. “I will crush the foot of any man who stirs!”

Attendants, clinging to the heads of four gray stallions that fought and kicked, brought out his chariot and others shut the gate behind it. Commodus admired the team a minute, then examined the new high wheels of the gilded chariot, that was hardly wider than a coffin—a thing that a man could upset with a shove and built to look as flimsy as an egg shell. Suddenly he seized the reins and leaped in, throwing up his right hand.

If he could have ruled his empire as he drove that chariot he would have far outshone Augustus, for whose memory men sighed. He managed them with one hand. There was magnetism sent along the reins to play with the dynamic energy of four mad stallions as gods amuse themselves with men. If empire had amused him as athleticism did there would have been no equal in all history to Commodus.

In a chariot no other athlete could have balanced, on a course providing not one unobstructed stretch of fifty yards, he drove like Phoebus breaking in the horses of the Sun, careering this and that way, weaving patterns in among the frightened men who stood like posts for him to drive around. He missed them by a hand’s breadth—less! He took delight in driving at them, turning in the last half-second, smiling at a blanched face as he wheeled and wove new figures down another zigzag avenue of men. The frenzy of the team inspired him; the rebellion of the stallions, made mad by the persistent, sudden turns, aroused his own astonishing enthusiasm. He accomplished the impossible! He made new laws of motion, breaking them, inventing others! He

became a god in action, mastering the team until it had no consciousness of any self-will, or of any impulse but to loose its full strength under the directing will of genius.

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The team tired first. It was its waning speed that wearied him at last. The mania that owned him could not tolerate the anticlimax of declining effort, so his mood changed. He became morose—indifferent. He reined in, tossed the reins to an attendant and began to walk toward the tunnel entrance, clothed as he was in nothing but the practise loin-cloth of a gladiator.

A dozen senators implored him to wait and clothe himself. He would not wait. He ordered them to bring his cloak and overtake him. Then he observed Narcissus, standing near the horse-gate, waiting to summon his trained gladiators for an exhibition:

“Not this time, Narcissus. Next time. Follow me.” He waited for a moment for Narcissus. That gave the substitute time to come down from the box and go hurrying ahead into the tunnel-mouth; he went so fast (for he knew the emperor’s moods) that the attendants found it hard to keep up; most of them were half a dozen paces in the rear. A senator gave Commodus his cloak. He took Narcissus by the arm and strode ahead into the tunnel, muttering, ignoring noisy protests from the senators, who warned him that the guards were not yet there.

Then there was sudden silence; possibly a consequence of Caesar’s mood, or the reaction caused by chill and tunnel-darkness after sunlit sand. Or it might have been the shadow of impending tragedy. A long scream broke the silence, thrice repeated, horrible, like something from an unseen world. Instantly Narcissus leaped ahead into the darkness, weaponless but armed by nature with the muscles of a panther. Commodus leaped after him; his mood reversed again. Now emulation had him; he would not be beaten to a scene of action by a gladiator. He let his cloak fall and a senator tripped over it.

There were no lamps. Something less than twilight, deepened here and there by shadow, filled the tunnel. By a niche intended for a sentry the attendants were standing helplessly around the body of a man who lay with head and shoulders propped against the wall. Narcissus and another, like knotted snakes, were writhing near by. There was a sound of choking. Pavonius Nasor was silent. He appeared already dead.

“Pluto! Is there no light?” Commodus demanded. “What has happened?”

“They have killed your shadow, sire!”

“Who killed him?”

“Men who sprang out of the darkness suddenly.”

“One man. Only one. I have him here. He lives yet, but he dies!”  
Narcissus said.



He dragged a writhing body on the flagstones, holding it by one wrist.

“He was armed. I had to throttle him to save my liver from his knife. I think I broke his neck. He is certainly dying,” said Narcissus.

Some one had gone for a lamp and came along the tunnel with it.

“Let me look,” said Commodus. “Here, give me that lamp!”

He looked first at Pavonius Nasor, who gazed back, at him with stupid, passionless, already dimming eyes. A stream of blood was gushing from below his left arm.



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“Now the gods of heaven and hell, and all the strange gods that have no resting place, and all the spirits of the air and earth and sea, defile your spirit!” Commodus exploded. “Careless, irresponsible, ungrateful fool! You have deprived me of my liberty! You let yourself be killed like any sow under the butcher’s knife, and dare to leave me shadowless? Then die like carrion and rot unburied!”

He began to kick him, but the stricken man’s lips moved. Commodus bent down and tried to listen—tried again, mastered impatience and at last stood upright, shaking both fists at the tunnel roof.

“Omnipotent Progenitor of Lightnings!” he exploded. “He says he should have had stewed eels tonight!”

The watching senators mistook that for a cue to laugh. Their laughter touched off all the magazines of Caesar’s rage. He turned into a mania. He tore at his own hair. He tore off his loin-cloth and stood naked. He tried to kill Narcissus, because Narcissus was the nearest to him. His crashing centurion’s parade voice filled the tunnel.

“Dogs! Dogs’ ullage! Vipers!” he yelled. “Who slew my shadow? Who did it? This is a conspiracy! Who hatched it? Bring my tablets! Warn the executioners! What is Commodus without his dummy? Vultures! Better have killed me than that poor obliging fool! You cursed, stupid idiots! You have killed my dummy! I must sit as he did and look on. I must swallow stinking air of throne-rooms. I must watch sluggards fight—you miserable, wanton imbeciles! It is Paulus you have killed! Do you appreciate that? Jupiter, but I will make Rome pay for this! Who did it? Who did it, I say?”

Rage blinded him. He did not see the choking wretch whose wrist Narcissus twisted, until he struck at Narcissus again and, trying to follow him, stumbled over the assassin.

“Who is this? Give me a sword, somebody! Is this the murderer? Bring that lamp here!”

Bolder than the others, having recently been praised, the senator Tullius brought the lamp and, kneeling, held it near the culprit’s face. The murderer was beyond speech, hardly breathing, with his eyes half-bursting from the sockets and his tongue thrust forward through his teeth because Narcissus’ thumbs had almost strangled him.

“A Christian,” said Tullius.

There was a note of quiet exultation in his voice. The privileges of the Christians were a sore point with the majority of senators.

“A what?” demanded Commodus.



“A Christian. See—he has a cross and a fish engraved on bone and wears it hung from his neck beneath his tunic. Besides, I think I recognize the man. I think he is the one who waylaid Pertinax the other day and spoke strange stuff about a whore on seven hills whose days are numbered.”

He had raised up the man’s head by the hair. Commodus stamped on the face with the flat of his sandal, crushing the head on the flagstones.



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“Christian!” he shouted. “Is this Marcia’s doing? Is this Marcia’s expedient to keep me out of the arena? Too long have I endured that rabble! I will rid Rome of the brood! They kill the shadow—they shall feel the substance!”

Suddenly he turned on his attendants—pointed at the murderer and his victim:

“Throw those two into the sewer! Strip them—strip them now—let none identify them. Seize those spineless fools who let the murder happen. Tie them. You, Narcissus—march them back to the arena. Have them thrown into the lions’ cages. Stay there and see it done, then come and tell me.”

The courtiers backed away from him as far out of the circle of the lamplight as the tunnel-wall would let them. He had snatched the lamp from Tullius. He held it high.

“Two parts of me are dead; the shadow that was satisfied with eels for supper and the immortal Paulus whom an empire worshiped. Remains me—the third part—Commodus! You shall regret those two dead parts of me!”

He hurled the lighted lamp into the midst of them and smashed it, then, in darkness, strode along the tunnel muttering and cursing as he went— stark naked.

### **X. “ROME IS TOO MUCH RULED BY WOMEN!”**

“He is in the bath,” said Marcia. She and Galen were alone with Pertinax, who looked splendid in his official toga. She was herself in disarray. Her woman had tried to dress her hair on the way in the litter; one long coil of it was tumbling on her shoulder. She looked almost drunken.

“Where is Flavia Titiana?” she demanded.

“Out,” said Pertinax and shut his lips. He never let himself discuss his wife’s activities. The peasant in him, and the orthodox grammarian, preferred less scandalous subjects.

Marcia stared long at him, her liquid, lazy eyes, suggesting banked fires in their depths, looking for signs of spirit that should rise to the occasion. But Pertinax preferred to choose his own occasions.

