

A R M I N I V S

William Walling

“Arminius,” by William Walling. ISBN 978-1-60264-856-2 (softcover); ISBN 978-1-60264-857-9 (hardcover).

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011912420.

Published 2011 by Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., P.O. Box 9949, College Station, TX 77842, US. ©2011, William Walling. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of William Walling.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

To be ignorant of that which occurred before you were born is to remain forever a child. For what is the worth of human life unless it is woven into the lives of our ancestors by the record of history

ORATOR ad M. BRUTEM
Marcus Tullius Cicero, 46 BCE

FOREWORD

Roman chronicles cite his feats. Many contemporary historians refer to this distant figure from the shadows of European antiquity as a liberating crusader, others as the noble savage gone wrong. In 1875 on a hilltop in modern Grotenberg, “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck-Schönhausen dedicated an enormous statue of *Hermann der Cherusker*, a princeling of the Cherusci, the aggregate Germanic tribal clans later to become one nucleus of the Goths. Rearing sixteen meters tall atop a high pedestal, the imposing white figure lofts a seven-meter sword in symbolic defiance of Rome. Germany’s vilified National Socialist régime went a step farther by eulogizing Arminius, favorably comparing his “savior-like” qualities to those of Nazi demi-god Adolph Hitler.

Whether destroying ingrate — the Roman view — or patriotic defender of the indigenous culture from which he sprang, his deeds surely lie closer to one such pole than the other. Culpable, benevolent, or slipping into the wide crack between, his documented accomplishments credit him with organizing and consummating a stunning defeat of imperial forces known to Roman scribes as *clades variana*, the Varian Disaster. The epic battle, quite possibly a turning point in European history, has inspired volumes of modern academic controversy and conjecture.

In telling this tale, the author had neither the means nor any intention of relating events and circumstances lost in the mists of time as they actually were, only as they might have been. Numerous inventions were needed to fill the gaping lacunae in sketchy ancient accounts as well as to round out characterizations. The span of years

involved, coupled with the Augustan era's rich confluence of prominent historical personalities, made it necessary to compress certain events known to have taken place, marginally time-shift others, and totally eliminate some.

Minimal evidence pertaining to the man himself has come down to us. What little hearsay there is derives from accounts in surviving Roman literature, including his classical identity, Arminius. Barbarian names may have been Latinized by the Romans as a matter of course, yet most contemporary scholars refute the notion that his conferred name derived from the hero's purported indigenous name, Hermann. Surviving books of the *ANNALES*, penned by Tacitus a century after the fact, mention Arminius and the famous battle, as do the fragmentary works of his contemporary, Marcus Velleius Paterculus, a soldierly historian who warred beside future Emperor Tiberius. Writing generations later, Florus and Cassius Dio also touch upon the epic struggles of Arminius, though neither account is too credible. In fact the name "Arminius" may have been bestowed centuries later by none other than the celebrated ecclesiastic reformer Martin Luther.

Roman historians refer to the hero's elder sibling as 'Flavus,' "The Blond"; to the Cheruscan petty-king who sired the brothers as 'Sigimerus'; to their uncle as 'Inguiomerus'; and to the hero's antagonistic father-in-law as 'Segestes.' It will never be known whether these names were rooted in the Cheruscan dialect, loose transliterations meant to endow them with a quasi-Latin ring, or simply adopted by the bearers from Roman culture. "Arminius" may have derived from *Irmin*, a proto-Germanic deity, or another called *Irminsul*. An educated guess is that his Cheruscan name was most likely a variation of the patronymic "Sigi-something." It has also been suggested that he might have been the legendary Siegfried of Germanic myth, the hero of heroes who gained international recognition in Richard Wagner's music-drama tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In this tale, he remains the familiar *Hermann der Cherusker* — Arminius.

More is known about his Roman antagonist, the much-maligned Publius Quinctilius Varus. A patrician whose second wife, Claudia Pulcra, was herself a grandniece of Caesar Augustus, Varus served Rome as *quaestor* (the letter "u" retained to enhance legibility did not occur in the twenty-three-letter Latin alphabet), and later as *legatus augusti legionis*, supreme commander of a multiple-legion army in what is now western Turkey. Circa 13 BCE, he was elected Roman *co-consul* in company with future Emperor Tiberius and eventually appointed *legatus augusti per praetore*, governing in turn the provinces of Africa and Syria. Lastly and fatally, Varus served as the emperor's

surrogate in *germania inferior*, where he reputedly exacted crushing tribute from the northern tribes living under Rome's nominal sway while rendering unjust magisterial decisions. Apparently viewing himself a patrician above the fray, Varus failed to heed military counsel in general or repeated warnings of a serious threat in particular.

Roman historians, all naturally biased in favor of their own culture, display small sympathy for a "barbarian inferior" who in their eyes had the effrontery to accept Roman citizenship and a rare elevation to equestrian social status only to flaunt those signal honors and revert to the role of a turncoat who betrayed Rome's trust and largesse. History is said to be written by the victors, yet in this instance, no rebuttal was forthcoming. The warlike, ethnically related peoples inhabiting early first century *germanorum* had no written language with which to plead their case.

