

CHAPTER XVII

TIBERIUS continued to rule with moderation and consulted the Senate before taking any step of the least political importance. But the Senate had been voting according to direction for so long that they seemed to have lost the power of independent decision; and Tiberius never made it plain which way he wanted them to vote even when he was very anxious for them to vote one way or another. He wanted to avoid all appearance of tyranny and yet to keep his position at the head of affairs. The Senate soon found that if he spoke with studied elegance in favour of a motion he meant that he wanted it voted against, and that if he spoke with studied elegance against it this meant that he wanted it passed; and that on the very few occasions when he spoke briefly and without any rhetoric he meant to be taken literally. Gallus and an old wag called Haterius used to delight in making speeches in warm agreement with Tiberius, enlarging his arguments to a point only just short of absurdity and then voting the way he really wanted them to vote; thus showing that they understood his tricks perfectly. This Haterius in the debate about Tiberius's accession had cried out: "O Tiberius, how long will you allow unhappy Rome to remain without a head?"—which had offended him because he knew that Haterius saw through his intentions. The next day Haterius pursued the joke by falling at Tiberius's feet and pleading for pardon for not having been warm enough. Tiberius started back in disgust, but Haterius grabbed at his knees and Tiberius went over, catching the back of his head a bang on the marble floor. Tiberius's German bodyguard did not understand what was

happening and sprang forward to slaughter their master's assailant; Tiberius only just stopped them in time.

Haterius excelled in parody. He had an enormous voice, a comic face, and great fertility of invention. Whenever Tiberius in his speeches introduced any painfully far-fetched or archaic phrase Haterius would pick it up and make it the key-word of his reply. (Augustus had always said that the wheels of Haterius's eloquence needed a drag-chain even when he was driving uphill.) The slow-witted Tiberius was no match for Haterius. Gallus's gift was for mock zeal. Tiberius was extremely careful not to appear a candidate for any divine honours and refused to allow himself to be spoken about as if he had any superhuman attributes: he did not even allow the provincials to build him temples. Gallus was therefore fond of referring, as if accidentally, to Tiberius as "His Sacred Majesty". When Haterius, who was always ready to carry on the gag, rose to rebuke him for this incorrect way of speaking he would apologize profusely and say that nothing was farther from his mind than to do anything in disobedience of the orders of His Sacred . . . oh, dear, it was so easy to fall into that mistaken way of speaking, a thousand apologies once more . . . he meant, contrary to the wishes of his honoured friend and fellow-senator Tiberius Nero Cæsar Augustus.

"Not Augustus, fool," Haterius would say in a stage whisper. "He's refused that title a dozen times. He only uses it *when he writes letters to other monarchs.*"

They had one trick which annoyed Tiberius more than any other. If he made a show of modesty when thanked by the Senate for performing some national service—such as undertaking to complete the temples which Augustus had left unfinished—they would praise his honesty in not taking credit for his mother's work, and congratulate Livia on having so dutiful a son. When they saw that there was nothing that Tiberius hated so much as hearing Livia praised they kept it up. Haterius even suggested that just as the Greeks were called by their fathers' names, so Tiberius should

be named after his mother and that it should be a crime to call him other than Tiberius Liviades—or perhaps Livigena would be the more correct Latin form. Gallus found another weak spot in Tiberius's armour, and that was his hatred of any mention of his stay at Rhodes. The most daring thing he did was to praise Tiberius one day for his clemency—it was the very day that news reached the city of Julia's death—and to tell the story of the teacher of rhetoric at Rhodes who had refused Tiberius's modest application to join his classes, on the ground that there was no vacancy at present, saying that he must come back in seven days. Gallus added, "And what do you think His Sacred . . . I beg your pardon, I should say, what do you think my honoured friend and fellow-senator Tiberius Nero Cæsar did on his recent accession to the monarchy, when the same impertinent fellow arrived to pay his respects to the new divinity? Did he cut off that impudent head and give it as a football to his German bodyguard? Not at all: with a wit only equalled by his clemency he told him that he had no vacancies at present in his corps of flatterers and that he must come back in seven years." This was an invention, I think, but the Senate had no reason to disbelieve it and applauded so heartily that Tiberius had to let it go by as the truth.

