

DIDIUS—A Play by Publius

(Forfeited by **Robert Cantrell**)

To keep the playwright's spacing the Author's Note intro appears at the end of the play.

DIDIUS
A play- By Publius

Cast of Characters

Marcus Didius Severus Julianus- A wealthy Roman senator

Gabullus Fratulus- his secretary

Clara Didia- daughter of Didius

Quintus- Claudia's husband, a general of the Roman army

Faustina- daughter of Claudia and Quintus, granddaughter of Didius

Lolia- seventh wife of Didius

Laetus- prefect of the Praetorian Guard

Sulpicianus- A wealthy Roman senator

Septimus Severus- General of the Roman Army of Pannonia (the Danube Frontier)

Pylades- a popular entertainer

Edward Gibbon- Eighteenth Century British historian

Act 1

At rise lights come up on a side area of the stage, the study of Edward Gibbon, circa 1785. At its center is a writing desk, with inkwell and quill pens, foolscap papers spilling off the sides, stacks of books piled around, a shelf behind with more books and perhaps a marble bust or two. All in all the den of the scholar in the process of writing The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Gibbon himself is a smallish man dressed in a simple suit of knee breeches, coat and vest, with a powdered wig a la mode the times. As the lights come up he is writing and looks up to notice the audience, as some visitor come to call.

Gibbon

Hello, hello! (Rising) Do come in. What an honor. I don't often get visitors. Certainly not from your time. Centuries on, I suppose, from the look of you. I have no idea why I am vouchsafed this experience, for though usually the present can never really know its own future, some men will spend their whole lives merely trying to earn the right to speak to it. Like some actor speaking to the audience from a stage, hoping to move them to tears or laughter, or perhaps to action of some sort, I suppose. Conversely, through the humble efforts of such scribblers as myself, the future can be introduced to its past, but can't affect it. It is all pure lesson, if the future has but the wit to see it. In short then, the future can know the past, perhaps learn from it, but can never speak to it. The past speaks to the future, alas too often in vain, but can never know if it profits from the message.

If I may be permitted the liberty, I am Edward Gibbon, Esquire. From my youth, especially since a moment under the shadow of the magnificent Roman Coliseum, I have aspired to the character of an

historian. Now, God willing, and civilization as we know it enduring, through my work, I may speak to you who live long after me. I can have but little idea of what you will be like, though. Your world will no doubt be as different from mine as mine is from that of the noble Romans. Through the transitive property of history you no doubt see my world through historical scholarship, but I can only see you through the haze of my own hope and cynicism.

On the other hand, if you have a peculiar desire to know, for instance, the minutia of the decline and fall of the later Roman Empire, I hope to oblige you. If you have an even more peculiar desire to acquaint yourself with the tinier footnotes of historiography, you might even know something about, well, me, your humble servant. My birth and death dates, something of my successes and tribulations, a précis of my life and so forth. You can never turn and speak to me, for I am gone... ash and dust, and your words fall away into the emptiness of expended time. If I have been successful, however, and you have read my work or even heard of it, I have left a tiny piece of myself in the future world. I survive in the image of myself that I cast in your mind. I am most gratified to be saved from the true and final forgotten oblivion that is the lot of the mass of masses of men who have ever lived. I've labored so long to assemble this voluminous work on the history of the Roman world as a two-thousand page calling card, hopefully to be found one distant day in the shelves of your libraries or in your drawing rooms at tea.

It is a catalog of Rome from the age of the Antonine Caesars, about two hundred years after the time of the great Julius, and Augustus of biblical fame, right down to Constantine XI Dragases, the last fellow to have the purple of Emperor of the Roman world. He died, by the way, leaping in despair off a battlement in Constantinople, sword in hand, onto a crowd of attacking Turks, in 1453. May 28th to be exact. A Friday. Just past eight o'clock in the morning.

Sink me if I can even remember where I was *last* Friday at eight o'clock in the morning. But then I'm not a Caesar. I'm not on the august list that includes such lights and shadows as Constantine and Caligula. The list contains both good and bad, sometimes in surprisingly close order.

Our story, the one you've come to see, the story of Didius Julianus, actually starts, I suppose, sometime after the end of the reign of one of the best of the Emperors, Marcus Aurelius, and the accession to the throne of one of the worst, his son Commodus. At least this sets the stage of the empire, around 193 Anno Domini, at the beginning of its true decline and final, fatal decadence.

In the tumult of civil discord, as in the time of an incompetent sovereign such as Commodus, the laws of society lose their force, and their place is seldom supplied by that of humanity. The ardor of contention, the pride of victory, the despair of success, the memory of past injuries, and the fear of future dangers, all contribute to inflame the mind, and to silence the voice of pity. From such motives almost every page of history has been stained with civil blood; but these motives will not account for the unprovoked cruelties of Commodus, who had nothing to wish and everything to enjoy.

His cruelty proved at last fatal to himself, however. He had shed with impunity the noblest blood of Rome, but he perished as soon as he was dreaded by his own domestics. Marcia, his favorite concubine, and Laetus, his Praetorian prefect, alarmed by the fate of their companions and predecessors, resolved to prevent the destruction which every hour hung over their heads. Marcia seized the occasion of presenting a draught of wine to her lover, after he had fatigued himself in the arena. Commodus retired to sleep; but while he was laboring with the effects of poison and drunkenness, a robust youth, by profession a wrestler, entered his chamber and strangled him without resistance. Such was the fate of Commodus, and so easy was it to destroy a hated tyrant, who by the artificial powers of government had oppressed, during thirteen years, so many millions of subjects.

The conspirators resolved instantly to fill the throne with an emperor whose character would justify and maintain the action that had been committed. They fixed upon Pertinax, praefect of the city, an ancient senator of consular rank, whose conspicuous merit had raised him to the first rank of the state.

When at a late hour he was awakened with the news that the chamberlain and another praefect were at his door, not knowing that Commodus was dead, dreading such a knock and assuming that they carried his death warrant, he received them with intrepid resignation, and desired that they

would quickly execute their master's orders. Instead of death they offered him the throne of the Roman world.

The Praetorian Guards were surprised rather than pleased with the suspicious death of Commodus, whose indulgence and liberality they alone had experienced; but the emergency of the occasion, the authority of Laetus, their praefect, the reputation of Pertinax, and the clamor of the people, obliged them to stifle their secret discontents.

Meanwhile to heal, as far as it was possible, the wound inflicted by the hand of tyranny, was the pleasing, but melancholy task of Pertinax. However, a hasty zeal to reform the corrupted state, accompanied by less prudence than might have been expected from the years and experience of Pertinax, proved fatal to himself and his country. His honest indiscretion united against him the servile crowd, who found their private benefit in the public disorders, and who preferred the illicit favor of a tyrant to the inexorable equality of the laws.

Amidst the general joy, the sullen and angry countenance of the Praetorian Guards betrayed their inward dissatisfaction. They had reluctantly submitted to Pertinax; they dreaded the strictness of the ancient discipline, which he was preparing to restore; and they missed the license of the former reign.

