



## *Victoires* (traduction en anglais)

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# EPI-REVEL

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## **“Victoires”**

*(a translation)*

**Graham Dallas\***

I for one don't give a fig about the Cimbrians and the Teutons, when handling my brushes, but I must be sure that they came since they did indeed come, damn it !

Paul Cézanne

Everything had begun, that October morning, with a dull rumbling coming in from the west. Along with the rumbling came a great cloud of dust swirling nearer and nearer, although there was no sign heralding a storm. The only explanation, especially after the long summer drought, was that a troop of horsemen was arriving, even if I had never hitherto observed a phenomenon of this size. Yet nothing that happens around here can escape my notice. I unroll my rocky ridges above several vast plains, in particular the one over which the Via Aurelia had been staked out. The road linked Rome to the Terraconnaise region, and an endless stream of men, horsemen and wagons travelled along it. But normally when such a mighty sound was to be heard, it was because there was a storm. After all, it's surely no coincidence if men have always associated me with the wind – I was already “Vint” for the tribes who lived around here before the Celts. That morning, one might well wonder if the noise didn't have something to do with the distant din that had been heard three days before in the vicinity of the Roman camp of Aquae Sextiae and which might well have been the noise of battle. And indeed, the day before, I had watched the arrival of a powerful Roman army, but I hadn't given it much thought since it was such a routine event for legions to use this major route when moving from place to place. Strangely enough, despite their numbers and the presence of cavalry, they made remarkably little noise, and it was in relative silence that they set up camp in the east, on a small hill overlooking the plain. Yet it had seemed to me that they took greater care than usual in organising their entrenchments, and that night, around the campfires, no shouts, no songs rang out, a sign that there was a certain tension in the air.

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The dust cloud had come closer and had now reached the plain lying beneath me. Suddenly the wind changed direction, blowing the cloud away and revealing a great jumbled mass of horses and horsemen advancing in disorder, quite the opposite of the military discipline of the Romans. The wind also wafted towards me a few snatches of their shouts – it was a guttural, incomprehensible language, which had never been spoken hereabouts. It was now becoming clear that this turbulent troop of horsemen could only be the vanguard of the nomadic populations of Teutons from the North. The conversations I had been overhearing for years around here kept harking back to that enormous mass of human beings who pillaged and looted everything on their way in order to get food. It wasn't really an army, but rather a mingling of tribes consisting of warriors, women, children, cattle and heavy wagons. As they had to put their animals out to graze, they could move only very slowly, and they left nothing behind when they moved on. Thirteen years had passed now since those whom the Romans considered to be barbarians had left their distant homelands and nobody knew what their real intentions were. They seemed to be looking for a place to settle, but so quickly did they exhaust the resources of the region that they never stopped for long in the same spot. Nonetheless they only did battle with the Romans when the latter barred their way. Countless are the stories I have heard about the three great battles in which the Romans had been put to rout! The last time was three years ago. The nomads found themselves faced with two Roman armies near the river that was then called Rhodanus. They parleyed, asked for right of way to the South and it was agreed that ambassadors should be sent to Rome to seek the Senate's advice. When the latter refused to accord right of way, conflict became inevitable, and at least twelve legions (the two Roman armies) were one after the other cut to pieces because their generals couldn't see eye to eye

I learned later what the consequences of this humiliating defeat had been, when, one evening, a legion camped at the foot of one of my cliffs and the conversation of the officers floated up to me. In that critical situation, Rome had called on general Caius Marius, recently victorious in Africa, who had been re-elected consul, although the law required an interval of ten years between two mandates. It was now two years since Marius had landed at Massilia – now called Marseilles – and the endless preparations he had ordered to be made for the great confrontation had become the talk of the whole region. He had entirely reorganised the Roman armies, improved their weaponry and their methods for obtaining supplies. In the province, he had built waterways so that boats from Ostia and Marseilles could carry their cargo as far as Arelate, which is now Arles, and even to Ernaginum farther to the North. In fact, the importance of the arrangements made by Marius was in proportion to the opposition he was facing, and I had on several

occasions heard an astounding account concerning the migrant forces. One day Marius had set up camp on a hill not far from the Rhodanus. From there he had been able to watch the nomads pass by, and the story had it that it had taken six whole days in the summer of 102 for them to pass. Later the tribes had separated into two large groups, the Cimbrians moving northwards and the Teutons southwards. Taking all that into consideration, it seemed to me that the approaching horsemen must form the vanguard of the second group.

