

THE MORNING LIGHT

George Hammond



*He that rules over men in justice,
That rules in the fear of God,
Is like the morning light at sunrise on a cloudless morning,
Making the greensward sparkle after rain.*

The Bible
2 Samuel 23:3-4

Chapter I

The crowd's cheers sounded and resounded throughout the stadium while the object of their adulation stood quietly, without acknowledging their praise, in the center of the arena.

Jason was gazing at the ground before him, on which lay the bodies of his twelve opponents. He stood erect, with a natural dignity. His short, curly hair glistened in the afternoon sun, but his physical beauty, which had recently shared the glory with his physical prowess, soon receded into the background of the crowd's attention. The illustrious performance which the gladiator had just accomplished also receded, as the crowd's cheers slowly hushed to a reverential awe of the simple spectacle now being enacted in the center of the arena.

The spectators were accustomed to the jaunty pride of the successful gladiators, and they poured out their praise for the prowess which the strongest displayed, but they also cheered because the gladiators scorned death, because they were reckless in the face of annihilation.

Jason, as many had already noticed, was an unusual gladiator. He did not have the boastful pride which the others displayed. Showing compassion to his opponents, he conducted himself royally. Never had the crowds witnessed such a noble gladiator. Jason was tall, his bronzed body strong, but not muscular. Many of his opponents had been larger than he, but Jason had never flinched during any of the twelve consecutive battles. Jason had astonished the crowd on several occasions, as when he struck a mighty blow on the shoulder of his largest opponent, knocking him to the ground. Instead of taking advantage of this opportunity, Jason had

waited until his opponent had recovered, and then had resumed the battle until he had won without an unfair advantage.

The crowd's attention was silently riveted to the center of the arena where Jason, bleeding from several wounds, yet calm as ever, was walking slowly toward the body of his first opponent. Jason leaned over the man's face and kissed his now-cold forehead. Jason remained bowed over his opponent for a few seconds, and then walked toward the body of his second opponent, where he repeated his ritual. After he had completed the ritual for each opponent, he stood straight and tall, without displaying any exhaustion from the past three hours of combat, and walked slowly out of the arena, having never acknowledged the existence of the spectators.

The crowd remained hushed, but with an excitement that carried many whispered rumors throughout the stadium, as they spilled out onto the streets of Rome.

"Father," Clara said quietly as she broke the silence which had descended upon her family since the first battle had begun hours ago, "sit back and relax."

Her soft words only registered after a few minutes, as her father was absorbed so deeply in thought that he was unaware of the fact that he had been sitting on the edge of their bench for quite some time. When her words had penetrated deep into his mind, and had located the corner where his consciousness was absorbed, Janus suddenly started, as if he had just been roused from a deep sleep, and then, laughing at himself, he turned to his daughter and smiled.

"I have been gone again, haven't I?"

His wife Phoebee replied, answering "yes" to Janus's question in her usual subtle and polite manner, "you haven't noticed, dear, but the crowds have been exceptionally slow in leaving. I hope you don't mind if we wait until they are gone."

Phoebee's proposal met with unanimous approval, as they were not pressured by time, and because Janus and Clara shared Phoebee's dislike of crowded conditions.

“What did you think of that gladiator?” Clara asked her father, who missed the mischievous gleam in her eye.

“That man has done more to influence our citizens than any legislation we have passed,” Janus began enthusiastically. “These games have generally fulfilled only their lower purpose of contenting the citizens’ love of violence and death. The gladiator battles allow them to vicariously live out their desires, without having to act violently themselves — which is a great boon to the state.

“Unfortunately, the higher purpose of displaying the nobility of warfare, so that our army would receive more support from the citizens, has been left unfulfilled — until today. The lack arose because we only use condemned prisoners and slaves for the contests, and one rarely finds a noble soul among such people. I am quite curious to know where that man came from.”

Janus was pleased that Clara had raised the subject, as it gave him another opportunity to defend the games from her criticism.

“I agree that this man has had a good influence on the citizens, as never before have they seen violence performed kindly, and that seemed to nullify all its harshness. People are acutely aware of the violence of natural forces and, as they always associate violence with ruthlessness and hatred because they have only experienced it in that context, it is difficult to explain how seemingly violent acts of the gods are actually benevolently inspired. This gladiator’s actions have made it possible for the citizens to have a better conception of the good which divinely inspired violence causes. Hopefully, they will now be able to better differentiate it from violence inspired by less-than-divine humans.

