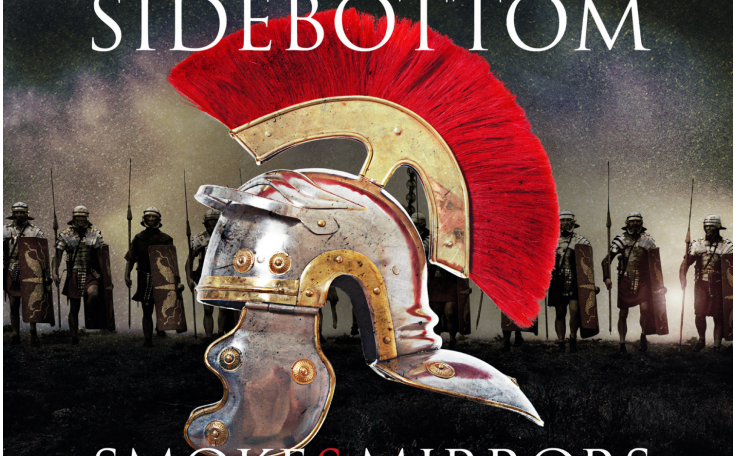
HARRY SIDEBOTTOM



SMOKE&MIRRORS

A THRONE OF THE CAESARS

SHORT STORY

Harry Sidebottom
Smoke & Mirrors

Аннотация

A tense and brilliantly dramatic short story from the bestselling author of the Throne of the Caesars Series.Maximinus Thrax is desperate to raise money for the army, but his advisors dissuade him from taxation, fearing another uprising. The spy Censorinus is sent to Abonouteichus to steal the secrets of rich and powerful men who have confided in the oracle there.

A THRONE OF THE CAESARS
SHORT STORY

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HARRY SIDEBOTTOM

HARPER

Harper
an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk
First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2017
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Ebook Edition © April 2017 ISBN: 9780008248369
Version: 2017-03-23

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I

The Legionary Fortress of Castra Regina on the Danube The Day before the Kalends of January AD236

'Money! We must have more money!' The great white face of the Emperor Maximinus Thrax gazed down from the throne. The frightful grey eyes looked at each of the three Senators in turn.

'The barbarians have overrun the Province of Dacia. The Governor is besieged in Sarmizegetuza. If the town falls, the Province is lost. We will have to march through the winter. Half the men have no boots, the others are lacking weapons and armour. The recruits need to be equipped and trained before the thaw. It all costs money.'

None of the three councillors in the small chamber spoke.

'The rich live in luxury, sleep safely, because we campaign and fight on the frontiers. They waste their time with catamites and philosophers, indulge themselves with unspeakable vices. Not one of them understands duty, or makes any sacrifice for the safety of the empire. Order them to make a contribution. The gods know, they can afford it.'

Again the grey eyes swept over them. It was a dreadful idea, but Honoratus was not inclined to venture an opinion. The Emperor did not care for any obstruction, and already in

these first ten months of his reign his terrible rages had become legendary.

'Increase the taxes on the extravagances it seems civilians cannot live without. Silks, spices, gems – raise the duty on goods crossing the eastern frontiers. Put up the tax on the sale of slaves. Introduce a levy on cook shops. Let the idle plebs learn to cook their own porridge like a soldier.'

Incense-laden smoke from the sacred fire on the small altar drifted up to the ceiling. There were hangings over the windows, and other braziers burning. The room was still cold. Outside the river was frozen.

Vopiscus cleared his throat, and fingered something hidden under the neck of his tunic. 'My Lord …'

'Don't *My Lord* me! Give me an answer!'

Vopiscus gripped the concealed amulet.

Honoratus wondered if the superstitious fool really thought no one knew that, like a child, he wore a small gold representation of a phallus to ward off evil.

'I said before the full imperial council that such measures would cause widespread unrest.'

'And I said before, Who cares about a few civilians? What can they achieve?'

