

Honorius and His Courtiers

A short story by Anthony R. Wildman



The Favourites of the Emperor Honorius, by John William Waterhouse. Art Gallery of South Australia.

Honorius Augustus

The little grey dove perches on my wrist, tilts its head sideways to fix its glassy eye on me, and then with a bob of its head, it delicately snatches at the wheat grains that lie scattered in the silver platter on my lap. It is a simple pleasure in a complicated life, this routine of feeding my birds—pigeons, doves, and chickens—each morning before the day's business begins. They are undemanding creatures, strutting around across the tiled floor, oblivious to the magnificence of their surroundings; for them, the imperial audience hall is just a space, like any other, where they can peck and scrabble for food.

To me, though, they are not mere birds. Since I was a small child I have been fascinated by them, and early discovered that I have an affinity for feathered creatures. They come to me when I call them, and readily feed from my hand, trusting me without hesitation. I know their little ways, their habits, and their personalities, for I have spent many hours studying them. It is a hobby that, I am well aware, borders on obsession.

I also know that this fascination with my birds causes my servants to snigger behind their hands, under the illusion that I do not notice them. And I know that some of my more powerful subjects are contemptuous of me, taking me for a simpleton. But why should I care what they think? For am I not Flavius Honorius, Augustus of the Roman Empire in the West, all-powerful master of domains that stretch from Illyria to the Gates of Hercules?

Well, perhaps not quite all-powerful. When my father, the great emperor Theodosius, was on his deathbed, he decreed that upon his demise the empire should be divided into two parts. My brother Arcadius would rule as Augustus of the East, from Constantinople, and I would be given the West. But I was only ten years old, and so he also commanded that his faithful general Stilicho should act as my guardian until I came of age, with full power over the state. So, I might be the emperor, but until I turn eighteen in a few months' time, my authority is limited.

Which perhaps is just as well, for the empire is beset by troubles. There have been rebellions in the African provinces; the Franks and Vandals nibble at our borders; and, most dangerously, the Goths, whom my father defeated in battle more than twenty years ago, seem to have found a new leader, a man named Alaric, who has fired them up to attack us in force.

Stilicho, who is himself half-Vandal, has proven to be as stalwart as a rock throughout these turbulent times. He put down the rebellion in Africa with ease, pushed the Franks and Vandals back, and even seemed to have sent the Goths packing. But two weeks ago, Alaric invaded Italy once again, this time with a huge army. Our own legions were deployed elsewhere, and I found myself besieged in Milan. Fortunately, my captain of guards is a resourceful fellow, and he found a way out of the city for myself and my immediate entourage.

We found refuge in the town of Asti, two terrifying days' ride away; Alaric pursued with astonishing speed, and my life might have ended there had Stilicho not turned up and chased the barbarians away. I will never forget my relief at the sight of my tall, imposing chief general striding into the central atrium of the little house in Asti where we had taken shelter. Our hurried and chaotic flight from Milan had shaken my confidence, and I did not know what I should do next, but Stilicho's calm presence seemed to restore everything to rights.

'Go to Ravenna, Lord; it is a strong place, surrounded by waterways and

marshes, easy to defend. I will deal with Alaric and his army, and then we will see what's what.'

And so we fled once more, though in somewhat greater state this time. Travelling at speed right across the country, we arrived in Ravenna ten days ago. After the chaos of the siege, it was a relief to settle again in the comfort of the imperial palace. Stilicho was right: Ravenna felt safe and secure behind its strong walls and the miles of waterlogged country that surround the city.

I have heard nothing from Stilicho since we parted in Asti, and I do not know whether or not he has prevailed against Alaric. Still, whatever is happening on the frontiers, imperial court routines must be maintained. Narcissus, my chamberlain, has worked hard to bring order from chaos, and today I am to hold my first imperial audience since we arrived in Ravenna.

I confess (though only to myself) that I am nervous, for I have almost never conducted the business of the state without Stilicho beside me to advise and warn, and to tell me what I should do. But I must never forget that I am of imperial blood, my father was the great Theodosius, and I know that God will tell me what I must do when the time comes for me to take the reins of power for myself.

My solitude is interrupted by Narcissus, who glides across the audience chamber on slippered feet, his staff of office in his hand, and drops neatly to one knee before me.

