

LLOYD C. DOUGLAS /

# The Robe

*The Riverside Press Cambridge*

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY *Boston*

Dedicated with appreciation .

to

*Hazel McCann*

who wondered what became of

The Robe

## Chapter I

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BECAUSE she was only fifteen and busy with her growing up, Lucia's periods of reflection were brief and infrequent; but this morning she felt weighted with responsibility.

Last night her mother, who rarely talked to her about anything more perplexing than the advantages of clean hands and a pure heart, had privately discussed the possible outcome of Father's reckless remarks yesterday in the Senate; and Lucia, flattered by this confidence, had declared maturely that Prince Gaius wasn't in a position to do anything about it.

But after she had gone to bed, Lucia began to fret. Gaius might indeed overlook her father's heated comments about the extravagances and mismanagement of his government, if he had had no previous occasion for grievance against the Gallio family. There was, however, another grievance that no one knew about except herself—and Diana. They would all have to be careful now or they might get into serious trouble.

The birds had awakened her early. She was not yet used to their flutterings and twitterings, for they had returned much sooner than usual, Spring having arrived and unpacked before February's lease was up. Lucia roused to a consciousness of the fret that she had taken to bed with her. It was still there, like a toothache.

Dressing quietly so as not to disturb Tertia, who was soundly sleeping in the alcove—and would be alarmed when she roused to find her mistress's couch vacant—Lucia slipped her sandals softly over the exquisitely wrought mosaics that led from her bedchamber and through her parlor into the long corridor and down the wide stairway to the spacious hall and out into the vast peristyle where she paused, shielding her eyes against the sun.

For the past year or more, Lucia had been acutely conscious of her increasing height and rapid development into womanhood; but here on this expanse of tessellated tiling she always felt very insignificant. Everything in this immense peristyle dwarfed her; the tall marble columns that supported the vaulted roofs, the stately statues

standing in their silent dignity on the close-clipped lawn, the high silver spray of the fountain. No matter how old she became, she would be ever a child here.

Nor did it make her feel any more mature when, proceeding along the patterned pavement, she passed Servius whose face had been as bronzed and deep-lined when Lucia was a mere toddler. Acknowledging with twinkling fingers and a smile the old slave's grave salute, as he brought the shaft of his spear to his wrinkled forehead, she moved on to the vine-covered pergola at the far end of the rectangle.

There, with her folded arms resting on the marble balustrade that overlooked the terraced gardens, the arbors, the tiled pool, and commanded a breath-taking view of the city and the river, Lucia tried to decide whether to tell Marcellus. He would be terrifically angry, of course, and if he did anything about it at all he might make matters worse; but—somebody in the family must be informed where we stood in the opinion of Gaius before any more risks were taken. It was unlikely, thought Lucia, that she would have an opportunity to talk alone with her brother until later in the day; for Marcellus had been out—probably all night—at the Military Tribunes' Banquet, and wouldn't be up before noon; but she must resolve at once upon a course of action. She wished now that she had told Marcellus last summer, when it had happened.

The soft whisper of sandal-straps made her turn about. Decimus the butler was approaching, followed by the Macedonian twins bearing silver trays aloft on their outspread palms. Would his mistress, inquired Decimus with a deep bow, desire her breakfast served here?

"Why not?" said Lucia, absently.

Decimus barked at the twins and they made haste to prepare the table while Lucia watched their graceful movements with amused curiosity, as if observing the antics of a pair of playful terriers. Pretty things, they were; a little older than she, though not so tall; agile and shapely, and as nearly alike as two peas. It was the first time that Lucia had seen them in action, for they had been purchased only a week ago. Apparently Decimus, who had been training them, thought they were ready now for active duty. It would be interesting to see how they performed, for Father said they had been brought up in a home of refinement and were probably having their first experience of serving a table. Without risking an inquiring glance at the young woman who stood watching them, they proceeded swiftly but quietly with their task. They were both very white, observed Lucia, doubtless from confinement in some prisonship.