Determining the site of the epic battle, *Varusschlacht* or *Hermannsschlacht* in the German language, became a subject of contemporary speculation and dispute, not to mention the object of numerous ground and aerial searches. A renowned nineteenth century classicist, Theodor Mommsen, was first to estimate the battle's location, if with minimal accuracy. Professor Mommsen based his conclusion on descriptive geography, a thorough knowledge of Roman historical accounts, military means and methods, and a significant quantity of Roman coins, none datable subsequent to the lengthy reign of Caesar Augustus, unearthed by farmers plowing in a locale near modern Osnabrück. Commencing in the early 1990s under University of Osnabrück sponsorship, an archaeological dig in rural Bramsche unearthed topographical details and items of physical evidence that definitely establish it as the climactic battle site.

Professor Mommsen is said to have begun a lecture with this intriguing sally: "Ladies and gentlemen, in speaking of ancient Rome, I could not have chosen a more modern topic." As in Dickens' romantic tale of revolutionary France, Augustan Rome flourished during the best and worst of times, when the seven-hilled city on the Tiber — its motto *urbi et orbi*, The City and the World — ruled some forty provinces and the lives of roughly fifty millions. As with other societies thriving in antiquity, Rome's socio-economic health and prosperity derived in some measure from lifelong servitude by an enslaved populace whose members were not considered human beings, but chattel. The empire sprawling across Europe and portions of Africa and Asia was created and sustained by the ferocity, tenacity, and incredible engineering feats of its fabled legions, twenty-eight in number on the eve of *Varusschlacht*.

Ah, the citizen soldiers of *legiones augusti!* Hordes of strapping, dark-haired farmers, shepherds and laborers recruited from Samnium, Latium, Marsica, and elsewhere were endowed with broad shoulders and stocky physiques their renowned *imperator*, Gaius Julius Caesar, had dubbed *brevitas*. Legionaries arrayed for battle in tactical cohorts were led by military tribunes from the senatorial or equestrian classes, while in each cohort, venal, pitiless, hardy and brave centurions welded the rank and file *gregarii milites* into indomitable centuries manned by iron-disciplined, enduring, relentless professionals.

In company with several of the era's historical luminaries, a real-life officer of the legions makes his way through portions of this narrative. The military career and life, of Marcus Caelius Rufus, a native of rural *bononia* — today's Bologna — was cut short while he held the exalted post of *primipilus*, or First Centurion, in ill-fated *legio XVIII*. His cenotaph, excavated near the town of Xanten in the seventeenth century, describes his fall at age fifty-three *bello variano*, only one victim of the numbing annihilation of three Roman legions amid forested hills, riverine marshes, and gloomy lowlands in a then-remote sector of *germania inferior* the Romans knew as *saltus teutoburgensis*. Caelius' gravestone, a rare item of physical evidence pertaining to the legionaries who were once the staunch comrades of Arminius and later his bitterest foes, commemorates the life and service of a much-decorated veteran.

Patrician or plebian, Roman citizen, foreigner, ally, freedman, slave, or unlettered barbarian, the denizens of early first-century Europe were human beings remarkably like ourselves. Popular books and films tend to laxly portray the milieu of *roma antica* in a vein more suited to cartoon strips than historical integrity, whereas the populace of antiquity's foremost civilization, its provinces and frontiers, was actually vital and industrious, if in some respects brutal and sinful when judged by contemporary standards.

Theirs was an era of juxtaposed bloodbath and constructiveness, epicurean self-indulgence and aristocratic noblesse oblige, monumental folly and flights of lofty genius.

Very much like our own.

All of this, you see, took place two thousand years ago, twenty centuries ago.

Yesterday . . .

INCIPIT LIBER PRIMVS

I

GERMANIA INFERIOR AB VRBE CONDITA DCCLXII

Farther Germania, in Rome's traditional 762nd year (9 CE)

Wind-driven rain fell slaunchwise from the rogue advance guard of big-bellied thunderheads marching above a plain that stretched northward all the way to Ocean. Fork-tongued lightning flickered in a somber sky, orchestrated by grumbling tympani householders acting as blood priests in the Sacred Grove liked to call “Donnar’s voice of anger.” Sun dazzle peeked between towering cloud anvils, sheening brakes of larch and alder that dripped from every leaf. Lush with rain-glossed greenery, a shallow slope fell away beneath the hillside vantage where two watchers kept a lonely vigil.

Weary and footsore from standing in place hour after hour, Flavus shuffled his feet often to relieve the discomfort. Chafing in silence, he idly fingered the hilt of his sword, turning now and again to glance back at the motionless figure rearing two paces behind him. His uncle looked as if he were standing at ease. Flavus knew better; he radiated tension electric as the weather.

Silhouetted against the tempestuous late-morning sky, his uncle had draped his muscular forearm atop the legionary buckler he never went anywhere without; the loosely held Roman javelin in his other hand was canted outward in a sentinel’s classic stance, its shaft butted against a scuffed, muddied legionary sandal. Moisture clung to his uncle’s copper-blond mane and beard; a wolfskin cape beaded with

water droplets shrouded his massive torso; the fixed gaze of his ice-blue eyes never strayed from a gap in the treetops framing a saddle in the low hills and the river meandering northward through a gently curving valley

Flavus lifted resentful eyes to the storm clouds convening overhead. The wind had picked up in strength, promising a wet, blustery afternoon, and their mounts, tethered out of sight beyond the hillcrest, were growing restive due to the growls and rolls of not too distant thunder. Flavus mistrusted his runty, ill-mannered colt and grimaced when it nickered softly. Skittish even as a foal, the small horse tended to shy at shadows, and bucked when least expected.

