

# FALL OF A SOCIAL CLIMBER

*Rome, 220 A.D.*

**M**ODERATUS SCRAPED HIS MASTER'S BACK and idly dreamed of the day when he could buy his freedom. The coins were coming in slowly, one or two on the festival of Saturnalia, perhaps an unexpected one if Marcus Livius was in a good mood. Right now, Marcus Livius was not in a good mood.

They were in the grand baths, newly completed by the Emperor Caracalla. They sat in the warm room, the slaves using strigils to scrape olive oil, and the dirt it trapped, off their owners' bodies. The Roman elite came to this ornate complex several times a week, to soak and steam and gossip and gamble. Moderatus continued to work on Marcus Livius, while his friend Norteo, a Nubian from North Africa, scraped Achilius, Marcus's son. As usual, the men spoke as if their slaves had no ears.

"You were schooled for a life in government," said Marcus, anger rising in his voice, "and, by Jove, you will do it. You are a member of my household, my property." That was true enough. Marcus had the power of life and death over all who lived under his roof. But Achilius was no longer a child.

"There is nothing ignoble in designing monuments and buildings," he begged his father. "The man who built the Coliseum was of the senator class."



"But that was his passion, not his trade. Building is best learned in the lower ranks of the army. Our family has worked too long to take such a step backwards."

Moderatus nodded unconsciously in agreement. No citizen of the equestrian class was more status conscious than Marcus Livius. He wore a trim on his toga that was nearly purple, a color reserved for the clothes of emperors and the trim of senators. He spent lavishly to entertain his betters. And when they wouldn't accept his dinner invitations, he would invite poets and actors—talented, famous men, but on the scandalous margin of good society—to dine at the house of Livius.

Marcus dismissed his son's plea and once more turned his attention to today's dinner party. "It's quite a coup having Eppides the Greek as our guest."

"Will he be the entertainment?" asked Achilius with a half-hidden smirk.

Marcus Livius was shocked. "Eppides is the greatest actor in Rome."

"He plays the women's roles in comedies," replied Achilius. Eppides did indeed play the female roles, but to such great acclaim. He was a recent arrival from Athens, historic home of the arts, where he was reputed to be a living legend.

"Eppides is a legend," Marcus Livius said, echoing the common sentiment. "He is never seen in public, not even at the baths, and almost never accepts invitations. He will share my dining couch. I would not insult him by asking him to perform. There will be the lute and pipes and a troupe of dancers."

It was early afternoon when the Livius men and their slaves arrived home from the baths. Moderatus and Norteo made their masters comfortable in the coolness of the atrium, then wandered off to the kitchen where Sabbina Livius, the matron, was busy supervising the upcoming meal. The daily fare was usually modest, fishbone soup or dormouse cooked in honey. But for a dinner party, there would be no expense spared. Songbirds were being de-boned and dressed to look

like fish. Young beef was being blanched and molded to look like songbirds. To disguise food as other food was the height of fashion—and the slave Norteo was especially skilled at it.

"Norteo!" The Lady Sabbina saw him enter and practically screamed his name. "What can I do? The monger sold my stupid cook a fish that is on the point of spoiling..."

Norteo hurried to the spice cabinet, lifting down the small clay containers of dried herbs. "Never worry," he reassured her. "I will make some garum, a strong sauce to disguise the taste."

The lady of the house sighed and smiled. "If you make this meal succeed, I will buy your freedom myself. I swear. This time I will."

Moderatus felt bad for his friend. For two previous dinner feasts, a desperate Sabbina had promised Norteo his freedom, just like this. On both occasions he had triumphed and on both occasions, Marcus Livius had taken the money, refused to let him go, and beaten both the slave and his wife when they objected.

"I know you mean it," Norteo said softly as he mixed the spices with olive oil and wine from a small clay amphora. "But for as long as your husband lives, there will be freedom for neither one of us."

Moderatus expected such a comment, even if whispered, to earn the Nubian slave a beating, or at the least a hard slap. But Lady Sabbina only shook her head sadly, as if to agree.

Moderatus left the kitchen. He was sweeping out the front foyer when a shadow fell across the threshold and a short, slim man walked in. In the shade of the wall, Moderatus almost mistook him for a woman. The man carried himself regally, despite his attire—a modest, everyday tunic and a bundle tucked under his arm. Without a word spoken, Moderatus knew his identity.

"The home of Marcus Livius?" asked the actor Eppides, today's guest of honor.

Moderatus bowed. But before he could even get out a word

of greeting, the master of the house was scurrying over from his cushioned bench. "Dear Eppides, we are honored," he said with a bow much too low for his station. "Forgive us for not being prepared, but..."

"I am early," the actor said with an ingratiating smile. "I was hoping to impose on your hospitality. I hear your home is one of the few to contain a private bath."

Moderatus realized that the bundle must contain the actor's dinner robes, plus a strigil for cleaning and a razor for shaving.

"I would be honored to have you use my bath," Marcus Livius said. "It is in my private quarters."

"I have never enjoyed bathing in public," Eppides explained as they walked off together. "Off the stage, I am somewhat of a recluse."