One of Father's hobbies, and his chief extravagance, was the possession of valuable slaves. The Gallio family did not own very many, for Father considered it a vulgar, dangerous, and ruinously expensive vanity to have swarms of them about with little to do but eat, sulk, and conspire. He selected his slaves with the same discriminating care that he exercised when purchasing beautiful statuary and other art objects. He had no interest in public sales. Upon the return of a military expedition from some civilized country, the commanding officers would notify a few of their well-to-do acquaintances that a limited number of high-grade captives were available; and Father would go down the day before the sale, and look them over, learn their history, sound them out, and if he found anything he wanted to add to his household staff he would bid. He never told anyone in the family how much he had paid for their slaves, but it was generally felt that he had never practiced economy in acquiring such merchandise.

Most of the people they knew were in a constant dither about their slaves; buying and selling and exchanging. It wasn't often that Father disposed of one; and when, rarely, he had done so, it was because the slave had mistreated another over whom he had some small authority. They had lost an excellent cook that way, about a year ago. Minna had grown crusty and cruel toward the kitchen crew, scolding them loudly and knocking them about. She had been warned a few times. Then, one day, Minna had slapped Tertia. Lucia wondered, briefly, where Minna was now. She certainly did know how to bake honey cakes.

You had to say this for Father: he was a good judge of people. Of course, slaves weren't people, exactly; but some of them were almost people. There was Demetrius, for example, who was at this moment marching through the colonnade with long, measured strides. Father had bought Demetrius six years ago and presented him to Marcellus on his seventeenth birthday. What a wonderful day that was, with all their good friends assembled in the Forum to see Marcellus — clean-shaven for the first time in his life — step forward to receive his white toga. Cornelius Capito and Father had made speeches, and then they had put the white toga on Marcellus. Lucia had been so proud and happy that her heart had pounded and her throat had hurt, though she was only nine then, and couldn't know much about the ceremony except that Marcellus was expected to act like a man now — though sometimes he forgot to, when Demetrius wasn't about.

Lucia pursed her full lips and grinned as she thought of their relationship; Demetrius, two years older than Marcellus, always so

seriously respectful, never relaxing for an instant from his position as a slave; Marcellus, stern and dignified, but occasionally forgetting to be the master and slipping absurdly into the rôle of intimate friend. Very funny, it was sometimes. Lucia loved to watch them together at such moments. Of course she had about the same relation to Tertia; but that seemed different.

Demetrius had come from Corinth, where his father — a wealthy shipowner — had taken a too conspicuous part in defensive politics. Everything had happened at once in Demetrius' family. His father had been executed, his two elder brothers had been given to the new Legate of Achaea, his patrician mother had committed suicide; and Demetrius — tall, handsome, athletic — had been brought to Rome under heavy guard, for he was not only valuable but violent.

Lucia remembered when, a week before Marcellus' coming of age, she had heard Father telling Mother about his purchase of the Corinthian slave, only an hour earlier. She had been much impressed — and a little frightened, too.

'He will require careful handling for a while,' Father was saying. 'He has seen some rough treatment. His keeper told me I had better sleep with a dagger under my pillow until the Corinthian cooled down. It seems he had badly beaten up one of his guards. Ordinarily, of course, they would have dealt with him briefly and decisively; but they were under orders to deliver him uninjured. They were quite relieved to get him off their hands.'

'But is this not dangerous?' Mother had inquired anxiously. 'What might he not do to our son?'

'That,' Father had replied, 'will be up to Marcellus. He will have to win the fellow's loyalty. And he can do it, I think. All that Demetrius needs is an assurance of fair play. He will not expect to be petted. He is a slave, and he knows it — and hates it; but he will respond to decent discipline.' And then Father had gone on to say that after he had paid the money and signed the documents, he had himself led Demetrius out of the narrow cell; and, when they were in the open plaza, had unlocked his chains; very carefully, too, for his wrists were raw and bleeding. 'Then I walked on ahead of him,' Father had continued, 'without turning to see whether he was following me. Aulus had driven me down and was waiting in the chariot at the Appian Gate, a few yards away. I had planned to bring the Corinthian back with me. But, as we neared the chariot, I decided to give him instructions about how to reach our villa on foot.'

