

# RUSO AND THE DISAPPEARING DANCING GIRLS

'Every bit as enthralling ...  
as Steven Saylor and  
Lindsey Davis'

EXPRESS



R. S. DOWNIE

Ruso and the Disappearing Dancing Girls  
by  
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# I

Someone had washed the mud off the body, but as Gaius Petreius Ruso unwrapped the sheet there was still a distinct smell of river. The assistant wrinkled his nose as he approached with the record tablet and the measuring stick he had been sent to fetch.

‘So,’ said Ruso, flipping the tablet open. ‘What’s the usual procedure here for unidentified bodies?’

The man hesitated. ‘I don’t know, sir. The mortuary assistant’s on leave.’

‘So who are you?’

‘The assistant’s assistant, sir.’ The man was staring at the corpse.

‘But you have attended a post-mortem before?’

Without taking his eyes off the body, the man shook his head. ‘Are they all like that, sir?’

Ruso, who had started work before it was light, stifled a yawn. ‘Not where I come from.’

The description should come first. Facts before speculation. Except that in this case much of the description was speculation as well.

*Female, aged . . .* He spent some time frowning over that one. Finally he settled on *approximately 18–25 years. Average weight. Height . . . five feet one inch.* At least that was fairly accurate. *Hair: red, scant.* That too, although it might not be very helpful if no one had ever seen her before without a wig. *Clothing: none found.* So no help there, then.

Three teeth missing, but not in places that were obvious.

Someone would need to know her very well indeed to give a positive identification from that.

Ruso glanced up. 'Did you go over to HQ for me?'

'I told them we'd got a body and you'd send the details over later, sir.'

'Did you ask about missing persons?'

'Yes, sir. There aren't any.'

'Hm.' This did not bode well. Ruso continued working his way down the body, making notes as he went. Moments later his search was rewarded. 'Ah. Good!'

'Sir?'

Ruso pointed to what he had found. 'If somebody turns up looking for her in a month's time,' he explained, 'we'll be able to tell them who we buried.' He recorded *Strawberry birthmark approximately half an inch long on inside of upper right thigh, eight inches above the knee*, and sketched the shape.

When he had completed the description, Ruso scratched one ear and gazed down at the pale figure laid out on the table. He was better acquainted than he wished to be with the dead, but this one was difficult. The water had interfered with all the signals he had learned to look for. There was no settling of the blood to indicate the position in which the body had been left, presumably because it had rolled over on the current. The limbs were flexible, so that meant . . . what? Men who died in the stress of battle often froze and then relaxed again much faster than was normal. So if the woman had been frightened or struggling . . . On the other hand, how would the aftermath of death be affected by cold water? He scratched his ear again and yawned, trying to think what he could usefully write on the report that would not cause more distress and confusion to the relatives.

Finally he settled on *Time of death: uncertain, estimated at least 2 days before discovery* and gave his reasons.

He glanced up at the assistant's assistant again. 'Can you write legibly?'

'Yes, sir.'

He handed the tablet and stylus across the body.

'*Place of death,*' he dictated, then corrected himself. 'No, put *Location of body.*'

The man laid the tablet on the end of the table, hunched over it and repeated, 'Location . . . of . . . body' as he scraped with awkward but determined obedience.

'Found five hundred paces downstream from the pier, in marshes on the north bank,' said Ruso, wishing he had carried on writing himself.

'F . . . found . . . five hundred . . .' muttered the man, suddenly breaking off in mid-sentence to look up and say, 'She could have drowned a long way upstream and come down on the river, sir. But then, she might have gone in further along and come up on the tide.'

'Pardon?' Ruso blinked, taken aback by this sudden display of initiative.

Moments later it was apparent that, although this soldier knew nothing about hospital administration and very little about writing, he had devoted his spare time to learning everything there was to know about the local fishing. The assistant's assistant's detailed description of all possible points of waterborne departure which might end in an arrival in the marshes on the north bank of the River Dee left Ruso baffled, but one thing was clear. In a land where coastlines shifted in and out and rivers flowed backwards twice a day, anything that floated could end up a very long way from where it fell into the water.

'Point of entry into water unknown,' he dictated.

The man paused. 'I didn't get the bit before that, sir.' Ruso repeated the location of the body. The man wiped a

scrape of wax off the end of the stylus with his forefinger, flicked it away and began to write.

There was a bird chirruping in the hospital garden, and a murmur of voices. Ruso glanced out of the window. On the far side of the herb beds an amputee practised with his crutches while orderlies hovered at each elbow, ready to catch him. A soft breeze wafted in, fluttering the flames of lamps that had been placed on slender black stands around the table, burning for the soul of the unknown figure laid out beneath them.

The flames lurched wildly as the door was flung open. The assistant's assistant looked up and said, 'It's not her, Decimus,' but the intruder still hurried to the table to look for himself.

Ruso frowned. 'Who are you?'

The man clasped both hands together and carried on staring at the body.

'Have you lost someone?'

The man swallowed. 'No. Not like this, no, sir.'

'Then you'd better leave, hadn't you?'

The man backed towards the door. 'Right away, sir. Sorry to interrupt, sir. My mistake.'

Ruso followed him across the room and barred the door before turning to the assistant. 'Is there a missing person that HQ don't know about?'

