

J A C O B M . A P P E L

---

## The Tear Sower

Carthage had been aflame for six nights when my mother's nitwit kinsman, Scipio Aemilianus, dispatched us into the *ager publicus* with the wheelbarrows. Consul Scipio—for so we were now expected to address my illustrious cousin—was one of those ambitious, calculating officers who had mastered the craft of disguising punishment as honor. With his generals gathered around the rubble of the Temple of Eshmun, where the defeated king had so recently had his thumbs and great toes lopped off, Scipio hailed me as “Brave Oppius,” and to a bystander, his words might have rung sincere. “Take noble Decimus Felix and two *contubernia* of legionnaires,” he ordered, “and salt the Carthaginian's soil, that not so much as a tare or vetch may sprout forth in the days of living men.” Good heavens! What kind of affected ass says “vetch” and “tare” like a Phoenician scribe? But Scipio had personally stormed the enemy's gates, and claimed fifty thousand hostages to his name, so I had no choice but to lead the salt-sowers past our dormant catapults and into the lush, fertile country that separated the dusty inland plateaus from the turquoise waves of Mare Nostrum.

A Roman must do his duty, but he does not have to enjoy it. Marching alongside my men in the mid-morning heat—for I refused to become one of those pampered, pudding-like officers who ride while their soldiers sweat—I watched the white sun glistening off the white salt, as blinding as a blacksmith's flames, and the extravagance of our enterprise made the blood pound up my neck and into the tips of my ears. We were not salting *all* the arable land in Carthage, of course, merely several thousand hectares of the defeated King Hasdrubal's choicest fields, but even this symbolic effort defied both sense and decency. Who benefitted from

squandering an emperor's ransom upon a gesture? The salt alone must have been worth two million *denarii*. One also had to consider the peasants who farmed this land—and the many free Italian citizens who would gladly have crossed the Sicilian Channel for such a patch to till. The truth was that this salting business made us no better than the Carthaginians. Possibly worse. I longed for a companion with whom to share these subversive thoughts, for sedition—even in its most idle form—covets the reassurance of companionship. Alas, Decimus Felix was a terminally earnest lad of nineteen years who would have sown pearls into the earth without questioning.

We pitched our camp under a stand of cork oaks. Our pack-bearers chased several drowsy jackals from the shade; the hammering of the tent posts sent a phalanx of golden hares scurrying through the esparto grass. To the south, in the shelter of a craggy ridge, stood an abandoned peasant settlement. It was a small village of twenty or so clay dwellings, but many of the walls were richly decorated with mosaics of lions and wild boar. Quite honestly, the tile-work was as skilled as anything to be found in the palaces of Herculaneum. On the outskirts of this village, a makeshift necropolis housed dozens of tiny burial urns. Whether these children had died naturally, or had been sacrificed to martial gods—as is claimed to be the Carthaginian practice—only an historian might discern, but I suddenly felt the expanse between myself and my own son, Agrippa, a cavalryman assigned to the Iberian legion. My boy was barely twenty, but already *optio centuriae*—second-in-command of one hundred troops. I was thinking of Agrippa as I hiked to the top of a nearby dune—to scout the lie of the territory, while the others broke for lunch—and I will confess that I fought back a sob as I gazed beyond those African sea-cliffs toward where clouds and surf melted into the horizon. Meanwhile, to the northwest, dying Carthage coughed out her final gasps of unforgiving black smoke.

Decimus came searching for me when the sun had reached its zenith. He paused at the top of the embankment and took a swig from his canteen. “The men are ready to salt,” he said. “Shall I send them into the fields?”

I felt another twinge of loneliness, as I willed Agrippa from my mind, and the sea air loosened my tongue. “May I ask you something?”

My companion's blank eyes peered from his equally blank face. His oversized fingers toyed with the fringe of his braided belt.

“Has it ever crossed your mind,” I asked, already realizing the futility of my question, “that we might be wrong and the Carthaginians might be right?”

“About what?” asked Decimus.

I pressed my inquiry. “Do you think the barbarians think of *themselves* as barbarians?”

The lad shrugged. “I don’t imagine the barbarians think much at all. That’s why they’re barbarians,” he replied. “Now are you ready to commence with the salting?”