“Commodus is in the bath,” Marcia repeated. “He will stay there until night comes. He is sulking. He has his tablets with him—writes and writes, then scratches out. He has shown what he writes to nobody, but he has sent for Livius.”

“We should have killed that dog,” said Pertinax, which brought a sudden laugh from Galen.



“A dog’s death never saved an empire,” Galen volunteered. “If you had murdered Livius the crisis would have come a few days sooner, that is all.”

“It is the crisis. It has come,” said Marcia. “Commodus came storming into my apartment, and I thought he meant to kill me with his own hands. Usually I am not afraid of him. This time he turned my strength to water. He yelled ‘Christians!’ at me, ‘Christians! You and your Christians!’ He was unbathed. He was half-naked. He was sweaty from his exercise. His hair was ruffled; he had torn out some of it. His scowl was frightful—it was freezing.”



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“He is quite mad,” Galen commented.

“I tried to make him understand this could not be a plot or I would certainly have heard of it,” Marcia went on with suppressed excitement. “I said it was the madness of one fanatic, that nobody could foresee. He wouldn’t listen. He out-roared me. He even raised his fist to strike. He swore it was another of my plans to keep him out of the arena. I began to think it might be wiser to admit that. Even in his worst moods he is sometimes softened by the thought that I take care of him and love him enough to risk his anger. But not this time! He flew into the worst passion I have ever seen. He returned to his first obsession, that the Christians plotted it and that I knew all about it. He swore he will butcher the Christians. He will rid Rome of them. He says, since he can not play Paulus any longer he will out-play Nero.”

“Where is Sextus?” Pertinax asked.

“Aye! Where is Sextus!”

Marcia glared at Galen.

“We have to thank you for Sextus! You persuaded Pertinax to shield Sextus. Pertinax persuaded me.”

“You did it!” Galen answered dryly. “It is what we do that matters. Squealing like a pig under a gate won’t remedy the matter. You foresaw the crisis long ago. Sextus has been very useful to you. He has kept you informed, so don’t lower yourself by turning on him now. What is the latest news about the other factions?”

Marcia restrained herself, biting her lip. She loved old Galen, but she did not relish being told the whole responsibility was hers, although she knew it.

“There is no news,” she answered. “Nobody has heard a word about the murder yet. Commodus has had the bodies thrown into the sewer. But there are spies in the palace —”

“To say nothing of Bultius Livius,” Pertinax added. He was clicking the rings on his fingers—symptom of irresolution that made Marcia grit her teeth.

“The other factions are watching one another,” Marcia went on. “They are irresolute because they have no leader near enough to Rome to strike without warning. Why are you irresolute?” She looked so hard at Pertinax that he got up and began to pace the floor. “Severus and his troops are in Pannonia. Pescennius Niger is in Syria. Clodius Albinus is in Britain. The senators are all so jealous and afraid for their own skins that they are as likely as not to betray one another to Commodus the minute they learn that a crisis exists. If they hear that Commodus is writing out proscription lists they will vie

with one another to denounce their own pet enemies—including you—and me!” she added.

“There is one chance yet,” said Pertinax. “Bultius Livius may have enough wisdom to denounce the leaders of the other factions and to clear us. None of the others would be grateful to him. That Carthaginian Severus, for instance, is invariably spiteful to the men who do him favors. Bultius Livius may see that to protect us is his safest course, as well as best for Rome.”



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He had more to say, but Marcia's scorn interrupted him. Galen chuckled.

"Rome! He cares only for Bultius Livius. It is now or never, Pertinax!"

Marcia's intense emotion made her appear icily indifferent, but she did not deceive Galen, although Pertinax welcomed her calmness as excusing unenthusiasm in herself.

"Marcia is right," said Galen. "It is now or never. Marcia ought to know Commodus!"

"Know him?" she exploded. "I can tell you step by step what he will do! He will come out of the bath and eat a light meal, but he will drink nothing, for fear of poison. Presently he will be thirsty and lonely, and will send for me; and whatever he feels, he will pretend he loves me. When the raging fear is on him he will never drink from any one but me. He will take a cup of wine from my hands, making me taste it first. Then he will go alone into his own room, where only that child Telamonion will dare to follow. Everything depends then on the child. If the child should happen to amuse him he will turn sentimental and I will dare to go in and talk to him. If not—"

Galen interrupted.

"Madness," he said, "resembles many other maladies, there being symptoms frequently for many years before the slow fire bursts into a blaze. Some die before the outbreak, being burned up by the generating process, which is like a slow fire. But if they survive until the explosion, it is more violent the longer it has been delayed. And in the case of Commodus that means that other men will die. And women," he added, looking straight at Marcia.

"If he even pretends he loves me—I am a woman," said Marcia. "I love him in spite of his frenzies. If I only had myself to think of—"

"Think then!" Galen interrupted. "If you can't think for yourself, do you expect to benefit the world by thinking?"

Marcia buried her face in her hands and lay face downward on the couch. She was trembling in a struggle for self-mastery. Pertinax chewed at his finger-nails, which were the everlasting subject of his proud wife's indignation; he never kept his fine hands properly; the peasant in him thought such refinements effeminate, unsoldierly. Cornificia, who could have made him submit even to a manicure, understood him too well to insist.

"Galen!" said Marcia, sitting up suddenly.

The old man blinked. He recognized decision sudden and irrevocable. He clenched his fingers and his lower lip came forward by the fraction of an inch.



“I must save my Christians. What do you know about poisons?” she demanded.

“Less than many people,” Galen answered. “I have studied antidotes. I am a doctor. Those I poisoned thought as I did, that I gave them something for their health. My methods have changed with experience. Doctoring is like statesmanship—which is to say, groping in the dark through mazes of misinformation.”



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“Know you a poison,” asked Marcia, “that will not harm one who merely tastes it, but will kill whoever drinks a quantity? Something without flavor? Something colorless that can be mixed with wine? Know you a safe poison, Galen?”

“Aye—irresolution!” Galen answered. “I will not be made a victim of it. Who shall aspire to the throne if Commodus dies?”

“Pertinax!”

Pertinax looked startled, stroking his beard, uncrossing his knees.

“Then let Pertinax do his own work,” said Galen. “Rome is full of poisoners, but hasn’t Pertinax a sword?”

“Aye. And it has been the emperor’s until this minute,” Pertinax said grimly. “Galen tells us Commodus is mad. And I agree that Rome deserves a better emperor. But whether I am fit to be that emperor is something not yet clear to me. I doubt it. Whom the Fates select for such a purpose, they compel, and he is unwise who resists them. I will not resist. But let there be no doubt on this point: I will not slay Commodus. I will not draw sword against the man to whom I owe my fortune. I am not an ingrate. Sextus lives for his revenge. If you should ask me I would answer, Sextus planned this murder in the tunnel and the blow was meant for Commodus himself. I am inclined to deal with Sextus firmly. It is not too late. There is a chance that Commodus, deprived now of his opportunities to make himself a spectacle, may bend his energies to government. Madman though he is, he is the emperor, and if he is disposed now to govern well, with capable advisers, I would be the last to turn on him.”

“If he will be advised by you?” suggested Marcia, her accent tart with sarcasm. “What will you advise him about Sextus?”

“There are plenty of ways of getting rid of Sextus without killing him,” said Pertinax. “He is a young man needing outlets for his energy and fuel for his pride. If he were sent to Parthia, in secret, as an agent authorized to penetrate that country and report on military, geographical and economic facts—”

“He would refuse to go!” said Galen. “And if made to go, he would return! O Pertinax —!”

“Be quiet!” Pertinax retorted irritably. “I will not submit to being lectured. I am Governor of Rome—though you are Galen the philosopher. And I remember many of your adages this minute, as for instance: ‘It is he who acts who is responsible.’ To kill an emperor is easy, Galen. To replace him is as difficult as to fit a new head to a body. We have talked a lot of treason, most of it nonsense. I have listened to too much of it. I am



as guilty as the others. But when it comes to slaying Commodus and standing in his shoes—”

Marcia interrupted.