Another late-summer shower raked the hillside. Drenched, footsore, and bored to the verge of insensibility, Flavus swung about and searched his uncle's stolid countenance. He cleared his throat in an overly loud manner, waited for a reaction that never came, then hawked irritably and spat into the humus underfoot. "Any sign of them?"

"Soon, I think," muttered Arminius.

"You said that a while ago."

"And I may say it again. You'd do well to learn patience, Flavus."

Disgruntlement creased the youth's high, summer-tanned forehead. He folded his arms and resolutely faced front, wondering if he would ever conquer an instinctive aversion to the name he'd chosen for himself. Rolling the syllables around in his mind, he examined their flavor, their texture — Fla-vus. For some reason, his acquired name echoed falsely when his uncle pronounced it in the manner of a *Römanischer*.

After months of soul-searching, he had succumbed to the counsel of relatives and close friends and adopted a new name. The weighty decision had been made in late spring of the previous year while accompanying Arminius and Papa Inguiomerus on a conspiratorial, rabble-rousing journey through the *Völkerschaften* lands of the Chatti, Marsi, and Ubii.

In the wake of endless conferences with nobles and elders who held themselves in godlike self-esteem, looked down upon by suspicious *Hunni* who led their respective warrior *Hundertschaften*, and invariably nay-said by uppity *Wehrmänner* who thought it their birthright to sustain a deep, abiding mistrust of strangers daring to propose anything new and untried, the threesome had journeyed southwestward instead of returning directly to the Cheruscan demesne. Making an impromptu holiday of the leisurely junket, they had crossed the multi-channeled Rhine on a series of military pontoon bridges downstream from the lesser Roman garrison of Durnomagus, and thence upriver to Ara Ubiorum, a moderate-sized Ubii

settlement that coexisted on the river's western bank with the major Roman fortress of Apud Aram.

Visiting Ubiorum had doubled Flavus' hunger to learn more about the wide world beyond his native *Dorf*. The town and its environs had proven fascinating, what with loose women to be admired and a seemingly infinite variety of wares vended in the jumble of stalls, tents, and lean-tos dotting the mud-rutted marketplace. In a time of relative tranquility east of the river, Ara Ubiorum was where "Those bastard sons of the she wolf" — Papa Inguiomerus' pet pejorative for Romans of all cants, complexions, and persuasions — had erected a *Roma et Augustus* shrine to the emperor's cult, as well as a more modest place of worship dedicated to Freye, Wodin, and other dieties favored by the *germani*, Rome's collective label for the diverse multitudes dwelling in a trackless hinterland of forest, hill, marshland, and watercourse east of the great river.

Bent upon upholding their reputation as canny, money-grubbing scoundrels, Ubiorum's civic fathers had not erected the Germanic shrine out of pious regard for local religious beliefs, but as an unsubtle lure designed to coax into the settlement any and all travel-prone *germani*. A place of worship, those in authority had decided, would surely induce relatively affluent surrounding peoples to rid themselves of the Roman coins earned by looting and pillaging among rival clan-nations, dispatching slaves to set traps and bring to market a variety of woodland pelts, or by cheerfully capturing and selling one another into slavery.

In Ubiorum, Flavus had learned the Germanic shrine's primary purpose: to attract wanderers among the Sugambri, Tencteri, Marsi, Chatti, Cherusci, et al, to fleece them of their meager stores of coins. It was common knowledge that nobles like Papa Inguiomerus, in most respects fearless to a suicidal degree, were abjectly terrified of giving offense on high. Ubii popular wisdom, doubtless inspired by the Romans, had it that no superstitious *germanus* would ever, under any circumstance, pass up an opportunity to appease the wrath of the dieties. He himself had been counseled often on the subject. "Trying to dodge the gods' vengeance," Papa would rumble in the gravelly bass rising full-flower from his deep chest, "would be like running between raindrops to stay dry."

True to his vacillating nature, Papa had at first refused to call the returned prodigal 'Arminius,' reverting to his nephew's birth name, Hermann. But then, on-again, off-again swings from unbending rectitude to liberal tolerance were what one expected of Papa. Vacillation was predictably in keeping with his lightning changes of heart.

Not long since, Flavus reminded himself, he too had felt naught

but deep disdain for anyone sinking low enough to rename himself in order to suit the caprice and convenience of the Romans and their hirelings. Yet, in the end, he had adopted the name of a second uncle, the brother of Arminius, dubbed 'Flavus' in infancy, not to please the Romans, but due to his newborn shock of butter-colored hair.

Many stiff-necked Cheruscan elders and villagers retained the conviction that renaming oneself was the ultimate form of self-debasement. Yet, despite sharing that feeling for most of his young life, the enlightenment brought about by a short stay in Ubiorum had revealed the deeper reason why Papa and many kinfolk had assumed Latinized names. Owning a recognizable, pronounceable alias simplified one's dealings with a settlement's tribute gatherers, merchants, officials, tavern keepers, legionaries, and camp followers. More to the point, as Papa never tired of explaining, being known as 'Inguiomerus' rather than 'Ingomar,' or some other truly guttural indigenous name, helped grease the skids during unavoidable face-to-face encounters with the Romans and their minions. As Flavus, he had found pleasantries often replacing formerly tepid greetings, shrugs of indifference, or an occasional, undeserved cuff on the ear.

