

Lemures

By S.J.A. Turney

Caius Attius Flaccus stood in the atrium of his villa and shuddered. Something ran up his spine like an ice cube on bare flesh, making him quail and quiver on the spot.

He snarled at his own failings and took a step closer to the small impluvium pool, looking down into the gathered rainwater, disturbed by the occasional drip from the atrium's sloping tile roof. A sad, slightly misshapen, unfashionable face looked back up at him, and he resisted the urge to look away. Most often he looked away. Almost always, in fact, he looked away. For that face carried more than just a shudder.

The left ear was fine. A beautiful ear, even. A classic example that would look fitting on a statue by Myron. The right? The right was a gnarled, curled thing. A hideous misshapen item, twisted at a young age with white-hot tongs. The nose was fine but, though his eyesight was more than adequate, those orbs were hard to look at, pale and watery and with virtually no iris visible – the result of having spent the first eleven years of his life in a dark closet. His lips were thin, the bottom one jagged and mangled from all the biting where he had sobbed his woes into it, helping him to endure the endless beatings.

And his skin... his skin so pale as to be almost translucent. The only colour to him was in the veins criss-crossing that sallow parchment that coated his bones.

He was hideous.

He knew that, of course. Knew he was unsightly and monstrous in the eyes of the world. On the odd occasion that Gaius was required to step outside the sumptuous villa and into the heart of the eternal city, no matter how much he stuck to the litter and his four Numidian slaves, nor how much he played on the fact that he had been elected a pontiff this season and could cover his misshapen body and unsightly head with the white toga, the public would inevitably catch sight of him. Children would scream and women would hustle their young ones away from this despicable creature. Sometimes he wondered what he would have looked like if he'd been left to grow up like a normal boy. After all, all his deformities had been thrust upon him...

There it was again – that strange deep, guttural grating noise that had first caused him to stop as he passed through the atrium. How odd. Was one of his neighbours having works done at their villa at this time of night?

He spat reflexively at the sudden arrival of a name on his tongue and moved to another side of the small pool to look down into its damning depths.

Lucius Attius Flaccus. His father. If ever a man had needed another father, it was this poor, deformed soul. But he'd been stuck with Lucius, husband of Cornelia. He'd been a swine from the first day Caius

remembered, and likely long before then. He had, after all, killed his wife when their baby boy was not quite two years old, flying into a rage over some imagined insult and beating her to death with a bust of his illustrious grandfather, smashing her skull to a pulp so that the brains had to be cleaned from every surface in the room. The bust had been sent to be re-chiselled, because he'd hit her so hard, he'd shattered a marble nose.

His mother. The only person who could have protected him from a monster of a father. None of the slaves would help, not that many lasted more than a season before the brutal beatings robbed them of their lives.

There was that odd grinding noise again, like the quern stones of Eurysaces' bakery down the road. It really was odd. It must be coming from the direction of the Esquiline because he'd moved that way around the pool, and this time the sound was louder. Whoever it was was clearly most inconsiderate.

Outside, he could hear the traditional rites of the Lemuria being carried out in other houses. The exorcism of the restless dead from the homes of good Romans with prayers and offerings of beans. But because no good Roman could observe a religious practice without the appropriate amount of debauchery, this hallowed rite was too often carried out in haste to make way for a lavish feast and possibly an orgy with dancing girls, roasting oxen, prostitutes at a finger's beckon and all the lascivious depth of Roman nobility!

Ha! Roman nobility! Caius' father had been considered the very epitome of Roman nobility, even as the neighbours were watching buckets of his wife's brains being ferried outside and slopped into the drains.

Well Caius had carried out his own rite of exorcism three years gone, and had felt untroubled ever since. Certainly, he'd felt no urge to don a silly costume and start an orgy...

The grating again! Somehow it seemed even louder than the sounds of Rutilius' debauched get together next door.

The moon began to insist itself upon him in the dark reflection of his ruined face, and Caius moved to the third side of the impluvium pool to move out of its blinding silver light.

His seething dark heart, born of so many years of imprisonment and stygian gloom, filled with spite as he remembered the night of the casting out.

The villa owners of Rome waved their expensive Arabian incense and spoke words to the counsellor Gods, offering beans and gold – for beans alone seemed so Plebeian to some of these people. They spoke the words by rote and offered set prayers handed to them on scraps of vellum. Not one of them had met the lemures – the spirits of the restless – who supposedly haunted their houses. And so they went about it as a common ritual.

Caius had had to do it for real. His lemure had been living, breathing and swinging knotted ropes. His father had been all *too* real. And he had not used beans to exorcise him.

One night, lurking in his dark alcove, Caius had finally summoned up the strength to do something about his predicament. Eleven years of torture had been enough. He had snapped. He had gone insane, and he was lucid enough to recognise the fact. He had scraped away the mortar and removed a brick from the cellar wall, and when the slave had come to deliver his drab, pale dinner, he had hit the poor bastard with the brick, stoving in his skull. It was a bad show. The slave had really deserved saving, not a painful murder. But some things had to be done, and he had known the slave would not help him and risk offending his master. A slave rarely lasted six months in this villa.