“By the great Twin Brethren, Pertinax! Who can be surprised that Flavia Titiana seeks amusement in the arms of other men! Does Cornificia endure such peasant talk? Or do you keep it to impose on us as a relief from her more noble conversation? Dea Dia! Had I known how spineless you can be I would have set my cap at Lucius Severus long ago. It may be it is not too late.”



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She had him! She had pricked him in the one place where he could be stirred to spitefulness. His whole face crimsoned suddenly.

“That Carthaginian!” He came and stood in front of her. “If you had favored him you should have foregone my friendship, Marcia! Commodus is bad enough. Severus would be ten times worse! Where Commodus is merely crazy, Lucius Severus is a calculating, ice-cold monster of cruelty! He has no emotions except those aroused by venom! He would tear out your heart just as swiftly as mine! As for plotting with him, he would let you do it all and then denounce you to the senate after he was on the throne!”

“Either it must be Severus, or else you!” said Marcia. “Which is it to be?”

Pertinax folded his arms.

“I would feel it my duty to preserve Rome from Severus. But you go too fast. Our Commodus is on the throne—”

“And writes proscription lists!” said Marcia. “Who knows what names are on the lists already? Who knows what Bultius Livius may have told him? Who knows which of us will be alive tomorrow morning? Who knows what Sextus is doing? If Sextus has heard of this crisis he will seize the moment and either arouse the praetorian guard to mutiny or else reach Commodus himself and slay him with his own hand! Sextus is a man! Are you no more than Flavia Titiana’s cuckold and Cornificia’s plaything?”

“I am a Roman,” Pertinax retorted angrily. “I think of Rome before myself. You women only think of passion and ambition. Rome—city of a thousand triumphs!” He turned away, pacing the floor again, knitting his fingers behind him. “Pertinax would offer up himself if he might bring back the Augustan days—if he might win the warfare that Tiberius lost. One Pertinax is nothing in the life of Rome. One life, three-quarters spent, is but a poor pledge to the gods—yet too much to be thrown away in vain. The auguries are all mixed nowadays. I doubt them. I mistrust the shaven priests who dole out answers in return for minted money. I have knelt before the holy shrine of Vesta, but the Virgins were as vague as the Egyptian who prophesied—”

He hesitated.

“What?” demanded Marcia.

“That I should serve Rome and receive ingratitude. What else does any man receive who serves Rome? They who cheat her are the ones who prosper!”

“Send for Cornificia,” said Marcia. “She keeps your resolution. Let her come and loose it!” Pertinax turned sharply on her.

“Flavia Titiana shall not suffer that indignity. Cornificia can not enter this house.”



But the mention of Cornificia's name wrought just as swift a change in him as had the name of Lucius Severus. He began to bite his finger-nails, then clenched his hands again behind him, Galen and Marcia watching.

"You are the only one who can replace Commodus without drenching Rome in blood," said Marcia, remembering a phrase of Cornificia's. And since the words were Cornificia's, and stirred the chords of many memories, they produced a sort of half-way resolution.



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“It is now or never,” Marcia said, goading him. But Pertinax shook his head.

“I am not convinced, though I would do my best to save Rome from Severus. Dioscuri!—do you realize, this plot to make me emperor is known to not more than a dozen—”

“Therein safety lies,” said Marcia. “Yourself included there can only be a dozen traitors!”

“Rome is too much ruled by women! I will not kill Commodus, and I will give him this one chance,” said Pertinax. “I will protect him, unless and until I shall discover proof that he intends to turn on you, or me, or any of my friends.”

“You may discover that too late!” said Marcia; but she seemed to understand him and looked satisfied. “Come tonight to the palace— Galen,” she added, “come you also—and bring poison!”

Galen met her gaze and shut his lips tight.

“Galen,” she said, “either you will do this or—I have been your friend. Now be you mine! It is too risky to send one of my slaves to fetch a poison. You are to come tonight and bring the poison with you. Otherwise—you understand?”

“You are extremely comprehensible!” said Galen, pursing up his lips.

“You will obey?”

“I must,” said Galen. But he did not say whether he would obey her or his inclination. Pertinax, eyeing him doubtfully, seemed torn between suspicion of him and respect for long-trying friendship.

“May we depend on you?” he asked. He laid a hand on Galen’s shoulder, bending over him.

“I am an old man,” Galen answered. “In any event I have not long to live. I will do my best—for you.”

Pertinax nodded, but there was still a question in his mind. He bade farewell to Marcia, turning his back toward Galen. Marcia whispered:

“Be a man now, Pertinax! If we should lose this main, we two can drink the stuff that Galen brings.”

“There was a falling star last night,” said Pertinax. “Whose was it?”

Marcia studied his face a moment. Then:



“There will be a rising sun tomorrow!” she retorted. “Whose will it be? Yours! Play the man!”

## **XI. GALEN**

Galen’s house was one he rented from a freedman of the emperor—a wise means of retaining favor at the palace. Landlords having influence were careful to protect good tenants. Furthermore, whoever rented, rather than possessed, escaped more easily from persecution. Galen, like Tyanan Apollonius, reduced his private needs, maintaining that philosophy went hand in hand with medicine, but wealth with neither.



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It was a pleasant little house, not far away from Cornificia's, within a precinct that was rebuilt after all that part of Rome burned under Nero's fascinated gaze. The street was crescent-shaped, not often crowded, though a score of passages like wheel-spokes led to it; and to the rear of Galen's house was a veritable maze of alleys. There were two gates to the house: one wide, with decorated posts, that faced the crescent street, where Galen's oldest slave sat on a stool and blinked at passers-by; the other narrow, leading from a little high-walled courtyard at the rear into an alley between stables in which milch-asses were kept. That alley led into another where a dozen midwives had their names and claims to excellency painted on the doors—an alley carefully to be avoided, because women of that trade, like barbers, vied for custom by disseminating gossip.

So Sextus used a passage running parallel to that one, leading between workshops where the burial-urn makers' slaves engraved untruthful epitaphs in baked clay or inlaid them on the marble tomb-slabs—to be gilded presently with gold-leaf (since a gilded lie, though costlier, is no worse than the same lie unadorned.)

He drummed a signal with his knuckles on the panel of a narrow door of olive-wood, set deep into the wall under a projecting arch. An overleaning tree increased the shadow, and a visitor could wait without attracting notice. A slave nearly as old as Galen presently admitted him into a paved yard in which a fish-pond had been built around an ancient well. A few old fruit-trees grew against the wall, and there were potted shrubs, but little evidence of gardening, most of Galen's slaves being too old for that kind of work. There were a dozen of them loafing in the yard; some were so fat that they wheezed, and some so thin with age that they resembled skeletons. There was a rumor that the fatness and the thinness were accounted for by Galen's fondness for experiments. Old Galen had a hundred jealous rivals and they even said he fed the dead slaves to the fish; but it was Roman custom to give no man credit for humaneness if an unclean accusation could be made to stick.

Another fat old slave led Sextus to a porch behind the house and through that to a library extremely bare of furniture but lined with shelves on which rolled manuscripts were stacked in tagged and numbered order; they were dusty, as if Galen used them very little nowadays. There were two doors in addition to the one that opened on the porch; the old slave pointed to the smaller one and Sextus, stooping and turning sidewise because of the narrowness between the posts, went down a step and entered without knocking.



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For a moment he could not see Galen, there was such confusion of shadow and light. High shelves around the walls of a long, shed-like room were crowded with retorts and phials. An enormous, dusty human skeleton, articulated on concealed wire, moved as if annoyed by the intrusion. There were many kinds of skulls of animals and men on brackets fastened to the wall, and there were jars containing dead things soaked in spirit. Some of the jars were enormous, having once held olive oil. On a table down the midst were instruments, a scale for weighing chemicals, some measures and a charcoal furnace with a blow-pipe; and across the whole of one end of the room was a system of wooden pigeon-holes, stacked with chemicals and herbs, for the most part wrapped in parchment.

Sunlight streaming through narrow windows amid dust of drugs and spices made a moving mystery; the room seemed under water. Galen, stooping over a crucible with an unrolled parchment on the table within reach, was not distinguishable until he moved; when he ceased moving he faded out again, and Sextus had to go and stand where he could touch him, to believe that he was really there.

“You told me you had ceased experiments.”