“However, if the purpose of the games is mainly to quench the violent tendencies of the people, then your thinking may sound logical, but does not hold up under proper analysis. After all, the oldest proverb concerning violence is that it begets itself. I tend to agree with that proverb, and I do think that it would be appropriate to decrease the number of these contests. In fact, if I were the consul, I would gradually eliminate the fights. Less violent entertainment would serve the purpose and also would have a less

detrimental effect on the spectators. You cannot count on having more gladiators like today's winner!" Clara had stated her position to her father several times before, but he had never agreed with her, and so she had only restated her ideas to convince her father that that day's exceptional contest had not overruled her convictions.

Glancing at Phoebe, Janus noticed her satisfaction with Clara's arguments, and so he said to Clara, "All right, dear, you don't have to attend the gladiator contests again. Your mother has filled you with her Grecian idealism, and I love her for it. I don't even care if the other patrician families notice your absence. I won't have you sully your principles just to serve my political ambitions."

"Oh, Janus, you know that we would never hinder you, if we could help it," Phoebe replied, with just a touch of anguish, as she realized that she was already viewed as a handicap to her husband's advancement by the other senators and their wives.

"Bee," Janus began, in order to reaffirm his decision, but he did not finish as he was interrupted by someone shouting his name. They all looked in the direction of the sounds and saw their friend running up the aisle as quickly as his short, fat legs could carry him, sweating profusely and shouting "Janus".

Senator Comprimo ran to their bench, his white silk toga stained with sweat and his face distorted by a combination of excitement and exhaustion. Janus seated his friend and told him to catch his breath before trying to relate his news. Janus was not surprised at Julius's excitement, for it seemed that Julius was always excited to some degree. But Janus guessed that Julius was carrying big news, as he had never seen his friend run before.

Julius Comprimo needed to sit down, and it took him several minutes to settle down enough to speak. In the meantime, he drummed his ample stomach with his short, chubby fingers, as that was his common thinking position, while Janus wiped the sweat from his balding head and from the back of his short, stout neck. Julius looked more like a baker than like a Roman senator, and he was still having difficulty fitting into that august assembly.

Janus was the only senator who had befriended him, and Julius never forgot Janus's kindness.

Julius was the first non-patrician to receive a senatorship, and it was obvious that it had only been bestowed grudgingly. The Senate needed his advice, as he was an expert in the field which had made him the wealthiest merchant in Rome, and they also needed to appease the growing influence and power of the merchants by granting them a seat in the Senate.

Even so, although several years had already passed, and although Julius's knowledge had become indispensable to the smooth running of the state treasury, Janus's immediate acceptance of Julius was still the only acceptance he had received. The other senators regarded him as a necessary evil, an attitude which would have stymied the effectiveness of a less confident man.

His merchant friends had once asked him how he could survive when he had to operate in such a hostile environment. Julius had replied that he felt he owed it to the state, and to his fellow merchants, to see that the state treasury was run efficiently. "Besides," he had added, "their hostility is mere jealousy. I ignore them as much as possible. Men who are capable of jealousy are not capable of opinions which could disconcert me."

Janus admired this strength in his friend. But that admiration had developed months after they had become friends. What had immediately struck Janus was Julius's good-natured honesty. The natural affinity which exists among men who are honest was increased, in this case, by the scarcity of such men in the Roman Senate, and so it developed quickly into a strong friendship.

"Janus," Julius finally managed to say between gasps for breath, "a special session of the Senate has been called for this afternoon. Marcus Pollizzo, one of the most influential merchants, has just returned from a seven month voyage. He has discovered an island west of Hispania which he says could ease our economic difficulties. The meeting has been called to discuss Pollizzo's proposition to trade with the island."

Janus listened patiently as Julius gasped out his message. The mention of Pollizzo's name had struck an uncomfortable chord in Janus's memory. When Julius had finished, Janus observed, "Marcus Pollizzo — isn't that the fellow who started the trouble with Egypt by enslaving some of their citizens and selling them in Rome?"

Julius, now somewhat composed, answered, "Yes, Janus, that was about fifteen years ago. He is considered a financial genius, but no one would praise his scruples. However, I do believe he now has more political acumen than he demonstrated in that Egyptian affair."

