

CHAPTER X

WHEN I came of age, Tiberius had lately been ordered by Augustus to adopt Germanicus as his son, though he already had Castor as an heir, thus bringing him over from the Claudian into the Julian family. I now found myself head of the senior branch of the Claudians and in indisputable possession of the money and estates inherited from my father. I became my mother's guardian—for she had never married again—which she felt as a humiliation. She treated me with rather more severity than before, though all business documents had to come to me for signature and I was the family priest. My coming of age ceremony contrasted curiously with that of Germanicus. I put on my manly-gown at midnight and without any attendants or procession was carried into the Capitol in a sedan, where I sacrificed and was then carried back to bed. Germanicus and Postumus would have come, but in order to call as little attention to me as possible Livia had arranged a banquet that night at the Palace which they could not be excused from attending.

When I married Urgulanilla, the same sort of thing happened. Very few people were aware of our marriage until the day after it had been solemnized. There was nothing irregular about the ceremony. Urgulanilla's saffron-coloured shoes and flame-coloured veil, the taking of the auspices, the eating of holy cake, the two stools covered with sheepskin, the libation I poured, the anointing by her of the doorposts, the three coins, my present to her of fire and water—everything was in order, except that the torchlight procession was omitted and that the whole performance was carried through

perfunctorily and hurriedly and with bad grace. In order not to stumble over her husband's threshold the first time she enters, a Roman bride is always lifted over it. The two Claudians who had to do the lifting were both elderly men and unequal to Urgulanilla's weight. One of them slipped on the marble and Urgulanilla came down with a bump, pulling them with her in a sprawling heap. There is no wedding omen worse than that. And yet it would be untrue to say that it turned out an unhappy marriage; there was not enough strain between us to justify the term unhappy. We slept together at first because that seemed expected of us, and even occasionally had sexual relations—my first experience of sex—because that too seemed part of marriage, and not from either lust or affection. I was always as considerate and courteous to her as possible and she rewarded me by indifference, which was the best that I could hope from a woman of her character. She became pregnant three months after our marriage and bore me a son called Drusillus, for whom I found it impossible to have any fatherly feeling. He took after my sister Livilla in spitefulness and after Urgulanilla's brother Plautius in the rest of his character. Soon I shall tell you about Plautius, who was my moral exemplar and paragon, appointed by Augustus.

Augustus and Livia had a methodical habit of never coming to any decision on any important matter relating to the family or the State without recording in writing both the decision and the deliberations that led up to it, usually in the form of letters exchanged between each other. From the mass of correspondence left behind them on their deaths I have made transcripts of several which illustrate Augustus's attitude to me at this time. My first extract is dated three years before my marriage.

“MY DEAR LIVIA,

“I wish to put on record a strange thing that happened to-day. I hardly know what to make of it. I was talking to Athenodorus and happened to say to him: ‘I fear that

tutoring young Tiberius Claudius must be rather a weary task. He seems to me to grow daily more miserable-looking and nervous and incapable.' Athenodorus said: 'Don't judge the boy too harshly. He feels most keenly the family's disappointment in him and the slights that he everywhere meets. But he's very far from incapable and, believe it or not, I get great pleasure from his society. You never heard him declaim, did you?' 'Declaim!' I said, laughing. 'Yes, declaim,' Athenodorus repeated. 'Now let me make a suggestion. You set a subject for declamation and in half an hour's time come and hear what he makes of it. But hide behind a curtain or you'll hear nothing worth listening to.' I set for a subject 'Roman Conquests in Germany' and, listening half an hour later behind that curtain, I have never been so astonished before in my life. He had his facts at his fingers' ends, his main headings were well chosen, and his detail set in proper relation and proportion to them; more than this, his voice was under control and *he did not stammer*. God strike me dead if it wasn't positively pleasant and instructive to listen to him! But how a fellow whose daily conversation is so hopelessly foolish can make a set speech, at short notice too, in so perfectly rational and even learned a style is beyond me. I slipped away, telling Athenodorus not to mention that I had been there or how surprised I had been, but feel obliged to tell you of the matter, and even to suggest that we might henceforth occasionally allow him to dine with us at night, when there are few guests there, on the understanding that he keeps his mouth shut and his ears open. If there is, after all, as I am inclined to think, some hope that he will eventually turn out a responsible member of the family, he ought to be gradually accustomed to mix with his social equals. We can't keep him shut away with his tutors and freedmen for ever. There is, of course, great division of opinion on the question of his mental capacities. His uncle Tiberius, his mother Antonia and his sister Livilla, are unanimous in regarding him as an idiot. On the other side, Athenodorus, Sulpicius, Postumus

and Germanicus swear that he's as sensible, when he wishes, as any man but that he's easily put off his balance by nervousness. As for myself, I repeat that I cannot make up my mind on the matter yet."

