

Gaius Lucius Calvus of Rome in the reign of Augustus

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Before I cast the dice I'd like to thank you all for making me the master of the drinking tonight. It's really an honor, after so many years in the provinces, to come home to Rome and be given such a respectable office in the presence of one's friends and close associates. I've had a devil of a time out there; the business of trade and commerce is not made up of excellent friends but rather of duplicitous enemies. Let's see what the order is tonight.... *quattuor cyathis!* Let it be so! To your health, Publius, if you can still hold your liquor like you used to. If you can't, well, perhaps then this isn't exactly for your health.

Now I suppose you fellows have had your own worries here in Rome, dealing with who's looking for the emperor's favor and which political seditionist he's going to proscribe next – now, I'm not saying you excellent gentlemen are soft or anything like that, drinking Falernian and bathing in oil every afternoon. I suppose the perks come with the trouble. But I tell you, life is much harder – and more interesting – out there trading in the provinces than you'd expect. I have a hypothesis – I picked that word up while I was closing a deal in Athens – that the trader really might make the best Roman administrator in these imperial times. After all, he has the needed character traits: physical if not necessarily moral courage, a willingness to sacrifice honesty for persuasion, and the capacity for ruthlessness. All of these things I will detail for you in the story you are evidently so clamoring for by now, if I judge the vintage of the wine right. Are we *sub rosa*? Good. Then I shall begin.

I suppose you all are aware that I spent time some years ago in Egypt, trading whatever homespun goods we could fob off on those poor Hellenized fools for goods traded by Egyptian middlemen. There was, and still is, a lot of grain coming in from the Nile headed for Rome, but what we were after was the prime good: incense. Incense! So coveted, so hard to acquire, yet such a profit you may turn, if you can make it through the dangers of those provincials who want your incense and are willing to acquire it through less than legal means. There was an incident in Alexandria involving a band of pirates and one Sextus Licinius Claudius, whom I'm sure you've heard of. Back then he and I were partners running three ships from port to port – moderately rich, but working very hard to be so. It was our second day there, and we had unloaded our cargo – mostly jars of *liquamen* - and were negotiating with local Alexandrian merchants, canvassing the market looking for any incense to be had. We had about half our cargo capacity of incense now, but we were looking for more. Licinius and I were ashore, along with most of the crew with the exception of two guards posted on the flagship to watch the cash we kept in the captain's cabin – we only carried enough ashore with us for transactions. Usually we separated in the forum, seeking out separate deals and comparing notes later so we could work each merchant separately, bartering him down to a lower price with the information we had. It was in the middle of the afternoon as I was concluding formalities with a merchant that one of the crew ran up to me breathlessly and reported that Licinius had been kidnapped by robbers.

Naturally I was rather taken aback but kept my head and asked the fellow what had happened. Turns out that he had gone with Licinius and they had entered negotiations with a merchant who said he had large stocks of incense in a nearby warehouse off the forum. The crewman, being an experienced hand at these things, had smelled something amiss and followed Licinius surreptitiously to the warehouse in question, where he hid just inside the door and observed the proceedings. Licinius and the merchant conversed for several minutes, when all of a sudden about ten men jumped out from behind their hiding places among the jars and seized the poor man, binding his feet and menacing him with short knives. They started questioning him about who he was, where he had come from, whom he knew and, once they had figured out that much, what cargo and monies were on the ships. It was apparent from the crewman's account that these robbers had captured Licinius and were intending to use him as a hostage in exchange for our goods and money. Unfortunately, at the time I had everything I had staked in this one venture. I would be ruined if the robbers succeeded.

I decided at once that we would have to rescue Licinius, at any cost. Straightaway I told the crewman to round up the crew and search the city for any sign of Licinius, after he told me how to get to the warehouse. I proceeded there immediately to try to find some clue to where Licinius was. When I got there I found the place just as my man had described it: packed almost to bursting with *amphorae*, with a few narrow paths in between and a larger space in the middle. I opened one of the jars, though, and found it packed full of sand. It was all a clever front – no doubt these robbers were running a scheme in which they lured merchants to this place under pretense of closing a deal, then kidnapped them and used them as bargaining chips to extort money or goods from their fellows. I went over to the far entrance of the warehouse and found the evidence of the robbers' hideout: some empty bags of money, black masks, the ashes of a small fire and plates of half-eaten food. But in the corner I found something of interest. On the dirt floor of the warehouse there were the clear marks of someone sitting, bound by the feet but not by the hands, perhaps tethered to an iron ring set into the wall so he could not escape. Inscribed by a loose stone upon the bricks of the wall, however, I found a curious little note:

Si Pompeius Magnus essem, piratas e maribus eriperem. Sed non Pompeius Magnus sum.

Now what could that mean? Licinius must have written it while he was here. But what would his capture have to do with Pompey the great? I noticed a crack in the mortar the writing and to my surprise as I reached in I pulled out a *denarius* and eighteen bronze *as*. The *denarius* was one of Pompey's commemoratives, struck a few decades back by his son-in-law Faustus Cornelius Sulla; on the front was a diademed bust of Pompey and on the back were three soldiers, symbolizing his victories in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and Faustus' monogram.

What could all this mean? Pompey's claim to fame, before he fell to Caesar, was that he had cleared the sea of pirates. Was Licinius using the symbols on the coin as clues? And what was the significance of the eighteen *as*? Then it dawned on me. These robbers weren't trying to use Licinius as a hostage. Pompey was associated with the sea – these robbers were going to use Licinius for information and then raid our very ships, docked in Alexandria harbor! The eighteen *as* must have been their number – one *denarius* for Licinius and eighteen coins for his captors. Licinius had succeeded in slipping to me the plans and strength of the gang. I decided it was time to act.