'Lord, state councillors Marcus Decimus Olympius and Publius Proculus beg for a few moments of your time. And the Bishop of Milan is waiting in the antechamber with the delegation from Rome.'

Olympius is the head of the Imperial Intelligence Service, a man with whom I have had few dealings since he has always reported to Stilicho (who does not much like him). He is clever, smooth as silk, ambitious, and sly. I don't much like him either, but he was appointed by my father, and he is too powerful to ignore, so I suppose I must give him my ear. Even so, I might perhaps make him wait.

'We will see the church delegation first. Admit Olympius and Proculus; they can witness our audience with the bishop.'

Bishop Venerius

I confess to being startled as I and my companions advance across the diamond-shaped tiles of the audience hall floor. The sight of the youthful Augustus of the West sitting on his chair of state, a grain-filled golden platter on his lap, and an assortment of barnyard birds pecking away at the handfuls of grain that he has tossed onto the carpet is hardly the vision of imperial majesty that I had expected. As I and my companions make our obeisance, the emperor barely acknowledges our presence, more concerned with coaxing one of the birds to take food from his palm. No one told us to expect this, though the Imperial Chamberlain, watching from his place against the wall, has an amused expression that suggests the omission was deliberate.

Still, he is a handsome youth, that at least can be said of him, whatever other doubts one might have. He has a fine-boned, narrow face beneath black hair enclosed in its golden circlet, equally dark eyes, a straight mouth and a regular chin. He does not look athletic, but his body seems well enough formed, broad-shouldered, slim and lithe within the robes of imperial purple edged with gold brocade.

But this business of allowing barnyard creatures into the audience chamber and onto the throne itself while he coos and clicks his tongue at them is unseemly for a young man who is the Augustus of the Roman Empire. It seems light-minded, and I wonder whether he might be lacking in wits. Yet he is our master, and his whims, upon which the very future of the church might depend, must be indulged.

It is hardly more than forty years since we were confronted with the spectre of an emperor who hated us, and the example of the apostate Julian is a constant reminder that we depend upon imperial goodwill to protect us from those who would deny us the place that God has ordained we should occupy, ever since He sent His miracle to convert Constantine. Will this youth, who at present seems only to be interested in coaxing a pigeon into his palm, prove another Theodosius, glorious protector of the Christian Church? Or are his intentions toward us less benign?

Though Honorius has been Augustus for seven years, he has been hidden away while Stilicho runs the state. In just a few months, he will reach his majority and make decisions of his own, so my election as Bishop of Milan comes at a crucial time, as the Holy Father, himself newly settled upon the chair of St Peter, was at pains to remind me before I left Rome.

But let me bury my fears and doubts, for the emperor seems to have finished

with his pigeon and is gesturing for the slaves to remove the assorted birdlife from the imperial presence; a comical interlude ensues as the birds resist being herded out of the room, the chickens flapping their wings and skittering across the floor in their evasive maneuvers, wise to the tricks of their would-be captors. The pigeons, more sensible, obediently follow the slave carrying their feed and are eventually coaxed into their wicker cages and removed.

The emperor watches all this impassively and then, once the commotion has died down, looks in my direction, beckoning us forward.

‘Bishop Venerius. Welcome to Ravenna. I am sorry that we could not have received you in your new diocese, but Milan is, as you know, for the moment unavailable to us.’

I bow. ‘Of course, Lord. But allow me to express my confidence that the imperial legions will correct the situation before very long.’

That brings a sardonic smile to the young man’s face. ‘So General Stilicho assures me, and he has never yet failed the empire. But those are military matters, which need not detain us. Let us talk instead of things religious, as is proper. Rome, too, has a new bishop. Tell me of him.’

‘Pope Innocent is a man of great spiritual learning and wisdom, and I do not doubt he will guide the church with a firm hand.’ I gesture for one of my assistants to step forward; he is carrying a heavy and richly decorated book. ‘His Holiness, knowing that I would be the first bishop of his papacy to set eyes upon you, asked me to convey this gift as a mark of his esteem.’

The book contains all of the gospels of the Apostles, collected in a single volume. It was a monumental work to undertake, and it is a most valuable present. My acolyte explains its contents in a voice that wavers with nervousness. The emperor touches the cover, signifying his acceptance, and then waves for it to be placed in the hands of a waiting slave, who takes it away and lays it on a table in a corner of the room. Otherwise, the emperor shows little interest in the object. I clear my throat, surprised that I am nervous in the presence of this composed, shuttered young man.