As for the distant din that had been heard three days before, it must have come from an initial skirmish with the Roman army now encamped in the east of the plain. However that may be, the nomadic horsemen had prudently come to a halt a little way from the Roman camp, on the edge of a vast open space to the north of the river. The Roman lookouts kept watch on them, but in the camp itself, all was feverish activity, for the soldiers, to a man, were busy reinforcing their defences.

As was to be expected, the first wagons arrived in the early afternoon, and for hours they poured into the space where the horsemen had preceded them. Never could I have imagined that there might exist such a huge mass of people gathered together. They settled down in an indescribable jumble of wagons, tents, and campfires, with children running all over the place and cattle in relative liberty, while a confused multitude of noises rose up to me. What struck me too, confirming the rumours I had heard, was the huge size of the nomads when compared to that of the Romans. All the same, it was clear that the warriors were making no provocative moves, and acted as if the Roman camp did not exist. The following day, nothing happened. The legionaries went on reinforcing their positions. As for the Teutons, they gave the impression that they wanted to rest and take advantage of this river bordering their encampment. At one point they sent some emissaries on horseback to the Roman camp, where they were received, but of course I couldn't hear what was said in the secret of Marius' tent.

Night fell. It took a certain time for calm to settle in the Teuton encampment, while a great silence prevailed among the Romans. At one point, glints on weapons and breastplates revealed that several thousands of legionaries were massing in the darkness near the east gate, out of sight of the Teutons. Then they silently slipped out and under the cover of the woods: it looked very much as if an ambush was being laid. In fact, the battle took place the following day. At the crack of dawn, the Teutons, eager to do battle, rushed to attack the Roman camp, without giving the legions time to be deployed in the plain. It wasn't the right choice of tactic, since the Teutons, attacking up the slope, were always positioned lower down than the Romans. First the legionaries pinned them down under a shower of javelins, then they advanced and, in hand-to-hand combat, exterminated the remaining survivors of this first attack. Meanwhile the Roman cavalry left

the camp by the south gate and, hidden by a hillside, advanced without being seen. The legionaries then began to move forward in the plain in two long lines, one behind the other. At that point, the bulk of the Teuton army attacked the lines right in the very centre in order to break them up, a tactic that had worked so well for them in earlier battles. That was when Marius' new strategy bore fruit. Thus, despite their greater numerical strength, the Teutons never managed to outnumber the Romans in the front line of the battle, because the Romans always endeavoured to limit it to one single line, the legionaries taking turns to relay each other after a certain period of fighting. As for the Teutons, they had no tactic at all and, in fact, the non-combatants in the rear involuntarily pushed to their death those of their comrades who were in the front line. Furthermore, they needed room to move in because of the length of their swords, and room was indeed what they didn't have that day, whereas the short broadsword that Marius had forced all his legionaries to use proved particularly effective in this close hand-to-hand fighting. When the Roman cavalry had skirted round the battlefield and attacked the Teutons from the rear, a real bloodbath began. All day long, shouts and the clash of arms echoed on my cliff walls. Late in the afternoon, some Teuton horsemen regrouped and tried to escape through the narrow pass to the North. Going by their rich gear, they seemed to be chiefs, and perhaps the famous king, Teutobodus, was among them. But Marius had had the pass sealed off early that morning by Marcellus' cohorts, and the fugitives were easily captured. That evening, the plain was strewn with tens of thousands of corpses, the equivalent of fifteen Roman legions. After the deafening din that had prevailed for hours came a relative calm, broken only by the cries of the wounded that the Romans hadn't had time to finish off. For their part, their losses amounted to only a few hundred dead, and they retired to their camp for the night.

The following morning, four of the five cohorts of Marcellus that hadn't fought and had remained in ambush, were sent down into the plain to do the terrible business. Every nomad – woman, child, old man – who could not be considered as a potential slave, every wounded warrior, perished by the swords of the infantrymen. More than a hundred thousand perhaps even two hundred thousand nomads died over these two days of slaughter. Many women preferred to kill themselves rather than be raped and reduced to slavery. Those who had been spared were put under the guard of Marcellus' cohorts and the following day, sent to Marseilles before being shipped to Rome.