The man shook his head. 'Take no notice of Decimus, sir. He's just one of the porters. He's looking for his girlfriend.'

'In the mortuary?'

'She ran off with a sailor, sir. Months ago.'

'Why look in here, then?'

The man shrugged. 'I don't know, sir. Perhaps he's hoping she's come back.'

Ruso, not sure if this was an attempt at humour, tried to

look the man in the eye, but the attention of the assistant's assistant remained firmly on the writing tablet.

Ruso looked down at the body. 'Write "Cause of death".'

The stylus began to scratch again. 'Cause of . . .'

'We'll start from the head down.'

'We will start . . .'

'No, don't write that.'

'Sir?'

'Just write "Cause of death". Nothing else yet.'

He frowned at the girl's head. The fishermen who brought the body in had sworn that they had done nothing to it, but he was at a loss to explain the girl's hair. At first he had thought she was simply unfortunate: now, on closer examination, he realized the patchy baldness was not natural. He ran one finger across the bristly scalp.

'Is this some sort of a punishment, do you think?'

'Perhaps she cut it off to sell it, sir,' suggested the orderly.

'This isn't cut, this is practically shaved.'

'Nits, sir?' suggested the orderly, suddenly sounding hopeful. 'Maybe she went down to the river to wash out the nits and drowned.'

Ruso took a deep breath of fresh air before bending down and holding the lamp closer to the body.

'She didn't drown,' he said, lifting the girl's chin with the tip of one finger. 'Look.'

Ruso was still pondering the body in the mortuary as he walked out of the East Gate of the fort. He was barely aware of his progress until he was abruptly recalled to his surroundings by a shout of 'Get up!' from further along the street. A man with a large belly was glaring at a grimy figure lying across the pavement just past the fruit stall. A woman with a shopping-basket put down the pear she was examining and turned to see what was going on.

The man repeated the order to get up. The woman stared down at the figure and began to gabble in some British dialect. The only word Ruso could make out was 'water'.

'Burn some feathers under her nose,' suggested the stallholder, bending down to retrieve a couple of apples that had tumbled off the edge of his display.

Ruso veered into the street to avoid the commotion and narrowly missed a pile of animal droppings. He frowned. He must try to concentrate on what he was doing. He had come out for a walk because he was unable to sleep. Now he was walking, he was having trouble staying awake.

At the open shutters of Merula's he ordered the large cup of good wine he had been promising himself for days. When it came it was nothing like the Falernian it was supposed to resemble. He scowled into its clear depths. At that price and in this place, he supposed it was as good as could be expected. In other words, not very good at all.

The doorman watched as he drained the wine almost unwatered and asked him if he would like to meet a pretty girl.

‘Not before I’ve been to the baths,’ grunted Ruso. ‘Are you still serving those oysters?’

‘Not today, sir.’

‘Good.’

‘I’m sorry, sir . . . ?’

‘So you should be.’

Ruso wondered whether to explain that a dish of Merula’s marinated oysters was the cause of his present unkempt state and uncertain temper. He decided not to bother.

Yesterday, strapping a poultice round the foot of a groom trampled by his horse, he had composed an imaginary notice for the hospital entrance: ‘To all members of XX Legion Valeria Victrix. While the Chief Medic is on leave, this hospital has three officers. The Admin Officer has gone shopping in Viroconium and taken his keys with him. One doctor has severe food-poisoning. The other is doing his best, despite having no idea what’s going on because he has no time to attend morning briefings. Until reinforcements arrive, non-urgent cases and injuries resulting from drunkenness, stupidity or arguments with drill instructors **WILL NOT BE TREATED.**’

Before the sun had fully risen today he had been presented with a seized back, a dislocated elbow, three teeth in the hand of a man who wanted them replaced and the body. When he pointed out that the body was beyond his help, he was told that they didn’t know what else to do with it.

Mercifully Valens – a paler and thinner version of the Valens who had eaten the oysters – had reported for duty this afternoon. Peering at Ruso, he announced, ‘You look worse than I do. Go and get some rest.’ Ruso, who had been desperate to sleep for the past three days, suddenly found himself unable to settle.

A group of youths with Army haircuts was sauntering

across the street towards Merula's. As they entered Ruso murmured, 'Don't touch the seafood.' He was gone before they could reply.

Passing the bakery, he realized he could not remember the last time he had eaten. He bought a honey cake and crumbled it against the roof of his mouth as he walked along.

Ahead of him, a babble of excited voices rose in the street. He recognized the fat man, still shouting orders in a thick Gallic accent. The female who had collapsed had now attracted a sizeable crowd. They seemed to be carrying her to the fountain. Ruso tossed the last fragments of cake to a passing dog and strode on in the direction of the amphitheatre. It was nothing to do with him. He was not, at this moment, a doctor. He was a private citizen in need of some bath-oil.

He took a deep breath before diving into the perfumed dusk of the oil-shop. He had placed his flask on the counter and was naming what he wanted when the shopkeeper's attention was caught by something behind him. The man snatched up a heavy stick and leaped out from behind the counter, yelling, 'Clear off!' The dog that had finished Ruso's cake shot out from behind a stack of jars and scuttled off down the street.

The shopkeeper replaced the stick under the counter. 'Somebody ought to do something about those dogs.'

'Are they dangerous?'

'Only when they bite. Now, what was it you were after?'