“I lied. The universe is an experiment,” said Galen. “Such gods as there are perhaps are looking to evolve a decent man, or possibly a woman, from the mess we see around us. Let us hope they fail.”

“Why?”

“There appears to be hope in failure. Should the gods fail, they will still be gods and go on trying. If they ever made a decent man or woman all the rest of us would turn on their creation and destroy it. Then the gods would turn into devils and destroy us.”

“What has happened to you, Galen? Why the bitter mood?”

“I discover I am like the rest of you—like all Rome. At my age such a discovery makes for bitterness.” For a minute or two Galen went on scraping powder from the crucible, then suddenly he looked up at Sextus, stepping backward so as to see the young man’s face more clearly in a shaft of sunlight.

“Did you send that Christian into the tunnel to kill Commodus?” he asked.

“I? You know me better than that, Galen! When the time comes to slay Commodus—but is Commodus dead? Speak, don’t stand there looking at me! Speak, man!”

Galen appeared satisfied.

“No, not Commodus. The blow miscarried. Somebody slew Nasor. A mistake. A coward’s blow. If you had been responsible—”



“When—if—I slay, it shall be openly with my own hand,” said Sextus. “Not I alone, but Rome herself must vomit out that monster. Why are you vexed?”

“That wanton blow that missed its mark has stripped some friends of mine too naked. It has also stripped me and revealed me to myself. Last night I saw a falling star—a meteor that blazed out of the night and vanished.”

“I, too,” said Sextus. “All Rome saw it. The cheap sorcerers are doing a fine trade. They declare it portends evil.”

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“Evil—but for whom?” Old Galen poured the powder he had scraped into a dish and blinked at him. “Affiliations in the realm of substance are confined to like ingredients. That law is universal. Like seeks like, begetting its own like. As for instance, sickness flows in channels of unwholesomeness, like water seeping through a marsh. Evil? What is evil but the likeness of a deed—its echo—its result—its aftermath? You see this powder? Marcia has ordered me to poison Commodus! What kind of aftermath should that deed have?”

Sextus stared at him astonished. Galen went on mixing.

“Colorless it must be—flavorless—without smell—undetectable. These saviors of Rome prepare too much to save themselves! And I take trouble to save myself. Why?”

He stopped and blinked again at Sextus, waiting for an answer.

“You are worth preserving, Galen.”

“I dispute that. I am sentimental, which is idiocy in a man of my age. But I will not kill him who is superior to any man in Rome.”

“Idiocy? You? And you admire that monster?”

“As a monster, yes. He is at least wholehearted. As a monster he lacks neither strength of will nor sinew nor good looks; he is magnificent; he has the fear, the frenzy and the resolution of a splendid animal. We have only cowardice, the unenthusiasm and the indecision of base men. If we had the virtue of Commodus, no Commodus could ever have ruled Rome for half a day. But I am senile. I am sentimental. Rather than betray Marcia—and Pertinax—who would betray me for their own sakes; rather than submit my own old carcass to the slave whom Marcia would send to kill me, I am doing what you see.”

“Poison for Commodus?”

“No.”

“Not for yourself, Galen?”

“No.”

“For whom then?”

“For Pertinax.”

Sextus seized the plate on which the several ingredients were being mixed.



“Put that down,” said Galen. “I will poison part of him—the mean part.”

“Speak in plain words, Galen!”

“I will slay his indecision. He and Marcia propose; that I shall kill their monster. I shall mix a draught for Marcia to take to him—in case this, and in case that, and perhaps. In plain words, Commodus has sent for Livius and none knows how much Livius has told. Their monster writes and scratches out and rewrites long proscription lists, and Marcia trembles for her Christians. For herself she does not tremble. She has ten times Pertinax’ ability to rule. If Marcia were a man she should be emperor! Our Pertinax is hesitating between inertia and doubt and dread of Cornificia’s ambition for him; between admiration of his own wife and contempt for her; between the subtleties of auguries and common sense; between trust and mistrust of us all, including Marcia and you and me; between the easy dignity of being governor of Rome and the uneasy palace—slavery of being Caesar; between doubt of his own ability to rule and the will to restore the republic.”



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“We all know Pertinax,” said Sextus. “He is diffident, that is all. He is modest. Once he has made his decision—”

Galen interrupted him

“Then let us pray the gods to make the rest of us immodest! The decision that he makes is this: If Commodus has heard of the conspiracy; if Commodus intends to kill him, he will then allow somebody else to kill Commodus! He will permit me, who am a killer only by professional mistake and not by intention, to be made to kill my former pupil with a poisoned drink! You understand, not even then will Pertinax take resolution by the throat and do his own work.”

“So Pertinax shall drink this?”

“It is meant that Commodus shall drink it. That is, unless Commodus emerges from his sulks too soon and butchers all of us—as we deserve!”

“Have done with riddles, Galen! How will that affect Pertinax, except to make him emperor?”

“Nothing will make him emperor unless he makes himself,” said Galen. “You will know tonight. We lack a hero, Sextus. All conspirators resemble rats that gnaw and run, until one rat at last discovers himself Caesar of the herd by accident. Caius Julius Caesar was a hero. He was one mind bold and above and aloof. He saw. He considered. He took. His murderers were all conspirators, who ran like rats and turned on one another. So are we! Can you imagine Caius Julius Caesar threatening an old philosopher like me with death unless he mixed the poison for a woman to take to his enemy’s bedside? Can you imagine the great Julius hesitating to destroy a friend or spare an enemy?”

“Do you mean, they strike tonight, and haven’t warned me?”

“I have warned you.”

“Marcia has been prepared these many days to kill me if I meant to strike,” said Sextus. “I can understand that; it is no more than a woman’s method to protect her bully. She accuses and defends him, fears and loves him, hates him and hates more the man who sets her free. But Pertinax—did he not bid you warn me?”

“No,” said Galen. “Are you looking for nobility? I tell you there is nothing noble in conspiracies. Pertinax and Marcia have used you. They will try to use me. They will blame me. They will certainly blame you. I advise you to run to your friends in the Aventine Hills. Thence hasten out of Italy. If Pertinax should fail and Commodus survives this night—”



“No, Galen. He must not fail! Rome needs Pertinax. That poison— phaugh! Is no sword left in Rome? Has Pertinax no iron in him? Better one of Marcia’s long pins than that unmanly stuff. Where is Narcissus?”

“I don’t know,” said Galen. “Narcissus is another who will do well to protect himself. Commodus is well disposed toward him. Commodus might send for him—as he will surely send for me if belly-burning sets in. He and I would make a good pair to be blamed for murdering an emperor.”



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“You run!” urged Sextus. “Go now! Go to my camp in the Aventines. You will find Norbanus and two freedmen waiting near the Porta Capena; they are wearing farmers’ clothes and look as if they came from Sicily. They know you. Say I bade them take you into hiding.”

Galen smiled at him. “And you?” he asked.

“Narcissus shall smuggle me into the palace. It is I who will slay Commodus, lest Pertinax should stain his hands. If they prefer to turn on me, what matter? Pertinax, if he is to be Caesar, will do better not to mount the throne all bloody. Let him blame me and then execute me. Rome will reap the benefit. Marcia has the praetorian guard well under control, what with her bribes and all the license she has begged for them. Let Marcia proclaim that Pertinax is Caesar, the praetorian guard will follow suit, and the senate will confirm it so soon after daybreak that the citizens will find themselves obeying a new Caesar before they know the old one is dead! Then let Pertinax make new laws and restore the ancient liberties. I will die happy.”

“O youth—insolence of youth!” said Galen, smiling. He resumed his mixing of the powders, adding new ingredients. “I was young once—young and insolent. I dared to try to tutor Commodus! But never in my long life was I insolent enough to claim all virtue for myself and bid my elders go and hide! You think you will slay Commodus? I doubt it.”

“How so?”

Sextus was annoyed. The youth in him resented that his altruism should be mocked.