'Alone?' Mother had exclaimed. 'Was that not very risky?'

'Yes,' Father had agreed, 'but not quite so risky as to have brought

him here as a shackled prisoner. He was free to run away. I wanted him to be in a position to decide whether he would rather take a chance with us than gamble on some other fate. I could see that my gestures of confidence had surprised and mellowed him a little. He said — in beautiful Greek, for he had been well educated, "What shall I do, sir, when I arrive at your villa?" I told him to inquire for Marcipor, who would advise him. He nodded, and stood fumbling with the rusty chains that I had loosed from his hands. "Throw them away," I said. Then I mounted the chariot, and drove home.

"I wonder if you will ever see him again," Mother had said; and, in answer to her question, Marcipor appeared in the doorway.

"A young Corinthian has arrived, Master," said Marcipor, a Corinthian himself. "He says he belongs to us."

"That is true," Father said, pleased with the news. "I bought him this morning. He will attend my son, though Marcellus is to know nothing of this for the present. Feed him well. And provide him with a bath and clean clothing. He has been imprisoned for a long time."

"The Greek has already bathed, Master," replied Marcipor.

"Quite right," approved Father. "That was thoughtful of you."

"I had not yet thought of it," admitted Marcipor. "I was in the sunken garden, supervising the building of the new rose arbor, when this Greek appeared. Having told me his name, and that he belonged here, he caught sight of the pool —"

"You mean" — expostulated Mother — "that he dared to use our pool?"

"I am sorry," Marcipor replied. "It happened so quickly I was unable to thwart it. The Greek ran swiftly, tossing aside his garments, and dived in. I regret the incident. The pool will be drained immediately, and thoroughly cleansed."

"Very good," Marcipor said Father. "And do not rebuke him; though he should be advised not to do that again." And Father had laughed, after Marcipor had left the room. Mother said, "The fellow should have known better than that." "Doubtless he did," Father had replied. "But I cannot blame him. He must have been immensely dirty. The sight of that much water probably drove him temporarily insane."

One could be sure, reflected Lucia, that Marcipor hadn't been too hard on poor Demetrius; for, from that day, he had treated him as if he were his own son. Indeed, the attachment was so close that slaves more recently acquired often asked if Marcipor and Demetrius were not somehow related.



Demetrius had reappeared from the house now, and was advancing over the tiled pavement on his way to the pergola. Lucia wondered what errand was bringing him. Presently he was standing before her, waiting for a signal to speak.

'Yes, Demetrius?' she drawled.

'The Tribune,' he announced, with dignity, 'presents his good wishes for his sister's health and happiness, and requests that he be permitted to join her at breakfast.'

Lucia brightened momentarily; then sobered, and replied, 'Inform your master that his sister will be much pleased — and tell him,' she added, in a tone somewhat less formal, 'that breakfast will be served here in the pergola.'

After Demetrius had bowed deeply and was turning to go, Lucia sauntered past him and proceeded along the pavement for several yards. He followed her at a discreet distance. When they were out of earshot, she paused and confronted him.

'How does he happen to be up so early?' she asked, in a tone that was neither perpendicular nor oblique, but frankly horizontal. 'Didn't he go to the banquet?'

'The Tribune attended the banquet,' replied Demetrius, respectfully. 'It is of that, perhaps, that he is impatient to speak.'

'Now don't tell me that he got into some sort of mess, Demetrius.' She tried to invade his eyes, but the bridge was up.

'If so,' he replied, prudently, 'the Tribune may wish to report it without the assistance of his slave. Shall I go now?'

'You were there, of course, attending my brother,' pursued Lucia. And when Demetrius bowed an affirmative, she asked, 'Was Prince Gaius there?' Demetrius bowed again, and she went on, uncertainly, 'Did you — was he — had you an opportunity to notice whether the Prince was in good humor?'

'Very,' replied Demetrius — 'until he went to sleep.'

'Drunk?' Lucia wrinkled her nose.