‘Lord, before I left Rome, I had a private audience with the pope. He charged me to say that he hopes before long to meet with you in person. And he asked me also to express his hope that you will join with him in continuing the fight against the forces of darkness, of heresy and paganism, as your father did before you.’

The emperor shifts a little in his gilded chair of state, and leans forward,

placing elbows on knees and lacing his fingers beneath his chin.

‘Why, bishop, would you think that I would do otherwise?’

‘Lord, His Holiness does not entertain doubts, but he recognises that these matters have hitherto been left in the hands of your council. Which has continued to enforce the laws of Theodosius, the laws that outlaw the pagan practices of animal sacrifice and the taking of auguries, and above all, the laws that give effect to the Edict of Thessalonica, which makes Christianity the religion of the state.’ This comes out in a rush, forcing me to pause for a breath before going on. ‘But a new age will dawn in a few months when you reach your eighteenth birthday; his holiness merely seeks to know your mind.’

The emperor regards me for a few seconds. I cannot read those dark eyes and can do nothing except return his gaze until he is ready to speak.

‘The Edict of Thessalonica was directed at the people of Constantinople, was it not? And therefore applies primarily to the Eastern Empire, over which my brother Arcadius rules. Perhaps his holiness should be directing his question in that direction.’

What is he saying? That he no longer recognises the Edict? Are we to be denied in the West? I open my mouth to reply, but he gestures me to silence.

‘Bishop, my revered father took much interest in theological matters, and he used his authority to help resolve your endless doctrinal disputes. But I have no interest in such issues: the pope and the bishops must deal with these things themselves, without running to me to command Christian obedience to one belief or another. And you should remember that there are still many subjects of the empire who have not yet seen the light of Christ; I will not persecute them for that. It is for you and your colleagues to persuade them to abandon their heretical ways and join the one true church.’

I must tread carefully here. ‘The Augustus is wise in his judgement, and I will convey your words faithfully to His Holiness. May I also convey to him your assurance that you remain a faithful son of the church, into which you have been baptised?’

Tiny frown lines appear between his eyes as if he senses a trap. ‘Of course, bishop. I follow the teachings of the Christos, as my father did, and as my brother in Constantinople does.’

That at least is a relief: Honorius is no recidivist, tempted to slip back into the darkness of paganism.

‘The Holy Father will be greatly reassured. And, inspired by your words, I do

not doubt that he will redouble the efforts of the church to convert the peoples of the empire to the faith.' It is my turn to pause and frown a little. 'Yet, despite all your father's efforts, the church's position remains insecure and uncertain. There are many who would resist our continued position of favour within the state. It would help matters greatly if, at the start of your imperial majesty's formal reign, you would issue some command, some edict, that would make it clear to all that you are continuing the policies of the late emperor Theodosius.'

The emperor's face hardens into a cynical expression. 'No doubt, bishop, you have something specific in mind?'

'I do, Dominus. The Lord's Day is sacred to all Christians, the day of the week upon which we rest from our labour and seek salvation through prayer. Yet it is a day upon which much frivolous entertainment—horse racing, theatrical displays, and the like—is allowed to take place. It would send a powerful signal if you were to ban all such activities on the Lord's Day.'

Again that unnerving, vacant and unreadable stare; I fear that I might have gone too far. But then the emperor nods, and his tight smile tells me that my judgement was right.

'So be it, bishop. It will be the first edict of my majority. You may convey that news to the pope when you return to Rome.'

With a flick of the wrist, we are dismissed. The audience is over, and after a few final courteous words, my companions and I back our way out of the audience hall. I am filled with a sense of relief that I can report to the pope that this young emperor, while no Theodosius, is at least not another Julian, and that our cause is safe for now.

Narcissus, the Imperial Chamberlain

The emperor is handling himself well, better than I expected. They are a slippery lot, the Christians, always conniving for some new advantage, some new privilege. This Bishop Venerius seems a little more straightforward than the usual greasy prelate, but the emperor is managing him perfectly, sending him away with what he wanted but with a warning that he couldn't expect the kind of full-throated support his father gave the Christians.