Tiberius at last silenced Haterius by saying very slowly one day: "You will please forgive me, Haterius, if I speak rather more frankly than it is usual for one senator to speak to another, but I must say that I think you are a dreadful bore and not in the least witty." Then he turned to the House: "You will forgive me, my lords, but I have always said and will say again that since you have been good enough to entrust such absolute power to me I ought not to be ashamed to use it for the common good. If I use it now to silence buffoons who insult you as well as myself by their silly performances, I trust that I will earn your approval. You have always been very kind and patient with me." Without Haterius, Gallus had to play a lone game.

Though Tiberius hated his mother more than ever, he continued to let her rule him. All the appointments which he made to Consulships or provincial governorships were really hers: and they were very sensible ones, the men being chosen for merit, not for family influence or because they had flattered her or done her some private service. For I must make it plain, if I have not already done so, that however criminal the means used by Livia to win the direction of affairs for herself, first through Augustus and then through Tiberius, she was an exceptionally able and just ruler; and it was only when she ceased to direct the system that she had built up that it went wrong.

I have spoken of Sejanus, the son of the Commander of the Guards. He now succeeded to his father's command and was one of the only three men to whom Tiberius in any way opened his mind. Thrasyllus was another; he had come to Rome with Tiberius and never lost his hold on him. The third was a senator called Nerva. Thrasyllus never discussed State policy with Tiberius and never asked for any official position; and when Tiberius gave him large sums of money he accepted them casually, as if money were something of little importance to him. He had a big observatory in a dome-shaped room in the Palace which had windows of glass so clear and transparent that you hardly knew they were there. Tiberius used to spend a great deal of his time here with Thrasyllus, who taught him the rudiments of astrology and many other magic arts including that of interpreting dreams in the Chaldean style. Sejanus and Nerva, Tiberius seems to have chosen for their totally opposite characters. Nerva never made an enemy and never lost a friend. His one fault, if you may call it so, was that he kept silent in the presence of evil when speech would not remedy it. He was sweet-tempered, generous, courageous, utterly truthful and was never known to stoop to the least fraud, even if good promised to come from so doing. If he had been in Germanicus's position, for instance, he would never have forged that letter though his own safety and that of the

Empire had hung upon it. Tiberius made Nerva superintendent of the City aqueducts and kept him constantly by him; I suppose by way of providing himself with a handy yardstick of virtue—as Sejanus certainly served as a handy yardstick of wickedness. Sejanus had as a young man been a friend of Gaius, on whose staff he had served in the East, and had been clever enough to foresee Tiberius's return to favour: he had contributed to it by reassuring Gaius that Tiberius meant what he said when he disclaimed any ambition to rule, and by urging him to write that letter of recommendation to Augustus. He let Tiberius know at the time that he had done this and Tiberius wrote him a letter, still in his possession, promising never to forget his services. Sejanus was a liar but so fine a general of lies that he knew how to marshal them into an alert and disciplined formation—this was a clever remark of Gallus's, it is not mine—which would come off best in any skirmish with suspicions or any general engagement with truth. Tiberius envied him this talent as he envied Nerva his honesty: for though he had progressed far in the direction of evil, he still felt hampered by unaccountable impulses towards the good.

It was Sejanus who first began poisoning his mind against Germanicus, telling him that a man who could forge a letter from his father in whatever circumstances was not to be trusted; and that Germanicus was really aiming at the monarchy but was acting with caution—first winning the men's affection by bribery and then making sure of their fighting capacities and his own leadership by this unnecessary campaign across the Rhine. As for Agrippina, Sejanus said, she was a dangerously ambitious woman: look how she had behaved—styled herself captain of the bridge and welcomed the regiments on their return as if she were Heaven knows who! That the bridge was in danger of being destroyed was probably an invention of her own. Sejanus also said that he knew from a freedman of his who had once been a slave in Germanicus's household that Agrippina somehow believed Livia and Tiberius responsible for the

