

"A SON AT THE LENGTH"¹

Brandishing a wooden toy sword, eleven-year-old Marcellus Gallus scampered around the dusty grounds of his parents' Roman villa, fighting imaginary foes and riding an imaginary horse.

"Come at me, if you will!" he yelled, challenging his imaginary fiends. Dropping his sword, he fell, rolling in the dust as he clutched his shoulder's imaginary wound.

"Ye think that ye have triumphed over me, O mine enemy!" he shouted, pulling a wooden dirk from his toga. A shadow passed over him, and he squinted at the standing silhouette of Joram, a twelve-year-old Jewish slave boy carrying a hammer, some nails, and a few wooden planks. He was making his way toward the fence that ran behind the stables. He turned and smiled at Marcellus, who scrambled to his feet.

"What do you have to do today?" Marcellus asked.

"Mend the fences from the damage they received in the storm last night," said Joram. "And you?"

Marcellus shrugged, "Nothing. Just playing."

"Wish I could join you," said Joram. "Do you enjoy playing by yourself?"

"Not really. Hey, when you finish your jobs, do you want to join me?"

"In what?"

"Fighting the Gauls!"

Joram grinned and nodded. "It will be later this afternoon, though."

With the neighing of horses in the distant paddock and the hammering of wood sounding in his ears, Marcellus returned to his fantasy. After a while, he "galloped" over to a fence with his imaginary enemies in hot pursuit.

I can jump it, he thought, reaching out his hands. It doesn't look too high.

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Hearing a shriek, Joram threw down his hammer and dashed



to the place from where it had originated. Marcellus was clutching his hand, and blood was streaming down his wrist.

"You were just mending this, weren't you?" he shouted.

Joram nodded apologetically.

"Why didn't you tell me there was a nail sticking out?"

"I'm so sorry. I was meaning to go back and flatten the points once all the planks were in place. Let me go and get—"

"Don't bother. Wait until I tell my father about this. He'll have you flogged."

"I was just doing my job," said Joram. "And I am sorry."

"I don't care. And forget about playing with me ... ever!"

At that moment, a woman with braided greying hair, bearing a gentle demeanour and wearing a saffron toga approached.

"I heard you screaming, Marcellus. What happened?"

"I went to jump that fence and this Jewish slave kid left a huge nail sticking out of it and..."

"It looks very bad," said the woman, inspecting the gushing wound.

"It's all his fault, Mother," Marcellus moaned.

"That doesn't matter right now. We need to get you to the house physician."

"But isn't he going to be punished?"

"Who?"

"This slave boy."

The woman turned to the forlorn figure standing by, hanging his head.

"Finish the fence and your duties for the day, Joram," she calmly said, "and then wait in your quarters until supper."

"Yes, Lady Domitilla. I am sorry. I beg yours and Marcellus' forgiveness."

"You have mine. And I'm sure you have my son's."

"He doesn't," Marcellus said as his mother led him away. "Never."

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Tribune Clemens Gallus stepped through the threshold of his villa, took off his plumed

helmet, and mopped his brow. His wife greeted him with a kiss and lifted the heavy scarlet cloak from his shoulders.

"A taxing day, darling?"

Clemens nodded and smiled wearily. "Taxing in a literal sense, Domitilla. I had to marshal a quelling of a crowd demanding fewer taxes!"

"Fortunately, there was no need to use this," he added, unbuckling his sword. "I would like to see their grievances solved, but..."

"Speaking of grievances, what happened here?" he asked, seeing Marcellus moping in a chair by the window with his hand wrapped in bandages.

"An accident," said Domitilla.

"It wasn't an accident, Mother," said Marcellus. "That Jewish slave you just got..."

"His name is Joram," said his mother.

Marcellus continued. "Well, Father, he left the point of a nail sticking out of the fence that he was supposed to be mending for you. I was trying to jump the

fence and the nail ripped my hand. It was his fault entirely."

"He didn't mean it," said Domitilla, "and he was extremely sorry."

"I don't care. If it wasn't for him, this wouldn't have happened. The physician said I will never be able to use my hand properly again. I won't be able to grip a sword or a spear."

"What?" Clemens exclaimed. "Is that true?"

"The nail tore a tendon," said Domitilla. "There's nothing they can do."

"Then I'll have the little cur flogged on the morrow!" Clemens thundered, smiting his chest.

"Wait, darling. Joram was only doing his job."

"Only doing his job!"

Clemens stopped. His reddened face paled, and after pacing the floor for a time, he left the room. A few minutes later, he returned, and with great deliberation, knelt on the floor beside Marcellus.