A certain colour was coming into the face of Maximinus. It was not a good sign.

'In the long term nothing, Emperor. But any revolt, even the most ephemeral and doomed, must be crushed. It might

demand your presence. As you most wisely say we must clear the barbarians from Dacia, and then return to campaigning against the Germans next summer.'

Vopiscus might be superstitious, but he was far from a fool. Perhaps, Honoratus thought, it was the amulets and oracles that gave him the courage to stand up to Maximinus. Certainly it took nerve to contradict the Emperor.

Maximinus frowned. 'Then we must explore new options. All the towns in the empire raise their own local taxes. What the town councillors do not steal, they squander on fripperies like baths and porticos and theatre shows. We take these revenues for the military treasury.'

Now Vopiscus was silent. His resolution appeared to be exhausted, the supernatural giving him no more aid. Honoratus looked at Catius Clemens. The latter avoided making any comment by blowing his nose. The hypochondria of Clemens was a useful tool. There was nothing for it, but Honoratus himself must speak.

'Emperor, no doubt much of the money is wasted. Yet such an unprecedented measure would create discontent across the empire. The provincials would follow any pretender who promised to revoke the order. The barbarians would pillage and burn across the frontiers, while we rushed here and there to put down one usurper after another.'

Maximinus sprang from the throne. The three Senators flinched. The Emperor glowered down at them. Maximinus was

a huge man, his very size intimidating. He was wringing his powerful hands, as if throttling an invisible opponent.

'You are *educated* men.' The Emperor made it sound like an accusation. 'You are my closest advisors, men with a lifetime of experience in politics. Find another way! Find the army more money!'

Maximinus swept past them. They stepped smartly aside. Maximinus paused at the door. 'And do it quickly!'

When the Emperor was gone, the three men regarded each other. They were the triumvirate that had organised the coup that had raised Maximinus to the throne. The big Thracian was a fierce warrior, an able leader of men in battle. He had begun life as a herdsman, having joined the army as a cavalry trooper, he had risen through the ranks. So lowly were his origins they had thought that he would be easy to control. Maximinus could fight the barbarians, while they governed the empire. Their judgement had been faulty. Against their unanimous, and strongly urged advice, he had doubled the pay of the troops. Now the treasury was almost empty.

The fire ticked, loud in the silence.

Finally, Vopiscus clutched his good luck charm and spoke. 'The treasures stored in the temples?'

'No,' Honoratus said, more peremptory than he had intended. 'Maximinus was right, when you raised that before. If the regime is thought to steal from the gods, everyone will turn against us.'

'Not the treasures dedicated to the gods.' Vopiscus was

reluctant to abandon his idea. 'Maximinus did not rule out claiming the things stored up by families that have died out. The Praetorian Prefect Anullinus volunteered to oversee their collection.'

'Anullinus is not the most *tactful* of men,' Catius Clemens sniffed.

Tact was not a quality that anyone would ascribe to the Praetorian Prefect. Anullinus had his uses. The triumvirate had sent him to kill the previous Emperor and his mother. Apparently he had accomplished the unpleasant task in cold blood and with evident pleasure. The word that came to Honoratus when he considered Anullinus was *malignant*.

Honoratus remembered the sight in the imperial pavilion. The Emperor had been decapitated. Both his corpse and that of his mother were naked. The old woman's body had been hacked about, her fingers cut off. There had been a table set with food. The pet birds of the Emperor had fluttered and hopped about. Honoratus wished that he had not witnessed the scene.

Catius Clemens dabbed his nose with a silk handkerchief. 'Those in charge of the Mint could adulterate the coinage, increase the amount of base metal in the gold and silver coins.'

Honoratus was thinking of his own family. His wife and son were in Rome. The boy was only six years old. If Honoratus himself fell, would they find any more mercy than the late Emperor and his mother? It was too painful to think of Anullinus, or another like him, forcing his way into their house.