On the 28th of March AD 193, only eighty-six days after the death of Commodus, a general sedition broke out in the camp, which the officers wanted either the power or inclination to suppress. They marched at noon, with arms in their hands and fury in their looks, toward the imperial palace.

On the news of their approach, Pertinax, disdainng either flight or concealment, advanced to meet his assassins. For a few moments the issue hung in silent suspense, till at length one of them leveled the first blow at Pertinax, who was then instantly dispatched with a multitude of wounds. His head, separated from his body and placed on a lance, was carried in triumph to the Praetorian camp, in the sight of a mournful and indignant people who lamented the unworthy fate of that excellent prince, and the transient blessings of a reign, the memory of which could only serve to aggravate their approaching misfortunes.

The Praetorians had violated the sanctity of the throne by the atrocious murder of Pertinax; now they dishonored the majesty of it with their subsequent conduct, which actually sets the story of our Didius in motion.

(Lights up on the family, reclining on couches, at a sumptuous dinner. Present are Didius, his daughter Clara and her husband Quintus, their 14 year old daughter Faustina, and Didius' longtime secretary and retainer, Fratulus)

Didius

You cannot imagine how glad I am to be back in Rome. Back in the bosom of my family and the protection of my household gods. Back to something approaching civilization. Traveling is always so difficult. I'm always sore for a month afterward. Coaching about, and those beastly ships.

Clara

Well, if it's such a trial for you Daddy, why do you always go on these business trips.

Didius

Why do I go? Well, there is a very good reason I go. You tell her Fratulus. Go on, you explain it to her.

Fratulus

Antioch is important to the firm, Domina, to the family's business. Oil and corn.

Clara

Of course. But why did Daddy have to go out there? I mean, wasn't that why you had Cousin Drusus and Cousin Artemius posted out there? To take care of all that sort of thing?

Fratulus

They weren't working for the firm, Domina. They were sent by the government.

Clara

Well isn't it the same thing?

Didius

(Laughing with Fratulus) Almost. But not...precisely. That's the way you do things like that, you see. The boys have been sitting out there on their official backsides for a couple of years, just so that they would be the officials we'd have to do business with when it came time to renew the grain contracts. "Be good Romans", I told them. "And when the time comes, remember and honor the family." Cost me a quarter-million sesterces to get them posted out there, I remember.

Quintus

Quarter of a million? Each of the little rats will clear that in the first year of the deal. They'll do very well out of it.

Didius

As will we.

Fratulus

Julian ships carry Julian grain from Julian warehouses in Antioch and Alexandria back here to Julian mills and finally to Julian bakeries here in the city itself. Out of every hundred grains of corn we take three for our share. It all adds up, you know. The only thing better would be a true monopoly.

Clara

Oh, I absolutely adore a monopolies! But Daddy, I still don't see why *you* have to go.

Didius

Because that's the way things are done. I'm still the paterfamilias around here, and if I don't rear my ugly old head once in a while, everyone seems to forget that. Fratulus, remind me to visit the Lares for a sacrifice, perhaps do something nice, new cabinet, eh? Something nice.

Fratulus

Dominus, your success does read well in the family annals. Your ancestors would be proud. And the generations will remember your sagacity.(Toasts him)

Clara

Yes, well, according to the family annals, I am Mother Juno herself, Quintus is a real general, and you, Fratulus, are the ever faithful and disinterested chamberlain.

Fratulus

At your service, Domina. I pledge my life to keeping the family accounts straight.

Clara

Your letters back to us are priceless when you and Daddy are on the road. (She picks up a small scroll from a nearby table). This one's from...where? Dalmatia. Dalmatia? You didn't tell me you'd even landed in Dalmatia. Whatever for?

Fratulus

Bad weather, blown off course. The only reason, I can assure you.

Didius

Place is full of barbarians. Nothing to laugh about, I'll tell you. You're safe enough from them here at Rome, but it's a jungle out there and they are all quite animals.

Clara

(By now, again reading the scroll) Fratulus, you never use one word when two will do.

Fratulus

Yes, Domina. Thank you. Your father pays me by the pound for my classical locution. It is my duty to leave a true and unbiased family and public record.

Clara

(Reads) "Didius Julianus bore always the full fury of the season's inclemency, riding manfully at the head of his troops." His troops? "Several sharp engagements with Scythian barbarians cleared the way through the wilderness." Dalmatia? Wilderness? I suppose one doesn't actually get the latest fashion gossip there for days and days, but, wilderness...? So really, Fratulus, tell us, how was the great D. Julianus.

Fratulus

(Consulting his master with a glance. Didius is now well into his cups and only smiles back) You would have been proud, Domina. Mostly he stayed very sensibly in his litter.

Didius

Pleasantly inebriated, I might add, on some excellent local wine. That reminds me Fratulus, order some of that stuff.

Clara

(Reading to herself. She suddenly looks up, surprised by what she has read) You watched an execution? You, Daddy?

Didius

Couldn't get out of it. Planned event and all...

Fratulus

Local mess. One sect chopping up another. Julianus became enmeshed as the leading Roman dignitary about at the time. You know your father always travels under senatorial pass, for safety's sake.

Clara

Yes.

Fratulus

Actually the same as making him an officer of the state.

Clara

Ah, yes, an officer, like with "troops".

Fratulus

Well, technically, Domina, even old Petrolus and Sphonsiba the cook, being under the pass, all of us, we're officers too. I, Domina, am praefect of a cohort, somewhere on paper. Sphonsiba is a centurion.

Clara

Doesn't surprise me. Quintus is a general and he doesn't know any more about being a soldier than you or the cook. So what did he do?

Fratulus

He? He who, Domina?

Clara

The, the....convict, or whatever.

Fratulus

Oh, yes, him. Well, Domina, he hit the ground with a solid thump. His head made another separate little "thock."

Clara

Thock?

Fratulus

Yes, thock, I think.

Clara

What I meant was, what had he done. The fellow whose head was chopped off.

Fratulus

Oh, that. Oh, certainly, Domina. Actually I haven't the vaguest idea.

Clara

You were the official witness for the senate and people of Rome when this fellow got his head cut off and you didn't even ask why? You are quite the archivist, aren't you?

Fratulus

I didn't ask...no...not really necessary...you see. A lot of that is up to the locals. They try, they convict. So long as Rome witnesses...they even provided the executioner, big hairy fellow, really big

sword, absolutely huge...perhaps Julianus asked. Dominus? (Didius is far into his cups. It is difficult to arouse him fully)

Clara

Daddy?

Didius

What? Hah?

Fratulus

We were asking, what did the fellow, you know the executed one...

Didius

The one with the head...?

Fratulus

Yes Dominus, him. Domina wants to know what he did.

Didius

He flopped around...

Fratulus

No, no, no...

Didius

You were there. You saw him. He did so flop! Remember we had to step back to keep from getting splattered. Best toga....

Fratulus

Yes Dominus, of course. But what she meant, I believe, was what had he done wrong?