To which Livia replied:

"MY DEAR AUGUSTUS,

"The surprise that you had behind that curtain was no greater and no less than the surprise we once had when the Indian Ambassador took the silk cloth off the gold cage which his master the High King had sent us, and we saw the bird Parrot for the first time with his emerald feathers and ruby necklet and heard him say, 'Hail Cæsar, Father of the Country!' It was not the remarkableness of the phrase, for any little lisping child can say as much, but that a *bird* spoke it astonished us. And nobody but a fool would praise Parrot for his wit in coming out with the appropriate words, for he did not know the meaning of any one of them. The credit goes to the man who trained the bird, by incredible patience, to repeat the phrase, for, as you know, on other occasions he is trained to say other things; and in general conversation he talks the most arrant nonsense and we have to keep his cage covered to silence him. So with Claudius, though it is hardly complimentary to Parrot, an undeniably handsome bird, to compare my grandson to him: what you heard was without the least doubt a speech that he had happened to learn by heart. After all, 'Roman Conquests in Germany' is a very obvious subject, and Athenodorus may well have made him word-perfect in half a dozen or more model declamations of the same sort. Mind you, I don't say that I'm not pleased to hear that he is so amenable to training: I am extremely pleased. It means, for instance, that we shall be able to coach him through his marriage-ceremony. But your suggestion about his supping with us is ridiculous. I refuse ever to eat in the same room as that fellow: it would give me indigestion.

"As for the testimony in favour of his mental soundness, examine it. Germanicus as a child swore to his dying father to love and protect his infant brother: you know Germanicus's nobility of soul and that rather than betray this sacred trust he would make out the best case possible for his brother's wits, hoping that they might happen one day to improve. It is equally clear why Athenodorus and Sulpicius pretend to consider him improvable: they are very well paid to improve him and their appointments give them an excuse for hanging about the Palace and giving themselves airs as privy counsellors. As for Postumus, I have been complaining now for some months past, haven't I, that I cannot understand that young man at all. I consider that Death has been extremely unkind to take off his two talented brothers and leave us only him. He delights in starting an argument with his seniors, where no argument is necessary, the facts being clearly beyond dispute, merely to exasperate us and show his own importance as your single surviving grandson. His championship of Claudius's intelligence is a case in point. He was positively insolent to me the other day when I happened to remark that Sulpicius was wasting his time in tutoring the boy: he actually said that in his opinion Claudius had more penetration than most of his immediate relatives—which I suppose was intended to include me! But Postumus is another problem. For the moment the question is about Claudius; and I cannot, I repeat, have him dining in my company—for physical reasons, which I hope you will appreciate.

"LIVIA."

He wrote to Livia a year later, when she was away for a few days in the country:

". . . As for young Claudius I shall take advantage of your absence to invite him to supper every night. I admit that his presence still embarrasses me, but I do not think it good for him always to sup alone with his Sulpicius and Athenodorus. The talk he has with them is too purely

bookish and, excellent fellows though they both are, they are not ideal companions for a boy of his age and station. I do sincerely wish that he would choose some young man of rank on whose bearing and dress and behaviour he might model his own. But his timidity and diffidence prevent this. He has a hero-worship for our dear Germanicus, but feels his own shortcomings so keenly that he would no more dare to imitate him than I would go about in lion's skin and club and call myself Hercules. The poor creature is unfortunate; for in matters of importance (when his mind is not wool-gathering) the nobility of his heart is clearly shown. . . ."

A third letter written shortly after my marriage, when I had just been nominated as a priest of Mars, is also of interest:

"MY DEAR LIVIA,

"As you advised me, I have discussed with our Tiberius what we are to do about young Claudius when these Games in honour of Mars are held. Now that he has come of age and been appointed to the vacancy in the College of the Priests of Mars we cannot put off our decision with regard to his future much longer: we agree about that, do we not? If he is sufficiently sound in mind and body to be eventually recognized as a reputable member of the family—as I believe he is, or I would not have adopted both Tiberius and Germanicus and left him as head of the senior branch of the Claudian house—then obviously he should be taken in hand and given the same opportunities for advancement as Germanicus. I admit that I may still be mistaken—his recent improvement has not been striking. But if we decide that, after all, the infirmities of his body are bound up with a settled infirmity of mind, we must not give malicious people a chance of making fun of him and us. I repeat, we must decide pretty quickly once and for all about the lad—if only because we would find it a continual trouble and

embarrassment if we had to decide afresh on every occasion that presented itself whether or not we considered him able to undertake those duties of State for which his birth befits him.