Outside, half a dozen pairs of hands were dragging a limp body along the pavement to where the fountain, a large and ugly stone fish, was vomiting water into a long rectangular tank.

The shopkeeper glanced up from the pouring-jug. ‘Something going on over there.’

Ruso heard a splash as he said, ‘A woman fainted in the street.’

‘Oh.’ The man twisted the stopper into the flask and wiped the side with a cloth. Ruso handed over a sestertius. As the man counted out the change more people were crowding round the fountain. Voices drifted across the street.

‘Get up, you lazy whore!’

‘Give her another dunk!’

‘If you burn some feathers –’

‘Stand her up!’

‘Lie her down!’

‘Lie her down? She does nothing but lie down!’

Ruso dropped the coins into his purse and emerged into the fresh air. He was not going to offer help. He had been caught like that before. Poor people, like stray dogs, bred huge litters they couldn’t look after and latched on to you with the slightest sign of encouragement. As soon as the whisper went round that some doctor was treating people for free, every case of rotten teeth and rheumatism within a thousand paces would be rounded up and thrust under his nose for inspection. He would be lucky to get away before nightfall.

A voice whispered in his memory: a voice he hadn’t heard for almost two years now: a voice accusing him of being cold-hearted and arrogant. He silenced it, as he usually did, by recalling other voices. The Tribune’s praise of his ‘commendable single-mindedness’ (of course Valens had to ruin it later by explaining, ‘He meant you’re boring’). Or the officer’s wife who had smiled at him over her sprained ankle and said, ‘You’re really quite sweet, Petreius Ruso, aren’t you?’ That memory would have been more comforting,

though, if she hadn't been caught in the bed of the Chief Centurion a week later and been sent back to Rome in disgrace.

Raising his fingers to sniff the smear of perfumed oil, Gaius Petreius Ruso headed back the way he had come.

The sharp crack of a hand on flesh rang down the street.  
'On your feet! Move!'

A pause.

'Throw some more water on her.'

A splash. A cry of 'Hey, mind my new shoes!'

Laughter.

Ruso pursed his lips. He should have stayed up at the fort. He could have helped himself to some of Valens' oil and used the hospital baths. Now he would sit in the steam room wondering what had happened to the wretched woman, even though he wasn't responsible for it.

'Wake up, gorgeous!'

More laughter.

If he managed to revive her, those comedians would take the credit.

'Turn her over!'

If he didn't, he would get the blame.

There was a sudden gasp from around the fountain. Someone cried, 'Ugh! Look at that!'

A child was pawing at her mother's arm, demanding, 'What is it? I can't see, tell me what it is!'

Ruso hesitated, came to a halt, and promised himself it would only be a quick look.

The military belt was an accessory with magical powers. Several of the onlookers disappeared as soon as it approached. The rest parted to let its wearer through, and Ruso found himself staring down at his second unfortunate

female today. This one was a skinny figure lying in a puddle by the fountain. She was still breathing, but she was a mess. The rough grey tunic which covered her was the same colour as the bruise under one eye. Blood was oozing from her lower lip and forming a thin red line in the water that still trickled down her face. Her hair was matted and mud-coloured. She could have been any age between fifteen and thirty.

'We're giving this girl some water, sir,' explained someone with an impressive grasp of understatement.

'She's fainted,' added someone else.

'She always faints when there's work to be done,' grumbled the man who had been shouting at her. He bent as far down as his belly would allow and yelled in the girl's ear, 'Get up!'

'She can't hear you,' remarked Ruso evenly. His gaze took in the copper slave band around the girl's upper right arm. Below the elbow, the arm vanished into a swathe of grimy rags. The pale hand emerging at the other end was what had silenced the crowd. It was sticking out at a grotesque and impossible angle. Ruso frowned, unconsciously fingering his own forearm. 'What happened to her arm?'

'It wasn't us!' assured a voice in the crowd. 'We was only trying to help!'

The grumbler turned his head to one side and spat. 'Silly bitch fell down the steps.'

'Fell down the steps, *sir*,' corrected Ruso, restraining an urge to seize the man by the ear.

'Yes, sir. Didn't look where she was going, sir.'

'It should have been set straight away.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Get it done.'

'On my way now, sir.'

The girl groaned. The man grabbed her good arm and hauled her to her feet. She fell against him. Caught off balance, he struggled to stay upright.

Ruso was uncomfortably aware that he was now at the centre of this entertainment. Whatever he did, he must not admit to being a doctor. Nor did he intend to waste his afternoon being soaked and muddied by dragging a sick slave around.

‘You there!’ He pointed to a greasy-haired youth who was lolling against a wall trying to dislodge something from his ear with his forefinger. ‘Yes, you! Give him a hand.’

The youth withdrew the finger, opened his mouth to argue, then thought better of it. He slid a reluctant hand under the girl’s arm. He and the girl’s owner began to drag the limp body along the pavement.

Ruso scowled at the crowd, which began to disperse.

‘The fort’s the other way!’ he shouted after the owner.

No reply.

He overtook them, blocking the path. The trio paused. The girl slumped lower.

‘She needs to go to the fort hospital. Now.’

‘Yes sir,’ agreed the owner, ‘but the thing is, sir . . .’