“Pertinax should do it,” Galen answered. “If Rome needed no more than philosophy and grammar, better make me Caesar! I was mixing my philosophy with surgery and medicine while Pertinax was sucking at his mother’s breast in a Ligurian hut. Rome, my son, is sick of too much mixed philosophy. She needs a man of iron—a riser to occasion—a cutter of Gordian knots, precisely as a sick man needs a surgeon. The senate will vote, as you say, at the praetorian guard’s dictation. You have been clever, my Sextus, with your stirring of faction against faction. They are mean men, all so full of mutual suspicion as to heave a huge sigh when they know that Pertinax is Caesar, knowing he will overlook their plotting and rule without bloodshed if that can be done. But it can’t be! Unless Pertinax is man enough to strike the blow that shall restore the ancient liberties, then he is better dead before he tries to play the savior! We have a tyrant now. Shall we exchange him for a weak-kneed theorist?”

“Are you ready to die, Galen?”

“Why not? Are you the only Roman? I am not so old I have no virtue left. A little wisdom comes with old age, Sextus. It is better to live for one’s country than to die for

it, but since no way has been invented of avoiding death, it is wiser to die usefully than like a sandal thrown on to the rubbish-heap because the fashion changes.”



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“I wish you would speak plainly, Galen. I have told you all my secrets. You have seen me risk my life a thousand times in the midst of Commodus’ informers, coming and going, interviewing this and that one, urging here, restraining there, denying myself even hope of personal reward. You know I have been whole-hearted in the cause of Pertinax. Is it right, in a crisis, to put me off with subtleties?”

“Life is subtle. So is virtue. So is this stuff,” Galen answered, poking at the mixture with a bronze spoon. “Every man must choose his own way in a crisis. Some one’s star has fallen. Commodus’? I think not. That star blazed out of obscurity, and Commodus is not obscure. Mine? I am unimportant; I shall make no splendor in the heavens when my hour comes. Marcia’s? Is she obscure? Yours? You are like me, not born to the purple; when a sparrow dies, however diligently he has labored in the dirt, no meteors announce his fall. No, not Maternus, the outlaw, to say nothing of Sextus, the legally dead man, can command such notice from the sky. That meteor was some one’s who shall blaze into fame and then die.”

“Dark words, Galen!”

“Dark deeds!” the old man answered. “And a path to be chosen in darkness! Shall I poison the man whom I taught as a boy? Shall I refuse, and be drowned in the sewer by Marcia’s slaves? Shall I betray my friends to save my own old carcass? Shall I run away and hide, at my age, and live hounded by my own thoughts, fearful of my shadow, eating charity from peasants? I can easily say no to all those things. What then? It is not what a man does not, but what he does that makes him or unmakes him. There is nothing left but subtlety, my Sextus. What will you do? Go and do it now. Tomorrow may be too late.”

Sextus shrugged his shoulders, baffled and irritated. He had always looked to Galen for advice in a predicament. It was Galen, in fact, who had kept him from playing much more than the part of a spy-listening, talking, suggesting, but forever doing nothing violent.

“You know as well as I do, there is nothing ready,” he retorted. “Long ago I could have had a thousand armed men waiting for a moment such as this to rally behind Pertinax. But I listened to you—”

“And are accordingly alive, not crucified!” said Galen. “The praetorian guard is well able to slaughter any thousand men, to uphold Commodus or to put Pertinax in the place of Commodus. Your thousand men would only decorate a thousand gibbets, whether Pertinax should win or lose. If he should win, and become Caesar, he would have to make them an example of his love of law and order, proving his impartiality by blaming them for what he never invited them to do. For mark this: Pertinax has never named himself as Commodus’ successor. I warn you: there is far less safety for his friends

than for his enemies, unless he, with his own hand, strikes the blow that makes him emperor.”



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“If Marcia should do it—?”

“That would be the end of Marcia.”

“If I should do it?”

“That would be the end of you, my Sextus.”

“Let us say farewell, then, Galen! This right hand shall do it. It will save my friends. It will provide a culprit on whom Pertinax may lay the blame. He will ascend the throne unguilty of his predecessor’s blood—”

“And you?” asked Galen.

“I will take my own life. I will gladly die when I have ridded Rome of Commodus.”

He paused, awaiting a reply, but Galen appeared almost rudely unconcerned.

“You will not say farewell?”

“It is too soon,” Galen answered, folding up his powder in a sheet of parchment, tying it, at great pains to arrange the package neatly.

“Will you not wish me success?”

“That is something, my Sextus, that I have no powders for. I have occasionally cured men. I can set most kinds of fractures with considerable skill, old though I am. And I can divert a man’s attention sometimes, so that he lets nature heal him of mysterious diseases. But success is something you have already wished for and have already made or unmade. What you did, my Sextus, is the scaffolding of what you do now; this, in turn, of what you will do next. I gave you my advice. I bade you run away—in which case I would bid you farewell, but not otherwise.”

“I will not run.”

“I heard you.”

“And you said you are sentimental, Galen!”

“I have proved it to you. If I were not, I myself would run!”

Galen led the way out of the room into the hall where the mosaic floor and plastered walls presented colored temple scenes—priests burning incense at the shrine of Aesculapius, the sick and maimed arriving and the cured departing, giving praise.



“There will be no hero left in Rome when they have slain our Roman Hercules,” said Galen. “He has been a triton in a pond of minnows. You and I and all the other little men may not regret him afterward, since heroes, and particularly mad ones, are not madly loved. But we will not enjoy the rivalry of minnows.”

He led Sextus to the porch and stood there for a minute holding to his arm.

“There will be no rivals who will dare to raise their heads,” said Sextus, “once our Pertinax has made his bid for power.”

“But he will not,” Galen answered. “He will hesitate and let others do the bidding. Too many scruples! He who would govern an empire might better have fetters on feet and hands! Now go. But go not to the palace if you hope to see a heroism—or tomorrow’s dawn!”

## **XII.-LONG LIVE CAESAR!**



## Page 83

That night it rained. The wind blew yelling squalls along the streets. At intervals the din of hail on cobble-stones and roofs became a stinging sea of sound. The wavering oil lanterns died out one by one and left the streets in darkness in which now and then a slave-borne litter labored like a boat caught spreading too much sail. The overloaded sewers backed up and made pools of foulness, difficult to ford. Along the Tiber banks there was panic where the river-boats were plunging and breaking adrift on the rising flood and miserable, drenched slaves labored with the bales of merchandize, hauling the threatened stuff to higher ground.

But the noisiest, dismalest place was the palace, the heart of all Rome, where the rain and hail dinned down on marble. There was havoc in the clumps of ornamental trees—crashing of pots blown down from balconies—thunder of rent awnings and the splashing of countless cataracts where overloaded gutters spilled their surplus on mosaic pavement fifty or a hundred feet below. No light showed, saving at the guard-house by the main gate, where a group of sentries shrugged themselves against the wall—ill-tempered, shivering, alert. However mutinous a Roman army, or a legion, or a guard might be, its individuals were loyal to the routine work of military duty.

A decurion stepped out beneath a splashing arch, the lamplight gleaming on his wetted bronze and crimson.

“Narcissus? Yes, I recognize you. Who is this?” Narcissus and Sextus were shrouded in loose, hooded cloaks of raw wool, under which they hugged a change of footgear. Sextus had his face well covered. Narcissus pushed him forward under the guard-room arch, out of the rain.

“This is a man from Antioch, whom Caesar told me to present to him,” he said. “I know him well. His name is Marius.”

“I have no orders to admit a man of that name.” Narcissus waxed confidential.

“Do you wish to get both of us into trouble?” he asked. “You know Caesar’s way. He said bring him and forgot, I suppose, to tell his secretary to write the order for admission. Tonight he will remember my speaking to him about this expert with a javelin, and if I have to tell him—”

“Speak with the centurion.”

The decurion beckoned them into the guard-house, where a fire burned in a bronze tripod, casting a warm glow on walls hung with shields and weapons. A centurion, munching oily seed and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, came out of an inner office. He was not the type that had made Roman arms invincible. He lacked the self-reliant dignity of an old campaigner, substituting for it self-assertiveness and flashy



manners. He was annoyed because he could not get the seed out of his mouth with his finger in time to look aristocratic.

“What now, Narcissus? By Bacchus, no! No irregularities tonight! The very gods themselves are imitating Caesar’s ill-humor! Who is it you have brought?”



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Narcissus beckoned the centurion toward the corner, between fire and wall, where he could whisper without risk of being overheard.

“Marcia told me to bring this man tonight in hope of making Caesar change his mood. He is a javelin-thrower—an expert.”