Didius

Got born badly, I suppose.

Clara

Yes, Daddy, but what was the charge? What was the actual case against him? Didn't they tell you?

Didius

Rome only has to watch. It doesn't have to listen, too, does it?

Clara

You don't know anything about it at all, then?

Didius

It had nothing to do with reality. A nobody that no one will remember. And all those barbarians jabbering away at once...

Clara

In Dalmatia? Daddy, you wouldn't know a barbarian if they got into bed with you.

Didius

Why, I'll wager I would. By the way, where *is* your mother?

Clara

Not now, Daddy. I have no doubt you'd know a barbarian. But as a traveler...Daddy, you've never been to Scythia. You've never been off the soft road as far as Dalmatia until the storm drove you there. I'm surprised you didn't try to buy off the weather. And that wasn't even outer Dalmatia. Scythian barbarians indeed!

Didius

I'm telling you, they're out there. They're huge and hairy and they want to put our heads out to dry on the walls.

Clara

Yes, Daddy.

Didius

No one but Cousin Severus and his legions holding them on their side of the Danube. And the troops in Antioch keep out the Assyrians...

Clara

...And those in Britain keep out the Celtic trash. Yes, I know Daddy. But do you know what the man did?

Didius

(annoyed) Oh, there was a letter. I think he wrote a letter and it offended the local cult or something. You know these new religious cults, all fuss and squabbles about who knows what. Ridiculous on the face of it. Why one man should get so exercised about what another man thinks about such things is beyond me. Why they guess, and whose guess is true, and whose guess is false. Totally beyond me.

Fratulus

The sects are all equally true and all equally false, and all equally useful to someone.

Clara

What did it say? The letter. Do you know?

Didius

(remembering with effort) Ah,...uhm, ah, oh, yes! It said something about crossing the river of life to drink from his own wells. I do like that bit. That was pretty, wasn't it?

Fratulus

Very poetic, Dominus.

Clara

And they cut off his head for that? They are barbarians.

Didius

You see! I told you! I mean, why don't they have the plain common sense to leave each other alone? Why do they hate themselves and each other so much? Bad for business. Who's right and who's wrong. So much self-flagellation. They're all still squirming around out there in the mud afterward. If I were a god, I wouldn't want to rule Dalmatia anyway. I can tell you that.

Why isn't this wine cooler? Is there no snow? Gods! Scythian bandits, and mud, and now this heat and no snow. Will it never end?

Clara

Now, Daddy...

Didius

Could you arrange for dessert in the tub? I really don't feel like sitting all the way up.

Clara

Yes, Daddy, you can get in a nice tub and I'll have them send you something colder.

Didius

I'm roasting, you see?

Clara

Heavens Daddy, it's only March. What would you do if you had to stay in Rome during the summer?

Didius

On the souls of my fathers, if I am still in the City one day after the first of June I would be just as pleased if you would cut *my* head off.

Clara

Quintus and I are going to Naples. Will you come with us this year?

Faustina

I'm going to Capri next week with Cilla and some others.

Clara

I beg your pardon, you most certainly are not.

Faustina

Mother!

Clara

That bunch is not good when they all get together, and especially if they get off where there is no one to supervise.

Faustina

Supervise? Oh Mother, you are so old fashioned. Sometimes I just don't know what to do with you.

Clara

It's a good thing that you don't yet have to know what to do with me.

Faustina

I've already told Cilla I'd go.

Clara

Then you can just tell her you were wrong about that.

Faustina

Mother!

Clara

No. That's final. You can not go.

Faustina

Granddaddy.... (appealing to Didius)

Clara

Tina, I said no.

Faustina

Well, grandfather is the head of the family. He has the last say. Grandfather?

Didius

What?

Faustina

I want to go to Capri.

Didius

Wonderful, dear. Wonderful place. Have a wonderful time.

Faustina

There, you see Mother.

Clara

Father, will you stay out of this!

Didius

What?

Clara

I said will you please stay out of this. I don't want her running off with those randy friends of Cilla Valeria's. She's too young to be running around with such a fast crowd.

Faustina

Too young? I'm three months older than Grandmother!

Clara

Lollia has nothing to do with this. I said no and that's final.

Faustina

Granddaddy!?

Didius

What?

Clara

No. Faustina, I said NO! And that's the end of it. (Faustina sulks. Enter Lollia who is indeed about the same age as Faustina, though from her dress and her jewelry, much more experienced.)

Lollia

Did I hear someone mention my name?

Clara

(Reservedly) No, dear. We were just talking about Faustina.

Lollia

Oh?

Faustina

Mother said I can't go to Capri with Cilla.

Lollia

What a shame. And I'm sure they'll have such a good time. And what does your Grandfather say?

Clara

Lollia, please... (Lollia looks innocent, smiles)

Lollia

(Settling in beside Didius, who rouses significantly at her presence) Well, I suppose you are a bit young.

Clara

Thank you, Lolly, for your expert opinion but that subject is closed. Fratulus, what were we discussing before?

Fratulus

We were just discussing the last trip to Antioch, Domina.

Clara

Ah, yes, and Dalmatia. Several versions.

Lollia

I am so proud of you Didius. Such a hard trip. So long away from home. And all for us. You are such a master of things.

Didius

Nothing to it. Anything for you, my dear, you know that...

(A messenger has entered and whispered something in Fratulus' ear)

Fratulus

What? When?

Messenger

Now, this very moment, sir.

Fratulus

Dominus, Dominus....? Ahem,... DOMINUS!

Didius

What?

Fratulus

The most remarkable news, Dominus. It seems that Pertinax has been deposed.

Quintus

So what's remarkable about that? It has been three months. Had it coming. You could have seen it a mile away.

Clara

Pertinax deposed? You mean they've killed him?

Fratulus

Yes Domina, I'm afraid so. The Praetorians, it appears.

Clara

Stupid fools.

Fratulus

But Dominus, the remarkable part... at this very moment, at the Praetorian camp...they are in the process of auctioning off the throne.

Didius

What?

Fratulus

To the highest bidder.

Quintus

Like I said. What's so remarkable about that?

Lollia

Pertinax was an old goody two-shoes anyway.

Clara

Gods, I'd hoped we'd had enough of Commodus' style of things. The Praetorians have us all by the throat.

Quintus

By the testicles. Twelve thousand of them out there at the camp alone. No more discipline than a nursery. Worse than the Senate. The only thing those boys understand is cash.

Fratulus

Yes, it was certainly the Guard...but

Didius

But what?

Fratulus

Well, Dominus, it is certainly the Guards in control at the moment, but if there was someone else at the helm, someone not like Commodus, of course but...

Didius

Someone else? At the helm?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. Someone...more worthy of the title...more...distinguished, perhaps.

Clara

Fratulus...

Didius

More distinguished?

Fratulus

More diplomatic, perhaps...

Lollia

Yes! Someone mature, and wise, and strong...

Clara

Now, Fratulus...

Fratulus

Level headed...

Clara

Whoever takes the throne will find their head leveled. Just like poor Pertinax.