death of her three brothers and the banishment of her sister, and had sworn to be revenged. Sejanus also began discovering all kinds of plots against Tiberius and kept him in constant fear of assassination while assuring him that he need not have the least anxiety with himself on guard. He encouraged Tiberius to cross Livia in trifling ways, to show her that she over-estimated the strength of her position. It was he who, a few years later, organized the Guards into a disciplined body. Hitherto the three battalions stationed at Rome had been billeted by sections in various parts of the City, in inns and such-like places, and were difficult to fetch out on parade in a hurry and slovenly in their dress and movements. He suggested to Tiberius that if he built a single permanent camp for them outside the City it would give them a strong corporate sense, prevent them from being influenced by the rumours and waves of political feeling which were always running through the City, and attach them more closely to his person as their Emperor. Tiberius improved on his advice by recalling the remaining six battalions from their stations in other parts of Italy and making the new camp big enough to house them all—nine thousand infantry and two thousand cavalry. Apart from the four City battalions, one of which he now sent to Lyons, and various colonies of discharged veterans, these were the only soldiers in Italy. The German bodyguard did not count as soldiers, being technically slaves. But they were picked men and more fanatically loyal to their Emperor than any true-born Roman. There was not a man of them who really wanted to return to his cold rude barbarous land, though they were always singing sad choruses about it; they had too good a time here.

As for the criminal dossiers, to which Tiberius, because of his fear of plots against his life, was most anxious now to have access, Livia still pretended that the key to the cipher was lost. Tiberius, at Sejanus's suggestion, told her that since they were of no use to anyone he would burn them. She said that he could do so if he liked but surely it would

be better to keep them, just in case the key turned up? Perhaps she might even suddenly remember the key. "Very well, mother," he answered, "I'll take charge of them until you do; and meanwhile I'll spend my evenings trying to work the cipher out myself." So he took them off to his own room and locked them in a cupboard. He tried his hardest to find the key to that cipher but it beat him. The common cipher was simply writing Latin E for Greek Alpha, Latin F for Greek Beta, G for Gamma, H for Delta and so on. The key of the high cipher was next to impossible to discover. It was provided by the first hundred lines of the first book of the *Iliad*, which had to be read concurrently with the writing of the cipher, each letter in the writing being represented by the number of letters of the alphabet intervening between it and the corresponding letter in Homer. Thus the first letter of the first word of the first line of the first book of the *Iliad* is Mu. Suppose the first letter of the first word of an entry in the dossier to be Upsilon. There are seven letters in the Greek alphabet intervening between Mu and Upsilon so Upsilon would be written as 7. In this plan the alphabet would be thought of as circular, Omega, the last letter, following Alpha, the first, so that the distance between Upsilon and Alpha would be 4, but the distance between Alpha and Upsilon would be 18. It was Augustus's invention and must have taken rather a long time to write and decode, but I suppose by practice they came to know the distance between any two letters in the alphabet without having to count up, which saved a lot of time. And how do I know about all this? Because many many years later when the dossiers came into my possession I worked the cipher out myself. I happened to find a roll of the first book of Homer, written on sheepskin, filed among the other rolls. It was clear that the first hundred lines only had been studied; because the sheepskin was badly soiled and inked at the beginning and quite clear at the end. When I looked closer and saw tiny figures—6, 23, 12—faintly scratched under the letters of the first line, it was not

difficult to connect them with the cipher. I was surprised that Tiberius had overlooked this clue.

Speaking of the alphabet, I was interested at this time in a simple plan for making Latin truly phonetic. It seemed to me that three letters were missing. These three were consonantal U to distinguish it from U, the vowel; a letter to correspond to the Greek Upsilon (which is a vowel between Latin I and U) for use in Greek words which have become Latinized; and a letter to denote the double consonant which we now write in Latin as BS but pronounce like the Greek Psi. It was important, I wrote, for provincials learning Latin to learn it correctly; if the letters did not correspond to the sound how could they avoid mistakes in pronunciation? So I suggested, for consonantal U, the upside-down F (which is used for that purpose in Etruscan): thus LA JINIA instead of LAUINIA; and a broken H for Greek Upsilon: thus BIBLIOTHECA instead of BIBLIOTHECA; and an upside-down C for BS: thus A CQUE for ABSQUE. The last letter was not so important, but the other two seemed to me essential. I suggested the broken H and the upside-down F and C because these would cause the least trouble to the men who use letter-punches for metal or clay: they would not have to make any new punches. I published the book and one or two people said that my suggestions were sensible; but of course it had absolutely no result. My mother told me that there were three impossible things in the world: that shops should stretch across the bay from Baiæ, to Puteoli, that I should subdue the island of Britain, and that any one of these absurd new letters would ever appear on public inscriptions in Rome. I have always remembered this remark of hers, for it had a sequel.