“Yes, certainly,” I agreed. “The salting.”

I followed Decimus back down the path to the camp, and I offered the men a brief sermon on the primacy of honor and duty. I’ll confess that I’ve always had something of a reputation for oratory—and, in a matter of minutes, I had the men stirred up to the point where they’d have salted the Nile to its very source. These high spirits proved necessary, as it turned out, because Decimus had been unable to procure any oxen for the sowing—it was reported that the enemy had driven their animals into the desert to starve, although I never encountered an actual witness to such deeds—so the men had to draw the harrows over their own shoulders. They worked in pairs, taking turns between kneading the soil and strewing the salt. While they labored, they sang a bawdy ballad about “The Punic Eunuch.” I would have joined them in the fields, both for the sake of solidarity and to distract myself from my doubts, but a senior officer must not traverse certain barriers. Instead, I dictated an account of our efforts for the benefit of my celebrated cousin. When the final rays of sun sank between the western hills, we had salted approximately two hundred *iugera*, or fifty hectares. At that rate, the completion of our mission would have required the entire autumn—all but ensuring that we’d miss the last of the victory banquets. This was my payback, I understood, for voting against Scipio in the consular balloting, and for denying him my reluctant Livia’s hand in marriage, but it was a cruel sentence to impose upon the men.

“Gaius Sempronius!” I ordered the cook on impulse. “A double ration for all.”

Decimus eyed me warily, as though I was more specter than flesh.

Around the fire, the men grew subdued. Young Lucius plucked a mournful dirge on the kithara and soon Drusus broke out his *aulos*. A sharp breeze blew in off the water; wide-eyed opossums rustled in the dwarf palms. To our collective amazement, when valiant Perseus had nearly completed his pursuit of Andromeda across the northern sky, a scimitar-horned oryx sauntered into our bivouac and settled indifferently beside the latrine. What an unlikely creature! Evidence that the mysteries of the universe are without bounds. Yet no exotic beast could divert our eyes too long from the sight of walled Carthage blazing like a torch in the distance. A man has not suffered the true shiver of living death until he has witnessed firsthand the mute horror of fire consuming a great metropolis.

The moon set. I assigned Drusus and a red-haired lad, Ephebus, to stand guard over the wheelbarrows, fearful that the oryx might overturn them in his late-night meanderings, and then I retired to my tent. I slept poorly, alas, consumed with thoughts of my distant son and daughter. When I awoke, the gulls and swallows were just welcoming the dawn. The oryx had departed. A fine dew coated the savannah. Decimus Felix was already waking the men, tapping the soles of their feet firmly with the end of his pike—his every act precisely in accord with regulations, on the path toward his own consulship, no doubt. I filled a gourd at the drinking trough and doused my face with cold water.

That was the final moment of peace before the calamity. Then the aged cook stood before me, his expression as perplexed as a blind man's.

"My apologies, sir," said Gaius Sempronius. "We appear to be out of salt."

A specific provision of the Legionnaire's Code governs the theft of military supplies: The perpetrator is to be tied inside a sack of serpents and thrown into a still body of water. In the absence of snakes, the accused may be cudged to death. However—and I quote here directly from a praetorian edict—*clubbing ought to be substituted for drowning sparingly, so as not to raise expectations of leniency among would-be thieves*. Of course, my first thought was that the salt had merely been misplaced or—and this has been known to happen—the men had united in hatching a rather distasteful prank at my expense. The obvious terror of red-haired Ephebus assured me that I was mistaken. This tremulous lad stood behind the row of empty barrows, head bowed, arms locked at his waist, awaiting his punishment. He readily confessed to having fallen asleep while on duty, the sanctioned penalty for which was stoning. Drusus, who had joined him in his slumber, had run off into the steppe to avoid such a fate.

I summoned both *contubernia*. "As you can see," I declared, keeping my voice steady as I gestured toward the scene of the disaster, "fortune has not smiled upon us. The fault is mine and I will answer for it. But all in due order. First, you will fan out across the hills and bring Sleepy Drusus back to camp." Then I looked pointedly at Ephebus. "And you may assure the young man that nobody will raise a hand against him over this episode."

