

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR SLAVES



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MARCUS SIDONIUS FALX

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CONTENTS



FOREWORD Mary Beard › vii

Author's Note › xi

Commentator's Note › xiii

INTRODUCTION Be the Master › 1

CHAPTER I How to Buy a Slave › 14

CHAPTER II Getting the Best from Your Slaves › 37

CHAPTER III Sex and Slaves › 68

CHAPTER IV What Makes a Good Slave? › 79

CHAPTER V The Punishment of Slaves › 101

CHAPTER VI When Only Torture Will Do › 120

CHAPTER VII Fun and Games › 130

CHAPTER VIII Remember Spartacus! › 140

CHAPTER IX Setting Slaves Free › 165

CHAPTER X The Problem with Freedmen › 181

CHAPTER XI Christians and Their Slaves › 196

EPILOGUE Farewell! › 205

Further Reading › 207

Index › 211

› CHAPTER I ›

HOW TO BUY A SLAVE



IF A SCULPTOR WISHES to make a great work of art he begins by searching out the piece of stone that most perfectly suits his purpose. So too the slave owner must realise that it is only from the right kind of human material that he can ever hope to fashion slaves who display the desirable characteristics of cheerfulness, hard work and obedience. It is vital that he takes the greatest care in selecting the best slaves in the market, ensuring that they are free from defects, whether physical, mental or moral. Here I shall instruct you how best to go about the difficult task of buying a slave.

Firstly, the where. Many will tell you to go to the Roman forum, behind the temple of Castor, but you would do well to ignore their advice. Only the lowest and roughest sorts of slave are offered for sale there. Far better are those to be found from the slave traders who operate in the Saepta Julia, close by the Pantheon. This is particularly so if you are seeking to buy a soft boy, or something from one of the more exotic regions of the

empire or even beyond, from such places as Ethiopia. All of these are to be found among the traders there, although you must be sure to ask them directly if they have anything special tucked away in the back of their shops. They always keep their best hidden from public view so as to retain them for their premium customers. You will have no trouble finding a castrated boy there too, if that is your desire, even though the law in theory prohibits such a trade.

Legally speaking, slaves are either captives from war or descended from female slaves but in reality there are other avenues into servitude. Some of the destitute illegally sell themselves into slavery to clear debts, or they might sell one of their children to help feed the remaining offspring. It is common practice for people to abandon unwanted babies at the rubbish dump on the edge of town and people sometimes raise these abandoned infants as their own slaves, even though such children technically remain freeborn. It is also to be suspected that slave dealers often buy their wares from traders who have simply kidnapped their goods, using pirate raids to snatch adults and children from far-flung coastal regions.

There is no doubt at all, however, concerning the legitimacy of those whom our armies have captured in war. These individuals owe their very lives to the mercy of our soldiers who chose, in the flush of victory, not to massacre them but spare their miserable lives so that they might provide us with services as payback for their military resistance. Captives from the wealthiest families might be given back to them after the payment of a satisfactory ransom. The rest pay for their lives through slavery.

I myself once took part in the sack of a small city in the border region with the Persian empire. After initial attempts to persuade the inhabitants to surrender peacefully in return for their lives had failed, we attacked vigorously and quickly broke through the city wall with our battering rams. Gaining control of the suburbs, we began to slaughter anyone we came across, whether man, woman or child. Most of the inhabitants fled into the old part of the city, in the centre, from where they sent out ambassadors in order to try to save their lives. What fools they had been not to accept our generous offer before. It was agreed that those who could pay the equivalent of 2,000 sesterces could go free, and fourteen thousand were in a position to do that. The rest, who amounted to some thirteen thousand, as well as all the other booty we could obtain, were sold.

Our commander was generous enough to distribute half of the slaves to us as a reward for our loyal service during the campaign. The rest he sold for the benefit of the state, to pay for the erection of a small votive shrine in gratitude to the gods for our victory, and for his own financial gain. The numbers involved here were, of course, nothing in comparison to the great booties which the likes of Julius Caesar acquired from his conquests. He is reputed to have taken one million slaves captive in Gaul. Or the mass enslavements which took place after the capture of Jerusalem, when it seemed that nearly the entire Jewish race fell into servitude, or in Dacia, when the great Trajan subjugated that warlike people. No, ours was small beer by comparison.

Once a slave has become a slave, by no matter which

route, if he is to be sold he will in time find himself in one of the aforementioned slave-dealer shops. There the slaves will generally be stood on a raised platform to ensure that prospective buyers are able to have a good look at them. Those who are newly imported have their feet chalked white. Other information, regarding his or her place of birth and personal characteristics, will be found on a label hung round the slave's neck.