The thing was that he was short of cash. The girl’s last owner had driven away with a cartload of best-quality wools and palmed him off with a slave who was lazy and useless. Now she had gone and broken her arm, and he couldn’t even sell her on. A harder man would have thrown her out into the street, but everyone knew Claudius Innocens was a man too soft for his own good. He knew the hospital at the fort had an excellent reputation – ‘Get on with it!’ prompted Ruso – but it was too expensive for a poor trader. He had heard there was a good healer on the Bridge Road. He was going there now.

‘I just have to do a little business on the way, sir,’ he added. ‘So I can pay for the treatment.’

Ruso had only been stationed in Deva for four days but already he knew that the local healer wouldn’t be able to do anything with that arm. He said nothing. It was not his problem. He had only come out for a drink and a flask of bath-oil. The girl’s face was horribly pale: she probably didn’t have long left anyway. The healer would have henbane, or mandrake. Perhaps some imported poppy-juice.

Ruso glanced round to make sure no one was looking, then undid his purse and placed two sestertii into the hand of Claudius Innocens. ‘Take her there now,’ he ordered. ‘Buy her a dose of something for the pain.’

‘You’re a kind-hearted man, sir!’ Innocens’ jowls bulged outwards in a smile that failed to reach his eyes. ‘Not a lot of gentlemen would see a poor man in need and –’

‘See to it!’ snapped Ruso and walked away, checking that his oil-flask was still tied to his belt and had not been subtly removed by someone in the crowd. He was not feeling like a kind-hearted man. He was a man who was deeply exasperated. He was a man who needed a good night’s sleep. And before that, he needed a trip to the baths.

In a few minutes, stretched out on a warm couch with a soft towel beneath him, he would forget the merchant’s slimy gratitude and the grisly shape of his slave-girl’s arm. He would forget the screams of the recruit this morning as his elbow was put back into shape. Distracted by the splash of the cold plunge and the murmur of gossip, his thoughts would drift away from the puzzle of that unknown woman lying in the mortuary. The perfumed oil would clear the stench of decay from his nostrils. The masseur’s practised hands would pummel away the tension of problems which, when he thought about them logically, all belonged to other people.

There was no sign of the young soldiers at the tables in Merula's. The doorman pretended not to recognize Ruso. He must have overheard the warning about the food.

An elderly slave was limping past the place where the girl had collapsed. The stink of the two buckets swaying on the pole over his shoulders was unmistakable. The man stopped to scrape up the pile of dung Ruso had almost trodden in earlier.

Half the world, decided Ruso, raising his fingers to his nose again, spent its waking hours engaged in clearing up the mess made by the other half. That girl's owner, like whoever had dumped that corpse in the river, had been a mess-maker. Not fit to be in charge of a dead dog. That disgusting bandage had been on for days.

Ruso stopped so suddenly that a child running along behind him collided with the back of his legs, tumbled full-length on the paving stones and, refusing his offer of help, ran off howling for its mother.

That girl hadn't fallen down any steps. She had raised the arm to shield herself from the blows that had blackened her eye. The wool-trader would pocket the money and leave town, and before long another unclaimed body would be found floating down the river. Gaius Petreius Ruso had just been swindled out of two sestertii.

It did not take long to find the unattractive trio again. The wet trail led away from the fountain and down a side street, weaving unsteadily round the legs of scaffolding poles. The scrape and slop of shovels mixing mortar announced yet another row of new shops. Ruso strode around the far side of the building site, entered the street from the opposite end, picked his way down past a burned-out building await-

ing demolition and came face to face with the shuffling threesome.

‘The Bridge Road is the other way!’ he shouted over a sudden burst of hammering, stabbing his forefinger in the direction they had just come.

The girl opened her eyes and looked at him.

She couldn’t see him, of course. It was an illusion. The eyes were blank; like the eyes of a sleepwalker. For the first time Ruso noticed the delicate shape of her nose, the tiny dimple in an ear-lobe where jewellery had once hung. And those eyes. The colour of – what were they the colour of? Like . . . like the clear, deep waters of . . . Ruso’s tired mind groped for a description that didn’t sound like the work of a bad poet and failed to find one.

The merchant was still talking. The youth was examining the toe-straps of his sandals. Only Ruso seemed to be interested in the girl.

‘If you don’t get help for her soon, this slave is going to die.’

He realized it was a mistake as soon as he had said it. The trader bent forward and dragged down the girl’s lower eyelid with a dirty thumb. Then he forced her jaw open and peered into her mouth. He was clearly not a man to waste two sestertii on dying livestock.

‘It’s not the state of her teeth you want to worry about.’

Innocens turned and looked at him curiously. ‘You wouldn’t be a medical man yourself, by any chance, sir?’

Ruso glanced up, wishing he believed in the sort of theatrical gods who swooped down from the heavens at difficult moments and set humanity to rights. But the gods, if they were watching, were hiding in the grey British clouds beyond the scaffolding poles, leaving him to his fate. And then, as

if inspired by something beyond himself, Ruso had an idea.

‘You said she isn’t worth anything.’

Innocens paused. ‘Well, not the way she is, sir. After she’s had a bit of a clean-up –’

‘I’ll take her off your hands.’

‘She’s a good, strong girl, sir. She’ll perk up in a day or two. I’ll knock a bit off the price for that arm.’

‘What price? You told me she was lazy and useless.’

