

From Oppius Egnatius Veranius to Vibius Cordius Grattus, the son of his close friend, written from Gaul in the reign of Emperor Domitian.

Vibius, I fear that this letter bears no good news. The only memories I have of you are of a small boy who was perhaps five years of age, but I know that it has been long since we were sent away from your town. If I have marked the years correctly, you should be fifteen now, and if Leontia's words from her letters are more than just the love of a mother, I hear that you have grown into quite an intelligent young man. I hope that you will fully understand the things which I have to say.

I have no way with words, so I fear that I will have to be blunt with you. Your father fell in battle only a few days ago as I write this. However, I send this letter not only to inform you of your father's fate, but also to tell you of his final hours. I always thought of your father as a great soldier and a great man, but he proved that I had underestimated him.

I remember the crunch of snow beneath my boots as I marched along through the cold land of Gaul. I felt the familiar flutter of my stomach as I thought of what was coming. Battle is an odd thing, Vibius, and it is something that I cannot describe. Fear and anticipation are your constant companions before arms clash, but once the line of enemies is actually in front of you, confusion begins to set in. The most experienced veteran is the one who realizes that a plan is a perfect device. It is the person who corrupts this perfect device, for no human being can hold to a plan completely. Thousands of minor mistakes eventually equate to chaos which is the true mistress of war.

Battle is horror, but it is more than that. To a veteran, it is like a well-known lover who has lain by his side many times. Your father was this kind of veteran, but he understood these things far better than I could ever hope since I am not so much a philosopher as he was. I simply speak the words that come to me, but he was able to intertwine the syllables to make beautiful sounding sentences that pleased the ear. Although it may sound like I am giving your father undue praise, I am simply writing the truth.

That day we were to fight a large number of Gaulic soldiers. Everyone knew that the fight would be a hard one, but no one suspected the truth. The Gauls had more men than we had been expecting, but your father never faltered in his steps, Vibius. When I nearly paused, he said to me, "Egnatius, do not let their numbers scare you. The gods look upon us kindly because we fight for Rome. Even if death is what the future holds, there will be an afterlife. Indeed, I know of no reason to fear death." I simply nodded in reply, but I knew my step was a little lighter. Still, I knew that battle was just around the corner.

I looked down on the hordes of barbarians and shuddered slightly. There were so many that I feared even the great Roman army might be defeated. I did not see fear in your father's face, Vibius. Rather, I saw determination that could break a stone and

loyalty to the empire. I know that I will always remember that rock-hard gaze as the pinnacle of how a soldier should look. If every soldier in the legion were like your father, the Roman army would be unbeatable. I turned to your father and said softly, "If Jupiter permits it, I will see you when chaos has fled on the heels of a finished battle."

"The same I return to you, Egnatius," replied your father in a calm voice. Not a tremor of anticipation or fear disturbed his rich baritone. Finally, your father's eyes changed as the barbarian horde began to charge up the hill. The glint of battle made his eyes shine like the blade of a *gladius* when the sun glimmers off of it. All along our line, we hefted our *pili* and prepared to throw.

As the slender spears flew gracefully through the air like a flock of geese, I felt the horrors of war begin to descend on me. As always, my memory of the exact events in the battle is dim at best. I can still hear the barbarians screaming in pain and bloodlust as our *pili* flew into their ranks. Drawing my *gladius* and preparing my *scutum*, I formed a shield line with my fellow soldiers. The Gauls would not find us weak foes.

The legion had subdivided into smaller groups, our normal strategy, and my century was in the first line. A Gaul charged me and raised his weapon. I stabbed swiftly and cut open his belly. He clasped it with his hands as he fell heavily to the ground. Another Gaul, enraged by the death of a friend, roared a battle cry and charged straight at me. I dodged behind my *scutum*, and stabbed at him after his weapon smacked into the shield's leather surface. The Gaul screamed and fell.

I heard the cry of my centurion somewhere off to my left. He was calling us back into a line in an attempt to keep the century together. As it was, we had split up into smaller groups rather than one whole and complete line. My group and I moved to join up with the rest of the century and prepared to fight the Gauls who were pressing in towards us.

Again I heard the centurion cry, but this time it was no order. He fell to one knee and groaned in pain as he clutched at an arrow sticking from his chest. The arrow was made so that pulling it out of his chest would have ripped a large hole and killed the man. Using all of his strength, the centurion pushed himself to his feet and seemed about to say something when another arrow struck him straight in the throat. With a gurgle the man died as his century looked on in terrified surprise.

The line began to crumble. We were of course trained to fight without our centurion, but we were still not prepared for this. Gauls began to break through as men died in shock or retreated. I was near to retreat when suddenly someone grabbed me by the shoulders. "EGNATIUS!!" roared a familiar voice. "You are not the type of man to run! Stand and fight!" Your father stood before me. He then turned to the other soldiers and shouted, "Do you all hear that? STAND YOUR GROUND, YOU SONS OF GOATS!" He grabbed men who had begun to run and shoved them physically back to the line. He smacked the faces of several newer soldiers who were in shock from the death of our centurion.

The line held. Your father had held the line himself, but he did not consider himself to be done yet. "We will fall back, but it will be ORDERLY!" he roared as if he were the centurion. "Move until I say halt!" I began to retreat with the man on the right and left of me. As we moved, the Gauls pressed their advantage. Their sneering faces

and shouted insults made my blood boil, but I held position. To try to stand and fight now was suicide.

We halted and began to fight again. For a moment, I thought that the line might continue to hold, but I knew it couldn't last. We had lost too many men, and your father knew that. He told us pull back because he hoped to get to some other soldiers before the line broke completely. He moved up to me and said softly, "Egnatius, I want you take half of the men back. I will stay here with half, and we will follow you before too long."

"No, Cordius," I replied. "You have a son, but I have no one. I will stay..."

"Egnatius, tell my son that I love him," said your father so quietly that I could barely hear him. "Now go!" He turned and moved to the front of the line. I wished more than anything that I could run to him and make him return to you, but I knew that he was the only one who could rally the men.

I divided up the century and took half the men back. In another minute or two, everyone who had stayed behind except your father and two other men made their way to us. We joined up with another group and continued the battle. After the Gauls were defeated, I scoured to battlefield and found your father's body. He was given a proper cremation here and honored by everyone in our century. With this letter, I have sent his ashes in a durable vase.

Vibius, you should never forget your father. Always when you look upon him remember what he did for the other men. He gave himself for us. Never forget his *virtus* (virtue).