When the Romans broke camp, they left behind them several cohorts to clean up the battlefield. It took them almost a month. First they salvaged everything that could be, to send it back to Rome, in particular metals, and they rounded up the scattered cattle. Then they organised the cremation ceremony for the legionaries who had been killed in action. In the end, the

stink having become unbearable, they lit a huge pyre to burn the corpses. Even today the people living on the plain say that the name of their village comes from the smell of putrefaction that pervaded the region for a long time.

A month had passed. Marius had personally returned to light the pyre. At one point during the ceremony a ripple ran through the crowd when four horsemen arrived. They made their way to Marius and one of them handed him a message. Upon reading it, he announced that he had just been appointed consul for the fifth time. The soldiers cheered him at length without caring much about whether the appointment was legal or not. But it was clear that Rome couldn't do without Marius, for the Cimbrians were still a menace to the city. The proof of that was the words "terror cimbricus" that I often heard uttered by the legionaries. So Marius was sent northwards to stop them and he won the battle in the same way as he had done here. The men think back on Marius as a general who had been in command in two of the most bloody battles in the history of Rome, but for the inhabitants of Marseilles and Rome he remained the man who saved them from destruction. You need only look at the number of men around here who have borne his name over the centuries.

Strangely enough, as for my present-day name, it has nothing to do with Marius' victory over the Teutons, but was attributed to me much later in honour of a great sea battle won by the Christian nations over the Turks. Nonetheless I have never been able to forget that bloody episode that took place on the plain below me. On stormy nights I think I can still hear the cries of the women and the children having their throats slit. In order to silence these cries and not to lose faith in men, I turn to the memory of silent but intense encounters with another man, a painter.

Our first meeting took place more than a century ago, when man had begun the great work of building their railways. I sensed something like an interrogation coming from the west and rising up to me. Far away down there, a painter was standing in front of his easel on the other side of a cutting for the railway. He was engrossed by what was before him, but now and again his eyes would look towards me with an intensity that I had never seen before. Then, quickly, he would look back down again. It was as if there were some obstacle between us, some kind of void that he was not yet capable of filling.

Fifteen years elapsed before I experienced the same feeling, and this time it came from the south. For a few weeks I felt his gaze, which, from behind his easel, swept along the whole length of my crest. Actually, the fact that such a position had been adopted was revelatory of the desire to take evasive action, all the more so as the easel had been set up reassuringly near houses. It was only progressively that he chose a direct confrontation with the great cliff from which I look down on the plain. He first chose a position

behind a screen of trees – pines growing in front of an aqueduct, or chestnut trees in a distant property. Later I discovered the painter at work beneath big trees which no longer formed a screen but which he probably must have been using as a frame for his painting.

Over the following years it appeared to me that the painter, for ever on the look-out for a good position, kept setting up his easel closer and closer to me. He was now no longer very young but I could easily recognise his somewhat thickset figure, and in summer he wore a big straw hat to protect him from the sun while in winter he was dressed in a sort of loose greatcoat.

One day I was surprised to see him with a little group of friends climbing up one of the paths leading to my highest point. It was the first time that I had heard his voice and I noticed that his manner of speaking was surprisingly jovial. He was for ever joking and expressed great content at still being able to climb up these slopes at his age. He kept repeating: "Here I am right on my model", adding with a roar of laughter "Much good it'll do me. You can't see anything close up." And sometimes he would encourage his companions with: "Onward to the Promised Land!" and they would reply with shouts of: "Go to it, Moses!" All that must have been part of their habitual joking.

After that memorable excursion, he seemed to be sufficiently sure of himself to do without intermediaries and foreground elements. In a way he had emerged from beneath the trees to start up a private conversation with me, a conversation in which he alone knew the questions and received the answers. With the years he no longer came and spent the night in the *cabanons* he had around here, but had himself driven here in a cart. When his short beard began to turn white, he may have come less frequently, but nonetheless he kept painting without respite. He preferred to remain close to the studio he now owned on a hill above the town. From there he could haughtily ignore all the scenery down below and merely gaze at me, a gaze that was no longer the uncertain one of the early days, but one seeking confirmation, only to immerse itself lengthily in the composition of his artwork

