



PROLOGUE

It was the first year of Emperor Theodosius¹, and I was just a fifteen-year-old boy, a son of innkeepers, who lived in *Mediolanum*². I was also the only son of my parents who had survived childhood. But the gods demanded from me a ransom in exchange for my survival: a disease which made my right leg shrink, just as it did for the august Emperor Claudius³.

On the bright side, I escaped from joining the Roman army and was able to serve as a pillar, however awry, to my

¹ The year 379 C.E.

² Actual Milan, Italy

³ Probably polio

elderly parents. My father himself was thirty-nine years old! The first memories of my life were doing the dishes, pulling the heavy basket of freshly washed clothes for my mother or picking up empty beer and wine cups from the customers' tables. Like all the other children I knew, I had no idea about what it was like to have time to play or even to do nothing at all. Life in a big city offered more opportunities than the country life, but the price to pay was fierce competition with the other taverns around.

There was no respite if we wanted guests to be satisfied and thus prevent the landlord from passing on the tavern lease to another family (and there was no shortage of candidates, since our pension was very well located, right next to the Forum). We were not poor. Being honest, I have to admit we were lucky, so to speak. My mother was the *magister equitum* (then *magister peditum*), the Great Flavius Timasius's second cousin niece's daughter. Himself, the Empress⁴' brother. Although the magister — whose name I inherited in his honor — did not suspect of our existence, the mere fact we were related gave us some advantages. "*Qui magis potest minus clamare*"⁴ says my mother, and she uses this distant, yet precious, kinship whenever our landlord threatens to evict us or when former legionnaires, who formed militias to charge merchants for "protection," came too often to collect their dues.

⁴ Those who have power, cry the less

So, apart from the continuous and exhausting work, I had nothing to complain or to worry about, not even the future. Life was simple for me. I would even say unflappable. And I loved it that way. At least that was what I thought, until the arrival of Lady Berenice. She was quite old, perhaps the oldest person I had ever met. She was also, undoubtedly, the richest person I had ever known. She had arrived at our hostel asking, in very clear terms, for our very best room. After checking the accommodation was suitable, she paid for a year of stay in advance, not without first requiring politely but also firmly that her sheets and clothes were always clean and fresh and her food was good. From the very beginning, the old lady spent her days away, only returning at suppertime, which she would take alone in her room without talking to anyone. We all wondered who she was and what she did on her days being so old. The few old people we knew were sick or senile meaning no more than an extra mouth to feed and a burden to their families, but Lady Berenice was incredibly vigorous and lucid. She would speak in a firm voice with a piercing gaze which seemed to fathom our souls as she spoke to us. To tell you the truth, she was intimidating.

Whenever it was my turn to tidy up her room, I stuttered and did everything wrongly, slowly and disorderly. As a result, Lady Berenice became impatient, taking the sheets from my hands and telling me to leave, as she wanted to finish the work herself. This both embarrassed and relieved me; I simply did not wait for her to say it twice.

On the eve of completing a year of accommodation with us, Lady Berenice fell ill. What started as a quiet cough gradually became violent. The old lady became progressively thinner and got increasingly tired. Since fever

episodes became recurrent, my mother, who did not want to lose such an important customer, took care of her devotedly.

The problem was the illness lasted several weeks: with so many customers and all the chores she had, my mother gradually delegated the care of the old woman to me. It was when I found out who our eccentric guest really was.

And that changed my life.

If before the illness I only saw Lady Berenice for a few days a month, now we had to see each other every day. In my mind, I imagined my presence was nothing but boredom for such a distinguished lady. She was a serious solemn woman, and I wondered why she had chosen to live among simple people. I confess I used to fantasize her as someone with an extraordinary past. I imagined her as the leader of a highwaymen gang who had plundered an imperial cargo, hiding herself by the end of her life in our insignificant hostel. Or maybe she was a rich widow fleeing the power of *pater familias*⁵ to live a torrid romance with a young lover — which would explain her daytime absence. Every day I would imagine a different story.

⁵ *Pater familias* were the authority that the oldest men in the family exercised over the servants, clients and slaves or married

As to Lady Berenice, I certainly did not offer the same interest nor did I have the same aura of mystery. I was none other than an *ephoebus*⁶, a cripple with a face full of pimples who could neither read nor write, and who had never taken a step beyond the Forum of Mediolanum.