They are insatiable, these priests of the nailed god. For sixty years, ever since they converted Emperor Constantine, they have pushed and prodded to make their cult the only religion allowed in the whole empire. If they could,

they would tear down all of the temples of their rivals and eliminate every other religion. Yet, despite sixty years of trying, and even though theirs is now the state's official religion, there are many people who—like me—refuse to give up on our ancient gods. And many of them are powerful men, so the emperor is sensible to go carefully.

I fear for him. I have served the emperor since he was a boy, looking after his household as Imperial Chamberlain, and I know him well, better than many of these courtiers who wait upon his every word. He is a kind youth, refined of taste, well-educated and thoughtful. But he has never been strong-willed and has always deferred to the judgement of others—particularly that of General Stilicho, whom he trusts without reservation. We must thank all the Gods that the general has proven a wise leader of the armies and the state in these perilous times.

But the time is not far off when he must assert himself, and weigh the competing voices raised in council by men whose motives are less than pure. I worry that his diffident nature will make him vulnerable to their machinations, to the peril of the state. Still, he showed surprising cunning and firmness in managing the Christians, so perhaps I am underestimating him; he is Theodosius' son, after all.

As Imperial Chamberlain, I am the stage manager of these audiences, ensuring that everything proceeds with decorum, that petitioners come forward in the correct order, according to court protocol, and that the scribes who sit in the corner just within earshot of the imperial throne have captured on their wax tablets the emperor's decisions. When the audience ends, they will write up their notes into a formal record that I will take to the emperor for his approval.

My place is to stand here against the wall of the audience hall, seemingly invisible to the proud priests and preening nobles who wait to press their various suits. But though they do not see me, I see them. I see the looks they exchange when they think the emperor's attention is elsewhere, the little muttered asides, the raised eyebrows, the dismissive gestures. And I watch them as they watch each other, jealous of precedence, anxious to ensure that their rights are not infringed, that they get their moment in the imperial ear.

While the priests drone on, I allow myself to look around the rest of the room. It is almost deserted, for this is the first audience in our new and temporary capital of Ravenna, and the hordes of petitioners and influence

peddlers who usually swarm about the court have not yet caught up with us.

But over there, standing beside the statue of Constantine, are two men whose eyes are filled with contempt for everyone else in the room, including, I suspect, the emperor himself. They are as slippery as the priests, these two, but far more dangerous. Marcus Decimus Olympius is a senator with a bloodline that goes back into antiquity—as far back as the Republic, he likes to say, but I doubt that is true. His dark complexion, mass of wiry black hair and drooping moustache, suggests he has more than a dash of barbarian blood mixed with that of his Roman ancestors.

When the old emperor died seven years ago, Olympius was all but unknown at court, a senator whose highest achievement was overseeing the games in Rome. But General Stilicho, for reasons best known to him, plucked him from obscurity and made him Count of the Imperial Estates. Then, after a few years, he was promoted again to head of the Imperial Intelligence Service. He is a perfect chief spy, a man as devious as any snake and as unreadable as the sphinx.

The other man is Publius Proculus. He is the head of the department that manages all of the emperor's correspondence. He might seem like a mouse of a man, bookish and servile, but his heart harbours great ambition. He wants to be Imperial Chancellor, the most powerful official at court, a post that is vacant at present. But he needs allies to achieve his aim, so he sidles up to more powerful men, like Olympius, and wheedles his way into their confidence.

The priests are finally finished and bowing and backing their way out of the imperial presence. The emperor sends me a swift glance, which is my instruction to bring Olympius and Proculus forward. They cease their whispering and, adopting an expression of humility, emerge from the shadow of Constantine to make their way across the blue and white tiles toward the emperor.

As they make their obeisance, my eye catches the look on the young emperor's face. It is a look of distaste mixed with apprehension. He does not like Olympius but knows he is too powerful to ignore.

Marcus Decimus Olympius

The churchmen are finished at last, and we can get on with the real business of the empire. Why that sly creature Narcissus allowed them to take precedence

over me, I do not know. Perhaps because he thought they would be more tolerant of the boy emperor's dalliance with his fowls than I. Or maybe he thinks to put me in my place in some subtle power game. No matter: I will deal with Narcissus when the time comes, and I'll give him plenty of opportunity to reflect on the folly of trying to humiliate me.

I make my bow especially obsequious, sweeping my hands out, palms up in supplication, keeping my head lowered for a few seconds longer than is strictly necessary before raising my gaze to meet the dark eyes of this youth who will soon possess all the God-like powers of the state, no longer fettered by Stilicho. I expected to see uncertainty, trepidation, and even fear on his face, but he is surprisingly unreadable today, which is a little disconcerting.