Even before he came of age and earned the privilege of bearing arms, Flavus had fallen into a habit of paying close heed to the fiery discussions, denunciations, and pronouncements of his elders. Prodigal in that respect, he'd rarely passed up an opportunity to eavesdrop on sober *Gau* Council debates, casual discussions, and not a few nighttime confrontations that invariably ended in blows and bloodshed. Try as he might, he had found it no easy task to sort and evaluate the widely divergent, stridently espoused attitudes and philosophies forever under discussion. Controversy raged eternal, most often centered about the question of how to treat the arrogant, tribute-hungry Romans and their high-handed magistrates. Determined to take a stand that would satisfy logic as well as the conscience of his inquiring mind, he had reflected long and hard on the thorny issue. The more thought he'd given to the question, the more confused he had become.

And then — wonder of wonders! — long lost Uncle Hermann had dumbfounded his extended family by making an unheralded return to the homeland. The stripling, who vanished years earlier under mysterious circumstances, had reappeared as a radically changed, mature *Wehrmann* who styled himself 'Caius Julius Arminius.' At first, reluctant to discuss his years among the Romans, it had soon become apparent that nameless fires smoldered deep within his uncle. After spending hours in earnest conversation with Papa Inguiomerus, the Romanized stranger had gradually regained semi-acceptance within his

native *Völkerschaft*, eventually taking a wife and ostensibly settling down.

But what his kith and kin assumed to be a brooding concession to things as they were had actually been a lengthy interlude of thoughtful scheming. Not long after the disputatious controversy over his nuptials died down, Arminius had begun campaigning in earnest. He had badgered the *Gau* Council with heated rhetoric, vociferously urging nobles and elders alike to help persuade the Cherusci and all neighboring peoples to join together and wage unremitting, winner-take-all warfare against his former Roman lords and masters. Opening up slowly, one slice at a time, if only to blood relatives and a handful of *Whermanner* who had earned his trust, he'd described his life as a Roman. Levied into service against his will while hunting in the Cheruscan forest, he'd been trained and assigned to an auxiliary unit made up of locally conscripted youths like himself, later awarded command of an all-Cheruscan auxiliary infantry detachment, and later still, through a quirk of fate, had gained Roman citizenship and been opted into the legion proper.

Regaling fireside audiences with tales of legionary life, Arminius had drawn word pictures of the city of cities, related certain experiences which had soured him on Rome and the Romans, and described how swelling disaffection had finally driven him to return to the homeland. He had reclaimed his Cheruscan heritage, albeit as one steeped in Roman military means and methods, strategy, tactics, policies, procedures, and traditions. Touting his military background, he had begun circulation through the outlying clan-nations, preaching one diatribe after another, repetitiously driving home to nobles, elders, warriors, and anyone else who cared to listen a solemn litany, namely that a thorough knowledge of the enemy was far and away the most vital milestone on the rocky road to defeating him and ousting him from *Völkerschaften* lands.

These advertisements of himself, coupled with keen intelligence and strength of character, not to mention his superb degree of expertise with all types of weaponry, had gradually advanced his cause. Eventually looked up to as a resourceful, respected Cheruscan prince, his anti-Roman crusade had steadily gained strength and momentum, attracting adherents by the tens of tens. And, as his preachments earned credence and popularity among the surrounding demesnes, he had also — with notable exceptions — garnered an ever-larger following within the bellicose Cheruscan faction supporting his views.

From the topmost strand of his tousled, reddish-blond mane to the hobnailed legionary sandals he favored, Arminius had become obsessed with organizing and commanding a regional army whose sole aim would

be to once and for all rid the lands of Roman dominance and persecution. This resolve, wrought in iron, caused him to turn a deaf ear to any and all arguments which rebutted his intransigent statement that Rome's rapacious legions could indeed be routed and driven from the lands.

Papa Inguiomerus, nominally a tough-minded pillar of integrity, often dismayed Flavus and the members of their extended family by swinging in the wind like a flimsy cattle gate, something especially true when the question arose of how to deal with the arrogant Romans. At any given moment, drunk or sober, smiling or sullen, Papa might voice total accord with his nephew's eloquent jeremiads, endorsing with militancy and unqualified enthusiasm his nephew's diatribes, holding back nothing in his effort to fire the zeal of the *Gau* Council. Bellowing in his usual overly loud manner, Papa would forcefully parrot the righteous polemics of his nephew, firmly declare that concerted, all-out warfare was the sole answer to Rome's "unconquerable" legions, and echo his nephew's stern credo that Rome's casual, overbearing sovereignty would never simply melt away, but would grow ever stronger, ever more oppressive. He would firmly back the demand of Arminius that the legions garrisoned along the Rhine, as well as isolated cohorts stationed in interior encampments and outpost fortresses, be defeated in the field lest the "civilized" masters of far-flung dominions eventually subjugate all *Völkerschaften* peoples and turn the lands into subservient provinces like those of the spineless Gallic tribes to the west.