First I headed to the military camp within the city and explained that I had information that some revolutionaries against Augustus were trying to hijack some ships in the harbor. It wasn't exactly true, but it did give me the use of a body of soldiers under the command of a tough-looking centurion in his early thirties. In situations like this, sometimes honesty bows to necessity. I then found the captain of our flagship and laid a careful plan. It was most likely that the robbers would attack the ships at night. We would divide the crew in half – one half would pretend to bunk on the ships with the usual guard posted, while the other half would wait hidden among the cargo on the wharf. Once the robbers were aboard the ships the men would rise up, armed, from their bunks while the men on the shore would rush the robbers from behind. I wanted the complement of soldiers for backup in case anything went wrong.

Let me tell you – what a perfectly frightening and tense thing it is to be waiting, in the near-perfect darkness of a new moon, for an enemy you cannot see! Every sound becomes the approach of impending doom. I had to restrain myself from jumping at anything that moved on that wharf. But patience won out, and finally I heard, faintly, the shuffling sounds of Licinius' feet among the band of eighteen robbers trying to keep quiet. They ascended the gangplanks, dispersed among the ships looking for our money reserves and cargo, and at that I yelled "at 'em, lads" and stayed in the rear of my men as they rushed to the fore. In these situations, physical courage gives way to prudence.

There was a clash of arms on the ships and I heard the screams as men met their deaths. We had prepared torches and they sprang up all of a sudden, so that the world went from pitch-darkness to a ruddy and flickering light. I rushed up the gangplank of the flagship behind the men, cudgel in one hand and knife in the other. Pandemonium reigned aboard ship as the confused battle raged upon the deck. Screams were heard as unseen blood was spilled upon the deck, as men were bludgeoned into senselessness. Every now and then a splash would be heard below as someone was thrown over the

side into the dark water. I gave a man a good crash on the head with my cudgel that sent him reeling to the deck and then started aft in search of Licinius, with the hope of rescuing him.

I found him in the cabin, where he was opening the locked box where our spare money was, held at dagger point by a man who was presumably the ringleader of the robbers. With a cry and the element of surprise I smashed Licinius' captor over the skull and he fell, blood spurting from a wound on his head. "Licinius, by Hercules, you're all right," I said.

"Yes, Gaius, I'm all right," Licinius replied. "But you won't be." Suddenly Licinius brandished a hidden dagger and in a trice he was behind me, the blade at my throat. "Drop your weapons, Gaius," he hissed, "or your throat won't like what I'll do to it." I was under no illusions as to my fighting efficacy, and my cudgel and dagger fell to the deck. "Now," continued Licinius, "we're going to go outside. You will tell the men to drop their weapons. Now!" He shoved me towards the door, the dagger still close to my back.

"This whole time," I said, "this whole thing – the clues – you being captive – was an elaborate ploy."

"Yes," Licinius answered, "though we didn't quite foresee you snuffing out Lucius here." He indicated the robber I had just knocked out. "When I approached him in the forum today he told me of his plan. Until then I was just another honest merchantman. Until I realized what money I could make with them. Bait you into a trap, take the money, the cargo, the ships – I could turn such a profit from that that I could really get into the big time."

"You despicable –" I was cut off by a sharp palm blow to the back of the head. "Get out there," Licinius said, "and let's get on with business."

You all know the stories of ancient and illustrious Romans who would have called Licinius' bluff in this kind of situation and refused to acquiesce. I, however, valued my life above any old stories of heroics. "Lay down your weapons," I said, "do it or he'll kill me!" The fighting came to an abrupt halt, and the men did as I told them.

"I'm sorry it has to end this way, Gaius," said Licinius.

"Yeah," I said, "so am I."

The few robbers – I noted with some grim satisfaction that there were only twelve left standing – rounded up my men and tied them up, piled the weapons on the deck, and began marching us down the gangplank. Licinius had gone into the cabin and appeared with the ringleader of the robbers, nursing the bloody wound on his skull and carrying in his hands both Licinius' and my collective fortunes. I must confess I had some doubts as to my fate: would I be killed by Licinius here and now on the spot or left to wander, penniless, in the province of Egypt, despoiled into ruin and far from the comforts of Rome? It was at this moment when my enlisting of aid proved most fortuitous, for I heard in the dark a muffled cry of "*Tendete!*" and then my senses reeled. The robbers began to shout and drop their weapons in panic, running willy-nilly around the little circle on the dock formed, I saw, by the approaching ring of Roman soldiers led daringly from the front by the centurion I had spoken to earlier. Let me tell you now, I have absolutely no doubts as to the grim and frightening efficiency of our military, for even though I knew that I was to be spared, the visage of twenty soldiers charging at you, shield-to-shield and swords drawn, is a truly terrifying sight. Poor Licinius didn't even have the presence of mind to slit my throat as the centurion roughly seized him, the dagger falling from his nerveless hands, and threw him on the ground. In short order the robbers, both on the dock and on the ship, were entirely subdued, bound, and marched off to the praetorium to meet their fates. I've heard that Licinius himself found work in one of the silver mines in Spain. With good behavior, he might get sent back for menial work at a mint. As for myself, I got my money and cargo back and a nice written commendation from the authorities acknowledging my role in helping capture a notorious gang of robbers.

This brings us back to the point of things, gentlemen, now that I see the wine doing its work. I found the commendation and the benefits it brought so enjoyable that I'm thinking of trying to gain an office in the administration of the emperor. I know that some of you fine fellows have some pull with him. As I've already told you, merchants are eminently qualified to thrive in the politics of this day and age.

Sources:

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