"I am sorry," he said softly. "Forgive my outburst. It was entirely against the law of the Divine Kingdom I now serve."

"What do you mean, Father? To punish him would be justice—divine Roman justice."

"Son. Remember I once told you about my time stationed as a foot soldier in the country of Judea?"

Marcellus nodded. "When you had to fight bands of rebels in the hills?"

"Yes. Well, one day I was given the unpleasant task of nailing three men to their crosses."

"Bad men?"

"Two of them were thieves. The other, a Nazarene ... well ... he was..."

Clemens paused. His lips were trembling.

"You don't have to tell the story if you don't want to, darling," said Domitilla.

"I must," said Clemens, and continued. "I was driving the nail into this man's hand—he was in excruciating pain, of

course, but he looked me in the eyes for a moment with such understanding. Then, as we hoisted his cross, he called out ever so clearly, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' To this day, I have never experienced such a response to undeserved brutality."

"Undeserved, Father? Wasn't he a bad man?"

"He had done nothing wrong that I was aware of. In fact, as far as I've been told, he had only done good. They said that he, a Jew, had even healed a centurion's servant. Maybe it was inscribed in jest, but the placard denoting the malefactor's crime that is usually nailed to the cross above his head said something in three languages about him hailing from Nazareth and being the king of the Jews.

"However, I was merely doing my job, and I assumed that the man must have been sentenced for good reason. So I performed my unsavoury task and sat

down with the other soldiers at the foot of the three crosses, got drunk and played dice."

"Then what happened?"

"At the point of his death, the sky went black for about three hours. It was very ominous. The centurion on duty, weeping and seeming much shaken by the whole ordeal, stood up and proclaimed that this righteous man was truly the Son of God. A few years later, he told me that we had crucified the very founder of what became known as the Christian faith, which by that time was beginning to spread throughout Rome."

"So this faith is all about a dead man?"

"He did not remain dead, son. Three days after we ... I crucified him, he came back to life. There were many witnesses, including his nearest and dearest."

"But you never actually saw him alive again, right, Father?"

"No, but those who testified had no reason to lie. As a result of their testimonies, I called out to him and he spoke to me in

my heart. Reassured me that I was forgiven."

Clemens lowered his voice. "I would appreciate it if you would keep this information to yourself, son, but your mother has recently been making the acquaintance of some of his followers."

"Really, Mother? With Christians?"

Domitilla nodded and perched herself on a wooden stool near the window.

"But they are evil," said Marcellus. "I've heard they do bad things in secret."

"They are not evil, son. Their company is to be treasured. I have been clandestinely visiting them, and I have to admit that in all my days, I have not met such delightful people, even among my own friends and relatives." Domitilla paused and chuckled.

"And unlike some of my tattling friends, they speak only well of others who are not present. Anyway, due to it becoming increasingly

dangerous for them to be bunching up together, even in the catacombs, we offered to take in Joram from among them, as his parents had been killed in the arena.”

“By the lions?”

Domitilla stared out the window and nodded.

“And does Joram know that you were responsible for ... er ... executing the founder of his religion?” Marcellus asked his father.

“I told him, and he forgave me. He said that forgiveness was a law that Jesus preached.”

Marcellus fell silent and joined his mother in pensively watching the setting sun.

After a while, Marcellus turned to his mother. “So that’s why he never wants to talk about his parents,” he whispered.

More silence followed, during which time a hurried slave girl placed a pot of lamb broth, bread, and several side dishes on the table and left the room.

“So, Father, was this man you had to ... er ... really the Son of God?”

“He was and is,” said Clemens. “And once I knew that, I felt full remorse for my deed, until I was reminded of his words on the cross, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ As I said, I knew in my heart that he and his Father had forgiven me. So if the very Son of God can ask his Father to forgive me for such a crime, how can you, my only son, not ask your father to forgive a poor slave boy for an unwitting mistake when he was only doing his job?”

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That night upon his cot, Marcellus found it difficult to sleep. Besides the throbbing pain in his hand, his thoughts troubled him. He wondered how he would have reacted to the very one who pounded the nails into the hands and feet of his god. On top of that, what would he have done if his parents had been thrown to the lions with

the silent consent of the very race of people whose hospitality Joram was now enjoying, even if only in a state of servility?

What would he have done?

Marcellus presumed that he, unlike Joram, would have railed about all things Roman, performed his tasks with seething resentment, and certainly would not have fraternized with one of their little rich boys.

Joram, however, from the day he was brought into the Gallus’ household, had only treated Marcellus with courtesy and a measure of respect, considering how idle and immature Marcellus was.

If anyone needed forgiveness, Marcellus concluded before he fell asleep, it was him, his family, and his—the Roman—people.

