

WHO IN THE WORLD WAS THE ACROBATIC EMPRESS?

THE STORY OF THEODORA

by Robin Phillips
Illustrations by Jeff West



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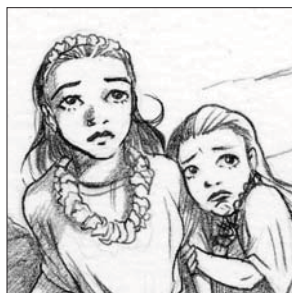
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The wooden wheel shattered into small pieces.

Chapter 1



A PLEA FOR MERCY

Shouts erupted from the crowds in Constantinople's huge arena, the Hippodrome. Tens of thousands of spectators filled the oval stadium, intent on the racecourse below them. Two charioteers, one wearing a blue helmet and the other a green helmet, drove their horses around the turn at full gallop, headed for the finish line. A loud crack came from the rear of one of the chariots. The wooden wheel shattered into small pieces. A dust cloud rose from the Hippodrome floor, and out of the cloud raced the blue-helmeted rider. He flashed towards the finish line—the winner.

Slaves carried the green-helmeted charioteer off the course. His sweating horses stumbled as they dragged the broken chariot through an open gate. His fans muttered with anger in the seats above.

Deep inside the Hippodrome, in a dingy corridor looking out toward the racecourse, two young girls listened to the voices of the spectators above them.

“Comita, help me! I can’t get my green pin to stay on,” pleaded Theodora. Her fingers frantically rubbed the steel of the green pin, trying to thread it through the sleeve of her tunic.

“It’s okay, Theodora. Calm down. As long as we follow Mother’s instructions and remember the words of the plea, we’ll be okay.” Theodora’s older sister Comita took the pin and fastened it to the shoulder of Theodora’s right sleeve.

Theodora and her sister slowly walked to the end of the corridor and looked out toward the thousands of people. The large arena was surrounded on two long sides by rows and rows of seats. People paid money to watch the chariot races and other entertainment taking place below. The two sides of the stadium, and the people who sat on each side, were named for colors. The Blues always sat on one side of the stadium and cheered for the chariot racers in blue, and the Greens cheered from the other side. Now the crowd had become silent, waiting for the next amusement. But the girls had a mission to carry out first. Their father had died not long before.

Now, Comita and Theodora were about to beg the Green fans in the crowd to give their mother their father’s old job as bearkeeper. If she could not get work, the little family would be penniless.



Deep inside the Hippodrome, in a dingy corridor looking out toward the racecourse, two young girls listened to the voices of the spectators above them.

“Here we go, Theodora. Don’t be nervous. Just follow me carefully, and do what I do.” Comita arranged the flowers in Theodora’s braided hair and gave her a garland to put around her neck. Both girls walked in to the Hippodrome. They could feel thousands of eyes staring at them. They knew to direct their plea towards one person—Asterius, their father’s old boss.

“Do you see him?” Theodora whispered, trying not to move her lips.

“He’s right in front of us, there at the center of the stands. Are you ready?”

The girls began together in perfect unison, loudly and slowly:

*Long life to you, Most Christian and gracious
Greens*

Life and Victory to you!

The girls’ voices sounded small and hollow, and they echoed in the large stadium.

O gracious Greens, we are oppressed.

Here we are, daughters of Acacius,

Who in this very stadium,

Was a bearkeeper.

Have mercy.

They continued on with the song their mother had taught them. They knew that their mother had helped their father and would do an excellent job keeping the bears. They thought the Greens would remember this, and help them.



Both girls walked into the Hippodrome. They could feel thousands of eyes staring at them.

When the girls finished their song, they knelt down before Asterius and the crowd. They pulled the garlands from their necks, and laid them on the ground. With her head still bowed, Theodora whispered to her sister, “Do you think they will accept our plea?”

The crowd was strangely silent. When Theodora had practiced this act days before, her mother had said the Greens would begin clapping, and that Asterius would look down kindly on them. But when she looked up at Asterius, Theodora did not see kindness in his face. He was looking up towards the Greens in the stadium, waiting for their reaction. They were not clapping. They were silent—and unfriendly.

After a long miserable moment, Asterius stretched out his right arm and gave a thumbs down. He would not give the job to this woman and her daughters.

Theodora thought quickly, and whispered to her sister, “I know this may not make sense, but follow me.” She got to her feet, and reached for the green pin on her right sleeve. With her left hand, she pulled it off and threw it toward Asterius and the Greens in disgust. She turned her back on them, took her older sister by the hand, and walked toward the other side of the stadium—toward the Blues.

“Theodora, what are you doing?” Comita hissed to her sister.

“The Blues will show us mercy, if only because the Greens did not—to make them look cruel!” Theodora whispered back.

“The Greens should have shown us mercy, and the Blues know that. Maybe they will give our mother the job. Maybe they will do what the Greens should have done!”

The girls turned and began again, this time more loudly and boldly:

*Long life to you, Most Christian and gracious
Blues ...*

The cheers from the Blues’ side of the stadium grew louder and louder. The girls continued to sing. Soon, the cheers of the Blues had drowned out the last boos from the Greens on the other side of the stadium.

Theodora and her sister had won their mother the job as bearkeeper for the Blues.

Chapter 2



ACTING IN THE HIPPODROME

Now that Theodora's mother was the bearkeeper, Theodora and her sister helped entertain the crowds too. They turned somersaults and acted out skits between chariot races.

One day, Theodora decided to try something new to make the crowd laugh. She and her sister would pretend to be animals.

When their mother called them out into the Hippodrome, Theodora and Comita got down on all fours and crawled out into the arena. The crowd had just seen the performing bears, so Theodora hung her head down, and let it dangle loosely from her shoulders, just the way bears did. A few laughs came from the crowd as they realized that Theodora and Comita were pretending to be the next bear act. Then Theodora and Comita stood up on their "hind legs," raising their "paws" in the air. The bears roared.