He had emerged from the cellar with one single goal in mind. He'd found his father whipping a whore to death in his office. Caius cared not for the whore, of course, but the knowledge that his father was meting out yet more arbitrary agony had snapped his already fraying senses, and Caius had pulled an unlit torch from the wall, walked into the room, and begun the business of turning his father into a side of meat.

He had not stopped the beating until his father was utterly unrecognisable. There was not an inch of skin left unmarked, and the head had gone, now just a wet mess of pink and white splayed across the bed. The whore had died in the process, catching many of the blows meant for her abuser. Caius had slowly returned to his senses, and had begun the business of tidying up.

Curiously it had been the day of the Lemuria festival that day too, and apart from the slave assigned to feed and muck out Caius, the villa was empty of staff, leaving the master of the house alone to abuse his whore unwatched. By the time the house's major domo and the staff had returned just before First Watch the next morning, Caius had buried the smashed, pulped remains of his father and the broken whore under the flagstones of this very atrium, depositing the excess soil in the peristyle garden, along with the blood-and-brain-soaked upholstery. The room had been cleaned and dried and bore no sign of the bloody violence that had been perpetrated there, by a father against a whore, or by a son against his father. The broken slave had gone into the ground with them, and it had been a work of supreme irritation putting the brick back into the cellar wall and cramming the powdered mortar back around it, and then locking the cellar door and pushing the key back beneath it.

He had been found. He had been looked after. For three weeks the city was on alert, looking for the missing Lucius Attius Flaccus. But he had gone. Many said he had eloped with a whore, but those who knew Lucius and his dark tendencies doubted this.

Caius had been consoled. His last living relative had gone and, while he would inherit the villa, it would obviously be no replacement for a father. Idiots. If only they'd known.

Over the next half year, Caius had set his seal on his ownership of the Villa Attia. He became the master of his demesne. He treated his servants and slaves well, and they gradually overcame their fear of his physical deformities to accept him as a master with a great deal more respect than they gave his father.

There was that damned noise again! People had no consideration during a feast night. It was almost certainly late night work in the bakery. He would have such a word with Eurysaces tomorrow! The

jumped-up little ex-slave clearly did not know his boundaries.

He had changed things. He would not live in the room where his father had abused and murdered whores. He would not work in that office. The house had to be cleaned and redecorated.

But the most important change had been here in this very atrium.

For he would not have a statue of his despicable father glowering at him as he passed, standing so close to the secret burial place of the man it depicted. For Lucius had commissioned a life-sized statue of himself the year before he died, and it had stood proudly at the side of the atrium, watching as his son buried his mortal remains beneath the flags.

The statue had gone straight away, but not permanently. One never wasted good marble, after all. In response to a lifetime of abuse by the bastard, Caius had commissioned one of the better young artists of this generation to re-carve the statue into a smaller, more delicate one of Nemesis – the goddess of rightful vengeance.

He turned and smiled at Nemesis. Three years since he had buried the bodies and had that form reshaped. Three bodies, three years. Three years this very night, in fact.

His brow folded into a frown. There was something distinctly odd about the statue tonight. Perhaps it was his imagination, fuelled by the dancing lamplight? No, there was definitely something odd. For Nemesis was not a smiling goddess. And the somehow twisted face of the statue was grinning a maniacal rictus that could not in any way be described as happy. Her eyes seemed tiny and set deep in a harsh face. *This* Nemesis was, frankly, hideous. At least as hideous as he himself.

He realised far too late where he had seen those features before.

The whore!

The whore his father had been abusing. The whore he had inadvertently – yet uncaringly – beaten to death as collateral in his father's demise. The whore who was now the statue. The whore who was now Nemesis!

The marble hand closed around his throat.

Caius felt a panic the like of which he'd never before experienced. Only briefly, though. For that cold, unyielding marble hand gripped his windpipe and jerked him forward so that his head cracked against the grinning face. He chipped one marble tooth and three real ones.

He screamed.

There was no one around tonight. He always allowed the staff festival nights to themselves. And with the sheer noise emanating from other villas, no one heard or cared. He screamed and screamed, the shrieking descending first to a gurgle and then to a moan as the marble grip smashed his face into the whore's again... and again... and again.

Finally, his body twitching in what he knew to be its death throes, Caius realised the statue had let go, and he had collapsed to the ground. His remaining eye stared up in blind panicked confusion at the statue that had killed him. Once more it had reverted to its divine polished glory. It was no longer the whore his father had abused and he had beaten to death. It was Nemesis, the lady of righteous vengeance, staring down at the bloody, dying heap of her murderer.

He felt cold. In the morning, the slaves would find him again, like they had three years earlier. But this time, he would be dead, having apparently battered his own brains out on a statue that had once been his father.

With a sigh, Caius Attius Flaccus expired atop the very slab that covered his erstwhile victims.

To some extent, it was a relief.

Happy Halloween, everyone (or if you're an ancient Roman and it's March, Happy Lemuria!)