

The Baltimore Sunday Herald
June 17, 1901

Untold Tales

How Oroccus Flim-Flammed the Wise Ones

If the truth must be told, Oroccus was a man of bucolic simplicity. Like most rich Romans of his time he lived upon a magnificent estate without the city walls, but unlike the majority of his fellow aristocrats he used his fork as a spoon and was given to wearing large Scotch plaid togas and bandana handkerchiefs. Those of his friends who were more ultra were wont to make gentle jokes at his expense, and full often his daughter, Miss Julia Oroccus, tearfully chided him for his ettiquettical deficiencies. But to all of these protests he turned a deaf ear.

“I made my money in olive oil,” he would say humorously, “and now you say that I am not oily enough. Cut it out. Let me have peace. When I started out in life as a cobblestone paver on the Appian Way I ate with my knife; now that I am rich I see no reason why I should abandon the habit.”

Now the age in which he lived—the reign of Hocus Augustus, the Emperor-poet, A.D. 109-146 (see Gibbon)—was one of tremendous refinement, and for this reason his peculiar eccentricities caused more remark than they would have excited in a time of more primitive customs. The newspapers, in fact, often playfully guyed him, and all over Rome it was the saying that Oroccus knew less about table etiquette than any other man in the empire.

Consequently, when he published a card one day, in the columns of the Naples Democrat, announcing his intention of running for the office of superintendent of the Appian Way, the politicians of his congressional district discerned an opportunity to place themselves next to his barrel. Within three hours after the papers were on the street a delegation of the district bosses called upon him and patted him upon the back. Also, they gave him the glad hand and nearly asphyxiated him with hot air.

Oroccus was delighted.

“Do you think I’m the man for the place?” he asked joyously.

“Sure,” said the politicians. “You are the logical candidate.”

“Could I get the nomination?” asked Oroccus.

The politicians winked at him significantly.

“It can be fixed,” they said, with the accent on the fixed.

Oroccus danced with boyish glee.

“It will take a good many denarii,” said the politicians, feeling their way.

“Hang the denarii!” explained Oroccus. “Haven’t I got a barrel? And ain’t it deep?”

The politicians’ hearts beat violently. “A cinch!” they whispered, under their breaths. “We will see you again,” they said aloud as they departed.

According to this arrangement they saw Oroccus many times. A week before the primaries they told him, with tears in his eyes, that they feared that it would take 10,000 denarii to blaze his way. To this he replied that he would see himself doomed to eternal torture before he would pay such a sum. A day later they discovered that the thing could be fixed for 8000 net. Oroccus still declared his intention of imperiling his soul. The politicians became uneasy.

Every day thereafter, until the eve of election, they spent from six to 10 hours in communion with him. They pleaded and cajoled and threatened and swore. But he seemed stony hearted. Finally, at 11.45 o'clock on the night before election day, they induced him to listen to reason.

"Give us 6000 denarii," they said, "and 75 percent of your appointments and we will call it square."

"Done!" said Oroccus.

Then the politicians took off their coats and sailed in; and a few weeks afterward the clerk to the election supervisors of the district forwarded the candidate an official notification of his nomination and election. He was as happy as a boy with a new appliance for torturing cats. When the politicians called upon him to extend their congratulations he smiled broadly. Also, he winked significantly. The wink was lost upon them.

At high noon on January 1, A.D. 124, he assumed the duties of his office. Having been elected as a Whig, he immediately gave the Ceramic office holders in his department 30 days' notice to join the great army of the unemployed. Then he signed three checks, ate a ham sandwich and shook hands with the politicians, who had been waiting for an audience in the anteroom.

After the usual hot air the latter veered toward the subject which formed the object of their visit.

"I have given the matter considerable thought," said Oroccus, "and in my leisure time have prepared a little schedule."

"Ah," said the politicians.

"Upon investigation," continued Oroccus, who began to manifest a surprising acquaintance with the rules of grammar, "I find that I have 40 appointments. By our agreement you are to have 75 percent of these. That makes 30. I have allotted you"—he read from a slip of paper—"the following, to wit:

"One assistant superintendent, at a salary of 1200 denarii a year;

"Four district superintendents, at 900 per year;

"Ten clerks, at 800 a year;

"Fifteen gang bosses, at 620 a year;

For myself, I have taken:

"One private secretary, at 1000 a year;

"One head bookkeeper, at 1000 a year;

"Six inspectors, at the same salary; and

"Two gang bosses, at 620."

"Good!" said the politicians, with delight. "We are satisfied."

"I am glad of it," said Oroccus.

Then they had a drink and the superintendent continued:

"If I remember rightly," he said, "I paid 6000 denarii for my job."

"Correct," said the politicians.

"And I agreed to give you 75 percent of the patronage."

“Correct,” said the politicians.

“The aggregate yearly salaries of the men you will name,” said Oroccus, “is 22,100 denarii.”

“Right,” said the politicians.

“Six thousand,” continued Oroccus, “is 27 and 14-1000ths percent of 22,100. Add 6 percent as a reasonable profit. This makes 33 and 14-1000ths percent, say 33 1-3.”

The politicians looked puzzled.

“Now, to demand this much out of the first year’s salaries would be too much,” said the superintendent. “Consequently I have determined to let your appointees pay it in two installments—20 percent the first year and 13 1-3 percent the second. Do I make myself plain?”

The politicians gasped convulsively.

“Didn’t you promise us the appointments?” they demanded wildly.

“Of course I did,” answered Oroccus. “And didn’t you promise me my job?”

“You got it!” exclaimed the politicians.

“For a consideration,” said Oroccus blandly. “You are getting your appointments—on the same terms.”

“Cyclones and hurricanes!” yelled the politicians, “you are bleeding us!”

“An eye for an eye and”—began Oroccus, but the politicians heard him not, for with a low gurgle of despair they fled.

When they were out of sight Oroccus chuckled merrily “Like a ripe watermelon,” he said. “I am not as green as I look.” And after laughing at his joke, he entered up his profit upon the credit side of his private cashbook.