At my words of mercy, the men's breath eased from their throats, and the very acacia branches seemed to sigh with relief. Ephebus fell silently to his bare knees, his body slumped, moisture staining his pock-marked cheeks. Within seconds, the search parties had vanished into the upcountry, abandoning the empty wheelbarrows to the scurrying of jerboas.

“With all respect, Oppius,” said Decimus Felix, “sentry duty is no light matter. What if the thieves had come for blood instead of salt?”

“I don’t recall having assigned a sentry,” I said—even though we both understood well that I was lying. “My final report shall reflect this oversight.”

I approached Ephebus and rested my staff on his shoulder. He looked up. His face was still lacquered with apprehension, as though he feared I might withdraw my reprieve.

“You will take a message to Scipio Aemilianus at Carthage,” I ordered him. “Inform the Consul that his kinsman, noble Oppius, requires more salt.”

The youth was the ideal herald for the task, after all. He had every reason not to explain *why* we required more salt so soon. If my cousin wanted any additional explanation, he would have to ask me for it directly. Not that I had much insight to offer. What sort of thieves would inconvenience themselves by carrying off the salt and leaving the barrows behind? This was more likely the handiwork of saboteurs than bandits—it would not have surprised me had we discovered the plunder discarded in the nearby scrub—but the tidal breeze had swept away both footprints and wheel ruts.

“We may find that salt yet,” I said aloud—but as much to myself as to Ephebus. “Neither treasure nor treason can be concealed forever.”

The lad remained on his knees, awaiting further orders. I think the poor youth may actually have been in shock.

“That is all,” I said.

I strode away quickly, as gratitude always leaves me uneasy, and I returned to the shade of the cork oaks to enjoy my breakfast. Decimus ate alongside me, and several times he leaned forward as though to speak, but his lips did not open. What could he say? He had only garnered his officer’s rank, after all, because of his uncle’s connections in the Senate, while I had given an eye and three fingers during the Macedonian Campaign. After the meal, I composed a fine letter to my daughter, sharing my observations on the flora of the African lowlands.

The sun was already high in the morning sky when the first *contubernium* returned with the hangdog Drusus in tow. The detachment had followed my orders and informed the terrified boy that he would not be stoned, but they had done so in such a jocular manner that he did not genuinely believe them, and the absence of his fellow offender, Ephebus, did little to allay his suspicions. I squandered the better part of an hour convincing the youth that no harm would befall him. Shortly afterward, the second *contubernium* emerged from the undergrowth with a prisoner. A girl of fourteen or fifteen. Pretty too, for a Carthaginian. Her nose

was as straight as a Celtiberian's sword and her skin no darker than a pistachio seed. She wore the sleeveless frock of the local tribeswomen, a hooded *palla*, and a pair of open-toed *carbatina* sandals. I was instantly struck by her expression: a firm and impenetrable chill.

"She is the culprit, sir," said the venerable Valerius Curio, a soldier of my own age, pushing the captive girl forward. "We found her sleeping on a bed of sandarac needles. You will find that salt remains matted in the folds of her garment."

I reached forward and tugged at the girl's cloak. Sure enough, the stolen crystals had formed a fine confection along the cloth furrows.

"Explain yourself," I demanded. "What have you done with our salt?"

The prisoner glared at me fiercely and spluttered a mouthful of indecipherable syllables.

I looked from the girl to the men. "I don't suppose any of you speak Punic?"

This question was rhetorical, of course. Roman soldiers do not study barbarian tongues.

I pointed to the empty wheelbarrows and then flashed my palms skyward—hoping to convey my question to the girl without words. I did not actually expect an answer. But I was not going to order the cudgeling of a young woman, even a Carthaginian saboteur, without attempting to ferret out an understanding of the crime. Secretly, I also hoped that the salt might be recovered. If no permanent harm had been rendered against the Republic, I felt that I might have some latitude in meting out the girl's sentence—although I could not imagine how I might convey this possibility to her through hand-gestures.

To my amazement, the captive girl grinned at my silent efforts. She cupped her own small hands together and brought them to her mouth like a squirrel stashing chestnuts. At first, I was genuinely befuddled. What did ground rodents have to do with salt? Only when she rubbed her hands across her belly did I realize that this girl was mocking my interrogation.