‘Useless at cleaning, sir, but an excellent cook. And what’s more . . .’ Innocens raised his free arm to steady the girl as he leaned forward in a haze of fish sauce and bellowed over more hammering, ‘Just the thing for a healthy young man like yourself, sir! Ripe as a peach and never been touched!’

‘I’m not interested in touching her!’ shouted Ruso, just as the noise stopped.

Someone sniggered. Ruso looked up. A couple of men were leaning down over the scaffolding. One of them said something to the other and they both laughed. The youth holding the girl glanced up and grinned.

It would be all over the fort by morning.

*You know that new doctor up at the hospital? The one that’s been telling the lads to stay out of whorehouses?*

*What about him?*

*Hangs around back streets. Tries to buy women.*

Innocens was smiling again. Ruso suppressed an urge to grab him by the neck and shake him.

‘What would you like to offer, sir?’

Ruso hesitated. ‘I’ll give you fifty denarii,’ he muttered.

Innocens’ jowls collapsed in disappointment. He shrugged the shoulder not being used to prop up his merchandise. ‘I wish I could, sir. I can hardly afford to feed her. But the debt I took her for was four thousand.’

It was a ridiculous lie. Even if it wasn’t, Ruso didn’t have

four thousand denarii. He didn't have four hundred. It had been an expensive summer.

'Fifty's more than she's worth, and you know it,' he insisted. 'Look at her.'

'Fifty-five!' offered a voice from the scaffolding.

'What?' put in his companion. 'You heard the man, she's a virgin. Fifty-six!'

Innocens scowled at them. 'One thousand and she's yours, sir.'

'Fifty or nothing.'

The trader shook his head, unable to believe that any fool would offer all his money at the first bid. Ruso, remembering with a jolt that payday was still three weeks away, was barely able to believe it himself. He should have put more water in that wine.

'Two hundred, sir. I can't go below two hundred. You'll ruin me.'

'Go on!' urged the chorus from the scaffolding. 'Two hundred for this lovely lady!'

Ruso looked up at the workmen. 'Buy her yourselves if you like. I only came out for a bottle of bath-oil.'

At that moment the girl's body jerked. A feeble cough emerged from her lips. Her eyelids drifted shut. A slow silver drool emerged from her mouth and came to rest in shining bubbles on the sodden wool of her tunic. Claudius Innocens cleared his throat.

'Will that fifty be cash, then, sir?'

‘What are you doing in here?’

Ruso opened one eye and wondered briefly why he was being addressed by a giant inkpot. Opening the other eye to find himself in fading light and surrounded by shelves, he realized he must have fallen asleep in the records office. He hauled himself upright on the stool and yawned. ‘Catching up on some notes. How are you feeling?’

Valens grinned. ‘Better than that thing in room twelve. It looks as if it’s just crawled out of the sewer. What is it?’

Ruso reached for the writing-tablet before Valens could make out: *Female, history unknown, fracture to lower right arm, pale, dry cough, weak, no fever. Note: Launder bedding, treat with fleabane.* He snapped it shut and slid it into the Current Patients box.

‘That thing is a sick slave with a broken arm.’

‘Whose?’

‘Her own.’

‘Very funny. Whose slave?’

Ruso scratched his ear. ‘Couldn’t say, really.’ He had entertained a faint hope that his purchase might be claimed by the lovestruck porter and taken off his hands, but the man had not recognized her.

‘I leave you on your own for a couple of days,’ said Valens, ‘and you fill the place with expiring females.’

‘A couple of fishermen found the other one already expired. The town council clerk wouldn’t let them dump

her outside his office, and they couldn't think what else to do with her.'

Valens shrugged. 'Of course. We're the Army, we'll deal with everything. If somebody doesn't identify her soon I suppose we'll have to bury her, too. So who said her friend could die in one of our beds?'

'She isn't dying,' argued Ruso, seizing the chance to sidestep the question of who had brought her in.

'That's not what I heard. She on your list?'

He nodded.

'No hope for her, then.' Valens glanced out into the corridor, pushed the door shut and lowered his voice. 'Five says she'll be dead by sunrise.'

Ruso pondered this for a moment. Payday seemed further away now than when he had foolishly offered all his remaining cash for a slave he didn't want. If he could just keep her alive until tomorrow, he would salvage some of his dignity and come out of it with money in his purse.

'She isn't dying,' he repeated with more confidence than he felt. 'Five says she's alive when they blow first watch.'

'If she were a dog, you'd knock her on the head now.'

'Well she isn't, and I shan't. So push off and find some patients of your own to annoy.'

The hollow cheeks of the patient in room twelve looked distinctly yellow against the white of the blanket that had been draped over her. The injured arm, secured across her chest in a crisp linen sling, rose and fell gently with each breath. The draught had done its work. She was asleep. Her doctor placed a cup of barley water on the table beside the bed and went to the shrine of Aesculapius.

\*

The hospital entrance hall was empty save for a smell of fresh paint and roses. Aesculapius leaned on his stick and looked out from his niche with a quiet dignity that somehow transcended the inscription 'WET PAINT' chalked underneath him. The God of Healing needed more maintenance than most of his colleagues: the touch of his eager supplicants tended to damage his paintwork. Today the faithful had left a bunch of white roses and a couple of apples at his feet, hoping to be saved from their ailments. Or, more likely, from their doctor.