'It is possible,' deliberated Demetrius, 'but it is not for me to say.'

'Did the Prince seem friendly — toward my brother?' persisted Lucia.

'No more than usual.' Demetrius shifted his weight and glanced toward the house.

Lucia sighed significantly, shook her black curls, and pouted.

'You can be very trying sometimes, Demetrius.'

'I know,' he admitted ruefully. 'May I go now? My master —'

'By all means!' snapped Lucia. 'And swiftly!' She turned and marched back with clipped steps to the pergola. Something had gone wrong last night, or Demetrius wouldn't have taken that frozen attitude.



Decimus, whose instinct advised him that his young mistress was displeased, retreated to a safe distance. The twins, who had now finished laying the table, were standing side by side awaiting orders. Lucia advanced on them.

'What are you called?' she demanded, her tone still laced with annoyance.

'I am Helen,' squeaked one of them, nervously. 'My sister is Nesta.'

'Can't she talk?'

'Please — she is frightened.'

Their long-lashed eyes widened with apprehension as Lucia drew closer, but they did not flinch. Cupping her hands softly under their round chins, she drew up their faces, smiled a little, and said, 'Don't be afraid. I won't bite you.' Then — as if caressing a doll — she toyed with the tight little curls that had escaped from Helen's cap. Turning to Nesta, she untied and painstakingly retied her broad sash. Both girls' eyes were swimming. Nesta stopped a big tear with the back of her hand.

'Now, now,' soothed Lucia, 'don't cry. No one is going to hurt you here.' She impulsively abandoned the lullaby, drew herself erect, and declared proudly: 'You belong to Senator Marcus Lucan Gallio. He paid a great price for you — because you are valuable; and — because you are valuable — you will not be mistreated.' Decimus she called, over her shoulder — 'see that these pretty children have new tunics; white ones — with coral trimmings.' She picked up their hands, one by one, and examined them critically. 'Clean,' she remarked, half aloud — 'and beautiful, too. That is good.' Facing Decimus, she said: 'You may go now. Take the twins. Have them bring the food. My brother will have breakfast with me here. You need not come back.'

Lucia had never liked Decimus very well; not that there was any particular ground for complaint, for he was a perfect servant; almost too deferential, a chilling deference that lacked only a little of being sulkiness. It had been Lucia's observation that imported slaves were more comfortable to live with than the natives. Decimus had been born in Rome and had been in their family for almost as long as Lucia could remember. He had a responsible position; attended to all the purchasing of supplies for their tables, personally interviewed the merchants, visited the markets, met the foreign caravans that brought spices and other exotics from afar; a very competent person indeed, who minded his own business, kept his own counsel, and carried himself with dignity. But he was a stranger.

One never could feel toward Decimus as one did toward good old

Marcipor who was always so gentle — and trustworthy too. Marcipor had managed the business affairs of the family for so long that he probably knew more about their estate than Father did.

Decimus bowed gravely now, as Lucia dismissed him, and started toward the house, his stiff back registering disapproval of this episode that had flouted the discipline he believed in and firmly exercised. The Macedonians, their small even teeth flashing an ecstatic smile, scampered away, hand in hand, without waiting for formal permission. Lucia stopped them in their tracks with a stern command.

'Come back here!' she called severely. They obeyed with spiritless feet and stood dejectedly before her. 'Take it easy,' drawled Lucia. 'You shouldn't romp when you're on duty. Decimus does not like it.'

They looked up shyly from under their long lashes, and Lucia's lips curled into a sympathetic grin that relighted their eyes.

'You may go now,' she said, abruptly resuming a tone of command. Lounging onto the long marble seat beside the table, she watched the twins as they marched a few paces behind Decimus, their spines straight and stiff as arrows, accenting each determined step with jerks of their heads from side to side, in a quite too faithful imitation of the crusty butler. Lucia chuckled. 'The little rascals,' she muttered. 'They deserve to be spanked for that.' Then she suddenly sobered and sat studiously frowning at the rhythmic flexion of her sandaled toes. Marcellus would be here in a moment. How much — if anything — should she tell her adored brother about her unpleasant experience with Gaius? But first, of course, she must discover what dreadful thing had happened last night at the Tribunes' Banquet.

