

An excerpt from  
**The Ides of April**  
by Mary Ray

**1: The Coppermiths' 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 even before the man who had been climbing it screamed as he lost his footing. Camillus, caught off balance, stumbled against the opposite wall as Hylas knocked him to one side.

The man fell screaming in a long wail like a dog at midnight, to land with an ugly thud across a pile of bricks below. Then came the ladder, banging against the scaffolding poles and shaking down loose mortar and wood. The whole fragile framework shook and the men high above cried out and clung to the unfinished wall.

Camillus pulled Hylas back beside him into cover until the last of the bricks had fallen and it seemed that the rest of the scaffold would not collapse at once. One of the men below had a cut head, and they could hear the foreman bellowing above like a startled bull. The slave who had fallen still lay across the scattered bricks. Hylas took one step forward but Camillus held him back.

"No, don't you see how he's lying? He broke both his back and his neck by the look of it."

Hylas was glad that the body lay with its face turned away, but red was already oozing down over the bricks. An overseer had reeled out of the wineshop down the street; he tested the scaffolding and shouted up angrily at the men above, who were still frozen motionless, afraid to move.

"Go on, what are you waiting for? It's safe enough."

There were sounds of work starting again and someone threw a sack over the body. One of the two men who had been on the rope was standing looking at it with his hands hanging loose at his sides and his face sick.

Camillus noticed the face, too. "Come on," he said to Hylas. "I don't expect you enjoy seeing slaves beaten, and he'll be wishing he could change places with his dead mate before the overseer's finished."

Hylas hurried after him, feeling sick and cold. He had seen men die before--in the streets, in the Circus, criminals dragged to execution; what small child in Rome had not? But he was a Greek, and did not think that violent and messy death was an entertainment. Camillus stopped at the top of the hill and turned back to Hylas. He seemed quite unruffled, until the slave noticed that there was sweat on his forehead, and though the afternoon was fine it was not warm enough for that.

"Thank you," he said. "I would not have liked to break my neck that way. Death by falling slave is not something I had thought of before." Then he grinned at Hylas, seeing him embarrassed. "No, I'm not going to give you money, I should insult you with a small coin, and to tell the truth, I haven't enough with me to reward you properly. I never take money out on a holiday, I might spend it."

Hylas went pink for the second time that afternoon, and ducked his head, and Camillus touched him lightly on the shoulder. "I might be able to help you sometime with something more practical than a silver coin. Ask me if I can, if I'm here. That's not much of a promise, but who knows what god is listening? Now where are we? Oh, I see, the turning's just up there on the left, isn't it?"

Again he went on ahead, and Hylas followed him to the gates of his master's house, wondering what made men so different and gave some the light touch of an artist on a stringed instrument in their dealings with people, and others the consideration of a drunken man blundering in the dark.

*An excerpt from [The Ides of April](#), copyright © Bethlehem Books.*