Fratulus

Sir, this is a remarkable opportunity.

Didius

What?

Fratulus

The Throne, Dominus. The Imperial throne itself!

Didius

Me? You mean me?

Fratulus

Of course, Dominus.

Lollia

Oh, Didius. Yes, yes, yes!

Faustina

You mean we'd be the Imperial family? Lollia! We'd look so good in purple!

Fratulus

The messenger said that when he left, the last bid had been from Sulpicianus...

Clara

But he's Pertinax' father in law. You mean they left him alive?

Fratulus

Only five thousand drachmas per man of the Guard. That's only...that's let's see, allowing for the officers...times twelve thousand, give or take...let's see....Dominus, it's a steal, and it would be at twice the price.

Lollia

Didius! Emperor! Think of it!

Didius

But...

Lollia

Sulpicianus is such a hog, and he's so very old, Didums. You can't let him take this. It should be yours. You should take it.

Clara

Daddy, no! My god, think about what is going on! What's just happened to Pertinax, and Commodus.

Lollia

But that was different. I mean Commodus was a tyrant, wasn't he? And Pertinax was a prig.

Clara

But why? What could you possibly gain that you don't have now?

Fratulus

The corn monopoly could be even tighter than it is now. With the imperial seals themselves we could have a tenth part. Ten grains per hundred.

Didius

Ten?

Fratulus

Or even twenty.

Didius

Twenty percent?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus, easily I would think. And that's, well...I couldn't even count that high.

Clara

No, Daddy. Don't do it!

Lollia

Oh, Clara, you're such a wet blanket. Just like Pertinax.

Clara

I'm not like Pertinax. I'm still alive. I'd like to stay that way.

Lollia

But this is different. Didius is smarter than Commodus, and he's so much younger and stronger than Sulpicianus. Its not the same at all. Rome needs Didius Julianus in the palace.

Faustina

Oh, Granddaddy! Lolly is right. The palace!

Fratulus

Dominus, I suggest that if you want to put in our bid, we should hurry. We wouldn't want Sulpicianus to beat us out of the deal. Dominus?

Didius

No, of course not. We can't let old Sulpicianus beat us out of this deal.

Fratulus

I'll order your litter. Dominus?

Lollia

Yes, immediately.

Faustina

Oh, yes. Oh Granddaddy! Think of it. Us in the palace! Cilla will just die. Wait till she finds out.

Clara

Father, stop! Stop! Wait and think about this. (The others have already physically pulled Didius up from his couch and are hustling him out the door, one under each arm to steer him straight)
Daddy! Daddy, stop!

Gibbon

(Lights up on his study) The vain old man hastened to the Praetorian camp, where Sulpicianus was still in treaty with the guards, and began to bid against him from the foot of the ramparts.

Fratulus

I'll go find out what the situation is, Dominus. There's Laetus over by the gate. I'm sure he's the one we will really be dealing with. And there's Sulpicianus.

Didius

I really should speak to him.

Fratulus

Dominus, if I may, you're not at the Senate now. This is real. Do be careful.

Didius

I won't give the bids away. If that's what you mean. But it will be so awkward if I don't at least acknowledge the man. Look, he's waving. You hurry over to Laetus and find out what you can, eh?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. And Dominus...

Didius

What?

Fratulus

There are sure to be others when the word gets out, the bidding, I mean. It is essential that we get this done quickly if possible.

Didius

Yes, yes, of course. Run along then. (Fratulus exits, Didius approaches Sulpicianus) Hail, Sulpicianus! Hail old friend. And how are you? Well, I hope?

Sulpicianus

Ah, Marcus Didius, what a pleasant surprise. I am well thank you. And you?

Didius

Quite well, thank you.

Sulpicianus

And your family? They are all well, I trust? Just remarking to my daughter the other day that we don't see enough of you all. She and Clara are such good friends, you know.

Didius

Yes, pity.

Sulpicianus

Beg pardon?

Didius

About her husband...

Sulpicianus

Oh, yes. Yes, a pity. Well, Pertinax was actually rather older than she was, and all.

Didius

Won't be any trouble for her...I mean living widow and all...eh?

Sulpicianus

No, no, I don't think so. No. (Pause) So how's business, old friend?

Didius

Damned boats.

Sulpicianus

Problems?

Didius

Damned boats won't stay afloat, you know how they are. Lost two of 'em out of the corn fleet. Duedced difficult to replace. You know, you've got some investments in the grain trade yourself, don't you?

Sulpicianus

Oh, yes. A sesterce or two. Never trusted too much to anything I had to carry on water. Too much variability, ...weather, pirates, you know?

Didius

Don't I though? Damned pirates robbing you blind, navy can't do a thing about it. Someone should do something about it, I tell you. I think I might speak out about it in the Senate house if it gets worse.

Sulpicianus

Good idea! Damned good idea. Someone... in the Senate... needs to do something about it. You'd be a good one...there in the Senate.

Didius

Perhaps I'll wait until everyone is back next fall.

Sulpicianus

Very good. Sound thinking. You, the senate, next fall. Very sound. (Re-enter Fratulus.)

Didius

Excuse me, won't you? (Fratulus takes Didius aside for a moment and they are obviously in agitated conversation regarding the situation)

Excuse that, old friend. Just some minor details...with the groves...we have groves in Picenum.

Sulpicianus

Rot.

Didius

Beg pardon?

Sulpicianus

Rot. In the olive groves. Difficult to control if it gets started.

Didius

Ah, no doubt.

Sulpicianus

Yes, if it gets too bad, have to chop'em down. Yes, just take an axe to them, if they cause too much trouble. So...your planning on staying in Rome this summer.

Didius

Rome? In the Summer? You must be mad.

Sulpicianus

Oh, yes. The very idea. Best thing is to get away. As far away as you can. Someplace more healthy. Impossible to tell what might happen to you here in this cess pool.

Didius

Can't imagine staying until someone does something about the Tiber. Awful stink in the heat.

Sulpicianus

Like a corpse.

Didius

Exactly like a corpse. Exactly.

Sulpicianus

So. What brings you down here, Didius? I should have thought you'd be home with that lovely young wife of yours.

Didius

Lovely thing, yes she is. (Pause) Well...I came down here because I heard a... well, a rumor. You know how those things are.

Sulpicianus

Yes, quite. Rumors.

Didius

Anyway, I'd heard a rumor...about the Praetorians, and the throne. Just came down to see what all the fuss was about.

Sulpicianus

No fuss. Nothing at all, really. The Guard is just...well, taking care of a few minor details. That's all. Nothing at all important. Be happy to tell you all about it in the Senate next week, no sense in your

having to hang about for these sorts of things. Actually I'd just have had the servants handle these little details, but I was the father-in-law and all...questions of funerals and such, daughter would like the head back and so forth, nothing...really. You will excuse me, old friend? I believe Laetus is free and I must have a word or two with him. (Exits, passing Fratulus as he re-enters)

Didius

Well, where do we stand?