"You did not *eat* twenty barrows of salt." I shook my head and slammed the foot of my staff into the dust. "Dammit, girl. Listen up," I snapped, grabbing her face by the jaw with one hand and forcing my gaze upon her onyx eyes. "I don't know whether you speak our language, but for your own sake, you'd better hope that you understand me. Now if you don't tell me what you've done with that salt, I will have no choice but to have you beaten."

The girl hissed at me through her broken teeth, like a feral cat, and for a moment, I expected her to spit in my face. Instead, she kicked me hard in the shin. It was

only a glancing blow, but I reflexively released her jaw and drew my knee to my chest. Several of the men instantly restrained the prisoner.

"I'm trying to spare your life, dammit," I shouted. "If that salt is not recovered, you are going to die."

"Meaning no offense," interjected Decimus Felix, "But the girl will have to die in any case....I can send to Carthage for a sack of snakes, if you would like."

"That won't be necessary," I shot back.

But Decimus was correct, I recognized. Sabotage was a far more serious offense than falling asleep on watch. Moreover, rules that might bend slightly for free and loyal Roman soldiers could not be shattered haphazardly for hostile peasants. Justice comes from the stability of laws, after all, not the caprice of men. That is why every tenth soldier must perish for his legion's cowardice, even if he has personally displayed great courage in battle, and why an officer's insubordination must be atoned for with his life.

In this girl's case, the only real decision to be made was whether to carry out her punishment myself, or to send her to Carthage in irons. Scipio Aemilianus possessed the authority to grant the wretch a consular pardon and to sell her into bondage—although the chances of such a reprieve were remote. At the same time, in Carthage the girl might fall prey to the baser urges of the garrison. Needless to say, this was not a judgment to be rendered in haste, so I ordered the captive secured to a solitary fig tree, under the guard of a revitalized Drusus, and I trekked out to the abandoned peasant settlement to reflect on the matter. Since we had not received a fresh supply of salt, the *contubernia* were left to their leisure. When I returned for the evening meal hours later—the call of the cook's ram-horn trumpet had echoed like a battle cry through the clay walls of the deserted village—the men were pitching quoits for quincunx coins.

Our second supper in the encampment proved far less festive than the first. The want of labor had left the men restless, and the prospect of an execution, even if merited, reminds men of their own inevitable mortality. Young Lucius, sensing the collective mood, sang a wistful ballad about a princess whose lover is lost at sea. At the conclusion of the melody, Decimus Felix—who could be surprisingly considerate, in his limited way—reminded me that Drusus had to be relieved from guard duty. While thinking of the captive, I had entirely forgotten about the bondage of her jailor.

"Will I be feeding the prisoner tonight?" asked Gaius Sempronius.

"Fill a pewter dish," I answered, "and I will serve her myself."

The men must have thought this peculiar—it's not very often that a senior *praefectus* plays maidservant to a condemned thief—but I suppose they'd already grown accustomed to my queer ways, because their expressions betrayed no surprise. I followed Gaius Sempronius to the cooking pit, retrieved the girl's meal, and approached the fig tree from behind. Drusus, clearly chastised, stood watch as rigid as a cedar plank. The captive sat at the base of the tree, elbows and torso roped to the trunk, glowering. When I approached, holding up my hand in a sign of peace, she balled both of her helpless fists.

I dismissed the guard and set the plate in the girl's lap. She had just enough freedom to maneuver her fingers to her mouth. The poor creature was clearly famished—not only from her afternoon of captivity, but from days, maybe weeks, roaming the wilderness. I squatted opposite her on the caked earth, and after she'd gnawed every last shred of gristle from the bone, I held my canteen to her lips and allowed her to drink the vessel dry. She was only a few years younger than my darling Livia, whom I missed most dreadfully, likely around the very age at which my daughter had resisted Scipio's unwelcome courtship. I hoped that if Rome were ever sacked—a horror so unspeakable that a man must have his tongue severed for mentioning the possibility—that a generous barbarian officer might take a warm meal to my precious child.

I smiled at the captive, but she did not smile back. Why should she smile upon the men who had driven her people from their land?