My mother was extremely short-tempered with me these days because our house took such a long time to rebuild and the new furniture I bought was not equal to the old, and because her income was greatly reduced by the share she took in these expenses—I could not have found all the money

myself. We lived for two years in quarters at the Palace (not very good ones) and she vented her irritation on me so constantly that in the end I could not bear it any longer and moved out of Rome to my villa near Capua, only visiting the City when my priestly functions demanded it, which was not often. You will ask about Urgulanilla. She never came to Capua; in Rome we had little to do with each other. She scarcely greeted me when we met and took no notice of me except, for appearances' sake, when guests were present; and we always slept apart. She seemed fond enough of our boy, Drusillus, but did little for him in any practical way. His bringing-up was left to my mother, who managed the household, and never called on Urgulanilla for any help. My mother treated Drusillus as if he were her own child, and somehow contrived to forget who his parents were. I never learned to like Drusillus myself; he was a surly, stolid, insolent child, and my mother scolded me so often in his presence that he learned to have no respect for me.

I don't know how Urgulanilla got through her days. But she never seemed bored and ate enormously and, so far as I know, entertained no secret lovers. This strange creature had one passion, though—Numantina, the wife of my brother-in-law Silvanus, a little fair-haired elf-like creature who had once done or said something (I don't know what) which had penetrated through that thick hide and muscular bulging body and touched what served Urgulanilla for a heart. Urgulanilla had a life-size portrait of Numantina in her boudoir: she used, I believe, to sit gazing at it for hours whenever there was no opportunity for gazing at Numantina herself. When I moved to Capua, Urgulanilla stayed at Rome with my mother and Drusillus.

The only inconvenience of Capua as a home for me was the absence of a good library. However, I began a book for which a library was not needed—a history of Etruria. I had by now made some progress in Etruscan, and Aruns, with whom I spent a few hours every day, was most helpful in giving me access to the archives of his half-ruined temple.

He told me that he had been born on the day that the comet appeared which had announced the beginning of the tenth and last cycle of the Etruscan race. A cycle is a period reckoned by the longest life: that is to say, a cycle does not close until the death of everyone who was alive at the festival celebrating the close of the previous cycle. The Etruscans reckoned it at one hundred and ten years. This was the last cycle and it would end with the total disappearance of Etruscan as a spoken language. The prophecy was already as good as fulfilled because he had no successors in his priestly office, and the country-people now talked Latin even in the home; so he was glad to help me to write my history, he said, as a mausoleum for the traditions of a once great race. I started it in the second year of Tiberius's reign and I finished it twenty-one years later. I consider it my best work: certainly I worked hardest at it. So far as I know, there is no other book on the subject of the Etruscans at all and they were a very interesting race indeed; so I think that historians of the future will be grateful to me.

I had Callon and Pallas with me and lived a quiet orderly life. I took an interest in the farm attached to my villa and enjoyed occasional visits from friends in Rome who came out for a holiday. There was a woman permanently living with me, called Actë, a professional prostitute and a very decent woman. I never had any trouble with her in the fifteen years she was with me. Our relationship was a purely business one. She had deliberately chosen prostitution as her profession; I paid her well; there was no nonsense about her. We were quite fond of each other in a way. At last she told me that she wanted to retire on her earnings. She would marry a decent man, an old soldier for choice, and settle down in one of the colonies and have children before it was too late. She had always wanted to have a houseful of children. So I kissed her and said good-bye and gave her enough dowry-money to make things very easy for her. She did not go away, though, until she had found me a successor whom she could trust to treat me properly. She found me

Calpurnia, who was so like her that I have often thought she must have been her daughter. Actë did once mention having had a daughter whom she had to put out to nurse because one couldn't be a prostitute and a mother at the same time. Well, so Actë married an ex-Guardsman who treated her quite well and had five children by her. I have always kept an eye on that family. I mention her only because my readers will wonder what sort of sexual life I led when living apart from Urgulanilla. I do not think that it is natural for an ordinary man to live long without a woman, and since Urgulanilla was impossible as a wife I do not think that I can be blamed for living with Actë. Actë and I had an understanding that while we were together we would neither of us have to do with anyone else. This was not sentiment but a medical precaution: there was so much venereal disease now in Rome—another fatal legacy, by the way, of the Punic War.