Should such a fate befall the Cherusci, Papa would cry, articulating his nephew's diatribe, Roman military incursions and harsh punitive measures like the "judicial murders" perpetrated by scum-sucking Roman magistrates, or the greedy exaction of tributes, or the forced levy of the clans' ablest youths into Roman military service, would continue forever and ever, world without end, time out of mind.

Yet, to the bewilderment of Flavus and others, in the very next breath, Papa might turn about head-to-tail and advocate conciliation and compromise as the only realistic means of dealing with Rome's demonically organized, vastly superior armed might. What never failed to strike his son as especially disconcerting was the fact that when preaching peaceful coexistence, Papa invariably sounded every whit as earnest and sincere as when chiming in and reinforcing Arminius' preachments about inciting a united martial uprising. When arguing compromise, Papa would hector the *Gau* Council with equal or greater vehemence, issuing caveat after caveat, ranting at length about the fact that, despite the self-defeating nature of bowing down and paying tribute, it would be suicidal folly to defy the bottomless resources,

insane discipline, ruthless energy, and organization exhibited by “Those bastard sons of the she wolf.”

As a footnote to his campaign, Arminius seldom became eloquent when coaxed and inveigled into discussing his legionary career. Having earned his salt as a seasoned auxiliary foot soldier — a *pedite* in the Roman term — he had been awarded Roman citizenship and brought into the legion proper with the rank of *pilanus*, a heavy infantryman. Later dispatched to Rome for some unstated reason, he had eventually been elevated in social status by the award of Roman knighthood, a facet of “Latinization” that helped cast him in the role of a pariah upon first returning to home and hearth. Flavus recalled his own juvenile resentment of the dandified Romanesque stranger unexpectedly thrust back into his extended family’s fold. In truth, he’d been unable to recall his uncle, to bring to mind anything of his appearance and personality. A foreign-yet-familiar stranger, his uncle had reappeared from nowhere, a phantom from early childhood.

But after a summer spent hunting and fishing in company with Arminius, especially after witnessing his uncle’s flashing Roman short sword in action or admiring his superb javelin casts, horsemanship, and woodcraft, his original opinion of the returned prodigal had fallen by the wayside. Time after time had he listened enraptured to his uncle’s quietly spoken counsel, his accounts of legionary life, the vignettes describing Rome’s insensate brutality and foulness that went hand in glove with noble deeds and lofty wonders. Only then had he begun to understand why his uncle had turned his back on Rome and the Romans, why he so avidly and violently opposed his avaricious former masters and their dominance over peoples they considered “barbarians.”

Rainsoaked and lethargic in the wake of the endless hillside vigil, Flavus was lost in introspection, contemplating the rhyme and reason of the world and his place in it, when his uncle stirred suddenly.

“There!” The word cracked like a nearby thunderclap.

Startled, the youth drew himself erect and peered into the distance.

“Outriders!” Arminius lifted the Roman javelin and aimed the backward-raked barbs of its head downriver. Elation sharpened his diction when he said, “See them, Flavus? They rove through patches of sun and shadow, combing thinned-out stands of timber above mud flats on the near shore.”

Flavus squinted, straining until his eyes watered.

“What we are seeing,” added Arminius, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice, “is the snake’s forked tongue. It flicks ahead of the line of march, rooting out danger. The head will not be far behind.”

Knowing where to look, Flavus picked out several crawling dots – horsemen moving through reedy marshlands shelving upward from the riverbank. “Scouts!” he cried, sharing his uncle’s excitement. “You told me scouts were, uh . . . is ‘scouts’ the right word?”

His mind elsewhere, Arminius murmured, “Scouts, yes. Or pathfinders.”

“How are they called in the *Römanische* tongue?”

“*Ex-plor-a-tores.*” Arminius clearly pronounced each Latin syllable for his nephew’s benefit. “Those your father and I saw at the Roman summer encampment were mainly Gauls, salted with a few Bructeri and others.” Abruptly changing the subject, he said, “Take your sword, Flavus. Go into the wood and fetch some fat, shaggy boughs for use as concealment.”

“Here on the hillside?”

“Where else?”

“Why stay now? We can mount up and ride. You’ve made sure they’re on march, coming this way as expected.” When Arminius did not reply, Flavus asked what they would do if the scouts spotted them.

“They won’t bother swinging up this little hill.”

The response did not satisfy his nephew. “What if they do? We take horse and make a run for it, right?”

“Should we cross paths with legionaries of any stripe,” informed his uncle, “we shall greet them warmly, empty-handed and smiling, heads bowed ever so humbly. We will shower them with Wodin’s blessings for rushing to the aid of the stricken peoples, pile fuel on the fire by explaining how miserably the war is ravaging the lands.”

“But what if they —?”

“Go, Flavus! Bring the boughs.”

Although the directive had been calmly stated, Flavus sensed the agitation underlying his uncle’s outward composure. Worried to think Arminius might be outsmarting himself, he unlimbered his sword, strode uphill into the dripping woodland, flexing his ankles in exaggerated fashion to work out the kinks.

In early afternoon, a nebulous gray ceiling had clamped down over hill, valley, and river, blotting out the horizon. Rain haze from a torrential downpour veiled the snakelike procession laboriously wending its way past the foot of the hill. Mounted legionaries Arminius called *alae* made heavy going of it, their horses’ hooves sucking mud.

“What are ahh-lay, whatever you called them?”

