
THE IDES OF APRIL

MARY RAY



The Ides of April

By Mary Ray

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press

Also by Mary Ray

The Roman Empire Sequence

A Tent for the Sun
The Ides of April
Sword Sleep
Beyond the Desert Gate
Rain from the West

THE · IDES OF · APRIL



MARY · RAY

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ROME, A.D. 62

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Patricians

CAIUS POMPONIUS AFER—Senator
DOMINA FAUSTINA———His stepmother
DECIANUS GALLUS———His stepbrother
DOMINA BLANDINA———His daughter
CAMILLUS RUFUS———A military tribune
GALERIUS———Camillus's friend

People of Rome

MACROBIUS—A prison governor
VARRO———A market porter
MATIDIA———His aunt
FIGULUS———A barber
VIBULANUS—A butcher

The household of Caius Pomponius

ASSINIUS—The steward
HYLAS———The senator's secretary
NISSA———Hylas's mother, Domina Faustina's maid
MEROPE———Now Domina Blandina's maid
AULUS———The senator's valet

DIONYSIOS—Secretary for Correspondence from the Eastern Provinces in the Imperial Household

All these people are imaginary, but Thræsea Paetus, senator and former consul, is not. During his lifetime Rome was ruled by three emperors, Gaius Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Caligula succeeded Tiberius in A.D. 37 and was murdered in A.D. 41. Then Claudius, his uncle, became Emperor. When he died in A.D. 54, his successor was Nero, who married the daughter of Claudius, Octavia. In A.D. 62, Nero was twenty-five years old.

1. The Coppersmiths' Street

HYLAS THE SECRETARY found the young man he was looking for in the entrance hall of the Baths of Agrippa, talking with a group of friends. Hylas was in no hurry; it was a treat to be away from his desk in his master's library for an hour, alone in the afternoon. Besides, there were few people in Rome he admired as much as Camillus Rufus, so he was content to wait for him. He moved around so that there would be some hope of catching the young tribune's eye when the conversation finished, and stood quietly as he had been taught, not lounging against a pillar or pushing himself forward. Hylas had been born a slave, he was seventeen years old, and he knew how to behave.

Camillus was enjoying himself. It was the first day of the Festival of Ceres and he had spent the morning at the Circus watching the races. He was home on leave for the first time from his legion in Germany, and was savoring the delightful experience of being suddenly grown up. Now he could talk easily to the group of men whom he used to think of as friends of his father, the people one called sir, who asked you questions about school. It was amazing the difference that one winter in Germany as a junior staff officer had made. Even his toga felt light and unfamiliar since he had learned to ignore the weight of a breastplate. And then there had been the most important happening of his leave, his marriage to the younger sister of his best friend. He had been nervous about it even though it had been arranged years ago and he had known Blandina by sight since she was a child. In the days since then he had discovered that she could be an amusing companion; he would be sorry to leave her behind when he went north again.

Hylas knew all about the marriage, being a member of the household of the senator Caius Pomponius Afer, who was the father of Domina Blandina, the bride. And it was Blandina who had sent him to find her husband.

"But, Galerius," Camillus was saying to the friend who was standing with a hand on his shoulder, "the balance of that statue is all wrong. No discus thrower ever had all the weight on the left foot so late in the throw. Look, he's already shifted the discus into

his right hand.” He shrugged off the restraining hand so that he could demonstrate what he meant.

Galerius, who looked languid compared to his shorter, more enthusiastic friend, said, “My dear Camillus, pity the poor model. No one could keep that halfway position properly for more than a few minutes. He had to shift forward and the sculptor could only copy what he saw.”

“Then he shouldn’t have tried to do that pose at all, if he couldn’t get it right. A Greek wouldn’t have done it. That sculptor must have been a Syrian or something. Surely I’m right, Senator?” He turned to a thin, gray-haired man who had been watching his enthusiasm with quiet amusement.

“Camillus, you know far more about athletics than I ever did, even at your age; don’t expect an opinion from me. The statue lacks something, I admit, and I am prepared to believe that it is because the athlete is standing incorrectly if you say so. And that reminds me: my old friend Catonius Justus, who is president of the Games of Ceres, has invited me to share the spectacle from his box on one day during the festival. Now I can think of few ways of spending a day that would give me less pleasure, but there are some invitations that are impossible to refuse. Would it amuse you to come with me?”

Camillus’s face glowed, and it was clear that young Galerius would have given a lot to be included in an invitation to watch the races from the best box in the Circus. “What a finish to my leave! Thrasea Paetus, you are really too good to me!”