Usually Ruso spared the deity no more than a passing nod. Now he paused to stand in front of the niche and murmur a promise of two and a half denarii should the girl in room twelve survive until morning.

Having thus enlisted extra help for the cost of only half his winnings, and with nothing to pay if the god failed to perform, Ruso headed back to room twelve to see what more could be done to improve his chance of winning this unexpected and probably illegal wager.

## 4

‘Are you – sure he’s – dead?’ asked Ruso, the words punctuated by grunts as he struggled to manoeuvre his end of the stretcher through the door.

‘Positive, sir,’ said the surgical orderly, deftly kicking the door shut behind him. ‘The man who told me heard it from someone who got it from one of the kitchen staff in the Legate’s house. It’ll be announced at parade this morning.’

‘How do the kitchen staff know?’

‘The despatch rider popped along for something to eat while the Legate read through the message, sir.’

Ruso suppressed a smile. ‘I suppose you know the cause of death?’

‘Not sure yet, sir. All we know is, he had a funny turn on the way back from sorting the Parthians out.’

They lowered the stretcher on to the table. ‘Do we know who’s taken over?’ asked Ruso, sliding out one of the carrying poles.

‘The Army are backing Publius Aelius Hadrianus, sir.’ The orderly slid out the other pole and stacked them both in the corner. ‘I’m told he’s a very generous man when it comes to bonuses. Double the going rate is what I hear.’

‘Does anybody know what the going rate is?’ asked Ruso. ‘Half the Army wasn’t even born when Trajan took over, let alone on the payroll.’

‘Hard to say, sir,’ agreed the orderly, ‘But in nineteen years it’s bound to have gone up, isn’t it?’ He bent over the table. ‘Just lie on your left, now.’ As they rolled the girl first

to one side of the table and then the other, slipping the stretcher sheet out from beneath her, he observed, 'Nothing of her, is there?'

When they had settled the girl the man hurried out to refill the water-bucket, complaining that someone else should have refilled it last night. 'You can tell Priscus isn't here.'

Ruso waited, hearing distant voices. The clump of boots on floorboards in the corridors. The usual clatter from the kitchen. Window-shutters crashing open to let in the new day. A day the anonymous girl in the mortuary would never see. Ruso, who did not like to inquire too deeply into matters of religion, wondered vaguely if she and Trajan would meet each other on the voyage into the shadowy world of the departed. He eyed the girl lying on the table in front of him. It might have been kinder to let her join them.

Laid out under a crumpled linen gown that smelled faintly of lavender, she looked smaller. And younger. He wondered how old she was. She must have a name: a tribe: a language. The trader had been yelling at her in Latin, but the words she had mumbled as the poppy-juice carried her into oblivion sounded British.

That was the only time he had heard her speak. When he had put his head round the door of room twelve just after dawn and said, 'Morning! Did you sleep well?' (She was alive! He must go and tell Valens . . .) she had looked at him with those eyes that were the colour of – well, whatever it was – as if she did not understand the question.

The eyes were open again now. The pupils had been shrunk to small black dots by medicine he had given her. She was staring up at the dust-motes floating in the sunshine that streamed in from the high windows. She showed no curiosity about where she was.

She did not seem to have grasped the purpose of the gleaming instruments laid out on the cloth beside the empty water-basin. She was not alarmed by the rolls of bandage stacked on the shelves, nor did she seem to be wondering what so many empty bowls might be there to catch.

Ruso was pleased with himself. Deciding the right amount of poppy-juice to administer had been a tricky business. The borrowed works he had hurriedly consulted last night had implied that, in all respects which would matter this morning, women were the same as men only smaller. In Ruso's experience, however, there was much about women that was dangerously unpredictable, and one of the attractions of Army life was that he was no longer expected to live with one.

'Everything all right, sir?' The orderly was back, splashing clean water into the basin.

Ruso nodded. 'I think she's about ready.'

The orderly began to buckle a leather strap across the girl's legs. She lifted her head slightly.

'Nothing to worry about,' said the orderly, who was a practised liar.

The girl's head fell back. She closed her eyes and appeared to be drifting off to sleep.

The door opened. Valens' head appeared, then retreated. 'Sorry! Didn't know you were in here.'

Ruso called after him, 'What about that five denarii?'

Valens reappeared, glanced at the body on the operating table and grinned. 'You must have cheated.'

'I could do with some help.'

'I'm supposed to be doing the rounds. What have you got?'

As the girl continued to doze while the orderly strapped her down, Ruso jerked a thumb towards the bandaged arm

lying on top of the linen. ‘Compound fracture of radius and ulna about halfway down. Probably three or four days old. I redressed the outside last night but it was too dark to operate.’

‘I like a challenge,’ said Valens and closed the door behind him. ‘Have you heard? Trajan’s dead.’

‘I know,’ said Ruso, who had private reasons to mourn the Emperor’s passing. ‘Sounds as though it’s Hadrian.’

Ruso began to remove the bandaging he had put on last night. The girl’s body jerked as she tried to raise herself. The orderly gripped her shoulders and held her down.

On the other side of the table, Valens stroked her good hand, leaned over and said gently, ‘We’re going to see to your arm. We’ll be very quick.’

Ruso wished he had remembered to say that himself.

They began to soak off the rag that had been stuffed into the wound.

‘I met him once,’ mused Ruso.

‘Hadrian?’