Fratulus

It appears that Sulpicianus is the only one to bid yet. That seems odd, no one else... But he's bid five-thousand a man and Laetus has told the Guard that they should keep the bidding open for now.

Didius

Perhaps we can bring the force of sweet reason to bear. Go offer 5250. Hurry! (He turns to speak to those up on the walls of the Campus Martius) Noble Praetorians! Shield of Mother Rome! I come to offer you my civic services in the hour of calamity! The leadership of Rome has passed from an indisputable madman through the hands of an undoubted despot, whom you have so righteously removed, and now I suggest that it is time for a voice of moderation and reason and a hand of lenity and generosity. We must steer like the good farmer, with straight furrow and clean tools. The fallow land of the commonweal must once again be made to bring forth the flowers and fruit of the noblest aspirations, all protected, of course, by the watchful eye and the strong hand of an ever-vigilant military corp. You, who as Praetorians, are the very cream of that historic and distinguished...ah,....er..distinguished legions whose overwhelming strength and dedication have long been the very mortar in the sublime stone and the regal marble of the very capitol itself...(Fratulus re-enters, out of breath)

Fratulus

No good. Laetus has already taken Sulpicianus' next bid of 5500. Dominus, this bidding could be ruinous if it gets out of hand. We must hurry and do something.

Didius

Damn, he will make it tiresome, Alright. Tell Laetus 5750...and an extra half-million for himself if the bidding stops there. Be quick about it. I'm running out of breath here. (Again addressing those up on the wall) You men! Sons of Campagna and grandsons of Italia are no doubt as concerned as I about the dilution of the power held by you, the real Roman families, by the influx of outlandish barbarians. It is obvious that they, have come late to the Empire have not paid the same share of their father's blood as you, er, and I. We, you and I, share a common language and a common culture, undeniably the most noble in the world. Certainly superior to anything that could be imported. Wine, yes, oil, yes, corn, certainly, perhaps the soft silks and even the soft eyes, yes, these we can import. These you may have, must have. Certainly we at the center of the empire should take advantage of these things, we fought for them, we're all veterans here. I was just saying to my son-in-law, General Fabonius Quintus about my recent campaign in Pannonia... (Fratulus re-enters)

Fratulus

Dominus, Laetus just laughed at the half-million. He made it clear that he would hold the bidding open as long as he liked. Until, as he put it, something serious was done for him. I believe he wants a piece of the action. He wants to be in the lists with the grosses rather than the nets.

And Dominus, apparently Sulpicianus has sent for Cletus.

Didius

That, that...driver fellow from the Greens at the races?

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. The Guard are all Greens. They're mad for him. Sulpicianus wants to trot him out.

Didius

Idiots.

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. But he might sway them over to Sulpicianus in a wave. Its that finely balanced. It would only take a moment.

Didius

The wrong damned moment. Whatever the traffic will bear, eh? Makes perfect sense. Alright, tell Laetus I'll speak to him, privately. We have something more to offer.

Gibbon

Julian at once rose to the price of 6250 drachmas (upwards of 200 pounds sterling as the bribe for each of the Praetorian Guards) and the gates of the camp were instantly thrown open to the purchaser and he was declared Emperor.

It was now incumbent upon the Praetorians to fulfill the conditions of the sale. They placed their new sovereign, whom they served and despised, in the center of their ranks, surrounded him on every side with their shields, and conducted him in close order of battle through the deserted streets of the city. The senate was commanded to assemble; and those who had been the distinguished friends of Pertinax, or the personal enemies of Julian Didius, found it necessary to affect a more than common share of satisfaction at this happy revolution.

After he had filled the Senate house with armed soldiers, he expiated on the freedom of his election, his own eminent virtues, and his full assurance of the affections of the Senate. The obsequious assembly congratulated their own and the public felicity; engaged their allegiance, and conferred upon him all the several branches of the Imperial power.

From the Senate Julian was conducted by the same military procession to take possession of the palace.

Didius

(Enters with Fratulus, other partiers. They immediately encounter a headless corpse.)

Fratulus, who is that?

Fratulus

I suppose it is, or at least it is what is left of, Pertinax.

Didius

Well, have it, or him, or whatever, removed.

Fratulus

Yes, Dominus. Or rather, yes, Your Imperial majesty!

Didius

(Seeing a rather frugal upper laid out as it had been for Pertinax) And Fratulus, have something tastier than...that, brought in. Can we find some entertainment? This is a party after all. See if you can get that Pylades. He's all the rage.

Fratulus

Yes, your majesty. (exits)

Didius

(Seeing a large cabinet, opens it. Inside are the wax masks of a dozen men. These are the ancestors of Pertinax, as are kept in all great houses as household gods. In this case, because the lineage of Pertinax was not distinguished the masks are very generic, i.e. not actual representations of real features of his ancestors with the exception of one, his father. Didius raises his cup to them, spills a

small splash, albeit drunkenly, and addresses them) Well, hello. And how are you this fine evening. Helvius Successus, father of Pertinax, excuse me, father of Emperor Pertinax....I salute you. Your son will be along to join you here. And the happy grandfather and his grandfather, and so forth and so on, back and back. And on and on? Who will keep you all in your nice case now, uhm? Who, beside me...slightly drunken...but slightly Imperial, me, will make a libation to you now? You know they'll kill everyone, his sons and their sons. I know, because "they" will be carrying my seal. I would as soon leave everyone alone, but...that seems to be what is expected. May leave Sulpicianus, old friend, business associate. You think they will think it weak of me?

I have my own cabinet, you know. At home. Perhaps I will have it moved here and you old men can sit in the sun and tell stories of the olden days to each other. Do you care? I'm talking to you. Do you care? It matters, you know. And I suppose you're talking to me. (Listens) Yes, you. Up there in the corner, all covered with dust. You've been here a long long time. How many thousands and millions have come along, squirmed for a season in the mud somewhere and died and rotted and blown away on the wind. They never were. They never mattered. Who were they? Nameless graves watched over by faceless gods. Nobodies. But you honored conscript fathers, you matter. I salute you. (Voices entering loudly) Ah, my guests. And now you must excuse me while I become, poof!, Emperor! Fratulus!

Fratulus

Yes, your majesty.

Didius

Have our Lares moved here tomorrow. And Fratulus...

Fratulus

Yes, your majesty?

Didius

Call a sculptor. Marble. Soon.

Gibbon

Here we see Didius in first flower. A magnificent feast was prepared by his order, and he amused himself until a very late hour with dice, and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer. Yet it was observed that after the crowd of flatterers dispersed, and left him to darkness, solitude and terrible reflection, he passed a sleepless night.

(Didius and Pylades are the only two left in the late night, darkened, banquet room.)

Didius

Who are you?

Pylades

Your majesty, I am Pylades.

Didius

Why are you here?

Pylades

I entertained, your majesty. I was in costume, so you might not recognize me.

Didius

You sang, and played the lyre...

Pylades

...and danced. And told jokes and stories. Yes, your majesty.

Didius

Tell me a joke.