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'Good morning, sweet child!' Marcellus tipped back his sister's head, noisily kissed her between the eyes, and tousled her hair, while Bambo, his big black sheep-dog, snuggled his grinning muzzle under her arm and wagged amiably.

'Down! Both of you!' commanded Lucia. 'You're uncommonly bright this morning, Tribune Marcellus Lucan Gallio. I thought you were going to a party at the Club.'

'Ah — my infant sister — but what a party!' Marcellus gingerly touched his finely moulded, close-cropped, curly head in several ailing areas, and winced. 'You may well be glad that you are not — and can never be — a Tribune. It was indeed a long, stormy night.'

'A wet one, at any rate, to judge from your puffy eyes. Tell me about it — or as much as you can remember.' Lucia scooped Bambo off the marble lectus with her foot, and her brother eased himself onto the seat beside her. He laughed, reminiscently, painfully. 'I fear I disgraced the family. Only the dear gods know what may come of it. His Highness was too far gone to understand, but someone will be sure to tell him before the day is over.'

Lucia leaned forward anxiously, laid a hand on his knee, and searched his cloudy eyes.

'Gaius?' she asked, in a frightened whisper. 'What happened, Marcellus?'

'A poem,' he muttered, 'an ode; a long, tiresome, incredibly stupid ode, wrought for the occasion by old Senator Tuscus, who, having reached that ripeness of senescence where Time and Eternity are mistaken for each other —'

'Sounds as if you'd arrived there, too,' broke in Lucia. 'Can't you speed it up a little?'

'Don't hurry me, impatient youth,' sighed Marcellus. 'I am very frail. As I was saying, this interminable ode, conceived by the ancient Tuscus to improve his rating, was read by his son Antonius, also in need of royal favor; a grandiloquent eulogy to our glorious Prince.'

'He must have loved the flattery,' observed Lucia, 'and of course you all applauded it. You and Tullus, especially.'

'I was just coming to that,' said Marcellus, thickly. 'For hours there had been a succession of rich foods and many beverages; also a plenitude of metal music interspersed with Greek choruses — pretty good — and an exhibition of magic — pretty bad; and some perfunctory speeches, of great length and thickness. A wrestling-match, too, I believe. The night was far advanced. Long before Antonius rose, my sister, if any man among us had been free to consult his own desire, we would all have stretched out on our comfortable couches and slept. The gallant Tullus, of whose good health you are ever unaccountably solicitous, sat across from me, frankly asleep like a little child.'

'And then you had the ode,' encouraged Lucia, crisply.

'Yes — we then had the ode. And as Antonius droned on — and on — he seemed to recede farther and farther; his features became dimmer and dimmer; and the measured noise he was making sounded fainter and fainter, as my tortured eyes grew hotter and heavier —'

'Marcellus!' shouted Lucia. 'In the name of every immortal god! Get on with it!'

'Be calm, impetuous child. I do not think rapidly today. Never again shall I be anything but tiresome. That ode did something to me, I fear. Well — after it had been inching along for leagues and decades, I suddenly roused, pulled myself together, and gazed about upon the distinguished company. Almost everyone had peacefully passed away, except a few at the high table whose frozen smiles were held with clenched teeth; and Antonius' insufferable young brother, Quintus, who was purple with anger. I can't stomach that arrogant pup and he knows I despise him.'

'Gaius!' barked Lucia, in her brother's face, so savagely that Bambo growled. 'I want to know what you did to offend Gaius!'

Marcellus laughed whimperingly, for it hurt; then burst into hysterical guffaws.

'If the Glorious One had been merely asleep, quietly, decently, with his fat chins on his bosom — as were his devoted subjects — your unfortunate brother might have borne it. But our Prince had allowed his head to tip far back. His mouth — by no means a thing of beauty, at best — was open. The tongue protruded unprettily and the bulbous nose twitched at each resounding inhalation. Our banquet-hall was deathly quiet, but for Antonius and Gaius, who shared the floor.'