Thinking out loud, and hoping there would not be another debate about slavery, Janus murmured, "it should prove to be an interesting meeting." He began to be anxious, though, as his last political setback had occurred only five years ago when he had been too outspoken on the subject of slavery. He had denounced Rome's reliance on slave labor in an attempt to relieve the burden, moral and economic, which the slave trade had caused. His failure then had made him cautious regarding touchy subjects and it seemed that, whatever Pollizzo was up to, it was bound to be a touchy subject.

Julius noticed immediately that Janus was anxious, as he had begun to pull at his fingertips. Since Janus was usually very composed, everyone took notice when he was not.

In order to divert Janus's mind from the past, Julius said, "I came as fast as I could to inform you of the meeting, as I was sure that you would want to arrive in time to persuade the other senators not to be swayed by Pollizzo. The rumors are already circulating. The favorite is that the inhabitants of the island are defenseless and could easily be brought to Rome to fill the lack of slave laborers."

"Then let's go at once," Janus replied, snapping out of his anxiety with decisiveness. "You may wait here until the crowds have dispersed," he added to Phoebee and Clara, "but Senator Comprimo and I must leave immediately."

Julius almost had to run to keep up with Janus's long, quick strides. Janus had been a good athlete when he was a student in Athens and, although it was thirty years since he had returned to Rome, his tall, strong body was still in excellent shape.

After they had gone some distance, Janus suddenly turned around, revealing the depth with which he had already appraised the situation, and shouted to Phoebee, who was just within hearing distance of his resonant voice, "Bee, prepare a large dinner for this evening as I will probably invite several senators."

Phoebee signaled that she had heard him, and so he turned again, walking briskly toward the main exit.

"Julius, you will join us tonight, won't you?" Janus asked as they slowed their pace due to the crowd ahead.

Janus smiled at the obvious pleasure on Julius's face. Janus only rarely entertained socially, and Julius always enjoyed the occasions, as they were his only opportunities to sit as an equal, as he rightfully deserved, with his fellow senators.

"Of course I'll come," was Julius's reply as they came to a complete stop on the edge of the crowd which was still leaving the stadium.

Janus stood patiently, now completely in control, while Julius stood impatiently as the crowd slowly filtered through the gates onto the already crowded streets. After they had been waiting for a few minutes, two young men, who had recognized Janus, approached him and offered to lead Julius and him through the crowd, as they could see that Julius was in a hurry.

"If you could do that for us it would be a great service to the state," Julius immediately replied, "as we must get to the Curia immediately."

Janus smiled at his friend's impatience, but he nodded an assent to the young men who were waiting for his answer. They immediately began shouting "Make way for Senator Luminus!" Quickly the sea of humanity which stretched in front of Janus and Julius parted, as the crowd passed on the message which the men were shouting so vehemently. Losing interest in leaving, and gain-

ing interest in seeing the famous senator, the crowd stepped aside, forming an aisle, and then leaned back in order to get a good glimpse of Janus Luminus.

Even Julius was amazed at the quick response, and the adoring glances, which the crowd gave to Janus. Since Janus was tall, many of the citizens were able to see him walking quickly through the crowd, his silver curls being tousled by the gentle breeze, his face, with its broad forehead, straight nose and high cheekbones, attesting to his nobility, and providing the setting for deep brown eyes, which at one moment would reflect his deep absorption in the future meeting and at another would sparkle merrily as he smiled at the citizens who were making room for him.

Julius could barely keep up with Janus. More than once the crowd closed in behind Janus, cutting Julius off from the path through the crowd. However, each time that happened Janus would soon notice and his gesture would cause the people to make way for Julius too.

Phoebe and Clara were watching the senators moving through the crowds on the streets of Rome, as they had been roused from their seats by the shouts of "make way for Senator Luminus!" They had gone to the outer wall of the stadium and had watched as the path opened before Janus, and quickly closed behind him. They almost laughed as Julius ran behind Janus in an effort to keep pace with him, and they did laugh when the crowd closed in behind Janus, cutting off Julius's forward motion, and leaving him temporarily stranded and ignored in the middle of the large crowd.

Phoebe and Clara continued to watch as the men made their way toward the Forum. When they had finally passed out of sight, the women, in their beautiful white stolas, trimmed with deep blue, walked leisurely home.