“Has he a javelin under the cloak?” the centurion asked suspiciously.

“He is unarmed, of course. Do you take us for madmen?”

“All Rome is mad tonight,” said the centurion, “or I wouldn’t be arguing with a gladiator! Tell me what you know. A sentry said you saw the death of Pavonius Nasor. All the sentries who were in the tunnel at the time are under lock and key, and I expect to be ordered to have the poor devils killed to silence them. And now Bultius Livius—have you heard about it?”

“I have heard Caesar sent for him.”

“Well, if Caesar has sent for this friend of yours, he had better first made sacrifices to his gods and pray for something better than befell poor Livius! Yourself too! They say Livius is being racked—doubtless to make him tell more than he knows. I smell panic in the air. With all these palace slaves coming and going you can’t check rumor and I’ll wager there is already an exodus from Rome. Gods! What a night for travel! Morning will see the country roads all choked with the conveyances of bogged up senators! Let us pray this friend of yours may soften Caesar’s mood. Where is his admission paper?”

“As I told the decurion, I have none.”

“That settles it then; he can’t enter. No risks—not when I know the mood our Commodus is in! The commander might take the responsibility, but not I.”

“Where is he?” asked Narcissus.

“Where any lucky fellow is on such a night—in bed. I wouldn’t dare to send for him for less than riots, mutiny and all Rome burning! Let your man wait here. Go you into the palace and get a written permit for him.”

But nothing was more probable than that such a permit would be unobtainable.

Sextus stepped into the firelight, pulling back the hood to let the centurion see his face.

“By Mars’ red plume! Are you the man they call Maternus?”

Sextus retorted with a challenge:



“Now will you send for your commander? He knows me well.”

“Dioscuri! Doubtless! Probably you robbed him of his purse! By Romulus and Remus, what is happening to Rome? That falling star last night portended, did it, that a highwayman should dare to try to enter Caesar’s palace! Ho there, decurion! Bring four men!”

The decurion clanked in. His men surrounded Sextus at a gesture.

“I ought to put you both in cells,” said the centurion. “But you shall have a chance to justify yourself, Narcissus. Go on in. Bring Caesar’s written order to release this man Maternus—if you can!”

Narcissus, like all gladiators, had been trained in facial control lest an antagonist should be forewarned by his expression. Nevertheless, he was hard put to it to hide the fear that seized him. He supposed not even Marcia would dare openly to come to Sextus’ rescue.



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“That man is my only friend,” he said. “Let me have word with him first.”

“Not one word!”

The centurion made a gesture with his head. The guards took Sextus by the arms and marched him out into the night, he knowing better than to waste energy or arouse anger by resisting.

“Then I will go to the commander! I go straight to him,” Narcissus stammered. “Idiot! Don’t you know that Marcia protects Maternus? Otherwise, how should an outlaw whose face is so well known that you recognized him instantly—how should he dare to approach the palace?”

The centurion touched his forehead.

“Mad, I daresay! Go on in. Get Marcia’s protection for him. Bring me her command in writing! Wait, though—let me look at you.”

He made Narcissus throw his heavy cloak off, clean his legs and change into his other foot-gear. Then he examined his costume.

“Even on a night like this they’d punish me for letting a man pass who wasn’t dressed right. Let me see, you’re not free yet; you don’t have to wear a toga. I spend half my days teaching clodhoppers how to fold hired togas properly behind the neck. It’s the only way you can tell a slave from a citizen these days! The praetorian guard ought to be recruited from the tailors’ shops! Lace up your sandal properly. Now— any weapons underneath that tunic?”

Sullenly Narcissus held his arms up and submitted to be searched. He usually came and went unchallenged, being known as one of Caesar’s favorites, but the centurion’s suspicions were aroused. They were almost confirmed a moment later. The decurion returned and laid a long, lean dagger on the table.

“Taken from the prisoner,” he reported. “It was hidden beneath his tunic. He looks desperate enough to kill himself, so I left two men to keep an eye on him.”

The centurion scratched his chin again, his mouth half-open.

“Whom do you propose to visit in the palace?” he demanded.

“Marcia,” said Narcissus.

The centurion turned to the decurion.



“Go you with him. Hand him over to the hall-attendants. Bid them pass him from hand to hand into Marcia’s presence. Don’t return until you have word he has reached her.”

To all intents and purposes a prisoner, Narcissus was marched along the mosaic pavement of a bronze-roofed colonnade, whose marble columns flanked the approach to the palace steps. Drenched guards, posted near the eaves where water splashed on them clanged their shields in darkness as the decurion passed; there was not a square yard of the palace grounds unwatched.

There was a halt beside the little marble pavilion near the palace steps, where the decurion turned Narcissus over to an attendant in palace uniform, but no comment; the palace was too used to seeing favorites of one day in disgrace the next.

Within the palace there was draughtily lighted gloom, a sensation of dread and mysterious restlessness. The bronze doors leading to the emperor’s apartments were shut and guards posted outside them who demanded extremely definite reasons for admitting any one; even when the centurion’s message was delivered some one had to be sent in first to find out whether Marcia was willing, and for nearly half an hour Narcissus waited, biting his lip with impatience.

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When he was sent for at last, and accompanied in, he found Marcia, Pertinax and Galen seated unattended in the gorgeous, quiet anteroom next to the emperor's bedchamber. The outer storm was hardly audible through the window-shutters, but there was an atmosphere of impending climax, like the hush and rumble that precedes eruptions.

Marcia nodded and dismissed the attendant who had brought Narcissus. There was a strained look about her eyes, a tightening at the corners of the mouth. Her voice was almost hoarse:

"What is it? You bring bad news, Narcissus! What has happened?"

"Sextus has been arrested by the main gate guard!"

Galen came out of a reverie. Pertinax bit at his nails and looked startled; worry had made him look as old as Galen, but his shoulders were erect and he was very splendid in his jeweled full dress. None spoke; they waited on Marcia, who turned the news over in her mind a minute.

"When? Why?" she asked at last.

"He proposed I should smuggle him in, that he might be of service to you. He was stormy-minded. He said Rome may need a determined man tonight. But the centurion of the guard recognized him—knew he is Maternus. He refused to summon the commander. Sextus is locked in a cell, and there is no knowing what the guards may do to him. They may try to make him talk. Please write and order him released."

"Yes, order him released," said Pertinax.

But Marcia's strained lips flickered with the vestige of a smile.

"A determined man!" she said, her eyes on Pertinax. "By morning a determined man might give his own commands. Sextus is safe where he is. Let him stay there until you have power to release him! Go and wait in the outer room, Narcissus!"

Narcissus had no alternative. Though he could sense the climax with the marrow of his bones, he did not dare to disobey. He might have rushed into the emperor's bedroom to denounce the whole conspiracy and offer himself as bodyguard in the emergency. That might have won Commodus' gratitude; it might have opened up a way for liberating Sextus. But there was irresolution in the air. And besides, he knew that Sextus would reckon it a treason to himself to be made beholden for his life to Commodus, nor would he forgive betrayal of his friends, Pertinax, and Marcia and Galen.

So Narcissus, who cared only for Sextus, reckoning no other man on earth his friend, went and sat beyond the curtains in the smaller, outer room, straining his ears to catch the conversation and wondering what tragedy the gods might have in store. As



gladiator his philosophy was mixed of fatalism, cynical irreverence, a semi-military instinct of obedience, short-sightedness and self-will. He reckoned Marcia no better than himself because she, too, was born in slavery—and Pertinax not vastly better than himself because he was a charcoal-burner's son. But it did not enter his head just then that he might be capable of making history.



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Marcia well understood him. Knowing that he could not escape to confer with the slaves in the corridor, because the door leading to the corridor from the smaller anteroom was locked, she was at no pains to prevent his overhearing anything. He could be dealt with either way, at her convenience; a reward might seal his lips, or she could have him killed the instant that his usefulness was ended, which was possibly not yet.

“Sextus,” she said, “must be dealt with. Pertinax, you are the one who should attend to it. As governor of Rome you can—”

“He is thoroughly faithful,” said Pertinax. “He has been very useful to us.”

“Yes,” said Marcia, “but usefulness has limits. Time comes when wine jars need resealing, else the wine spills. Galen, go in and see the emperor.”