“*Alae* . . . ? Cavalry, uh . . . *Pferdetruppen*,” enlightened Arminius, using a Cheruscan term. “Mounted squadrons of irregulars, mainly foreign auxiliaries levied or recruited from Gaul and other regions, are usually deployed on the wings in battle.” Leaning forward on the legionary buckler, he studied the passing parade intently and wagged his head in disbelief. “By the gods! It makes no sense. The noble Varus has failed to heed the warnings of my dear father-in-law.”

“Segestes *warned* him?”

“More than once. Stern warnings they were, so I was told.”

“Then why haven’t the Romans —?”

“The great man refuses to believe a Romanized barbarian like myself could do wrong. Still and all, something is awry. With no apparent threat in the offing, I can understand him being careless. But not *this* careless.”

“How . . . careless?” Open-mouthed, Flavus marveled at the endless column of riders, soldiers, and beasts of burden stretching into the mistiness downriver.

“They advance in a formation called *agmen pilatum*,” declared Arminius. “A proper marching order in ‘safe’ country, a region known to harbor few, if any, hostiles. When the heavy infantry marches past, you’ll see four-abreast files grouped cohort by cohort, but —”

“You would do it differently.” Flavus made it a flat statement.

“Much differently. The patrician Varus has committed a lapse far worse than disregarding the warnings of my beloved father-in-law. He’s either swallowed the tendered bait at a gulp or become grossly overconfident. Whichever is true, he’s living in a fool’s paradise. The prescribed marching order in a suspect area is *acie instructa*, an alignment akin to the order of battle. I grant you it would be difficult to hold that formation farther upstream, in the narrow savannas between the river and marsh.”

“You would have tried,” supplied his nephew.

“Oh, I would have done more than *try*.”

“Foot soldiers are coming,” announced Flavus. “Is it the main body?”

“Hardly. Those are *velites* you see — lightly armed skirmishers. In the Roman tongue, the slingers are known as *fundatores*; the best come from the Balearic Isles. The archers marching with them are called *sagittarii*. Behind the skirmishers, we’ll see light infantry formations, then more cavalry leading a contingent of *fabri* — engineers and road builders.”

“And after them?”

“Mules and carts beyond count hauling the impedimenta of —”

“The what?”

“Baggage, Flavus; the belongings of Varus, his legates, tribunes,

and lesser officers.”

“You once said there was more than one kind of leeg . . .”

“Lee-gat,” syllabified Arminius. “An army of two or more legions is sometimes commanded of one of Rome’s *consuls*, their highest-ranking officials, or in some cases, former holders of that office called *consulars*. Varus assumed co-consulship years ago in company with a renowned commander of the legions who’s now the emperor’s adopted son and heir. It’s said that Varus, once a relatively poor Roman noble, governed the rich province of Syria and left the Syrians destitute upon returning to Rome greatly enriched. His name is tainted in the Roman tongue: ‘Varus’ connotes being ‘stooped’ or ‘crooked.’ When a major uprising broke out in Rome’s southeastern provinces, the emperor appointed him supreme commander of three legions garrisoned in my first posting, a fortress to the west on the upper-middle Rhine.”

Flavus had difficulty absorbing the foreign terms. “What exactly is a . . . lee-gat?”

“The commander of a single legion bears the title *legatus legionis*. Varus is a makeshift appointee, a surrogate who represents the emperor’s imperial power as *legatus augusti per praetore*, meaning ‘He charged with Augustus’ mission.’” Knowing the Latin terms meant little or nothing to the youth, he clarified. “I use their designations, Flavus, because no such terms exist in our way of speech. Think of Varus as . . . nevermind; it’s complicated. What it boils down to is that Augustus handed Varus the authority to act not only as supreme commander of the legionaries marching through the rain below us, but also to act in his place and direct imperial affairs in the entire northern region.”

“Aw-gus-tuss.” Flavus seized on the name. “Their high king?”

“In effect, though much more. The emperor refers to himself as *princeps*, ‘Rome’s first citizen,’ or sometimes as *imperator*, a mark of favor once bestowed by legionaries wishing to honor the praiseworthy legate in command. Legates are almost always drawn from the ranks of Roman nobility. In addition to command, they’re granted the unique power of life and death judgment called *imperium*. In the Roman tongue, *imperator* and *imperium* have more than one meaning.”

Further confused by the cascading foreign terms and usages blithely tossed off by his uncle, Flavus was nonetheless fascinated by the intimidating spectacle unreeling beneath the hill. “You once told me,” he declared, “their marching order never varies.”

“Seldom, if ever.”

“What comes after the, uh, baggage?”

“The great man himself, riding in company with a mounted honor

guard. Shortly after Varus passes our hill, we'll see a second body of light infantry and cavalry, then a collection of small *catapulta*." Noting the way his nephew stumbled over the term, he explained how numerous *scorpiones* — small, one-man devices designed to cast larger than normal spears — were sure to be seen, but no *ballistae*, large siege engines capable of throwing heavy stones.

"Why not?"

"Because no sites in the *Völkerschaften* lands are worthy of besiegement. Hauling heavy equipment over this difficult ground, especially with rain-soaked sand and clay underfoot, would be an exercise tens of times more burdensome than useful."

Feigning comprehension, the youth remained silent for a number of heartbeats. At length, he said with a degree of reverence, "It's such a *long* snake. Must we stand here in the rain all day to watch it wriggle past?"