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Though his countenance bore witness to fitful slumber, the next morning, Marcellus, exhilarated and pleased with the profundity of his night’s

meditation, made his way over to the slaves’ quarters. A couple of young slave girls who had been milking the goats tittered, and Marcellus blushed and brushed off his toga. He was tempted to turn and run.

“I-I have come for the Jewish slave—Joram.”

“Gone,” said one of the girls.

“Gone? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. His cot is empty, and he took his belongings.”

“He must have left in the night,” said the other girl.

“Wouldn’t want to be in his shoes. He’s in for a right brandin’ and floggin’ should he be caught—and that’ll be mighty easy wearing that huge slave bracelet. Besides, they put up a pretty penny for capturing runaway slaves.”

Dazed, Marcellus stumbled back toward the villa, concerned that his intention to make reparation with Joram would fade as the day passed. He stepped into the front atrium, where his mother was having her hair dressed by a female

slave and his father was buckling on his sword while instructing a number of male slaves before leaving for his day's duties. The aroma of freshly baked bread was wafting from the kitchen, but the pit in Marcellus' stomach was diminishing his hunger.

Domitilla remarked on his noticeable chagrin, and Marcellus waited until his father had left before answering.

"Joram ... gone?" his mother whispered once she had dismissed her hairdresser.

"Yes. Will Father put out a reward for his capture?"

"Most likely."

"And he will have him flogged if found?"

"Most likely. He's obliged to as an example to the rest of the slaves. Otherwise, your father will have mutiny on his hands."

Marcellus shook his head and stared at the floor. Tears welled up.

"But," his mother went on, "that is a far better fate than falling into immoral and

unprincipled hands that would not wish to give him up for reward."

They were interrupted by an announcement from the hallway that visitors had arrived to see Lady Domitilla on urgent business. She excused herself and left her son in the atrium. Presently, Marcellus edged over to the curtain, from behind which he heard muted voices.

"Recognized him right off, we did."

"Yeah, he didn't get far. He was even headin' this a-way. He gave us a cock 'n' bull story about how, being a Christian, he was thinkin' better of runnin' away, and that he was comin' back to turn himself in."

"All that to say, we have found him."

"So what are you asking?" Domitilla asked.

"Well, in light of the fact that your husband would probably be offerin' a handsome ransom, our price is cheap."

"Then why not await his price?"

"A bird in the hand, ma'am, and we could work together to catch quite a few in the bush."

"What do you mean?"

"The whereabouts of more Christians in hiding."

"I see. Tell me, what are you asking?"

"A mere fifty silver quinarii."

"I'll pay," said Domitilla.

"Upon delivery. Which will be...?"

"Within the hour, lady."

And within the hour, Marcellus was loitering expectantly in the front courtyard.

"And what brings you here?" Domitilla asked as she descended the steps from the villa.

"I overheard, Mother. They've captured..."

The gates opened to two men on horseback, one of whom was leading Joram with a rope binding his wrists, and the other was one of that morning's negotiators. He dismounted and greeted Domitilla, who told him to untie Joram.

"Refresh yourself from the fountain," she said to the boy.

Joram did so thankfully, drinking and splashing the water on his face. Seeing Marcellus, he turned away.

"Y-your h ... hand," he suddenly stammered, his back still turned to Marcellus. "How is it?"

"Umm ... fine. Kept me awake a bit last night, but yes, fine."

"Th-that's good. I prayed for you last night."

"You did? To the gods?"

"The God. His Son, specifically."

"The man whom my father ... the Nazarene?"

Joram turned around. "Yes, to Jesus."

Marcellus swallowed hard before continuing. "H-He was a Judean, like you, right?"

"Matters little," said Joram. "He might just as well have come from Ethiopia."

"Why did you run away?" Marcellus asked. "You knew it would be dangerous."

"Yesterday evening, I heard your father scream out about having me flogged. I panicked."

“But you would have suffered the same eventually, possibly worse.”

Joram nodded. “True. But I think the wounds of being unforgiven by you and your family, whom I have grown to love, would have been harder to bear. That’s why I decided while on the road out to ... never mind.”

“To turn yourself in?”

“Yes, but no one believes me.”

“Well, Joram, you can be assured that...” Marcellus began.

“The transaction is settled,” Domitilla sadly said, approaching the two boys. “I’m sorry, Joram, but I must have you taken to the detention quarters.”

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Early the following morning, the Gallus household, together with about a hundred and fifty slaves, assembled to witness Joram’s chastisement. Only Domitilla’s weeping, along with that of Marcellus and most of

the slave girls, disturbed the occasion’s silent gravity.