Galen shook his head.

“He is a sick man,” said Marcia. “I think he has a fever.”

Galen shook his head again.

“I will not have it said I poisoned him.”

“Nonsense! Who knows that you mixed any poison?”

“Sextus, for one,” Galen answered.

“Dea dia! There you are!” said Marcia. “I tell you, Pertinax, your Sextus may prove to be another Livius! He has been as ubiquitous as the plague. He knows everything. What if he should turn around and secure himself and his estates by telling Commodus all he knows? It was you who trusted Livius. Do you never learn by your mistakes?”

“We don’t know yet what Livius has told,” said Pertinax. “If he had been tortured—but he was not. Commodus slew him with his own hand. I know that is true; it was told me by the steward of the bedchamber, who saw it, and who helped to dispose of the body. Commodus swore that such a creeping spy as Livius, who could be true to nobody but scribbled, scribbled, scribbled in a journal all the scandal he could learn in order to betray anybody when it suited him, was unfit to live. I take that for a sign that Commodus has had a change of heart. It was a manly thing to slay that wretch.”

“He will have a change of governors of Rome before the day dawns!” Marcia retorted. “If it weren’t that he might change his mistress at the same time—”

“You would betray me—eh?” Pertinax smiled at her tolerantly.



“No,” said Marcia, “I would let you have your own way and be executed! You deserve it, Pertinax.” Pertinax stood up and paced the floor with hands behind him.

“I will have my own way. I will have it, Marcia!” he said, calmly, coming to a stand in front of her. “He who plots against his emperor may meet the like fate! If Commodus has no designs against me, then I harbor none against him. I am not sure I am fitted to be Caesar. I have none to rally to me, to rely on, except the praetorian guard, which is a two-horned weapon; they could turn on me as easily and put a man of their own choosing on the throne. And furthermore,



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I don't wish to be Caesar. Glabrio, for instance, is a better man than I am for the task. I will only consent to your desperate course, for the sake of Rome, if you can prove to me that Commodus designs a wholesale massacre. And even so, if your name and Galen's and mine are not on his proscription list—if he only intends, that is, to punish Christians and weaken the faction of that Carthaginian Severus, I will observe my oath of loyalty. I will counsel moderation but—”

“You are less than half a man without your mistress!” Marcia exploded. “Don't stand trying to impress me with your dignity. I don't believe in it! I will send for Cornificia.”

“No, no!” Pertinax showed instant resolution. “Cornificia shall not be dragged in. The responsibility is yours and mine. Let us not lessen our dignity by involving an innocent woman.”

For a moment that made Marcia breathless. She was staggered by his innocence, not his assertion of Cornificia's—bemused by the man's ability to believe what he chose to believe, as if Cornificia had not been the very first who plotted to make him Caesar. Cornificia more than any one had contrived to suggest to the praetorian guard that their interest might best be served some day by befriending Pertinax; she more than any one had disarmed Commodus' suspicion by complaining to him about Pertinax' lack of self-assertiveness, which had become Commodus' chief reason for not mistrusting him. By pretending to report to Commodus the private doings of Pertinax and a number of other important people, Cornificia had undermined Commodus' faith in his secret informers who might else have been dangerous.

“Your Cornificia,” Marcia began then changed her mind. Disillusionment would do no good. She must play on the man's illusion that he was the master of his own will. “Very well,” she went on, “Yours be the decision! No woman can decide such issues. We are all in your hands— Cornificia and Galen—all of us—aye, and Rome, too—and even Sextus and his friends. But you will never have another such opportunity. It is tonight or never, Pertinax!”

He winced. He was about to speak, but something interrupted him. The great door carved with cupids leading to the emperor's bedchamber opened inch by inch and Telamonion came out, closing it softly behind him.

“Caesar sleeps,” said the child, “and the wind blew out the lamp. He was very cross. It is dark. It is cold and lonely in there.”

In his hand he held a sheet of parchment, covered with writing and creased from his attempts to make a parchment helmet, “Show me,” he said, holding out the sheet to Marcia.



She took him on her knee and began reading what was written, putting him down when he tugged at the parchment to make her show him how to fold it. She found him another sheet to play with and told him to take it to Pertinax who was a soldier and knew more about helmets. Then she went on reading, clutching at the sheet so tightly that her nails blanched white under the dye.



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“Pertinax!” she said, shaking the parchment, speaking in a strained voice, “this is his final list! He has copied the names from his tablets. Whose name do you guess comes first?”

Pertinax was playing with Telamonion and did not look at her.

“Severus!” he answered, morbid jealousy, amounting to obsession, stirring that cynical hope in him.

“Severus isn’t mentioned. The first six names are in this order: Galen, Marcia, Cornificia, Pertinax, Narcissus, Sextus alias Maternus. Do you realize what that means? It is now or never! Why has he put Galen first, I wonder?”

Galen did not appear startled. His interest was philosophical— impersonal.

“I should be first. I am guiltiest. I taught him in his youth,” he remarked, smiling thinly. “I taught him how to loose the beast that lives in him, not intending that, of course, but it is what we do that counts. I should come first! The state would have been better for the death of many a man whom I cured; but I did not cure Commodus, I revealed him to himself, and he fell in love with himself and—”

“Now will you poison him?” said Marcia.

“No,” said Galen. “Let him kill me. It is better.”

“Gods! Has Rome no iron left? You, Pertinax!” said Marcia, “Go in and kill him!”

Pertinax stood up and stared at her. The child Telamonion pressed close to him holding his righthand, gazing at Marcia.

“Telamonion, go in and play with Narcissus,” said Marcia. She pointed at the curtains and the child obeyed.

“Go in and kill him, Pertinax!” Marcia shook the list of names, then stood still suddenly, like a woman frozen, ash-white under the carmine on her cheeks.

There came a voice from the emperor’s bedroom, more like the roar of an angry beast than human speech:

“Marcia! Do you hear me, Marcia? By all Olympus—Marcia!”

She opened the door. The inner room was in darkness. There came a gust of chill wet wind that made all the curtains flutter and there was a comfortless noise of cataracts of rain downpouring from the over-loaded gutters on to marble balconies. Then the emperor’s voice again:



“Is that you, Marcia? You leave your Commodus to die of thirst! I parch—I have a fever—bring my wine-cup!”

“At once, Commodus.”

She glanced at the golden cup on an onyx table. On a stand beside it was an unpierced wine jar set in an enormous bowl of snow. She looked at Pertinax—and shrugged her shoulders, possibly because the wind blew through the opened door. She glanced at Galen.

“If you have a fever, shouldn’t I bring Galen?”

“No!” roared Commodus. “The man might poison me! Bring me the cup, and you fill it yourself! Make haste before I die of thirst! Then bring me another lamp and dose the shutters! No slaves—I can’t bear the sight of them!”



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“Instantly, Commodus. I am coming with it now. Only wait while I pierce the amphora.”

She closed the door and looked swiftly once again at Pertinax. He frowned over the list of names and did not look at her. She walked straight up to Galen.

“Give me!” she demanded, holding out her hand. He drew a little parchment package from his bosom and she clutched it, saying nothing. Galen was the one who spoke:

“Responsibility is his who orders. May the gods see that it falls where it belongs.”

She took no notice of his speech but stood for a moment untying the strings of the package, frowning to herself, then bit the string through and, clutching the little package in her fist, took a gilded tool from beside the snow-bowl and pierced the seal of the amphora. Then she put the poison in the bottom of the golden cup and poured the wine—with difficulty, since the jar was heavy, but Pertinax, who watched intently, made no movement to assist. She stirred the wine with one of her long hair-pins.

“Marcia!” roared Commodus.

“I am coming now.”

She went into the bedroom, leaving the door not quite closed behind her. Pertinax began to stare at Galen critically. Galen blinked at him. Commodus’ voice came very distinctly from the inner room:

“Taste first, Marcia! Olympus! I can’t see you in the dark. Come close. Are your lips wet? Let me feel them!”

“I drank a whole mouthful, Commodus. How hot your hand is! Feel—feel the cup—you can feel with your finger how much I have tasted. I broke the seal of a fresh jar of Falernian.”

“Some of your Christians might have tampered with it!”