'Revoltin'!' muttered Lucia.

'A feeble word, my sister. You should give more heed to your diction. Well — at that fateful moment Antonius had reached the climax of his father's ode with an apostrophe to our Prince that must have caused a storm on Mount Parnassus. Gaius was a Fountain of Knowledge! The eyes of Gaius glowed with Divine Light! When the lips of Gaius moved, Wisdom flowed and Justice smiled! . . . Precious child,' went on Marcellus, taking her hand, 'I felt my tragic mishap coming on, not unlike an unbeatable sneeze. I suddenly burst out laughing! No — I do not mean that I chuckled furtively into my hands; I threw back my head and roared! Howled! Long, lusty yells of insane laughter!' Reliving the experience, Marcellus went off again into an abandon of undisciplined mirth. 'Believe me — I woke everybody up — but Gaius.'

'Marcellus!'

Suddenly sobered by the tone of alarm in his sister's voice, he looked into her pale, unsmiling face.

'What is it, Lucia?' he demanded. 'Are you ill?'

'I'm — afraid!' she whispered, weakly.

He put his arm about her and she pressed her forehead against his shoulder.

'There, there!' he murmured. 'We've nothing to fear, Lucia. I

was foolish to have upset you. I thought you would be amused. Gaius will be angry, of course, when he learns of it; but he will not venture to punish the son of Marcus Lucan Gallio.

'But — you see —' stammered Lucia, 'it was only yesterday that Father openly criticized him in the Senate. Had you not heard?' 'Of course; but the Pater's strong enough to take care of himself,' declared Marcellus, almost too confidently to be convincing. There was a considerable pause before his sister spoke. He felt her body trembling.

'If it were just that one thing,' she said, slowly, 'perhaps it might be overlooked. But — now you have offended him. And he was already angry at me.'

'You!' Marcellus took her by the shoulders and stared into her worried eyes. 'And why should Gaius be angry at you?'

'Do you remember, last summer, when Diana and her mother and I were guests at the Palace on Capri — and Gaius came to visit the Emperor?'

'Well? Go on!' demanded Marcellus. 'What of it? What did he say? What did he do?'

'He tried to make love to me.'

'That loathsome beast!' roared Marcellus, leaping to his feet. 'I'll tear his dirty tongue out! I'll gouge his eyes out with my thumbs! Why haven't you told me this before?'

'You have given the reason,' said Lucia, dejectedly. 'I was afraid of the tongue-tearing — and eye-gouging. Had my brother been a puny, timid man, I might have told him at once. But my brother is strong and brave — and reckless. Now that I have told him, he will kill Gaius; and my brother, whom I so dearly love, will be put to death, and my father, too, I suppose. And my mother will be banished or imprisoned, and —'

'What did Mother think about this?' broke in Marcellus. 'I did not tell her.'

'Why not? You should have done so — instantly!'

'Then she would have told Father. That would have been as dangerous as telling my brother.'

'You should have told the Emperor!' spluttered Marcellus. 'Tiberius is no monument to virtue, but he would have done something about that! He's not so very fond of Gaius.'

'Don't be foolish! That half-crazy old man? He would probably have gone into one of his towering tantrums, and scolded Gaius in the presence of everybody; and then he would have cooled off and forgotten all about it. But Gaius wouldn't have forgotten! No — I decided to ignore it. Nobody knows — but Diana.'

'Diana! If you thought you had such a dangerous secret, why should you tell that romping infant Diana?'

'Because she was afraid of him, too, and understood my reasons for not wanting to be left alone with him. But Diana is not a baby, Marcellus. She is nearly sixteen. And—if you'll pardon my saying so—I think you should stop mussing her hair, and tickling her under the chin, when she comes here to visit me—as if she were five, and you a hundred.'

'Sorry! It hadn't occurred to me that she would resent my playful caresses. I never thought of her except as a child—like yourself.'