Marcus Livius rallied the servants to prepare the room. Screens were erected for absolute privacy. Water was heated and the finest oils laid out. Toward the end of the bath, Marcus himself intruded on the actor, trespassing behind the screen to offer fresh, warm towels.

The other guests arrived at the regular mid-afternoon hour. To take advantage of the fine weather, Sabbina Livius had transformed the peristyle, the rear garden, into a dining room, lining the dining couches around the small tables that would hold the food. In the center, a wooden platform had been placed on the ground, a stage for the entertainment.

Moderatus and the other slaves were kept busy serving the meal. Norteo the Nubian was assigned to filling the finger bowls in which the diners would wash their greasy hands. True to his word, Marcus Livius shared his couch and bowl with the famed actor. As the day slipped slowly into evening, the torches were lit and the feast held all the promise of a huge success. A general of the second legion vigorously praised the elaborate dishes, and not one of the senators fell asleep during the epic poem honoring the last emperor.

As always, Lady Sabbina occupied the couch closest to the

kitchen, a perfect position for a hostess. A pair of slaves carried in a platter of peacock breasts and she carefully inspected it, taking a few extra seconds to rearrange the peacock feathers decorating the edges.

Achilius, the family's only son, shared a couch with two of his friends. Typical of the youths of the day, they whispered among themselves, ignoring the poets and making eyes at the female dancers. Moderatus handed a jug to Achilius and noticed how little water the young man added to his wine before passing the jug to his father at the next couch.

Marcus Livius diluted his cup in the accepted fashion. But even weak wine can intoxicate. The honeyed concoction, combined with the success of his party, had put Marcus in an expansive mood. "These poets and dancers are good enough," he slurred to his guests. "But we must impose upon the incomparable Eppides to honor us with an example of his skill. Perhaps a scene from Plautus?"

The diners all turned on their couches, expectantly. Moderatus didn't know what to expect. To ask a dinner guest to perform was unheard of.

Eppides paused. A moment later he smiled graciously and rose to his feet. Applause greeted him as he stepped up on the wooden platform. The garden fell into a hushed silence, broken only by the labored breathing of the host. This lone sound only grew more intense, until Marcus Livius was stumbling to his feet, knocking over the finger bowl in front of him.

All of Rome knew what the effects of poison looked like. For hundreds of years, poison had been the empire's favorite means of dispatching relatives and enemies. It could be taken from the cheery, yellow buttercup or from the roots of the autumn crocus. Hemlock disguised in honey had killed the famed Seneca. But to be poisoned at the feast table, where so much of the food was eaten communally, that was unusual.

Moderatus watched from a distance as a general and a senator rushed to the rich man's side, eased him to the ground and tried to make him comfortable. If Marcus Livius knew the

identity of his prisoner, he didn't use his last gasps of breath to say. Sabina and Achilius were on their feet, saying nothing, while the dying man's favorite hound lapped calmly at the puddle left from the spilled finger bowl.

It was hours later, after the guests had rushed home to spread the scandalous news, that order began to be restored. Sabina Livius had the body placed in the dining room and the house draped in mourning. Moderatus had joined the other slaves in cleaning up the rear garden when Achilius called his name and took him aside.

"I've been watching you," the son said, his tone somber. "You're a clever man—and you see things. Tell me, Moderatus, how much do you want your freedom?"

In a matter of minutes the deal was struck. Moderatus would try to discover the truth. And if he could prove to the world that someone other than Achilius was responsible for his father's death, then Achilius would buy the slave his freedom.

(1) Who poisoned Marcus Livius? (2) How did the poisoning occur?  
(3) What was the motive?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 130.  
To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 106.

#### HISTORICAL NOTES ON ANCIENT ROME

THE STORY OF Rome began around 750 B.C. when the city was founded and ruled by Etruscan kings. When the last king was ousted, Rome became a republic, governed by the rich, high-ranking senators. Rome expanded and prospered, until it was invaded by Hannibal, a general from North Africa, who brought his armies, including war elephants, into Spain and across the Alps. The war was devastating. But at the end, with Hannibal defeated, Rome suddenly found itself with new territories, and an appetite for even more.

Generals became powerful heroes, until the most powerful of all, Julius Caesar, declared himself dictator. He was promptly assassinated for his ambition, but in the chaos that followed, his adopted son, Augustus, took control and became Rome's first emperor, leaving the senate with limited power.

Soon Rome controlled most of the known world, building a system of roads to connect its vast conquests and ushering Europe into its first prolonged peace, the *Pax Romana*.

But the world was changing. Power, trade, and money were moving farther east, and eventually the empire had two capitals, one in Rome and the other in Constantinople. The eastern capital grew in power while Rome in the west became more and more vulnerable to barbarian tribes coming down from Germany.

Rome fell to the barbarians in 410 A.D., but the Roman Empire didn't die. The eastern half, dubbed the Byzantine Empire, thrived for another millennium, until the Ottoman Turks invaded Constantinople and changed its name to Istanbul.

The period from the birth of Rome until the death of the empire encompassed 2,300 years, quite a respectable run in anybody's book.