"A while longer. We must see what we came to see."

"Eagles . . . ?"

"Eagles, Flavus. Pray to the gods for two or more."

"No eagles will be aloft in this weather," said his nephew slyly.

Arminius gruded a thin smile. "The talons of the birds we seek are sunk in mud, never to leave the ground."

Peering over the sodden branch he held for concealment, Flavus watched with a swelling sense of awe as streaming masses of horsemen, foot soldiers, beasts of burden, and baggage carts slowly traversed the soggy terrain, ascending shallowly from the river flowing placidly at summer-low ebb. He shook his head, flicking the rainwater from his eyes, then cupped a hand against his forehead and tried to ignore the deluge. "They go on and on," he said, a break in his voice.

"With many more to come."

Shivering involuntarily, Flavus pulled the waterlogged cloak tightly about his shoulders. "Haven't we seen enough? It's soaking out here."

"Wet or dry, their overall strength must be confirmed."

"You know their strength," objected Flavus. "Didn't you and Papa ride a distance with them marching out of the summer encampment?"

"A ways with the pathfinders, yes. But jumping to that shortsighted conclusion could be the end of us. Varus led out with all three legions intact, along with squadrons of cavalry and six cohorts of *auxilia*. I sat to horse beside your father and watched them assemble."

“So, why do we have to —?”

“Think, Flavus,” counseled his uncle. “How else can we learn whether Varus has divided his forces?”

“Won’t it be better if he has?”

Gauging his nephew’s acumen, Arminius’s response was slow in coming. He answered the question with a question. “Better in what way?”

“Well, we’d, uh . . . be going against a smaller army.”

“True, in all likelihood, but with many cohorts or a full legion held in reserve. Were Varus’ fancy red commander’s boots strapped on my feet, and were I holding an imperial ivory wand signifying the authority to command, that is *exactly* how I would direct a campaign to put down a supposed uprising. From our standpoint, what you suggest would be the worst situation we could face.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That does not surprise me.” Arminius paused to marshal his thoughts. “You’ve witnessed the maddening frustration of trying to organize a mob of self-styled rogues into reasonable fighting units. We may have succeeded, maybe not; we don’t know, won’t know until they clash with the bloody-handed butchers marching past below. Even if we’ve been successful, our so-called ‘army’ will be short-lived. The gods themselves couldn’t hold our undisciplined rabble together long enough to wage a series of campaigns. If the coming encounter ends in anything short of total victory, we’ll be hounded, ripped apart, destroyed piecemeal.

Flavus took his time digesting the information.

“I’ve lectured kings, princes, elders, and warriors,” pursued Arminius. “I’ve spoken out of both sides of my mouth until I was too hoarse to be heard. I’ve cajoled them, encouraged them, threatened them, and yes, told them outright lies, tried every way I knew how to sway the opinions of obstinate nobles, skeptical elders, and antagonistic warriors. I’ve shouted assurances and reassurances to believers and nonbelievers, including some among our own people. I’ve explained time and again, then yet again and again, that our sole hope of defeating a major Roman force will be to catch the main bodies of all three legions unprepared, unsuspecting.

“A phenomenal amount of forethought and scheming went into the battle plan, Flavus.” On a roll, his enthusiasm feeding upon itself, Arminius was more or less thinking aloud. “As a tactical concept, our plan is simple: we catch the main column near the gap between *Kalkreise* and the bog just as the snake’s tongue encounters the rampart sealing off further progress. After pinning down the main bodies

between the river, Chalk Hill, and the bog, we chop them to pieces, devour their triple hearts, the heavy infantry cohorts of all three legions. If the battle plan isn't followed to the letter, well . . ."

Hanging on his uncle's words, Flavus waited for him to continue.

"The heavy infantry," amplified Arminius, "is the heart of each legion. Our one and only objective will be to trap the legions in an escape-proof ambushade, subject them to converging assaults where and when they are most vulnerable, especially our first assault wave, when it is least expected. We have to overwhelm them with sheer numbers, grind them into the mud, with no quarter asked, none given, and no retreat possible. There will be no second chance if we fail. It won't be a matter of simply defeating Varus; his entire command will have to be overcome, the legionaries destroyed, wiped out to the man."

Disconcerted by the length and vehemence of his uncle's speech, and his imagination ignited by foreknowledge of the carnage to come, Flavus said, "Doing it that way means all three armies must be together in one place."

An emphatic nod. "Verily. The independent-minded sods blood-sworn to do battle in a common cause could never be reorganized, readied to fight separate engagements in more than one locale. Who could make them understand orders, or for that matter, force them to halfway follow what they pretend to understand? Who could pound into their bloodthirsty brains the fact that victory's foundation is laid by meticulous planning, a thorough knowledge of tactics the enemy will employ, a thorough appreciation of the counter-tactics we must originate? Who could lead them in two or more separate engagements?"

"You," Flavus said promptly.

"Ah, yes; assuming I could be in more than one place at the same time."

"I, uh . . . see what you mean." Pondering the ramifications of what he had learned, Flavus held his tongue until startled by his uncle's sudden intake of breath.