“No, no, Commodus. That jar has been in the cellar since before you were born and the seal was intact. I washed the cup myself.”

“Well, taste again. Sit here on the bed where I can feel your heart-beats.”

Presently he gave a gasp and belched, as always after he had swallowed a whole cupful at one draught.

“Now close the shutters and bolt them on the inside; there might be some of your Christians lurking on the balcony.”



“In this storm, Commodus? And there are guards on duty.”

“Close them, I say! Who trusts the guards! Did they guard the tunnel? I will rid Rome of all Christians tomorrow! Aye, and of many another reptile! They have robbed me of my fun in the arena—I will find another way to interest myself! Now bring me a fresh lamp in here, and set the tablets by the bed.”

She came out, shutting the door behind her, then stood listening. She did not tremble. Her wrist was red where Commodus had held it.

“How long?” she whispered, looking at Galen.

“Only a very little time,” he answered. “How much did you drink?”

She put her hand to her stomach, as if pain had stabbed her.

“Drink pure wine,” said Galen. “Swiftly. Drink a lot of it.”



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She went to the amphora. Before she could reach it there came a roar like a furious beast's from the bedroom.

"I am poisoned! Marcia! Marcia! My belly burns! I am on fire inside! I faint! Marcia!—Marcia!" Then groans and a great creaking of the bed.

Marcia—she was trembling now—drank wine, and Pertinax began to pace the floor.

"You, Galen, you had better go in to him," said Marcia.

"If I do go, I must heal him," Galen answered.

The groans in the bedroom ceased. The shouts began again—terrific imprecations—curses hurled at Marcia—the struggles of a strong man in the throes of cramp—and, at last, the sound of vomiting.

"If he vomits he will not die!" Marcia exclaimed. Galen nodded. He appeared immensely satisfied—expectant.

"Galen, have you—will that poison kill him?" Marcia demanded.

"No," said Galen. "Pertinax must kill him. I promised I would do my best for Pertinax. Behold your opportunity!"

Pertinax strode toward him, clutching at a dagger underneath his tunic.

"Kill me if you wish," said Galen, "but if you have any resolution you had better do first what you wanted me to do. And you will need me afterward."

Commodus was vomiting and in the pauses roaring like a mad beast. Marcia seized Pertinax by the arm. "I have done my part," she said. "Now nerve yourself! Go in now and finish it!"

"He may die yet. Let us wait and see," said Pertinax.

A howl rising to a scream—terror and anger mingled—came from the bedroom; then again the noise of vomiting and the creaking of the bed as Commodus writhed in the spasms of cramp.

"He will feel better presently," said Galen.

"If so, you die first! You have betrayed us all!" Pertinax shook off Marcia and scowled at Galen, raising his right arm as if about to strike the old man. "False to your emperor! False to us!"



“And quite willing to die, if first I may see you play the man!” said Galen, blinking up at him.

“Hush!” exclaimed Marcia. “Listen! Gods! He is up off the bed! He will be in here in a minute! Pertinax!”

Alarm subsided. They could hear the thud and creak as Commodus threw himself back on the bed—then writhing again and groans of agony. Between the spasms Commodus began to frame connected sentences:

“Guards! Your emperor is being murdered! Rescue your Commodus!”

“He is recovering,” said Galen.

“Give me your dagger!” said Marcia and clutched at Pertinax’ tunic, feeling for it.

But she was not even strong enough to resist the half-contemptuous shrug with which Pertinax thrust her away.

“You disgust me. There is neither dignity nor decency in this,” he muttered. “Nothing but evil can come of it.”

“Whose was the star that fell?” asked Galen.

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There came more noise from the bedroom. Commodus seemed to be trying to get to his feet again. Marcia ran toward the smaller anteroom and dragged the curtains back.

“Narcissus!”

He came out, carrying Telamonion. The child lay asleep in his arms.

“Go and put that child down. Now earn your freedom—go in and kill the emperor! He has poisoned himself, and he thinks we did it. Give him your dagger, Pertinax!”

“I am only a slave,” Narcissus answered. “It is not right that a slave should kill an emperor.”

Marcia seized the gladiator by the shoulders, scanned his face, saw what she looked for and bargained for it instantly.

“Your freedom! Manumission and a hundred thousand sesterces!”

“In writing!” said Narcissus.

“Dog!” growled Pertinax. “Go in and do as you are told!”

But Narcissus only grinned at him and squared his shoulders.

“Death means little to a gladiator,” he remarked.

“Leave him to me!” ordered Marcia.

“Go and sit down at that table, Pertinax. Take pen and parchment. Now then—what do you want in writing? Make haste!”

“Freedom—you may keep your money—I shall not wait to receive it. Freedom for me and for Sextus and for all of Sextus’ friends and freedmen. An order releasing Sextus from the guard-house instantly. Permission to leave Rome and Italy by any route we choose.”

“Write, Pertinax!” said Marcia. Narcissus glanced at Galen.

“Galen,” he said, “is one of Sextus’ friends, so set his name down.”

“Never mind me,” said Galen. “They will need me.”

Marcia stood over Pertinax, watching him write. She snatched the document and sanded it, then watched him write the order to the guard, releasing Sextus.



“There!” she exclaimed. “You have your price. Go in and kill him! Give him your dagger, Pertinax.”

“I hoped for heroism, not expecting it,” said Galen. “I expected cunning. Is it absent, too? If he should use a dagger—many men have heard me say that Caesar has a tendency to apoplexy—”

“Strangle him!” commanded Marcia.

She thrust the palms of her hands against Narcissus’ back and pushed him toward the bedroom door, now almost at the end of her reserves of self-control. Her mouth trembled. She was fighting against hysteria.

“Light! Lamp! Guards!” roared Commodus, and again the ebony-posted bed creaked under him. Narcissus stepped into the darkened room. He left the door open, to have light to do his work by, but Marcia closed it, clinging to the gilded satyr’s head that served for knob with both hands, her lips drawn tight against her teeth, her whole face tortured with anticipation.

“It is better that a gladiator did it,” remarked Pertinax, attempting to look calm. “I never killed a man. As general, and as governor of Rome, as consul and proconsul, I have spared whom I might. Some had to die but—my own hands are clean.”



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There came an awful sound of struggle from the inner room. A monstrous roar was shut off suddenly, half-finished, smothered under bedclothes. Then the bed-frame cracked under the strain of Titans fighting—cracked—creaked—and utter silence fell. It lasted several minutes. Then the door opened and Narcissus came striding out.

“He was strong,” he remarked. “Look at this.”

He bared his arm and showed where Commodus had gripped him; the lithe muscle looked as if it had been gripped in an iron vise. He chafed it, wincing with pain.

“Go in and observe that I have taken nothing. Don’t be afraid,” he added scornfully. “He fought like the god that he was, but he died—”

“Of apoplexy,” Galen interrupted. “That is to say, of a surging of blood to the brain and a cerebral rupture. It is fortunate you have a doctor on the scene who knew of his liability to—”

“We must go and see,” said Marcia. “Come with me, Pertinax. Then we must tidy the bed and make haste and summon the officers of the praetorian guard. Let them hear Galen say he died of apoplexy.”

She picked up a lamp from the table and Pertinax moved to follow her, but Narcissus stepped in his way.

“Ave, Caesar!” he said, throwing up his right hand.

“You may go,” said Pertinax. “Go in silence. Not a word to a soul in the corridors. Leave Rome. Leave Italy. Take Sextus with you.”

“You will let him go?” asked Marcia. “Pertinax, what will become of you? Send to the guard at the gate and command them to seize him! Sextus and Narcissus—”

“Have my promise!” he retorted. “If the fates intend me to be Caesar, it shall not be said I slew the men who set me on the throne.”

“You are Caesar,” she answered. “How long will you last? All omens favored you—the murder in the tunnel—now this storm, like a veil to act behind, and—”

“And last night a falling star!” said Galen. “Give me parchment. I will write the cause of death. Then let me go too, or else kill me. I am no more use. This is the second time that I have failed to serve the world by tutoring a Caesar. Commodus the hero, and now you the—”

“Silence!” Marcia commanded. “Or even Pertinax may rise above his scruples! Write a death certificate at once, and go your way and follow Sextus!”