'Good morning Olympius. You have my leave to approach.'

I take two steps forward and bow again. 'I am happy to see you well, Dominus. After the rigours of, ah, recent events.'

The emperor's stare tells me nothing. What is he thinking? That he wants to get rid of me, I expect, so that he can get back to cooing over his poultry.

'You have reports for us, Olympius? Is there any news from General Stilicho?' There is a note of anxiety in the emperor's voice, as well there might be, for we have had no formal reports from the field since the flight from Milan, though rumours swirl and eddy around Italy, finding their way here to the new capital at Ravenna, where my bureaucrats sift and sort, trying to make sense of it all.

'Lord, I fear that I must make the same report that I made two days ago: there have been no dispatches of any kind from the general.'

'He is perhaps too busy to find the time to pen a report to me...'

'Too busy to write to the Emperor of Rome?' Just a little note of outrage, I think. I must not seem too eager to besmirch the reputation of our gallant general, my enemy.

'We shall forgive him his forgetfulness when he brings us victory, as he surely will. But as head of the imperial intelligence services, you must surely have some other sources upon which you can draw in order to advise us?'

'Rumours from the street, Lord, little more. The many skeins and threads that connect us to our regular intelligence services have yet to be collected up and drawn here to Ravenna.'

This is not entirely true, for in the last ten days I have succeeded in rebuilding many of our disrupted systems, and the regular flow of information

is starting to come in once more. But the emperor does not need to know that just yet.

‘And what do these rumours say?’

‘That General Stilicho has succeeded in pushing Alaric westwards, and that there has been a battle at a place called Pollentia. But that is all that is said; there has been no news as to the outcome.’

‘When was this battle supposed to have taken place?’

‘Some four or five days ago, Lord.’

The emperor’s teeth appear, biting his lower lip, accompanied by a petulant frown. ‘We should have been informed by now. Has Stilicho forgotten that I am his master?’

‘Lord, I am sure that the general knows his duty. Besides, is it not said that bad news invariably loses the race to good, so perhaps this silence betokens success in the field.’

‘Let us hope so, Olympius. What else do your spies report?’

They report much. There is unrest in Rome over the corn dole, which is being hoarded by the agents of the city’s leading patricians to drive up the price. This is nothing new; as a former city official, I know the games that the leading citizens of Rome play, since I used to play them myself. The situation in Africa remains volatile after the recent revolt. Both Nearer and Further Spain seem quiet for the moment, a blessing given the threats facing Gaul and Italy. Britain, that cloudy and wet and most distant province, is a cauldron of discontent; when a rumour started that a legion might be withdrawn from the island for the better defence of Gaul, the senior officers of the province threatened to go into revolt. That is a situation that bears watching, and I have marked out the ringleaders for heightened surveillance.

All this and more—much more—I relay to the emperor in considerable detail. At first, he listens intently, nodding at each new item, but after a while his attention wanders, he fidgets in his chair and picks at his nails, and sends little glances towards the Chamberlain, as if he wants that oily eunuch to intervene and bring my dissertation to an end. Theodosius would have cut me off long before now, but Honorius does not seem to know how to wield his authority.

There is a method in my madness, though. In the welter of detail that I lay before him, there are many small but crucial pieces of information that I want to be able to say later, should it be necessary, that the emperor has been informed. Thus I can drape my actions in the cloak of imperial authority, and

proceed unhindered in my schemes.

‘...and so, Lord, the price of oil at Antioch has fallen dramatically as a result of our suppression of Illyrian piracy.’

For a moment, the emperor does not seem to realise that I have stopped speaking. ‘Ah...thank you, Olympius, your report seems to be most comprehensive. The scribes have recorded it all, Narcissus?’ The Chamberlain’s nod confirms that they have, and the emperor makes a move to stand.

‘There is one thing more, Lord, if I may crave your indulgence?’ He looks annoyed but resumes his seat nevertheless. ‘It is a matter of great significance, and for no ears other than your own...’

‘You wish me to clear the hall?’

‘Yes, Lord. Everyone should leave except myself and Publius Proculus, who is involved in this matter.’