‘Who receives most of the coins issued by the treasury?’ Vopiscus was speaking. Honoratus brought his thoughts back.

‘The soldiers are uneducated,’ Catius Clemens said. ‘They might not realise.’

‘They are not complete fools,’ Vopiscus said. ‘The soldiers are the only group whose loyalty can be relied upon. Adulterating their pay will turn them against Maximinus – and against his advisors.’

Silence again descended on the room.

There was a mirror on the wall opposite Honoratus. He looked at his own dark hair, and dark eyes, the cheekbones, chiselled like those of a statue. Even in the dim reflection, he was beautiful. As he admired himself, his mind was working.

Outside the wind fretted at the shutters.

Honoratus smiled his perfect smile, and said the one word they had all been avoiding: *confiscations*.

Catius Clemens wiped his eyes, hiding behind the perfumed cloth.

Vopiscus clawed at the magic object hidden in his clothes. ‘The Emperor has ordered the retrial of those rich men and women who, through bribery, avoided condemnation for their crimes in the last reign. There were many of them. The regime was corrupt. Now Vollo, the head of the imperial spies, is busy rounding them up.’

‘It is not enough,’ Honoratus said.

‘The unjust condemnation of the elite, the confiscation of their

estates is the mark of a tyrant. Everyone hates such a ruler … and his ministers. Actions of that sort are utterly against the spirit of the reign of Maximinus Augustus.'

Vopiscus spoke the last sentence loudly. Although they appeared to be alone, at the imperial headquarters you never knew who might be listening surreptitiously. Imperial spies were everywhere.

Honoratus smiled wider – his teeth really were perfect. 'Not when the traitors are guilty, condemned by their own words.'

The other two stared at him.

'As our noble Emperor just said, we are *educated* men. You will both have read your Lucian, the *Life of Alexander of Abonouteichus*.'

Slowly remembrance dawned, and smiles spread across their faces.

II

The Legionary Fortress of Castra Regina on the Danube The Kalends of January AD236

'What do you know about Abonouteichus?' Vollo asked.

Censorinus thought before answering. 'A town in Paphlagonia, on the southern shore of the Black Sea. Now called Ionopolis. There is an oracle of a god called Glycon there.'

'And what does Lucian tell us about the oracle?'

Censorinus took his time. When the commander of the imperial spies asked a question any of his men would do the same. Sometimes, Censorinus thought, just sometimes, honesty was best. 'I have never read Lucian.'

Vollo nodded, as if he had already known the answer, and was pleased that the young *frumentarius* had not lied.

'You should, you really should,' Vollo said. 'You have to read widely if you want to rise in the world. Being a good *frumentarius* involves much more than delivering covert messages, eavesdropping and opening the letters of the disloyal, much more than occasionally, for the safety of the Emperor, removing such people from this world with speed and discretion.'

Censorinus took the words not as a rebuke, but an encouragement. There had been no call for literature in the remote Alpine village in which he had been born. He had learnt

to read and write serving in the Legion in Raetia. Although his Greek had not progressed much beyond putting the letter *theta* on rosters against the name of a soldier who was *thanatos*, dead. His promotion into the *frumentarii* had been the result of native wit, a good memory, and the efficient obeying of orders, no matter how unsavoury. Yet now he accepted that knowledge, if not power itself, was a key to gaining that desirable and both status and wealth enhancing quality. To move unnoticed in elite circles, a *frumentarius* needed to be able to pass himself off as a man of culture. Censorinus had bought a primer on the poetry of Homer, and, when unobserved in the barracks, had begun to laboriously plough through its turgid pages.

'The oracle was founded back in the reign of Marcus Aurelius by a man called Alexander. Lucian says that he was as great in villainy, as his namesake the son of Philip was in heroism. This Alexander was worse than a bandit, because he filled not just one region, but the whole empire with brigandage. His soul was a compound of lying, trickery, perjury, and malice. He deserved to be torn apart by foxes and apes in the amphitheatre.'

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