"Three!" bellowed Arminius, and whooped, repeated the cry, roaring it at the top of his lungs, "*Three*, Flavus!" Flinging aside the rainsoaked bough, his uncle lofted the legionary javelin on high. "Three glorious, golden eagles! How they shine through the wet and gloom. Oh, Varus, you foolish man! You've served up your armies intact, with nothing in reserve. *Nothing!*"

Flavus found his uncle's pulse-pounding excitement infectious. "Just as you'd hoped."

"Just as I had prayed the gods to deliver." His massive chest heaving and breathing stertorously, Arminius swept back the cowl of

his cloak, lifted his face to the weeping sky and closed his eyes, letting raindrops pelt him until water streamed from his hair and beard. “O blessed rain! Our everlasting thanks for this bounty, mighty Donnar.” Nimble switching languages, he added in Latin, “A sacrifice and stone marker of thanksgiving is also due you, *iuppiter pluvius*, even if your flock sleeps in enemy tents.”

Dropping the javelin, he seized the bronze torque encircling his nephew’s upper arm in an iron grip. “Look you, Flavus! Drink in the sight, savor it! Three Roman legions marching toward oblivion. Never again will you see anything half so magnificent.”

Determined to savor the sight, Flavus winced and attempted to wrench free, hoping his uncle’s bear grip had not permanently impaired the usefulness of his swordarm.

“How sloppily,” observed Arminius, “the *aquiliferi* tote the poles topped by their gleaming birds. Behind them will come the *signiferi*, the *labarum* standards of their cohorts drooping, flapping in the wind and rain. The trumpeters look half-drowned.”

“So do we.” Flavus broke free with an effort.

His uncle’s low-pitched utterance was more a growl than a statement. He said, “On the heels of the *signiferi* will come the first batch of authentic butchers — ten heavy infantry cohorts of the Seventeenth, followed by ten of the Eighteenth, lastly ten of the Nineteenth.”

“And behind them . . . ?”

“The main baggage train; it’s usually somewhere in mid-column for safety reasons. Then you’ll see more horses, mules, and carts than a scholar can tote. Daylight will be all but gone before the rear guard *optiones* march past. Trailing them will be a rag-tag collection of camp followers from the temporary settlement next to Varus’ summer encampment.”

Flavus shivered. “Must we stay for all that?”

“No, we’re through.” Arminius bent to scoop up the javelin. Inserting his left arm through the straps of the legionary buckler, he hefted it. “Come, we’ve miles to cover before dark.”

Stiff-legged from the lengthy vigil, Flavus massaged his arm and trailed his uncle. Slogging uphill through the dripping wood, his mind alive with visions of the carnage to come, he said, “Will it be tomorrow?”

“No,” was his uncle’s flat denial. “Close on four tens of Roman miles separate the summer encampment from the marsh before Chalk Mountain, and they’re strung out over a good number of those miles. They’re too numerous, too encumbered and slow

moving to arrive in the vicinity of *Kalkreise* on the morrow. Riverside bogs lie ahead; Donnar's blessed rains will ensure even muddier, sloppier going in this downpour. The march will slow from a crawl to a series of starts and stops long before the pathfinders cross the plain below Chalk Mountain. We'll also begin felling trees in their path, further slowing the column."

"Then, the day after . . . ?"

"Possibly, at the earliest. Perhaps not even then if Donnar's miraculous rains persist. The legions will have to stop and set up an overnight encampment at least once more."

"Wouldn't that be a perfect time to strike, when they're asleep?"

Arminius surprised his nephew by saying, "It would be the worst mistake we could make."

Topping the gentle rise, the horses came into view. The chestnut mare and Flavus' runty colt looked woebegone, bedraggled, heads hanging low, their rumps turned into the driving rain.

Arminius finished his explanation as he untethered his mount and pulled himself up into the stirrupless, four-pommeled Roman saddle. "Each afternoon on march, legionaries build an encampment wonderous to behold, a temporary fortress ringed by a ditch, an earthwork and palisade, with every hide-covered eight-man tent aligned along the inner streets, and sentries posted. Awake or sleeping, every *Legionär* keeps his arms and armor within reach, alert for the sound of an alarm, prepared to instantly dash to a pre-assigned defensive post. Unless you've witnessed them raise an overnight encampment, you would not believe the lengths they go to erecting a 'temporary' fortress."

Rather than turning toward the warrior horde eagerly awaiting the honk of an elk horn that would transform them into a raging, battle-frenzied mob, Arminius walked the mare up a gentle slope to the hillcrest. He let the horse pick her way along the tree-lined ridge, searching for a break in the screening forest, and reined in for a last, lingering survey of the legionaries destined to become fair game for the hordes of blood-lusting *Wehrmanner* under his nominal command.

The rain beat down, a ferocious, unremitting deluge that sorely impeded the progress of heavy infantry cohorts belonging to *legio septendecim* torturously filing past below. Motionless, Arminius sat astride his mount, viewing the rain-soaked procession in stoic silence.

His breath suddenly caught in his throat as a vivid picture flashed before his mind's eye. On an idyllic, long gone summer morn, a smaller, infinitely less significant Roman "snake" had slithered unbidden into lands bordering the Cheruscan demesne. Nearly a dozen

WILLIAM WALLING

years had fled since the watershed summer marking the end of his youth and an enforced entry into manhood. He had been happier then, months younger than his nephew was now, and a good deal happier.

But so incredibly naive . . .