‘Trajan. In Antioch.’

‘I suppose he’ll be the divine Trajan soon.’

‘No doubt,’ agreed Ruso. At least, none that he was foolish enough to express in public.

‘May he rest among the gods,’ added Valens.

‘Among the gods indeed, sir,’ echoed the orderly.

Ruso left a brief silence that could have been respect or rebellion, then murmured, ‘Water.’

The orderly refilled the jug.

‘Think Hadrian’ll try and take the North back?’ asked Valens.

‘Why not?’ Ruso said. ‘He’ll be wanting to make an impression. Britannia’s big enough to count, but remote enough not to matter.’

‘He’ll have to send more legions if he’s serious about it. We’re spread pretty thin here.’

‘He might not go for it. He’s Trajan’s man. He might just carry on the divine Trajan’s policies.’ Ruso glanced at the orderly. ‘No doubt the kitchen staff will let us know. Here it comes . . .’ He lifted off the rag and dropped it into the waste-bucket.

Both men leaned forward to peer at the swollen and blood-caked mess that had once been an arm.

Valens brought one hand down over his own elbow with a chopping motion, and raised his eyebrows in question.

Ruso shook his head. ‘It looks clean. The wrist’s intact.’

Valens strolled round the table, looking at the injury from a different angle. ‘I wouldn’t,’ he murmured. ‘You’ll only make a worse mess and end up taking it off anyway.’

‘It might work. If you broke your arm –’

‘I’d pray I didn’t get some would-be hero like you.’

‘I think we should try.’

There was a pause.

‘She’s my patient,’ added Ruso.

Valens shrugged. ‘Fine. She’s your patient. So, do we know how much Hadrian values his loyal troops?’

‘He’ll be doubling the usual bonus, apparently.’

‘How much is that?’

‘Not a clue.’

As they began to clean the wound, the girl gasped. Her face twisted into a grimace of pain.

‘Try and lie still,’ said the orderly, tightening his grip and glancing to check that all the straps were fastened.

‘We’ll be very quick,’ promised Ruso, wishing he could make patients believe it the way Valens did.

‘My friend’s famous for being quick,’ added Valens. ‘Ask all the girls.’ He glanced at Ruso. ‘What’s she called?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Ruso, only you could round up two women and not know the names of either of them.’

‘Next time,’ said Ruso, ‘I’ll tell them my friend would like to be introduced.’ He picked out a stray thread of rag with the tweezers. The girl gave a low moan.

‘Shush now,’ said the orderly.

Ruso hoped she wouldn’t be a whimperer. Whimperers were worse than screamers. Screamers made him cross, which made him work faster. The sound of a whimperer trying to be brave was a distraction.

The girl didn’t whimper. She clamped her teeth on to the leather strap the orderly offered her and didn’t make another sound.

There was a rap at the door.

‘What?’ snapped Ruso. A very young soldier appeared, swallowed and announced, ‘Urgent message for Gaius Petreius Ruso.’

‘That’s me.’

‘Sir, there’s a man at the East Gatehouse. He says you promised to pay fifty-four denarii first thing this morning.’

‘It was fifty,’ said Ruso, not looking up. ‘And I’m busy.’

The youth did not reply. He was staring at the operating table.

‘Tell him I’ll be down later,’ said Ruso.

The youth swallowed again. ‘He said to tell you the extra is the tax and the cost of drawing up the documents, sir.’

Ruso nodded towards the mangled mass of the girl’s arm. ‘If you don’t get out right away, I shall do this to you too.’

The youth fled.

Ruso aimed the tweezers at the waste-bucket, missed and said, ‘I think that’s clean.’

Valens laid a hand on the girl’s forehead. ‘We like this

arm so much, young woman, we're going to put it back together for you.'

The orderly leaned down until his face was almost touching the girl's. 'Breathe deeply now,' he ordered. 'Ready? In, out, in, out . . .'

Ruso had rehearsed his speech all the way down to the gatehouse, but when he got there he found his time had been wasted. Instead of the wool-trader, the guards presented him with an elderly slave with no teeth who made it clear that if he failed to return to his master with the right money, his life would not be worth living. Ruso, who had neither the time nor the inclination to queue at the tax office, paid up. He also sent a message to say that if Claudius Innocens ever showed his face in Deva again he would be instantly arrested but he doubted the slave would have the courage to deliver it.

The clerk of the Aesculapian Thanksgiving Fund gave him a receipt for the two and a half denarii which Valens had borrowed from someone who had borrowed them from someone else who had very possibly borrowed them from the Aesculapian Thanksgiving Fund in the first place.

Ruso went to thank the god personally. Standing in front of the statue, he fingered the two receipts tucked into his belt. One said that in gratitude and fulfilment of a vow, Gaius Petreius Ruso had paid the Aesculapian Thanksgiving Fund two and a half denarii. The other confirmed Gaius Petreius Ruso as the new owner of an injured and sickly girl with indescribable eyes and a name that seemed to be a series of spelling mistakes.

Ruso gazed up at the statue of the god who had answered his prayer. For the first time he noticed that the painter had not just performed the usual touch-up over the rough bits.

The god had been completely repainted. Ruso stood to take a closer look and as he gazed into the brown eyes of Aesculapius he had the distinct impression that the god of healing was looking back at him, and laughing.