The sale of slaves is regulated by the relevant sections of the Curule Aediles' Edict. The purpose of this is to ensure that the prospective buyer is able to ascertain all the facts about a slave, so that he is able to discover any diseases or defects he may have; whether he is likely to try to run away or loiter about aimlessly; or whether the slave is free from any legal liability for a claim for damages. Those who sell slaves must state the origin of birth of each slave they offer for sale. You should pay particular heed to this. For the origin of a slave frequently determines whether or not they will become a good slave, with some tribes having a far better reputation than others. One would not, for instance, consider using a nasty little Briton as a personal servant, given their rough manners and demeanour. By contrast, young Egyptian boys make for excellent pets.

Opinions differ as to what is the best source for slaves. One thing all agree about, however, is that it is abhorrent to use fellow Roman citizens as slaves, as might otherwise happen if they have perhaps fallen into heavy debt. Instead, these poor cases should be sold abroad so they should not create unease among their owners, who would otherwise have to give instructions for menial

tasks to those who had once been part of the proudest race of people in the world. For it is wrong that those who have been born as free Romans should end up in servitude. Even the German barbarians refuse to use their own people in this way. You may be surprised to learn that this dour race are fanatical gamblers, to such an extent that they will risk everything, including their freedom, to win one last throw of the dice. If they lose they will submit to being led away in chains. They claim it is because their honour is at stake but to me it seems like simple obstinacy. But the winner will always ensure that he sells such an enslaved free man abroad, in order that they should not on a daily basis have to feel ashamed at having caused such a downfall by seeing the loser working in their neighbourhood.

The great philosopher Seneca thought that home-bred slaves were best because they knew no other life and so were less likely to champ at the bit, as it were. Cicero's friend Atticus was so fussy that he would only use home-breds for domestic slaves. In his view, home-born slaves are far more likely to remain loyal to their master, seeing him almost as a father, nor do they bear any grudge against him for their enslavement. The problem with this is, as we shall see, that breeding slaves is both expensive and time-consuming.

And, in any case, there are many who argue that a new slave is like wet clay, capable of being moulded into whatever shape the master wishes. Like puppies, they can be trained quickly to perform their tasks in a certain fashion, rather than be brought up over long years to achieve the same end. Newly captured barbarians will

obviously need to be broken in. And when buying one, it is important to remember that it will take them some time to grow accustomed to their new, much reduced station in life. We should show them some leniency in these early days and even some sympathy. For how can we not pity someone who tries to hold on to some vestige of his former status and is less than enthusiastic at performing the sordid tasks we assign to him? Do not punish him too hard if he has grown unfit during transportation and imprisonment and is unable to keep up with your horse on foot. Or if he is not used to having to be on his toes all day, awaiting his master's call, and keeps falling asleep. Similarly, second-hand slaves cannot be expected to adapt to their new roles seamlessly. If they have come from an easy life in Rome, with all the holidays and gentle household jobs that entails, then they are going to find life in the country exhausting.

One point of special caution is not to buy too many slaves from the same background or nationality. While it may seem superficially appealing to have slaves who are able to work together and co-operate easily, on account of the fact that they speak the same language, this can generate great problems. At best, the slaves will conspire among themselves to work lazily, sit about chatting, and steal from you; at worst, they will argue, fight and plot to escape or even murder you. It is far better to source your slaves from a range of nationalities. Then they will be unable to converse with each other. Not only will this prevent servile collusion in shirking their work, but it will also force them to acquire the rudiments of Latin. This will in time enable you to issue orders to them

more freely and for you to overhear the contents of their conversations and gossip.

Be very careful about buying slaves who have been snatched in raids by pirates. I once bought one by mistake – the dealer misled me as to how he had acquired him – and once he had learnt some Latin, the fellow insisted to me that he was in reality a free man. He claimed that he came from the town of Mothone on the Adriatic Sea, where one day a number of ships had put in pretending to be traders from the east. They agreed to buy wine from the town at the price which the Mothonians had asked for, and even sold them some of their own merchandise of spices. The following day, more people came into the town from the surrounding area since they had heard that there were opportunities for trade and for buying exotic oriental items. Eventually, the quayside was brimming with men and women trying to sell them wine and barter goods from them in return. But as the wine was being carted down to the harbour, the pirates, for that in truth is what they were, suddenly grabbed as many of the men and women as they could and forcibly drove them on to their ships, before sailing off and leaving the town denuded of people. Naturally, I assumed he was telling a lie to win his freedom falsely but he persisted and even persuaded a magistrate to hear his case, although it was kicked out for lack of evidence. In the end I was forced to sell him at a significant loss so that I would not have to put up with his incessant grumbling.