“Can we not stop this, Father?” Marcellus wailed. “After all, he was turning himself in.”

“I am sorry, son. I wish there could be another way. If his escape had been successful, I would even have turned a blind eye but for the fact that, as I believe your mother pointed out, his fate would be much worse left in the hands of dogs.”

A soldier slowly and soberly led Joram out to the dusty paddock where a scarred, bloodied wooden post stood in its centre, a pair of empty rusty shackles affixed to it. A burly, grim-faced guard carrying a flagellum followed them.

“Wait!”

The soldier was about to fasten the shackles to Joram’s wrists when he stopped at the plaintive cry.

“Marcellus, what means this?” Clemens said as his son stepped into the paddock.

“It means I must take Joram’s flogging.”

“What?”

“If it wasn’t for me, Father, he would not have been here facing this.”

“Son, you mustn’t!” Domitilla wailed. “You cannot be his whipping boy!”

“I’m sorry, Mother, but I must.”

“I forbid you!” Clemens bellowed.

Joram broke away from the guard and ran at Marcellus. “No!” he screamed. “I cannot let you.”

“You must,” Marcellus calmly responded.

Joram swung his fist, which Marcellus deftly ducked.

“Let me take this punishment, Marcellus. I could not live with myself if you did.”

“Why?”

“You are a Roman, and as such, to war is valourous. I have caused you to be unable to use sword or spear.”

“But, Joram, it would prove your worth also that someone

was willing to take this punishment for you.”

“Stop him, Clemens,” Domitilla whispered. “Use force.”

Her husband shook his head helplessly.

“Please, Joram,” Marcellus insisted. “Knowing I can never use sword or spear, then maybe you would allow me to prove my valour this way.”

Joram scraped his foot in the dust. Presently, with gleaming eyes, he raised his head.

“I believe that can be changed,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Give me your hand.”

“What?”

“Shake my hand!”

Marcellus hesitantly did so, and to his surprise, the Jewish boy closed his eyes and held his grip.

“Lord Jesus of Nazareth,” he prayed with a voice loud enough for the onlookers to hear, “I call on You to touch Marcellus’ hand with Your healing power and make it every whit whole,

just as You did for the man with the withered hand as written by Your disciple, Mark.”

Marcellus gasped and gave a start. He felt power surge through his hand, and he withdrew it from Joram’s.

“Take off the bandages,” Joram calmly commanded. Marcellus asked for the accompanying guard’s knife and did so.

With eyes wide in disbelief, Marcellus moved his fingers and gripped the handle of the knife. Then, shaking his head and laughing with joy, he waved it at his astounded parents.

“Father!” he shouted. “I can now hold a sword!”

The onlookers broke into cheers and applause, and Joram walked resolutely back to the wooden post, holding his hands out to the soldier

to be shackled. The guard, who seemed insensible to the miraculous event, began flicking his flagellum in preparation for his duty. As Marcellus and the crowd erupted into protest, he looked over at Clemens, waiting for a signal.

The tribune raised his hand and shook his head.

“Who among you would wish to chastise such nobility and bravery displayed in true Roman tradition by both parties? Step forward, if so. In the words of Joram’s King and the Son of God who healed my son’s hand, ‘Let him cast the first stone.’”

Following a period of hushed expectancy, the soldier raised his hands and walked away. The guard then lowered his head, dropped the whip, and followed him. The crowd

cheered. Domitilla and the slave girls were weeping—this time for joy—and Clemens called for the preparation of a feast for that evening.

“And I hereby pronounce Joram free!” Clemens said, raising his brimming chalice. “Officially, he can have his slave bracelet removed.”

Joram, who was standing by him wearing an exquisitely embroidered toga, courtesy of his master and mistress, bowed his head and addressed the cheering guests.

“I appreciate my master’s honour, but I hereby relinquish my freedom in order to continue to serve the noble household of Clemens and Domitilla Gallus, which has served me with such care, nearing that which would be afforded a son.”

Clemens smiled and placed a hand on Joram’s shoulder. “Precisely. And my wife and I wish to make that care official.”

“I do not understand, sir.”

“I will have the adoption papers drawn up tomorrow.”

Joram’s mouth fell open, and as he speechlessly faced the cheering throng, Domitilla and Marcellus stepped forward to embrace him.

“And so the proverb is true,” Joram finally said with a misty-eyed smile. “He that delicately bringeth up his slave from a child shall have him become his son at the length”¹.

“Wise words,” said Clemens. “From whom?”

“From one of my people’s wisest!” said Joram.

The End

Footnote:

¹ Proverbs 29:21 KJV

S&S link: Character Building: Values and Virtues: Forgiveness-2a

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