It was with this feeling of inferiority, or should I say, insignificance, I entered Lady Berenice's room every morning to serve her breakfast — even though she was ill, she did not lose her impressive appetite.

However, every day I realized this old lady's contempt was, perhaps, only in my head. Despite being impatient, she was never rude. On the contrary, she treated me with kindness and courtesy, thanking me for every task I performed with a *siliqua*⁷ (which I kept in secret), every week in recognition of my services. Little by little, I lost my

girls, as well as over their wives.

⁶ Adolescent

⁷ Little silver coin

shyness, trying to do everything well to please my employer. For the coins, certainly, but also because it was gratifying to feel valued, to feel I was doing a good job and being appreciated for it.

Soon I began to spend more time with Lady Berenice. She had so many beautiful things in her room: silk, jewelry (which she did not mind hiding), fine leather sandals and, what delighted me the most, some of the most exquisite perfume bottles I have ever smelled in my entire life. Even nowadays, as an adult, when I close my eyes, I remember the sweet fragrance of sandalwood and jasmine that enchanted me, which I never got tired of.

One day, my mother came into the room to scold me in front of the old lady, “Flavius, you are too slow! Our guest must be getting tired of your prolonged presence. From today on, Frøya will take care of Lady Berenice!”

I was deeply disappointed to hear that the little slave girl would take my place. I did not want to go back to my usual chores, as well as to the other customers’ boredom.

To my great surprise, Lady Berenice intervened on my behalf, “My dear Rosalina, I appreciate your concern for my satisfaction, but I must say I am delighted with Flavius’ services. He does it at length that is certain, but also with great care and diligence. I would like to take this opportunity to request your son’s permanent services as my secretary,” she continued. “I have a lot of scrolls to

organize, therefore, I need help. Flavius is my choice for this job. I will pay you a *solidus* every three months. Oh, before I forget,” said the old lady in a deliberately careless tone, “I have still not paid for my lodging. Here is a year in advance.”

While saying those words, she took twelve *solidus* of shining gold from a small box and gave them to my mother who, enticed by such generosity, had no other reaction but to accept them, “This is more than we deserve, milady. May the gods protect you and reward you doubly. But...”

“Yes, what is it?” Lady Berenice asked nicely.

“Unfortunately, not only for his paralytic leg but also for we are not rich, Flavius was never accepted in the *ludus litterarius*⁸. He cannot read or write. Forgive us, milady,” said my mother, visibly sad.

Five minutes ago, I was the happiest kid in the world. Now, I was the saddest.

“I see it. What a pity your son did not have the chance to know the letters. But it is not a problem for me. On the contrary, I can teach him. It will also be an opportunity for me to exercise my mind before I become outdated. At the age of seventy-four, I am convinced the Fates forgot the thread of my life in a corner of the Hades and I will not die

⁸ There were no public schools in ancient Rome. Rich families had exclusive mentors for their children. For the others, there was the *ludus litterarius*, but those schools were few in number and not all of them could afford a *litterator*, i.e. a teacher.

anymore. Having an apprentice will keep me busy while I am stuck in this room.”

Even Apollo's chariot could not be as bright as my smile!

Learning to read? Learning to write? Escape from the daily chores of cleaning, brushing, collecting filth from customers' latrines? It sounded too good to be true.

This time my mother did not oppose the statement, “Very well, milady. Flavius is, from now on, at your service. And you!” she said, turning to me. “Try to obey and respect Lady Berenice! Make yourself helpful whatever the circumstances are.”

My mother then left us, not without first stating her gratitude for that gesture she perceived as a mixture of pity, kindness and generosity she had never known before.

“All right, my dear. Now you work for me. Your first task is to go to the Forum market and buy some *ceræ* and a *stylus*⁹ to start your apprenticeship. After that, you can enjoy your free time. Take the opportunity to observe life there: what people do, how they speak, how they behave. If you have the chance to follow a conversation between tribunes,

⁹ *Ceræ*: a wax-filled wooden frame used for studies. Often two frames were used, connected by two metal rings. They were the size of a modern notebook.

Stylus: a long stick with a sharp end, used to write on the *ceræ*, similar to today's pencils.