The price you should be prepared to pay for a slave will obviously vary according to the quality of the merchandise. Be aware that slaves are not cheap. On average

you should expect to pay 1,000 sesterces for a healthy adult male, who is somewhere between fifteen and forty years of age. A comparable woman will cost a little less, say 800. Given that a poor man can probably feed a family of four for little more than 500 sesterces a year, it will be clear to you what a considerable investment slaves represent. Older and younger slaves will be a similar price, with the over-forties fetching about 800, and a youth between the ages of eight and fifteen the same. Those of extreme old age or youth, the over-sixties and children below the age of eight, will be cheaper, costing perhaps 400 sesterces. Bear in mind that prices will be far higher if the slave has been trained in a skill, such as reading, accounting or barbering.

Of course, the sky is the limit if your funds allow. There have been many examples of the wealthy paying colossal sums for exceptional specimens, who might reflect favourably on the status of their owner. Mark Antony, for example, was sold two particularly attractive twin slaves by the dealer Toranius. He is reputed to have paid 200,000 sesterces. But it turned out to be a con because one had actually been born in Asia and the other north of the Alps, a fact that emerged because they spoke with such different accents. When a furious Mark Antony confronted Toranius, the quick-witted dealer replied that this was the real reason he had demanded such a high price: that there was nothing special about twin brothers looking alike, but to find such similarity in two boys from different races was unique and priceless. Mark Antony was so surprised that, even though he had been in a rage, he now believed that these 'twins' were

the finest possessions he owned and duly reflected his great status as co-ruler of Rome with Octavian.

I might add that the highest 'normal' price I have been able to discover that has been paid for a slave was when Marcus Scaurus offered 750,000 sesterces for the grammarian Daphnis, who was being sold by Attius of Pisaurum. Naturally, this figure has been greatly exceeded by famous slave-actors buying their freedom out of their colossal earnings. Long ago, the actor Roscius supposedly earned 500,000 a year, so he must have paid much more to get himself freed. There have also been some special cases. One of Nero's slaves, who ran his military campaign against Tiridates in Armenia, was sold his freedom in return for the plunder, which amounted to some 13 million sesterces. And so, too, when Lutorius Priscus bought the eunuch Paezon from the emperor Tiberius's henchman Sejanus for 50 million sesterces. The price was given to gratify his lust and to advertise his wealth not because the slave was somehow worth it. It is a sign of how terrible and anxious that period was, under Sejanus's wicked influence, that the people were too preoccupied to put a stop to a bargain of so scandalous a nature.

It is worth giving some thought as to the type of character that a slave you are thinking of buying possesses. Does he seem weak-willed or reckless? The types best suited for work are those who are neither extremely cowardly nor extremely brave, since both of these are likely to cause trouble. Those who are too easily cowed will not persevere with their work, while those who have too much courage are difficult to control. On the other

hand, in some positions, particularly when it comes to choosing domestic servants, it is useful to seek out those who are deferential and unassertive. Household slaves should be like mice – quiet, timid, but always scurrying busily around. Of course, you should beware those who are merely putting on such attributes for the sake of a quiet life. Many slaves act tamely in order to be entrusted with some gentle household occupation, such as being a waiter at table, which gives them opportunities for relaxation between meals and for eating the fine leftovers from our plates.

When it comes to buying slaves, let the buyer beware! If you perchance see a slave in whom you are interested you must be sure to examine him or her closely. Just as you would take the cover from a horse you intended to buy so that you might better be able to look at its physique and spot any existing or potential weaknesses, so you should have the slave dealer make the slave undress. Dealers are the most untrustworthy sort and often they will seek to conceal defects with clothing. They will use a long tunic to hide knock knees. Or brightly coloured clothes to distract from weak and puny arms. Check that male slaves have both their testicles intact, since you will likely want to breed from them. In other words, you must be sure to prod and poke to make sure you reveal the truth of the physical specimen in front of you.

Slave dealers are a most unscrupulous bunch and are to be guarded against at all costs. Their only interest is in generating as large a profit as possible, which they will seek to achieve by all kinds of trickery. Dealers in eunuchs are the worst since they will even mutilate their