

## **HARLAN J. BERK** ESSAY CONTEST

Junior category  
Essay # 1611

**Winner** : Vittoriano Di Vaio, age 12  
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### Lucius

My name is Lucius. I am a 40 year old wealthy Roman merchant living in Gades, Hispania, under the rule of Emperor Alexander Severus. The year is 227 A.D. I come from a line of important Roman Generals. My grandfather, Maximus, was a general under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, around 160 A.D, and my father, Julius, was a general under Emperor Septimius Severus, 30 years later. I myself, however, have chosen not to live the life of a general, but rather that of a merchant. I am a powerful figure in Roman trade. I purchase exotic goods from all over the known world: carpets from Syria, ivory from Africa, perfumes and gems from Arabia, and spices from India. I then sell them in the many marketplaces I control throughout the empire. I even control a slave market in southern Greece. I own an elegant bayside villa, with gardens, fountains, many bedrooms and bathrooms, dining rooms, studies and an atrium. I live there with my wife, Flavia, and my son Maximus Secundus, named after my grandfather. Maximus is 15 years old. He is an excellent student. He is leaving for Rome tomorrow to study law. It will take him 9 days by ship to reach Ostia, the Roman port. It is the first time my son will travel so far, and be away for so long. I am worried, but I want my son to live his own life. I hope he will travel safely.

Right now, Maximus is passing by my study. “Maximus,” I call. “I want to give you something: A brass sestertius, minted in 167 A.D, almost 50 years ago, to celebrate the Roman victory in the Parthian war. It was given to my grandfather for honorable fighting by the emperor Marcus Aurelius himself.” It is a beautiful portrait of the emperor, but the back of the coin was most meaningful to my grandfather. The figure of Victory advancing, holding a wreath and a palm leaf, symbolizes my grandfather’s accomplishments. The wreath symbolizes victory, the palm represents peace. Maximus is fascinated. “Father,” he asks. “I want to know the entire story.” I think for a moment and reply, “very well, my son. I will take you back 50 years, to Armenia, to the war your great grandfather fought and won.”

General Maximus was a strong, experienced fighter, and a great leader. He fought honorably in battles as a common legionary, and worked his way to becoming an officer. He was then dubbed general, after several displays of honor and loyalty. He was a public hero, and admired by all, even his superiors. Around 160 A.D, he was asked by emperor Marcus Aurelius to summon the army, attack the Parthians and regain total control of Armenia. He was second in rank only to Marcus Aurelius’s adopted brother, Lucius

Verus. Marcus Aurelius had sent a messenger to deliver battle plans to Lucius Verus, who commanded Maximus to attack the Parthian settlement. His troops consisted of several legions of cavalry and infantry. Already, he could see the enemy approaching, and drawing nearer by the second. Following Marcus Aurelius's tactics, he ordered his cavalry to stay along the wings of his infantry. He then commanded the infantry to gather into the *orbis*, a formation in which several soldiers marched side by side in a square made of shields, covering themselves from all sides. This made them impossible to hit until they reached the enemy. While the Parthian archers were preoccupied with the impenetrable soldiers, Maximus commanded his cavalry to attack the Parthian army. The legionaries used the gladius (short sword) as a quick and fierce weapon, and the Parthians were stunned. General Maximus and his troops were able to overthrow the Parthian army and reclaim Armenia for Rome. After that, he achieved several other significant victories against the Parthians, and ended the war in 163 A.D. He returned to Rome famous and was honored by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. He was given a good pension, and 4 years later, received the first mint of Marcus Aurelius's coin, an honor beyond his imagination. The coin was as magnificent then as it is today, maybe even more. He would proudly wear it around his neck. In early January, 164 A.D, Maximus died of a terrible plague brought upon Rome by the soldiers returning from Armenia. On his deathbed, he passed on the coin to my father, Julius. "What a story," my son exclaims. "My son," I answer, "the story is not nearly finished."