'Well—it's time you realized that Diana is a young woman. If she resents your playful caresses, it is not because they are caresses but because they are playful.' Lucia hesitated; then continued softly, her eyes intent on her brother's gloomy face. 'She might even like your caresses—if they meant anything. I think it hurts her, Marcellus, when you call her "Sweetheart."'

'I had not realized that Diana was so sensitive,' mumbled Marcellus. 'She is certainly stormy enough when anything displeases her. She was audacious enough to demand that her name be changed.'

'She hated to be called Asinia, Marcellus,' said Lucia, loyally. 'Diana is prettier, don't you think?'

'Perhaps,' shrugged Marcellus. 'Name of a silly goddess. The name of the Asinius stock is noble; means something!'

'Don't be tiresome, Marcellus!' snapped Lucia. 'What I am saying is: Diana would probably enjoy having you call her "Sweetheart"—if—'

Marcellus, who had been restlessly panthering about, drew up to inspect his sister with sudden interest.

'Are you trying to imply that this youngster thinks she is fond of me?'

'Of course! And I think you're pretty dumb, not to have noticed it! Come and sit down—and compose yourself. Our breakfast is on the way.'

Marcellus glanced casually in the direction of the house; then stared frowningly; then rubbed his eyes with his fists, and stared again. Lucia's lips puckered into a reluctant grin.

'In truth, my sister,' he groaned, 'I am in much worse condition than I had supposed.'

'You're all right, Tribune,' she drawled. 'There really are two of them.'

'Thanks! I am relieved. Are they as bright as they are beautiful?' he asked, as the twins neared.



'It is too early to tell. This is their first day on duty. Don't frighten them, Marcellus. They're already scared half out of their wits. They have never worked before. . . . No, no, Bambol! Come here!'

Rosy with embarrassment, the Macedonians began unburdening their silver trays, fussily pretending they were not under observation.

'Cute little things; aren't they?' chirped Marcellus. 'Where did Father pick them up?'

'Don't!' whispered Lucia. She rose and walked to the balustrade, her brother sauntering after her. They turned their faces toward the city. 'What did Tullus think of what you did?' she asked, irrelevantly.

'Tell me' — Marcellus ignored her query — 'is there anything peculiar about these slaves that makes you so extraordinarily considerate?'

Lucia shook her head, without looking up — and sighed.

'I was just thinking,' she said, at length, 'how I might feel if I were in their place.' Her troubled eyes lifted to meet his look of inquiry. 'It is not impossible, Marcellus, that I may soon find myself in some such predicament. . . . You wouldn't like that. Would you?'

'Nonsense!' he growled, out of the corner of his mouth. 'You're making too great a disaster of this! Nothing's going to happen. I'll see to that.'

'How?' demanded Lucia. 'How are you going to see to it?'

'Well' — temporized Marcellus — 'what do you think I should do — short of going to that ugly reptile with an apology?'

Lucia brightened a little and laid her hand on his arm.

'Do that!' she pleaded. 'Today! Make peace with him, Marcellus!

Tell him you were drunk. You were; weren't you?'

'I'd rather be flogged — in the market-place!'

'Yes — I know. And perhaps you will be. Gaius is dangerous!'

'Ah — what could he do? Tiberius would not permit his half-witted stepson to punish a member of the Gallio family. It's common knowledge that the old man despises him.'

'Yes — but Tiberius consented to his regency because Julia demanded it. And Julia still has to be reckoned with. If it came to a decision whether that worn-out old man should stand up for the Gallio family — against Gaius — with his shrewish wife screaming in his ears, I doubt that he would trouble himself. Julia would stop at nothing!'

'The vindictive old —' Marcellus paused on the edge of a kennel word.



'Think it over.' Lucia's tone was brighter, as if she felt herself gaining ground. 'Come—let us eat our breakfast. Then you will go to Gaius, and take your medicine. Praise him! Flatter him! He can stand any amount of it. Tell him he is beautiful! Tell him there's nobody in the whole Empire as wise as he is. Tell him he is divine! But—be sure you keep your face straight. Gaius already knows you have a keen sense of humor.'