Pylades

Three Greeks walk into a tavern...

Didius

Oh, that one's ancient.

Pylades

Yes, your majesty, of course.

Didius

Is there any wine left? Pour me some. Take a cup yourself.

Pylades

Thank you, Majesty. (He picks up a stringed instrument and absently plucks at it.)

Didius

You play well. I like your music. Don't stop. Where is everyone? It must be near dawn. My first day. As Emperor. Can you imagine... no, I suppose you can't really. No one can. Only Pertinax, and Commodus and the others. The few others. Augustus, Tiberius.

Nero...now there was a real piece of work. Nerva, Trajan... Aurelius, bless him. It is possible to do it well, I suppose. How do you do it, Pylades?

Pylades

Majesty?

Didius

Stand in front of perfect strangers and sing and dance and so forth?

Pylades

I as trained up to it, Majesty. I have been an entertainer since I was a small boy.

Didius

You have a remarkable singing voice. Are you castrati?

Pylades

Yes, Majesty.

Didius

Did it hurt? I mean, do you miss...them?

Pylades

Honestly don't remember much about the actual event, when I lost...them. I suppose the only thing that I miss is not being able to have children of my own.

Didius

Ah, yes. Well, that can be a mixed blessing. So you miss children. What is it, I mean why would you want them? You may speak freely. I suppose I need to have someone honest to speak to. That is all I ask of you Pylades, you may speak freely to your Emperor, but always speak the truth. So what about children?

Pylades

One wants to leave something behind. You have your lares, your ancestors. At least their masks. Someone will keep your image when the time comes. But I have no one to do that. I will live and die with only a moment of public fame. And fame is nothing.

Didius

Fame? Nothing? Fame is everything. Leaving your name, a mark in the world. I cannot abide the idea that someday there will be no trace, no memory of me. It is floating in blackness. Fame is something. Yours is based upon the talent you have to sing and dance, that's something.

Pylades

But dance disappears at the instant it appears, and song is like smoke in the air. You leave nothing behind. Nothing real, nothing to touch or hold. No one that remembers you. I suppose most art is like that.

Didius

Perhaps that is a bit bleak...?

Pylades

Of course, your majesty. I suppose everything we do leaves some mark, if it is public. Let us suppose you remember a song I sing. And remembering, a tear falls from your eye. The song, having caused a real tear, having a real effect... is the memory of that song then not as real as when it was first sung? When you heard it with your ear. That kind of fame can last as long as memory serves.

Memory is a precious thing. It is my tool, I must have memory of my steps and notes. But it is like fire, too much memory and you can live with pain, like a jilted lover. Not enough memory, when the people forget you, then you are nothing, washed up in this business.

Didius

Then our job is to make them remember us. We must plan and scheme to make memory.

Pylades, if the memory of pleasure is pleasurable and the memory of pain is itself painful, then is the forethought of pleasure not real pleasure, and the forethought of pain not itself also painful.

Pylades

Perhaps your majesty is right, though far too many people spend far too much time it seems, worrying about pains to come. But what pain can the master of the whole world contemplate?

Didius

Oh, Pylades, you do not know. I see little but pain. I am alone here.

Pylades

I am here, Majesty. And you have your family, and your friends, and your retainers.

Didius

And my parasites. And my keepers, the fickle Praetorians. Even my money will run out sooner or later, you know. And then there is Severus.

Pylades

Severus?

Didius

Septimus. A distant cousin. The commander of the legions on the Danube.

And then there is Neger, in the East, and Alba in Britannia. When this dawn breaks the ragged color in the sky will be like the handkerchief that they drop to start the races in the hippodrome. It is only a matter of time before one or the other of them shows up. I suppose we should really do something about that. Do you know anything about military engineering? Seiges, catapults, that sort of thing?

(Some time later, the throne room. Pylades is present and will continue to be, rather in the character of court fool. Also present is a sculptor who works silently throughout the scene, working on a bust of Didius in clay. This character could be played by the same actor as Gibbon.)

Clara

(Entering abruptly) Father. What did you do?

Didius

Do? About what?

Clara

About what?! About Faustina! About your own granddaughter!

Didius

Ah, yes, that. I supposed you might get around to that.

Clara

Get around to it? Daddy, what have you done? You gave her to Laertus!

Didius

Well, you see, I had to.

Clara

You're the goddamned Emperor, you don't HAVE to do anything!

Didius

But I wasn't the goddamned Emperor when I did it. I had to do it to become the goddamned Emperor.

Clara

You sold her? You sold her to Laetus for the throne.

Didius

Traded, is perhaps a more accurate word. And altogether more pleasant.

Clara

But your own granddaughter...why? She's in shock. How could you? She's only a child and Laetus is a grubby little nobody with no class and no manners.

Didius

Well, lets take those things one at a time...

Yes, she's my granddaughter, like you are my daughter, and I am the paterfamilias the last time I checked. (Glances toward Pylades who is present. Pylades nods in acknowledgement of the fact.) And as I said, I did it because the issue was in the balance and the only thing that would clinch it for us was to offer Laetus a place in the Imperial family. Sulpicianus has as much money, but he had no readily available girls. For which I thank you. As to her shock, she's been raised at least in the mode of a patricia and as such should have been prepared to do whatever she was called upon to do by her family and by Rome. If she's shocked now, wait until tomorrow morning. I suppose Laetus is on his

way to collect her about now. As to Tina's tender age, we could have her grandmother console her regarding that, as if Tina hadn't already been to Capri, any number of times, I imagine.

As to Laetus' lineage, we are all of us what we make of ourselves through grasping the main chance. (Looks to Pylades, who only gives him an arch look) The only difference in Laetus' undoubted grubbiness and our lofty redolence is the distance of a few generations here or there. My worthy predecessor Publius Helvius Pertinex' ancestral cabinet held exactly one real wax mask, his only recently manumated father, Helvius Successus. Time is a cheap commodity, it just takes... a long time, to acquire it. It shouldn't be held against one. People who don't matter don't matter, people who do matter seem to matter because they make themselves matter.

Clara

But doesn't her happiness mean anything to you?

Didius

Happiness and sadness are of piece.

Clara

I just don't understand you.

Didius

Yes. I know.

Clara

Well, as far as I am concerned. You are no longer my father. When you gave away your granddaughter, you gave away your daughter as well.

Didius

Oh, I doubt Laetus needs you both...

Clara

Gods! I will have nothing to do with you ever again as long as you live. I'm leaving!

Didius

That would probably be best. (Clara exits) Go. Never know me again. Get far away. Disappear.

I have traded my family and now I must live with the bargain.

(Still later. Didius is looking over some papers and scrolls that Fratulus has brought him.

Pylades is once again quietly present)

Fratulus

Will that be all, Majesty?

Didius

Any word on our three little projects?

Fratulus

Nothing at all from Britannia or Antioch. Too far I suppose to be there yet. We have no reports from where ever they are on the way.

Didius

We don't know that they have actually even started this way, though do we? Neger, Alba?

