TALBOT MUNDY

CAESAR DIES

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I. IN THE REIGN OF THE EMPEROR COMMODUS

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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.

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.

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!"

"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.

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.

"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."

"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.

"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