For a moment, I think that the boy will refuse me. But then he nods, and gestures for Narcissus and the scribes to leave. The look on Narcissus’ face, when he passes Proculus as he approaches the throne, is priceless, and I can barely restrain my laughter.

‘Well, then, speak.’

‘It concerns General Stilicho. Publius?’

Proculus gives the emperor his most obsequious bow. I despise the man: he is a self-seeking flatterer of no great ability who will do anything and say anything to achieve his ambition, which at the moment is to persuade the emperor to appoint him as Imperial Chancellor, a post that is far above his station, and which in any case I fully intend to procure for myself. But he is a useful tool, and for the moment, it suits my purpose to ally with him.

‘Dominus, we all know that General Stilicho is a soldier without peer, upon whose good counsel your majesty has relied throughout the years of his minority. And we have always assumed that when you take the reins of the state into your own hands the general would, of course, continue to serve you loyally.’

There is a trace of impatience on the young emperor’s face: get on with it, Proculus!

‘I have an acquaintance among the general’s staff,’ Proculus says, slightly hurriedly to forestall an imperial rebuke. ‘This man is honourable and reliable, and he writes me often from the field. His last letter, dated just two days ago, contained startling allegations that I felt I must share with your majesty.’

Honorius glances my way. 'I thought that we had not heard anything from Stilicho's camp, Olympius?'

'Lord, until this morning, that was true. Publius Proculus only shared his news with me moments before the audience began, and I did not think it should be heard by any ears other than yours.'

'Well then, Proculus, what are these "allegations"?''

Proculus clears his throat, nervous. 'Among other things, my correspondent reported that General Stilicho told his officers gathered in council that he would never allow your majesty—he called you "that stripling"—to rule without his directing hand, and that if necessary he would imprison your imperial majesty here in the palace at Ravenna so that you could hear no other advice than his. In effect, he would hold you as a permanent hostage.'

'What mischief is this?' Angry blotches appear on the young man's cheeks. 'I do not believe you, Proculus. Stilicho has never shown anything other than loyalty to the throne: why would he suddenly make such dire threats?'

'Publius but does his duty in passing on to your majesty the report that he has received.' I am soothing. 'But consider, Lord: does it seem so unlikely? The general has wielded unfettered power these last years, and the prospect of having to submit himself to your judgment in matters that he has hitherto determined for himself must seem at the very least irksome.'

'Even so...'

'Lord, there is more.' I am greatly daring in cutting off the emperor, but now is the moment to press home the arguments. 'Publius' friend also reports that this battle at Pollentia has been decisive and that Alaric is beaten.'

'Then that is good news, surely? News that you should have shared sooner, Olympius!'

'The outcome of the battle is indeed cause for celebration: General Stilicho's plans, though, are not. It seems that he intends, instead of pursuing Alaric and destroying him, to instead pay him a great sum in gold and make him an ally.'

Honorius is gaping at me now, shaken.

'Lord, I know this must be hard to believe. But Stilicho is, after all, half-barbarian himself. Making alliances with his own kind might well sit more easily with him than facing them in battle...'

'Enough, Olympius.' The emperor's hand comes down on the arm of his throne with a slap. 'Stilicho is an honourable man, and he has never considered himself as anything other than a loyal Roman, whatever his birth. He has

served us well, and I will not believe these reports without hearing him defend himself in person.'

Proculus and I bow in submission. The look on my colleague's face suggests that he fears that he has genuinely offended the emperor, but I have no such concerns. My main aim has been achieved: to sow doubt in the imperial mind. I will not bring Stilicho down this day, but I have laid the foundations of an edifice that I shall build, brick by brick, that will one day enclose our over-mighty general and doom him to an ignominious end to his power.

Honorius Augustus

What am I to make of all this? Neither of these men has pure motives, that much I know. Both want to be appointed to the post of Imperial Chancellor: Narcissus has told me of their ambitions. It is the most powerful office in the empire, responsible for all the major departments of the government, but it has been left vacant for some time; Stilicho has not yet got around to appointing a replacement for the previous chancellor, who died in office. He keeps telling me that he is too busy to make the appointment, a protestation I have always accepted at face value, though there are those who have whispered in my ear that he has left the chancellorship vacant so that he can continue to control the great offices of state himself.