“Hardly. But I was secretly hoping that your expertise would cover my ignorance. I used to bring home toys for you from the East when your father and I were stationed together in Bithynia. I am delighted to see that in spite of your new military swagger you are not too old for treats! I will send you word, then.”

As he left, the group parted politely, for Thrasea Paetus was a former consul and one of the most respected men in the city. That gave Hylas his chance and he managed to attract the young tribune’s attention. Camillus recognized him at once; Hylas had often attended Marcus, his master’s son, during the last summer before they went north to begin their military service. Hylas was probably better educated than Marcus, for Caius Pomponius had recognized that the child born to his mother’s maid was unusually intelligent

and had paid for him to go to school. Camillus was fond of his friend, but Marcus knew more about the form of the chariot teams in the Circus than about the works of Vergilius. Camillus prided himself on appreciating both, but could never have guessed that that was partly why Hylas admired him so much.

“You wanted me?” he asked.

“Yes, noble Tribune, Domina Blandina sent me. She is at the Villa Pomponia and hoped that it would be possible for you to meet her there.”

“What’s that, an invitation to dinner, or is your wife afraid to come home in the dark?” said Galerius, laughing.

“When you are married, my friend, you will understand these matters better! I’m leaving Rome in ten days’ time, and there are still arrangements to be made about Blandina. I’ll see you tomorrow at the usual place?”

Hylas followed him out through the pillared portico into the brilliant spring sunshine in the small square opposite the Theater of Pompey. “You’re going back to the villa, then? I’ll walk with you. There’s so much rebuilding going on that I’m out of date already. I expect you know the quickest ways. Next time my wife sends for me from half across the city she’ll have to send a litter!”

Hylas, two paces behind, flushed pink with pleasure and wished that all the members of his master’s family were as polite. Domina Blandina for one had been imperious from the age of two, when her tempers had shaken the whole house. She was fifteen now and had changed very little, but perhaps Camillus would not need to discover that yet.

Camillus led the way at a good pace through the holiday crowds, past the Circus Flaminius and the Forum of Julius. It was the hour in the afternoon when, with the shops shut for the beginning of the festival and all public business suspended, people came out to walk up and down and enjoy the air. There had been a thunderstorm the night before and the morning had started cloudy, but now it was warm and the shadows lay dark and sharp across the worn paving stones, except where the swallows gathering along the cornices of the temples flickered and swooped after gnats.

The cripples were out as well, hoping for good pickings from the superstitious or the generous. Withered legs trailed awkwardly across the pavements, and misshapen children caught at passing

togas. Hylas turned his head away from one unpleasant sight. He had no money to give, slaves never had, for they must save like squirrels in autumn against the hope of buying their freedom. The crowds were good-tempered enough, but the city guard was already out in force, expecting trouble later. Rome was never an easy city; these days it was an ant heap of underworked and underfed freedmen squashed into squalid rooms in rickety blocks of flats. And then there were the slaves, better fed, some not overworked except when they were hired out to do the tasks that free men disdained. But never free, never unhurried, never able to stop to listen to the man who was making a speech from the public rostrum over there without having to account for the time later. No, never free to choose something as simple as that.

Hylas pulled himself together to see that Camillus had got ahead of him in the crowd and had stopped to wait. "Where now?" he asked. "We don't need to go all the way around by the Via Tusculana, do we?"

"No, my lord, we can go up the Coppersmiths' Street and cut off a corner."

Hylas went ahead. The narrow, muddy alleys they were now in looked strange with the shutters up outside the shops and the usual festoons of cooking pots and sandals locked away, but they were still crowded with people making their way down to the more spacious squares and colonnades in the center of the city. It was too noisy to talk, and they had to pick their way among the mounds of rubble and stacks of timber being used by the builders of a new block of flats. There were men working there even during the holidays. The walls were already four stories high and the wooden scaffolding looked frail as a vine climbing up the side of the unplastered walls.

They stopped for two slaves hauling on a pulley to raise a load of bricks up to the level where the men were working. Hylas followed the swaying bundle with his eyes as it spun on the rope. A corner caught against the jutting end of a ladder at the level of the third floor and the men below gave the rope a sharp tug to free it. The bricks swung out, but as they jerked upward they struck the ladder a heavier blow, like a battering ram gathering force.

Camillus was looking at the men below, cursing them mildly because he wanted to pass, but Hylas saw the ladder begin to slide