Here I wish to put it on record that I have never at any time of my life practised homosexuality. I do not use Augustus's argument against it, that it prevents men having children to support the State, but I have always thought it at once pitiful and disgusting to see a full-grown man, a magistrate, perhaps, with a family of his own, slobbering uxoriously over a plump little boy with a painted face and bangles; or an ancient senator playing Queen Venus to some tall young Adonis of the Guards cavalry who tolerates the old fool only because he has money.

When I had to go up to Rome I stayed there for as short a time as possible. I felt something uncomfortable in the atmosphere on the Palatine Hill, which may well have been the growing tension between Tiberius and Livia. He had begun building a huge palace for himself on the North-West of the hill, and now moved into the lower rooms, before the upper ones were finished, leaving her in sole possession of Augustus's palace. Livia, as if to show that Tiberius's new building, though three times the size, would never have the prestige of the old one, put a magnificent gold statue of

Augustus in her hall and proposed, as High-Priestess of his cult, to invite all the senators and their wives to the dedicatory banquet. But Tiberius pointed out that he must first ask the Senate to vote on the matter: it was a State occasion, not a private entertainment. He so managed the debate that the banquet was held in two parts simultaneously: the senators in the hall with himself as host, and their wives in a big room leading off it with Livia as hostess. She swallowed the insult by not treating it as such, only as a sensible arrangement more in keeping with what Augustus would have wished himself; but gave orders to the Palace cooks that the women were to be served first with the best joints and sweetmeats and wine. She also appropriated the most costly dishes and drinking-vessels for her feast. She got the better of him on that occasion and the senators' wives all had a good laugh at the expense of Tiberius and their husbands.

Another uncomfortable thing about coming to Rome was that I never seemed to be able to avoid meeting Sejanus. I disliked having anything to do with him, though he was always studiously polite to me and never did me any direct injury. I was astonished that a man with a face and manner like his and not well-born or a famous fighter, or even particularly rich, could have made such a huge success in the City: he was now the next most important man after Tiberius, and extremely popular with the Guards. It was a completely untrustworthy face—sly, cruel and irregular-featured—and the one thing that held it together was a certain animal hardiness and resolution. What was stranger still to me, several women of good family were said to be rivals in love for him. He and Castor got on badly together, which was only natural, for there were rumours that Livilla and Sejanus had some sort of understanding. But Tiberius seemed to have complete confidence in him.

I have mentioned Briseis, my mother's old freedwoman. When I told her that I was leaving Rome and settling at Capua she said how much she would miss me, but that I was wise to go. "I had a funny dream about you last night,

Master Claudius, if you'll forgive me. You were a little lame boy; and thieves broke into his father's house and murdered his father and a whole lot of relations and friends; but he squeezed through the pantry-window and went hobbling into the neighbouring wood. He climbed up a tree and waited. The thieves came out of the house and sat down under the tree where he was hiding, to divide the plunder. Soon they began to quarrel about who should have what, and one of the thieves got killed, and then two more, and then the rest began drinking wine and pretending to be great friends; but the wine had been poisoned by one of the murdered thieves, so they all died in agony. The lame boy climbed down the tree and collected the valuables and found a lot of gold and jewels among them that had been stolen from other families: but he took it all home with him and became quite rich."

I smiled. "That's a funny dream, Briseis. But he was still as lame as ever and all that wealth could not buy his father and family back to life again, could it?"

"No, my dear, but perhaps he married and had a family of his own. So choose a good tree, Master Claudius, and don't come down till the last of the thieves are dead. That's what my dream said."

"I'll not come down even then, if I can help it, Briseis. I don't want to be a receiver of stolen goods."

"You can always give them back, Master Claudius."

This was all very remarkable in the light of what happened later. I have no great faith in dreams. Athenodorus once dreamed that there was treasure in a badger's den in a wood near Rome. He found his way to the exact spot, which he had never visited before, and there in a bank was the hole leading to the den. He fetched a couple of countrymen to dig away the bank until they came to the den at the end of the hole—where they found a rotten old purse containing six mouldy coppers and a bad shilling, which was not enough to pay the countrymen for their work. And one of my tenants, a shopkeeper, dreamed once that a flight of eagles wheeled

round his head and one settled on his shoulder. He took it for a sign that he would one day be Emperor, but all that happened was that a piquet of Guards visited him the next morning (they had eagles on their shields) and the corporal arrested him for some offence that brought him under military jurisdiction.