Yet even serpents may occasionally speak the truth with their forked tongues. Though they might twist the facts to suit their own purposes, it is still possible that there is a pure kernel among the chaff that they throw into the air in their attempts to confuse me. Does Stilicho harbour ambitions to stifle my authority once I am of age? It would hardly be surprising for a man who has wielded absolute power for so many years to be resentful at the thought that he must lose that power. I can believe that he might have used immoderate language in an unguarded moment, as Proculus' "friend"—spy, more like—has reported.

But would he imprison me? Make me a hostage to his will? That I refuse to believe, though there is precedent enough in the history of the empire for such extremes. Over-mighty generals have made and broken emperors often enough. Still, I think I know Stilicho's character well. Honour is his guiding star, and such a betrayal would also be a violation of that honour.

More troubling is his tardiness in reporting what he has been doing in the field. Why, if he has had a great victory, has he not sent official word? It seems

arrogant, as if he does not deem my majesty worthy of being advised and consulted. And certainly, he would be going beyond his authority to conclude a treaty with the beaten enemy, as Olympius and Proculus are suggesting, without our approval of the terms; even under the guardianship, I am owed that much courtesy.

All these thoughts are flying through my head while my two unreliable counsellors bow and scrape their way back from the imperial presence. As they do so, I become aware that there is an unseemly commotion coming from beyond the doors on the far side of the room. The door crashes open, and Narcissus hurries across the floor, makes the sketchiest of bows and then leans in to whisper in my ear. What he has to say cheers me up immensely.

‘Admit him instantly. And my lords, you might wish to stay for a moment.’

Olympius and Proculus cease their retreat, in some confusion, their gaze swivelling between me and the door. After just a few moments, the great cedar doors swing open again, to admit the tall, powerfully built figure of General Stilicho, accompanied by a gaggle of travel-stained staff officers. The general barely acknowledges the presence of the two courtiers as he makes his way across the room to drop on one knee at my feet. He looks up with a beaming smile on his face.

‘General, your arrival has never been more welcome. We were discussing your, ah, activities on the field of battle, these gentlemen and I, and wondering when we might hear your formal report. And here you are, conjured up like one of those eastern genies, come, no doubt, to report in person.’

Stilicho looks around at the other two men, affecting to see them for the very first time.

‘I am sorry to have interrupted your councils, Lord, in such a peremptory fashion. No doubt these able men have been advising you wisely.’ The contempt on his face and the irony on his tongue makes it clear that he thinks no such thing. ‘But my news is of such great moment that I felt I must bring it to you myself: Alaric and his Goths are beaten!’

‘Rumour has flown ahead of you and has reported your success in the marketplace before you could yourself arrive. But your news is nonetheless welcome, as are you yourself, General.’ I wave to Narcissus. ‘The general must be tired after his journey, Narcissus: send for a stool upon which he may rest himself while in our presence.’

In the interval, while the stool is being fetched, Stilicho, Olympius and

Proculus regard each other warily, their eyes stalking each other like prizefighters preparing for a bout. From my seat, occupying the throne to which all of them must defer, this posturing verges on the comical, and I struggle not to laugh.

Settled on his stool (itself a signal honour that I can see the two courtiers resent), the general gives me his report. Having chased Alaric from Asti, he attacked the Goths near the town of Pollentia, while they were at prayer, it being Easter Sunday. There was a fierce battle, but in the end, Alaric was routed and forced to quit the field, leaving behind a baggage train bloated with the spoils of his campaign.

‘God be praised!’ Proculus’ exclamation is theatrical, his hands pressing together in the ritual of thanks. ‘The treasury will welcome the addition to its funds.’

Stilicho shakes his head. ‘Treasury will have to wait. I decided to use the silver and gold that we captured to pay a subsidy to Alaric and extract from him a promise to lead his men back whence they came.’

The rise in Olympius’ bushy eyebrows is eloquent enough: this is exactly what his rumour-mongers have reported. ‘This seems irregular, General: surely such an important foreign policy decision should have been deferred to the emperor and his council?’

Stilicho’s hand waves that away as though swatting at an irritating fly.

‘There was no time. Besides, it was a tactical decision—I knew that Alaric would not abide by the terms of my agreement with him, and I kept half of the subsidy back until he crossed the border. We shadowed him as he crossed the Po, and then my spies brought me the news that Alaric was planning a new attack on the empire, this time across the Rhine. So I considered myself absolved from the terms of the treaty. By forced marches, I placed my army across his path and defeated him again in the hills near Verona.’