“Do *you* think you're a barbarian?” I asked.

She answered with a violent burst of Punic jabber. Later, when I turned over the sentry post to Valerius Curio, I reached my hand forward to brush the coarse bangs from her eyes—and she dug her teeth into my wrist. I could not help thinking that, with an armed century of girls as fierce as her, I could bring all of the tribes of Germania to their knees.

A squall blustered across the camp during the overnight, and we greeted the morning under a sky of chalcedony clouds. During the storm, a flock of partridges had taken refuge in the shelter of the cork oaks; the fowl scampered and fluttered into the shadows as I approached, their swollen gorgets puffed with pride. Rainwater had overrun the sides of the drinking trough and wind gusts had uprooted several of the acacias. A wondrous aroma of honeysuckle drifted down from the hills. At the horizon, so recently scarred by smoldering Carthage, nature had snuffed the city's flames with the ease of extinguishing a lantern.

Although we still possessed no salt, Decimus Felix roused the men at daybreak. That seemed a fruitless exercise to me, but while I could in principle have overruled my fellow officer, the badge of a wise *praefectus* is knowing which battles to fight. My opportunity arrived soon enough when, following breakfast, the lad raised the future of the prisoner. I had dwelt on the girls' fate into the wee hours of the morning, but had reached no definitive conclusion.

Decimus had left the *contubernia* to their quoits and followed me out to the solitary ficus.

"She must be punished," he said. "If you do not act soon, the men will think us weak."

"I know," I agreed.

"I'm not so sure that you do know, Oppius," answered my companion. "You have a son in Iberia, don't you?"

"So?" I demanded.

"So, she'd *kill* him. Without a second thought." Decimus snapped an invisible stick between his hands to emphasize his point. "It's us against them, Oppius. Don't forget that."

He was speaking the truth. I had assured myself that I could return the girl to Carthage with the *contubernium* that was to bring us the salt, but now I recognized that the matter had to be handled quickly. Infantrymen will tolerate many shortcomings in a senior officer, but they grow restless when they perceive a dereliction of responsibility. Common decency also told me that it was cruel to keep the captive fettered as she was, once her destiny had been sealed, although I also knew that my judgment ought not be swayed by her welfare.

"Look, Oppius," said Decimus. "I do not mean to question you. I know you know your duty as well as any Roman. But whatever your motives, friend, surely you must realize that this dithering is to no purpose."

The boy placed his clammy hand on my elbow like a tutor—as though he had seen twice my years and not half as many. His words might have been patronizing, but they were clearly heartfelt. And his reasoning was sound: dithering *did* serve no purpose. I shook free of his grasp and walked off toward the latrine.

"Gather the men," I ordered without turning around. "Tell them to fashion bludgeons from the fallen branches and to convene for the punishment of the captive."

I had butchered scores of men in combat, but no battlefield carnage prepares a man to supervise an execution. While the praetorian edicts may warn against the

substitution of cudgeling for the snake-sack, on the grounds of leniency, I suspect the real concern is for the resolve of those charged with exacting the penalty. With the snake-sack, the victim's face is concealed at the outset. In contrast, a fatal beating requires the presiding authority to watch first-hand the consequences of his orders—to meet the eyes of the condemned. Ten thousand years could not erase the horror I felt as Marcus and Valerius Curio dragged that shrieking wretch across the encampment to the ditch where she was to be slaughtered. As is the custom in the African legions, she was buried up to her waist in earth—both to prevent her escape during the beating, and to facilitate her subsequent interment. Once she recognized the inevitability of her fate, the girl stopped hollering and adopted the icy rigor of a Stoic. Her hostile gaze followed me relentlessly, until I planted myself on a boulder beyond the arc of her neck.

I waited for Marcus and Valerius Curio to return to the ranks, and then I did my duty and addressed the men. “A Roman birthright is not free,” I said. “With its glorious privileges come heavy burdens. Today, we carry such a burden.” Then I launched into a discourse on the responsibilities of citizenship and the special obligations of the republican legionnaire. Whatever doubts I had, I made sure that the men did not sense them. A good leader, after all, is much like a talented surgeon: Sometimes right—but always certain. “So we must act with fortitude,” I concluded. “But we do so for the good of Rome, not the pleasure of revenge. Let no man among us believe otherwise.”