Pylades

We don't actually know that the sun is coming up over there tomorrow.

Didius

Anything more about Cousin Severus?

Fratulus

Not since the messenger confirmed that he is indeed on the way. Our people have been gone for 12 days. It would take them that long on horseback to get anywhere near Severus. We haven't heard of him any closer than the Brenner Pass. That's 10 days, at least, just getting there.

Pylades

Ten days? I don't think my nails will even be dry in ten days. Well, we'll just look a mess...

Fratulus

Assuming he stays with the army, however, it will still be some weeks. The great mass he's bringing can't travel anywhere near as fast as a solitary...agent...on horseback.

Pylades

Thank gods. If one is going its best to have time to prepare, to be in proper costume, to go with one's cod-piece buttoned, even if one doesn't have cods in it.

Didius

Do you think our man will be able to get close enough?

Fratulus

Difficult to say. I assume that if we have thought of this, Severus and the others have too. They will certainly have all their food tasted, so it had to be something slow enough not to kill the canary and give the game away and yet fast enough to drop Severus himself before he gets here. A very ticklish proposition, Majesty. As for trying anything else, a knife or bowshot, I am sure he surrounds himself with an absolute phalanx.

Didius

He doesn't trust us? How sad.

(In the camp of Septimus Severus. He is in his military tent. He is apparently addressing his staff officers)

Septimus

The little sneak. Try to assassinate me? In my own camp? Who does he think he is? The idea of Pertinax was irritating enough, but at least he had been a real soldier, I'll give him that. He didn't deserve to die like that, a brave man set upon by that pack of sniveling curs that call themselves the Praetorian Guard. You cannot let them sully the name of Roman legionary unpunished. When I get to Rome I'm going to have a long talk with Laertus and his buddies... every tenth one gets his head stuck as an ornament on the walls of the city... a long talk with them and a short talk with Cousin Didius. Very short. His melon goes up over the front gate.

But Didius Julianus?! Have they all just given up back there? Stopped even caring? We're out here on the edge of Hera's bum getting our throats slit by these animals, sending back the dues to Mater Roma, most of these boys putting in their straight up 20 in the Legions, and back there in the City they somehow settled on a cross between a puff-ball and a worm to be the maximum leader? If we don't do something about it, how long would it take one or the other of the frontiers to collapse? Do they all think this empire holds itself up? That it breathes like we breathe without thinking, feeds and digests and breeds like some blind slimey thing in a cess pool? It does not! There has to be a brain and eyes and a heart as well as a strong arm or else the body politic will surely blunder off a cliff.

Didius? Didius!? No, he won't mount a defense. He doesn't know the first thing about how, and if I know the Praetorians, half of them are sweating exactly how soon they can swing over to our side and the other half are just too slack-bellied, sprung-butted, and generally sodden to be any problem to us.

First thing I want is to meet with the aediles about the food supply and the city engineers, and the treasurer. First thing after Didius, that is. As of now, Didius is a dead man. Bring that fellow's head, the assassin, and his hand, and send them back to the palace. Make sure that the date it left our camp is prominently displayed on the package. Send by a fast express rider so that our erstwhile Emperor knows exactly how soon we will be there. In ten days we will be able to see the city walls. Long before Albinus and Neger can even get onboard ship.

You will all be rewarded well for your loyal service to the state. We should be able to find, oh, ten thousand or so in the treasury for each of you real soldiers. I accept your nomination as Emperor.

Scene (Didius, dressed in a purple-trimmed toga sits in a comfortable chair, with Fratulus, Sulpicianus, and Pylades in attendance. Fratulus and Sulpicianus are working frantically at a table covered with a disorderly mound of scrolls.

Fratulus

Your Majesty, it appears that there are serious bread shortages developing in some parts of the city. (Gaining his attention)Your Majesty...

Didius

And?

Fratulus

And if history serves, that often leads to civil unrest, mobs gathering, riots. They may be the only thing between us and Severus.

Didius

And?

Pylades

Thin bellied little urchins crying out in hunger. I know, I was one.

Didius

How unpleasant for you I'm sure. But what the deuce does any of that have to do with me?

Fratulus

Ahem. You are... the Emperor.

Didius

Well, yes of course. I know that. See the trim on my suit.

Pylades

You really should drape it a touch more loosely, and next time have them use a stronger Tyrian dye. And your shoes are, well, the young people are sort of snickering.

Didius

Really, you think less strap? Should I show more ankle?

Sulpicianus

Your Majesty. The bread?

Didius

Yes, you keep mentioning that. Why?

Sulpicianus

The people your Majesty...

Didius

(Irritated) Yes, and you keep mentioning them. Again, why? (Fratulus and Sulpicianus hold their tongues)

Pylades

You're supposed to do something about them. The people.

Didius

(With dawning realization) Really?

Fratulus

Allow me to be cynical here, Your Majesty, You should do something if only in self-defense. Or let us say, because if the people are poor, or all dead, there will be no one to buy Julian bread and you will have no profits coming in.

Didius

Ah, well. Why didn't you say so? But I thought we were doing wonderfully well.

Sulpicianus

When your majesty closed all the bakeries except those under the sign of the Julian house, it slowed the production of bread to perhaps 20 percent of normal. There is quite enough grain, but most of it is in the warehouses of Ahenobarbus and the Cornelii and Tullus. You ordered them locked, to prevent competition.

Didius

Well, you said we could have the monopoly.

Fratulus

Yes, Your Majesty. Of course. But having it available, and using it in this maximal way... is a different proposition. This... this... is like, like eating everything on a banquet table and leaving the waiters to starve. In the end you starve, too. No one left to bring you anything to eat.

Didius

Waiters?

Fratulus

Yes, Majesty. The people, more generally...

Sulpicianus

It's called "economics".

Fratulus

Its called self-interest.

Pylades

Its also called simple pity.

Didius

Well, whatever its called, I don't have time for any of that just now. You see, I'm much too busy, ruling.

SCENE: (The throne room, which is now dressed up in incanabula, altars, incense and fetishes of all sorts. Didius is conductng a sort of rite with Pylades as his acolyte.)

Didius

We sent out the Vestal Virgins. The priests. Ambassadors. They were as a gossamer to a charging bull.

We could still try to associate Severus to the empire. I could adopt him as Junior Caesar. Do you think that would work? Do you? Help me here. (Hands Pylades a censer and other objects which will be used at the small altar he has set up for his rites)

Pylades

Would it satisfy you, if you were him?

Didius

I take your point. I had counted on it being Neger. Coming all the way from Syria. That there would be time. And Neger is a reasonable man, a thoughtful man, a man of business for all his warlike trappings. But this Pannonian whirlwind... he can't be bought.

(As he chants the following list of names Didius is laying out various objects such as feathers, a lump of bread, a goats horn etc etc etc. Exactly what, is a matter of taste and convenience to the actor.

Porimna Antevorta is the goddess of the future, the Parcae, Nona Decima, and Morta are the Roman

equivalents of the three Fates. Letum and Libitinum are ancient Etruscan gods of death. Viduus separates the body from the soul.)