‘And Alaric? Is he dead?’

‘No, Lord. He escaped with the remnant of his army. By now, he will be crossing the Alps and returning to Illyricum.’

‘Only a partial victory, then, General?’ Olympius has his bland face on, the one he uses when he knows he is saying something offensive. ‘Surely this vermin should have been exterminated, so as to never threaten the empire again?’

Stilicho stiffens and visibly suppresses his anger. ‘Are you a soldier, now,

Olympius? Defeating and destroying enemy armies is not quite as simple as catching a few rats.'

He turns his attention back to me. 'Lord, we have won two great victories, and Alaric's credit with his people will surely be greatly diminished as a result. He will be no threat to the empire for years to come.'

'You are to be congratulated on your successes, General, and we shall order celebrations throughout the empire. Once again, my father's wisdom has been demonstrated in appointing you to lead our armies.' Stilicho is pleased by this. 'Nevertheless, General, we must consider future policy towards the Goths. Since, as Olympius says, your victory has not been quite as complete as we would have wished, there is the possibility that Alaric and his tribesmen will attack us again. Perhaps you should return to the field and pursue him across the Alps and destroy him utterly.'

The frown on Stilicho's face tells me that I have taken him by surprise. He is unused to anything other than acquiescence from me, and the idea that I might have ideas of my own is disconcerting. 'Dominus, your suggestion has merit, of course...'

'It is not a suggestion, General.' It is an effort to keep my voice flat, and my eyes steady. 'It is the imperial will.'

Stilicho bows his head. 'Indeed. And I accept it as such. But perhaps I might be your majesty to consider another course, before setting his will in stone?'

'Such as?'

'Lord, Alaric may be beaten for now. But his tribesmen are numerous, and though he led a large army across our frontiers, there are many, many more Goths ready to take up arms, if not under Alaric, then under another. Better, I think, to make Alaric an ally. I have met with him, I understand him, and I think we can make use of him.'

'How so?'

'As you know, Lord, certain of our territories in Illyricum have been illegally annexed by some of your brother's ministers—without, I am sure, his knowledge—thus denying us their revenues. Let us give Alaric the task of recovering those provinces, in return for a share of taxes.'

'Lord, surely this is a dangerous policy!' Olympius looks genuinely alarmed. 'Leaving a barbarian warlord in possession of an army on our borders is madness, for he will surely turn upon us once again when the opportunity presents itself. Not to mention the offence to your imperial brother.'

They are good points. But I can also see the merit in Stilicho's proposition. 'I can deal with Arcadius. But, General, if Alaric breaks the peace once again, it will be upon your head. Do you understand me?'

Stilicho bobs his head, and I can see in his eyes that I have won new respect from him. I stand, ending the audience, and they bow their way out of the imperial presence. I am left alone with Narcissus.

'Well, my friend?'

'Lord, I think that from this day forward, there will be no doubt as to who is in command of the empire of the West.'

I grunt. 'There will be many more battles of will before I can be sure of obedience from the likes of Olympius and Proculus, curs though they are. Stilicho is another matter. I am sure of his honour, but I can also see he will not relinquish power easily.'

Narcissus nods. 'Is my lord hungry? Thirsty? Shall I fetch food and wine?'

He hurries off, leaving me alone. A kind of melancholy seems to descend from the rafters above, and my doubts return. Olympius has planted a seed that I cannot quite bring myself to pluck out and cast aside. Can I entirely trust Stilicho? He does seem too ready to accommodate this barbarian chieftain. On the other hand, he may be right: the Goths are too numerous, too strong, and buying them off might be the most sensible policy.

I suppose that only time will tell.

THE END

Author's Note

Time did indeed tell. In 410, eight years after the events related in this story, Alaric did indeed attack again and successfully led his armies as far south as Rome, which they brutally sacked. It was a shocking event and one of the key markers in the long story of the decline of the Roman Empire. Honorius' reputation never recovered from this humiliation, even though Rome itself had long ago ceased to be the capital of the empire. He has gone down in history as one of the 'bad emperors', though that designation is probably not entirely deserved.

Stilicho at least did not live to see the sack of Rome, having been executed at

the emperor's command two years before, accused of participating in a conspiracy with the barbarians to overthrow Honorius. The accuser was none other than Olympius, by now high in imperial favour.