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Having decided to accept his sister's counsel, Marcellus was anxious to perform his unpleasant duty and be done with it. Prudence suggested that he seek an interview through the formal channels and await the convenience of the Prince; but, increasingly impressed by the gravity of his position, he resolved to ignore the customary court procedure and take a chance of seeing Gaius without an appointment. By appearing at the Palace shortly before noon, he might even be lucky enough to have a few minutes alone with the Prince before anyone had informed him about last night's mishap.

At ten, rejuvenated by a hot bath, a vigorous massage by Demeetrius, and a plunge in the pool, the Tribune returned to his rooms, dressed with care, and sauntered downstairs. Observing that the library door was ajar, he paused to greet his father, whom he had not seen since yesterday. The handsome, white-haired Senator was seated at his desk, writing. He glanced up, nodded, smiled briefly, and invited Marcellus to come in.

'If you are at liberty today, my son, I should be pleased to have you go with me to inspect a span of matched Hispanian mares.'

'I should like to, sir; but might tomorrow serve as well? I have an important errand to do; something that cannot be put off.' There was a note of anxiety in the Tribune's voice that narrowed the wise old eyes.

'Nothing serious, I trust.' Gallio pointed to a vacant seat.

'I hope not, sir.' Marcellus sat tentatively on the broad arm of the chair as a fair compromise between candid reticence and complete explanation.

'Your manner,' observed his father, pointedly, 'suggests that you are worried. I have no wish to intrude upon your private perplexities, but is there anything I might do for you?'

'I'm afraid not, sir; thank you.' After a moment of indecision, Marcellus slowly slid into the chair and regarded his distinguished parent with a sober face. 'If you have the time, I will tell you.'

Gallio nodded, put down his stylus, and leaned forward on his

folded arms encouragingly. It was quite a long narrative. Marcellus did not spare himself. He told it all. At one juncture, he was half-disposed to introduce Lucia's dilemma as relevant to his own; but decided against it, feeling that their pater was getting about all he could take for one session. He concluded, at length, with the declaration that he was going at once to apologize. Gallio, who had listened attentively but without comment, now shook his leonine head and shouted 'No!' He straightened and shook his head again. 'No! — No, no!'

Amazed by his father's outburst, for he had anticipated his full approval, Marcellus asked, 'Why not, sir?' The most dangerous implement a man can use for the repair of a damaged relationship is an abject apology. Gallio pushed back his huge chair and rose to his full height as if preparing to deliver an address. 'Even in the most favorable circumstances, as when placating an injured friend, a self-abasing apology may do much harm. If the friend is contented with nothing less, he should not be served with it at all; for his friendship is not worth its upkeep. In the case of Gaius, an apology would be a fatality; for you are not dealing here with a gentleman, but with a congenital scoundrel. Your apology will imply that you expect Gaius to be generous. Generosity, in his opinion, is a sign of weakness. By imputing it to him, you will have given him further offense. Gaius has reasons to be sensitive about his power. Never put yourself on the defensive with a man who is fretting about his own insecurity. Here, he says, is at least one opportunity to demonstrate my strength.'

'Perhaps you are right, sir,' conceded Marcellus. 'Perhaps?' Of course, I am right! The Senator walked to the door, closed it softly, and resumed his seat. 'And that is not all,' he went on. 'Let me refresh your mind about the peculiar relations in the imperial family which explain why Gaius is a man to be watched and feared. There is old Tiberius, alternately raging and rotting in his fifty-room villa on Capri; a pathetic and disgusting figure, mooning over his necromancies and chattering to his gods. My son,' Gallio interrupted himself, 'there is always something fundamentally wrong with a rich man or a king who pretends to be religious. Let the poor and helpless invoke the gods. That is what the gods are for — to distract the attention of the weak from their otherwise intolerable miseries. When an emperor makes much ado about religion, he is either cracked or crooked. Tiberius is not crooked. If he is cracked, the cause is not far to seek. For a score of years he has nursed a bitter grudge against his mother for demanding that he divorce Vipsania — the only creature he ever