Ruso lay on the borrowed bed and stared into the gloom that hid the cracks in the ceiling plaster, reflecting that Socrates was a wise man. Surveying the goods on a market stall, the great one was said to have remarked, ‘What a lot of things a man doesn’t need!’

*What a lot of things a man doesn’t need.* That thought had comforted Ruso over the last few months. The more you own, he had told himself, the more you have to worry about. Possessions are a burden.

The kind of possessions which needed to be regularly fed were a double burden. They were only worth having if they earned their keep by doing the laundry, or barking at burglars, or catching mice, or carrying you somewhere, or chirruping in a way that your ex-wife used to find entertaining. It was a pity Socrates hadn’t thought to add, *which is why I never shop after drinking on an empty stomach.*

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ Valens had said, carefully lowering the lid back on to the beer-barrel so as not to tip the stack of dirty dishes which had been there when Ruso moved in, ‘if there’s no one waiting for the room and you’re not using much staff time to nurse her, you can leave her there.’

Ruso took the dripping cup of beer and wondered whether to clear up the dishes, or whether to wait and see how long it would be before Valens did. ‘She’ll need proper nursing for a few days.’

‘Fair enough. But the other one’s got to be out of the

mortuary tomorrow, claimed or not.’ Valens tossed a broken fishing-rod into the corner to clear himself space on the couch. As he sat down, three puppies scuttled out from underneath. The puppies were a legacy from the previous occupant, whose lone and portly terrier bitch Valens had agreed to look after while the man was seconded elsewhere. ‘Gods, I’ll be glad when Marius gets back to pick this stuff up. It’s not all my mess in here, you know.’

Ruso, who had shared quarters with Valens before, made no comment. The offer of free accommodation had been too good to turn down, but he had known there would be a price to pay.

‘To tell you the truth,’ said Valens, ‘I thought you’d be bringing a servant or two. You used to have lots.’

‘Claudia had lots.’

‘Ah.’ Valens squinted into his own beer, rescued something with a forefinger and flicked it over his shoulder. A rush of inquisitive puppies followed its course.

‘How long have you been a beer drinker?’

‘I’m not. Some native gave it to me as a thank-you for treating one of his children.’

Ruso frowned into his drink. ‘Are you sure he was grateful?’

‘Smells like goat’s piss, I know. But you’ll get used to it.’

Ruso tried another mouthful and wondered how long getting used to it would take. He said, ‘Can’t the Legion give us somebody to help keep the place straight?’

Valens winced. ‘If you want some squint-eyed misery who makes a ridiculous fuss about a little bit of mess.’

Ruso deduced that this had already been tried. ‘What about a private arrangement? It wouldn’t cost much between us.’

‘The servants here aren’t much better than the beer, I’m

afraid. The first one we tried had a bad back. The next one kept sitting on the floor and crying and we didn't have the heart to beat her, so we sold her. At a loss, of course. Then we tried hiring in a local girl, but Marius saw her kick the dog, so she had to go.' Valens leaned back and indicated the size of the room with a sweep of his arm. The motion sent beer slopping over the side of his cup. 'This isn't a big house, is it?' He transferred the beer to the other hand and wiped his wet fingers on the couch. 'It can't be much work. I mean, we don't even use that end room.' The beer slopped again, indicating the direction of the corner room which had been abandoned as impossibly damp and was now growing several fine blooms of strange-smelling mould. 'There's only the two of us to cook for,' he continued, 'and half the time we eat across at the hospital. Here, can your girl cook?'

'At the moment she can't even stand up.'

'No matter. We don't want one in a splint anyway. We want some nice healthy lass who's handy with dogs and cleaning.'

'And wants a challenge,' observed Ruso, glancing through the open door into the earthquake zone that was Valens' bedroom. 'Where would we put this healthy lass?'

'In the kitchen, I suppose. When your furniture turns up she could have the mattress off that bed you're using.'

Ruso did not reply.

'We could always get rid of her later if your girl shows promise,' Valens added.

'I won't be keeping her. I'll start looking for a buyer as soon as she can be moved.'

'You'll just have to hope Priscus doesn't come back in the meantime.'

Ruso frowned. 'Doesn't anybody know when he's coming?'

‘Doubt it. He likes to take people by surprise. He thinks it keeps them on their toes. He’s not keen on private patients unless they pay well. By the way, that other dog isn’t yours as well, is it?’

Ruso said, ‘What other dog?’

‘I didn’t think it was. I’ll tell them to get rid of it.’

*Other dog?*

Ruso yawned. The girl in the mortuary was not his problem, but if he didn’t get the live one out of the hospital soon, not only would he get off on the wrong foot with Chief Administrator Priscus, but he would be saddled with every other passing stray for whom no one else wanted to take responsibility.

Somewhere beyond the ill-fitting shutters of his bedroom window a trumpet sounded the change of watch. He rolled over, wriggled to avoid the lump that always seemed directly under his shoulder no matter how many times he turned the mattress or shook the straw around and closed his eyes. He was just dropping off to sleep when he heard a knock on his door and Valens asking if he was awake.

‘No.’

‘Are you busy in the morning?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pity. Somebody’s going to have to go down to Merula’s.’

‘Uh. Send an orderly.’

‘It ought to be somebody official, and I’m on duty.’

‘Can’t it wait?’

‘No. One of the men’s identified that body.’