In early January 193 A.D, Emperor Pertinax was murdered, and Didius Julianus was proclaimed his successor, only to be killed by Septimius Severus, the new emperor of Rome. However, the governor of Syria (a Roman Province in the Middle East), Pescennius Niger declared war on Rome, to take the throne for himself. This marked the beginning of the civil war. My father, Julius, was a youthful man and had fought several wars under the rule of his father, General Maximus. He was an experienced warrior, and was asked by Emperor Severus to fight the eastern rebellion for him. Julius was proclaimed General, in recognition of his father's loyalty to the Empire. Governor Niger had taken control of Byzantium, and was sending troops to fight the Romans in Nicaea, near Byzantium (Turkey). My father was in control of an army stationed on the Asian shore of the Propontis (Sea of Marmara), and was preparing to fight the eastern traitors. His legions included loyal friends of his father, General Maximus. Julius was wearing the brass sestertius around his neck. It was his pride, and the only remembrance of his father. The Byzantine war formation was more or less like that of the Romans, with the infantry in the center and the cavalry on the wings. Julius decided to send his infantry and cavalry out to the enemy, and then send half of his army to both sides of the Byzantines. The tactic worked perfectly. The Romans surrounded the Byzantines from the front, and the left and right sides, so the only option of the Byzantines was to flee south. The Romans and my father emerged victorious. Niger, however, was not killed.

In January, 194 A.D, my father began a military campaign throughout the eastern empire and in the name of Emperor Severus, took control of Bithynia (Roman Province in Turkey). In late spring, 194 A.D, my father Julius once again encountered Niger, this time near Issus (Syria). Niger and his supporters were determined to regain the land they had

lost, and destroy the Roman army that was pursuing them. However, Niger and his troops were once again defeated by my father and his army. In the battle, Niger's remaining army collapsed. After experiencing a second defeat, he fled farther south. After the war, my father pacified Syria, and continued his pursuit of Governor Niger. After months of searching, General Julius finally found Niger in Antioch (Syria), and killed him. This ended the civil war. My father was undefeated, and was considered invincible. He had done his job, but Emperor Severus asked one more thing of him. The city of Byzantium stubbornly refused to admit defeat, and give in to western authority, so General Julius was asked to convince the Byzantines to surrender. It had been a year, and still Byzantium did not shift sides, until my father became impatient and threatened the city using his army. The Byzantines finally gave up, but the Emperor, as punishment for their stubbornness, ordered Julius to destroy their city walls. He and his army destroyed the walls of Byzantium, and returned home. My father was proud. He had survived a dangerous war, and now believed that this had something to do with the coin around his neck; he was more convinced of the "powers" of the coin. The figure of victory truly meant victory for those who had it. "How did you get the coin?" my son asks. "I will tell you," I reply.

After all his adventures, my father was granted a sum of money from the Emperor, and received a house in Hispania (Spain) as a gift. There, he married a beautiful woman, and they had a son. When I was a boy, I thought my father's tales of war were fascinating. As I grew up, I came to fear war, because to me, it meant almost certain death. But under Roman law, all men of age 16 to 46 had to serve in the army during a time of war, and I constantly feared the day someone would come and take me away. But that day did not come, because there were no wars that required troops from all over the empire, and there were no wars in Hispania when I was a teenager. I eventually gave up on the fact that I would serve in the military and became a merchant. I traveled around the empire, collecting gifts and foods from all the places I visited. I went to the places where my father and grandfather once fought. I saw the world. Then, one day, my father caught a fever and passed away. Before he died, he gave me a coin: the brass sestertius of Marcus Aurelius. The story behind it was as rich as the portraits of both Marcus Aurelius and Victory. My father told me all about where it came from, and how it came to him, as his father had done before him.

My father also left me all of his, and his father's money. With this money, I took control of the local marketplace. The port of Gades was an important commercial port, and I began receiving goods shipped from across the empire. I had many men working for me. Soon, I became rich. I took control of other local marketplaces, and started opening trading routes and roads all over the empire. Years passed, and men from the Roman army came to Gades to recruit Roman soldiers, but none were too humble to refuse my bribes. By bribing officers, I was able to avoid war and continue my life as a merchant. I figured the coin on my neck might not only mean military victories, but economic victories. "I had no idea a coin could mean so much!" my son exclaims.

"Now, I want you to have it," I tell him. "You leave tomorrow. Take it for good luck, and a safe voyage." I hold out my hand, with the coin in it. My son thanks me, takes

the coin, and leaves the room. I am very proud of what I have done with my life. I wish for my son to live a long life and tell his story, my story, and those of our heroic family of generals to his children when he gives the coin to them. To our family, this little brass coin symbolizes good luck, luck that is passed on for generations to make us victorious, whatever we choose to be; generals, merchants, or lawyers.