Porimna Antevorta, magna Parcae , Nona, Decima, Morta. Letum et Libitinum. Necessetas trivialis Hecate. Viduus Aeternatas. (Motions to Pylades to wave the censor) There, maybe that will do it.

Pylades

You could fight him.

Didius

Fight him? With what? The Praetorians are still slithering out of the baths and the theater. Most of them don't remember where they left their armor. The elephants all ran away. And the marines, well just look out there at them trying to drill. What a mess. The street urchins are laughing at them. No, if the gods of the underworld will not rise and help us, I fear for our position. I am making other prayers to other gods.

Pylades

Then, Majesty, I beg to take my leave.

Didius

You're leaving me? Going away?

Pylades

No Majesty, only as far as a warm bath and a sharp blade will take me.

Didius

Ah, then we've come to that. (Pylades is silent) The last act. Well, it had to come. I knew it would.

Pylades

They are coming Majesty.

Didius

Where then? The baths will be easiest for them to clean, no?

Pylades

You're coming with me then?

Didius

No. I... am the Emperor of Rome. I will wait here and follow you along when they come for me.

(Sits down, one last time, on the throne) That will be soon enough.

Gibbon

Severus had the laudable intention of ascending the throne without drawing the sword. His emissaries, dispersed in the Capitol, assured the guards, that provided they would abandon their worthless prince, and the murderers of Pertinax, to the justice of the conqueror, he would no longer consider that melancholy event as the act of the whole body. The faithless Praetorians, whose resistance was supported only by sullen obstinacy, gladly complied with the easy conditions, seized the greatest part of the assassins, and signified to the senate that they no longer defended the cause of Julianus. That assembly, convoked by the consul, unanimously acknowledged Severus as lawful emperor, decreed divine honors to Pertinax, and pronounced a sentence of disposition and death against his unfortunate successor. Julianus was conducted into a private apartment of the baths of the palace and June second, ironically true to his word, AD 193, was beheaded as a common criminal, after having purchased, with an immense treasure, an anxious and precarious reign of only sixty-six days.

(Didius and Pylades, on a bare stage of indeterminate location. There is a bust of Didius (A wax mask could be used instead))

Didius

Pylades, so good to see you! I trust your...transition was not too uncomfortable?

Pylades

No. Once you've had your nuts cut off, everthing else is fairly tame by comparison. I just remember going to sleep in the bath. And you? Its good to see you here. By the way, is here where I think it is?

Didius

If you mean dead, yes.

Pylades

And your passage was as you had expected?

Didius

To the letter. Dead on script, if I may be allowed the phrase. Not an hour after you left there was a great clanging and clacking and some of Severus' fellows came barging in. I was actually a bit offended that Septimus chose not to come for me himself, but I suppose he was busy looting the treasury. Anyway, without so much as a "sorry about that" they whirled me off into the baths...I saw you there, peaceful, and swick, swack my head was rolling along the tiles under the cabinet.

Gibbon

(At his desk in his study)Excuse me.

Didius

Yes?

Gibbon

I must ask...

Didius

Yes?

Gibbon

I must ask, why...

Didius

Yes?

Gibbon

I must ask why someone who was rich enough to actually be able to buy the throne, and thus able to buy anything else of which one could conceive, because it was all under the throne, I say why one who could buy the throne, but who would also have been smart and connected enough to know how the cow ate the cabbage, well...

Didius

Why one who knew better?

Gibbon

Exactly. Why one who well knew that he had not a figs chance of holding the throne would have spent all he had, including his family, his gravitas, and eventually his head, to sit upon it for so short a season.

Didius

As I prayed to my Lares and Penates, to the gods of the past, I could almost see a setting, in the future, perhaps in your time, where all the Caesars (indicates the bust) would be kept in one place, and a man or woman of your time would walk by them and see the inscriptions of their names

and say them over softly to themselves. And in that moment, we, that is the Caesars, me, I would be alive in the mind of that person. Someday, maybe a thousand years or more, there may be a large Forum of people all together and I will live if only someone says to them the name, Didius Julianus.

And moreover, if I wish, I can give eternal life to my friend by simply saying to them "I knew the great singer Pylades". In their imaginations they will hear him sing, and whether it has the slightest hint of the way he really sang, which was beautifully I might add...I say they will close their eyes and hear him sing and he will live on.

It doesn't matter if I you say I was a good emperor or a bad one. Or that I reigned a day or a century. I was a Caesar. I have the bust. You will all remember Didius Julianus. And I will live forever.

Pylades

Thank you, Majesty. Thank you. I feel...younger already.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

Firstly, be it known that this is a significantly mashed-up play. I have been walking the edge between folks like Jaron Lanier on one hand, who want strict accounting (and accountancy) for authors' rights, and Lawrence Lessig who want people to be able to use any prior work in any prior way to suit their new artistic fancies. I used Gibbon because no one will get their panties in a twist re copyright. So this is kind of like the Raymond Burr scenes in the original {sic} Godzilla. I used Gibbon because Gibbon fit, exactly the role I needed. Scene setter, as well as stand in for the audience who may be wondering what personal motivations led to these events happening. The obvious joke is that Gibbon's lines are essentially just quoting him from the "Decline". He was a great raconteur and you would probably have wanted to sit down with him over a bottle of claret.

The true story, as told by him, is a corker. Guy of no particular talent except making money buys the title of Caesar for no apparent reason aside from plain primary greed. But there has to be some motive beyond that, or at least, there might be.

This play's first draft, with the basic concepts, was written some years ago. Originally it had nothing particular to do with any current event. But it behooves us now, given the public givens we are given, whether we are pro administration or anti, to give some thought to the deeper motivations that people may have when they seek office.

As a matter of fact, let me extend the plagiarism admission; I didn't actually write ANY of it. This person Publius, approached me, in 2015 or earlier, where I'll not say, with a tightly rolled paper manuscript. It sat for some time at my place and my confidence in memory of particulars now degrades. But be it known, I didn't write any story about anyone in high office. Nope, uhuh, not me. Alexa, I fully support the goals and aims of the administration.

BIO: *I retired last year after 40 years in general practice medicine. I live in Tucson and for the last 10 months have been working with the immigrant population coming from Central America. To get better at this, I am taking Spanish at the local JC. Otherwise my hobbies include reading, because without readers, writers are an absurd proposition. Most of us are anyway. Another hobby is biking, which is pretty choice here in Tucson, in the plain-old-cotton-shorts variety rather than the Spandex and razor shades.*

Philosophically, I spend my time trying to get my head around the bravery that we old Gnus will need in order to get on with it when our natural time comes and our ride is here. We need to be able to do that as a whole generation, with grace, possibly with humor, and certainly with efficiency instead of panic and wasteful flailing. Take that, Greta. It requires less bravery than that called for by young people marching off to war, and it is a lot less questionable in any event. But until it presents itself, there is still scotch to sip and desert sunrises to watch, and hopefully still time to write something good.

