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Story of the day:

The Boy with the Burnt Hand

The old men were gathered together, high up in the citadel overlooking the walls of the city. Outside of the walls they could see the smoke of campfires rising from the ground. Around every fire there were men. They were soldiers – enemy soldiers. Somewhere in all those fields was the tent of the king who was leading the attack.

“Quirinius,” said one of the old men to his friends near him, “the food is running short. What shall we do?” In one direction all the hills and plains were black, not green. The enemy had set fire to the grain and the grasses for pasture. The enemy could afford to wait. Whatever food there was, they were devouring. The people huddled inside the city walls could starve, for all they cared.

“It seems, Collatinus, that Porsena is leaving us with three choices. We can wait here and starve. We can strike forth, far outnumbered, and be cut to pieces. Or we can surrender.”

“Never surrender!” cried out a young lad

who was standing near, listening to the old men and their sad talk. His eyes were flashing with anger.

“We do not need to hear from mere boys,” said Quirinius. “Your place is to listen, not talk.”

“When the old men are talking about surrender,” said the boy, “then the young men



have to speak instead!”

“What do you recommend, then, Mucius?” said Collatinus, who was not yet too old to remember what it was like to have a young man’s fire. “Are you going to be our new general and lead in battle men twice your age? You have some strategy to make one Roman worth ten of these soldiers of Etruria?”

“No, sir,” said the boy, blushing. “I know I don’t have the knowledge for that. But I do know this. I can get to the king, myself. *I can kill Porsena.*”

Now it was Quirinus’ turn to soften. “Lad,” he said, “don’t talk foolishness. You will be cut to ribbons before you get near him. Do not throw away your life for nothing.”

“Sir,” said Mucius, “I grew up in those woods and fields. I know every path, every tree, every rock, every hill. Those soldiers don’t. I speak Etruscan as well as I speak honest Latin. I swear,” he said, holding his hand above his head, “by the great Divine Father, the Best and Greatest, the Stayer of Flight, that I will kill Porsena even if it means that I must die for it. Without their king, they will leave us in peace.”

The two men looked at one another. There was something to what the boy said. Without Porsena at the head, the army would melt away, going back to their own farms to mind their business.

“May the god of war make your arm like steel,” said Quirinus.

So in the dead of night Mucius climbed up over a part of the wall facing away from the enemies, picking his way by finger-holds and toe-holds, and then sneaking like a cat, here and there, barefoot, clothed in a short skin-robe, to blend in with the wood and the dead grass. Tucked inside his robe lay a dagger nine inches long. The handle felt cold against his chest. It was a constant reminder of what he had to do.

Sometimes a boy can get around where a grown person can’t, because he’s lighter of foot, and because nobody pays him much

attention. That’s what Mucius was counting on. He knew that when day broke he would be spotted. He just had to appear like one of the kids hanging on to the Etruscan army – there were many of those, whom the soldiers used for tending the cattle or carrying water. And it helped that he could speak the language.

Finally he came to a clearing. It was full of armed men, and right in their midst, sitting upon a throne, was a man giving orders to the

soldiers. Mucius listened closely. The captains received their instructions, made a low bow, and went straight to carry them out, one by one.

“That has to be King Porsena,” he said to himself.

But what to do? He couldn’t wait till the man was alone, and if he did anything now, the crowd would be sure to seize him. He would never see another day.

“What has to be done, has to be done,” said Mucius, and he slipped the dagger out of his robe, rushed up to the man on the throne, and buried it in his chest, killing him instantly.

Shouts went up all around as the soldiers grabbed Mucius, and suddenly, from a tent nearby, came a tall man whose very presence said he was a man of authority. He sat upon the throne. The man whom Mucius had killed was not King Porsena. It was his secretary. This was the king.

“Plant a stake and build a fire,” said the king, looking at the boy. “Son,” he said, “your deed will cost you your life.” The boy was slender and tall, with dark skin and glossy black hair. It was a shame to kill him, Porsena thought, but what has to be done, has to be done. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I do,” said Mucius. The fire was burning high. “I do not regret giving my life for my

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country. But you, King Porsena, should know this,” and he took his right hand and thrust it into the fire. “We Romans are not like other people. We will never surrender. You may have caught me, but I am only one,” he said. The fire had caught his hand, and the people roundabout could smell the burning flesh. Mucius fixed the king in his eye and never once looked at his hand. The pain was beyond anything he could have imagined, but he did not care.

“I am only one!” he cried. “After me there will come another, and another, and still another, and we will not give up, O king, until one of us has succeeded. That is the courage of a Roman!”

The king looked upon the lad with real admiration. He bowed his head and considered. Porsena was not a man of fear.

“Let the lad go,” he said to his soldiers. “Let him have safe conduct back to his city. It is only right to recognize such courage, and such love of country.”

So they did. They bound up his hand, which was black and useless, and sent him on his way. He returned to the city and told everyone what had happened, and he showed the hand. The burn would heal, but the muscles and nerves never did.

The Romans treated Mucius like a hero, and they and their descendants would celebrate his memory forever. They gave the boy a nickname that would remind everyone of his

brave deed: Scaevola. That nickname became a family name, a name of honor. If you were called Scaevola, it meant that you were a descendant of this brave lad.

Scaevola means *Lefty!*

You can read this story, and many others like it, in the *History of Rome*, written by Titus Livy, in the years just before Jesus was born. The Romans were not always good people, but they were not cowards, and they did bring law and order wherever they went.



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