"Well, the immediate question is, what to do about him at these Games. I would have no objection to his being put in charge of the priests' mess-room, but on the strict understanding that he leaves everything to his brother-in-law, young Plautius Silvanus, and merely does what he is told. He could learn a good deal in this way and there is no reason for him to disgrace himself if he learns his lesson well. But of course it is out of the question for him to sit with me in the President's Box, along with the sacred Statue, for everybody in the theatre will constantly be looking in that direction and any oddities in his behaviour will be commented upon.

"Another problem is what to do with him at the Latin Festival. Germanicus is going to the Alban Hill with the Consuls to take part in the sacrifice and Claudius wishes, I understand, to go with him. But there again I am not sure whether he can be trusted not to make a fool of himself: Germanicus will be busy with his duties and unable to look after him all the time. And if he does go people will want to know what he's doing there in any case; they will ask why we have not appointed him to act as City Warden at Rome for the duration of the festival, in the absence of the magistrates—an honour which, you will recall, we have granted in turn to Gaius, Lucius, Germanicus, young Tiberius and Postumus, as soon as they came of age, as their first taste of office. The best way out of the difficulty is to report him sick because, of course, the City Wardenship is out of the question for him.

"If you care to show Antonia this letter I have no objection: assure her that we shall soon decide one way or the other about her son. It is an incongruous position for her to be legally under his guardianship.

"AUGUSTUS."

Except that it was my first public duty there is nothing remarkable to record about my management of the priests' mess. Plautius, a vain, natty little cock-sparrow of a man, did all the work for me and did not even trouble to explain the catering system and the rules of priestly precedence; even refused to answer my questions about such matters. All he did was to drill me in certain formal gestures and phrases which I was to use on welcoming the priests, and at various stages of the meal; and forbade me to say another word. This was extremely uncomfortable for me because frequently I could have taken a useful part in the conversation, and my dumbness and subservience to Plautius gave a bad impression. The games themselves I did not see.

You will have noticed Livia's disparaging remarks about Postumus. From this time on they grow more and more frequent in her letters and Augustus, though at first he tries to stand up for his grandson, gradually admits disappointment in him. I think that Livia must have told Augustus a good deal more than appears in their correspondence, for Postumus to have forfeited his favour so easily; but certain definite things appear. First, Tiberius is reported by Livia as complaining of an impudent reference by Postumus to the University of Rhodes. Then Cato is reported by her as complaining of Postumus's bad influence on the younger scholars in defying his discipline; then Livia produces Cato's confidential reports, saying that she has held them back so long in hope of a change. Next come worried references to his moroseness and sullenness—this was the time of Postumus's disappointment over Livilla and his grief for the death of his brother Gaius. Then there is a recommendation, when he comes of age, that the whole of his inheritance from his father Agrippa shall not be made over to him for a few years, because that "might give him opportunities for even greater profligacy than he now indulges in!" When he is enrolled among the young men of military age he is posted to the Guards as a simple staff-lieutenant and given none of the extraordinary honours awarded to Gaius and Lucius.

Augustus himself is of opinion that this is the safest course to take, for Postumus is ambitious: the same sort of uncomfortable situation must not arise as when the young nobles supported Marcellus against Agrippa or Gaius against Tiberius. Soon we read that Postumus takes this ill, telling Augustus that he does not want the honours on their own account but that their being withheld has been misinterpreted by his friends, who believe him under a cloud at the Palace.

Then follow more serious notes. Postumus has lost his temper with Plautius—but neither of the two will tell Livia later what the circumstances of their quarrel were—and has picked him up and thrown him into a fountain, in the presence of several men of rank and their lackeys. He is then called to account by Augustus, and shows no contrition, insisting that Plautius deserved his ducking for speaking in an insulting way to me; at the same time he complains to Augustus that his inheritance is being unjustly withheld. Soon he is reprimanded by Livia for his changed manner and for his surliness towards her. "What's poisoned you?" she asks. He replies, grinning, "Maybe you've been putting something in my soup." When she demands an explanation of this extraordinary joke he replies, grinning still more vulgarly: "Putting things in soup is an old trick among step-mothers." Augustus soon after this has a complaint from Postumus's general that he does not mix with the other young officers but spends all his leisure time at the sea, fishing. He has earned the nickname "Neptune" for this.

My duties as priest of Mars were not arduous and Plautius, who was a priest of the same college, was detailed to watch me whenever there was a ceremony. I was coming to hate Plautius. The insulting remark for which Postumus had thrown him into the fountain was one of many. He had called me a Lemur and said that it was only loyalty to Augustus and Livia that prevented him from spitting at me every time I asked him foolish and superfluous questions.