The veteran warriors nodded in agreement. Young Lucius, his delicate features pale as a death mask, appeared as though he might vomit. The partridges twittered and clucked around the condemned woman, oblivious to the impending bloodshed.

I lifted my sword—knowing that as soon as I lowered the blade, the massacre would commence. That's when a spear of sunlight broke through the cloudscape, sparking a glimmer across the distant cavalcade of salt. Gaius Sempronius, perched atop a nearby ridge, cried out that a convoy was indeed approaching, and we all watched, transfixed, as a formation of wheelbarrows advanced across the open grassland toward our oasis. Soon the phalanx separated into individual rows—*hundreds* of rows—an entire army of salt-bearers. The lead barrows paused at the edge of the clearing, paying no heed to the girl buried waist-deep in the freshly-dug soil. The *decurion* at the head of the column dismounted and presented himself.

“From Consul Scipio Aemilianus,” he said. “With complements to his noble kinsman.”

He handed me a parchment under wax seal. The message read: *Brave Oppius! All of the salt in the Republic is at your disposal. Enjoy your labors. Sc. Aem.* Although

I was now seething with rage—once again my cousin had packaged his venom in the cloak of generosity—I thanked the cavalryman and quickly dismissed his unit. Soon the visiting legion, having deposited the wheelbarrows in the shade of the cork oaks, was retreating across the plain. The afternoon had turned tranquil: A hawk soared high above the sea cliffs. In the center of the clearing, the condemned girl remained steeled to her doom.

I sensed Decimus Felix at my elbow. “You should finish her off now,” he whispered, “before the men lose their resolve.”

“I can’t do that.” I turned to the men. “Dig her up,” I ordered.

Decimus placed his hand on my shoulder. “Think of your son.”

“I *am* thinking of my son,” I answered—which was true. But I was also thinking of the barbarian girl’s father, maybe somewhere out in those dusty hills, awaiting her return. “You, Valerius Curio. And you, Drusus. Free the captive immediately. And you, Gaius Sempronius: Make sure she has a full meal before she leaves the camp.”

The men jumped into action. A Roman legionnaire does not question his instructions, no matter how irrational or erratic they may seem. Within seconds, the girl was free of her terrestrial prison and being dragged, kicking and wailing, toward the roasting pit. I suppose she expected to be assaulted—rather than fed—but that could not be helped.

“I will have to lodge a formal objection,” said Decimus Felix.

“You do that,” I said. “Absolutely. A formal objection.”

I was still standing in the clearing, digesting my own deeds, when Gaius Sempronius approached with his aged head bowed.

“I don’t mean to interrupt, sir,” he said. “But what would you have us do with the salt?”

“Excuse me?”

“If we leave it out in the open like this, sir,” he explained, “there is no telling what the elements may do to it. Would you like me to search for a cave in which to stow it?”

I took a deep breath. “What I’d like,” I replied, “is to pour the damned salt into the depths of the sea.”

The ancient cook nodded—assuming I was speaking to myself.

“That’s an order, Gaius Sempronius,” I barked. “Take the men and pour the salt over the cliffs. Every last goddam grain of it!”

Decimus Felix gasped. “If you’re not feeling well—”

“Don’t question me,” I snapped at him. “I’m the senior *praefectus* in this legion, and my command is that the salt be discarded into the sea. If I find a single grain of salt in this camp at nightfall, every tenth soldier will perish.”

So the men did as they were ordered and poured the trove of salt over the cliffs, barrow by barrow, watching the precious crystals return from whence they came. They did not question my authority even once. They knew their duty. I watched from the shade of the abandoned peasant village, recording this history and hoping that my children would be proud of me—knowing that, when the last of the precious salt had melted into the sea, I too would do my duty to the Republic by climbing over those same cliffs and returning from whence I had come.



**JACOB M. APPEL** is a physician and attorney living in New York City. He has published more than one hundred works of short fiction in such journals as *Gettysburg Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Shenandoah* and *Threepenny Review*. More at: [www.jacobmappel.com](http://www.jacobmappel.com)