

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE summer afternoon at Capua I was sitting on a stone bench behind the stables of my villa, thinking out some problem of Etruscan history and idly shooting dice, left hand against right, on the rough plank table in front of me. ^{A.D. 16} A raggedly dressed man came up and asked whether I was Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus: he had been directed here from Rome, he said.

"I have a message for you, sir. I don't know whether it's worth delivering but I'm an old soldier on the tramp—one of your father's veterans, sir—and you know what it is, I'm glad of having an excuse for taking one road rather than another."

"Who gave you the message?"

"A fellow I met in the woods near Cape Cosa. Curious sort of fellow. He was dressed like a slave but he spoke like a Cæsar. A big thick-set fellow and looked half starved."

"What name did he give?"

"No name at all. He said you'd know who he was by the message, and be surprised to hear from him. He made me repeat the message twice to make sure I had it right. I was to say that he was still fishing, but that a man couldn't live wholly on fish, and that you were to pass the word to his brother-in-law, and that if the milk was sent it never reached him, and that he wanted a little book to read, at least seven pages long. And that you were not to do anything until you heard from him again. Does that make sense, sir, or was the fellow cracked?"

When he said that, I could not believe my ears. Postumus! But Postumus was dead. "Has he a big jaw, blue eyes and a

way of tilting his head on one side when he asks you a question?"

"That's the man, sir."

I poured him out a drink with a hand so shaky that I spilt as much as I poured. Then, signing that he was to wait there for me, I went into the house. I found two good plain gowns and some underclothes and sandals and a pair of razors and some soap. Then I took the first sewn-sheet book that came to hand—it happened to be a copy of some recent speeches of Tiberius to the Senate—and on the seventh page I wrote in milk: *What joy! I shall write to G. at once. Be careful. Send for whatever you need. Where can I see you? My dearest love to you. Here are twenty gold pieces, all I have at the moment, but quick gifts are double gifts, I hope.*

I waited for the page to dry and then gave the man the book and clothes wrapped in a bundle, and a purse. I said: "Take these thirty gold pieces. Ten are for yourself. Twenty are for the man in the woods. Bring back a message from him and you shall have ten more. But keep your mouth shut and be back soon."

"Good enough, sir," he said. "I'll not fail you. But what's to prevent me from going off with this bundle and all the money?"

I said: "If you were a dishonest man you wouldn't ask that question. So let us have another drink together and off you go."

To cut a long story short, he went away with the bundle and money and a few days later brought me back a verbal answer from Postumus, which was thanks for the money and clothes and that I was not to seek him out, but that the crocodile's mother would know where he was and that his name was now Pantherus and would I forward him his brother-in-law's answer as soon as possible. I paid the old soldier the ten pieces I had promised him and ten more for his faithfulness. I understood whom Postumus meant by the crocodile's mother. The Crocodile was an old freedman

of Agrippa's whom we called that because of his torpidity and greed and his enormous jaws. He had a mother living at Perusia, where she kept an inn. I knew the place well. I sent off a letter to Germanicus at once to tell him the news; I sent it by Pallas to Rome telling him to send it off with the next post to Germany. In the letter I merely said that Postumus was alive and in hiding—I did not say where—and begged Germanicus to acknowledge the receipt of the letter at once. Then I waited and waited for an answer but none came. I wrote again, rather more fully; but still no answer. I sent a message to the Crocodile's mother by a country-carrier that no message had yet arrived for Pantherus from his brother-in-law.

I did not hear again from Postumus. He did not wish to compromise me further, and now that he had money and was able to move about without being arrested on suspicion as a runaway slave he was not dependent on my help. Somebody at the inn recognized him and he had to move from there for safety's sake. Very soon the rumour that he was alive was all over Italy. Everyone was talking about it at Rome. A dozen people, including three senators, came out to me from the City to ask me privately if it were true. I told them that I had not seen him but that I had met someone who had, and that there was no doubt that it was Postumus. In return I asked them what they intended to do if he came to Rome and won the support of the populace. But the directness of my question embarrassed and hurt them, and I got no answer.

Postumus was reported to have visited various country towns in the neighbourhood of Rome, but apparently he took the precaution of not entering them before nightfall and always going away, in disguise, before dawn. He was never seen publicly but would lodge at some inn and leave behind a message of thanks for the kindness shown him—signed with his real name. At last one day he landed at Ostia from a small coasting vessel. The port knew, a few hours beforehand, that he was coming, and he had a tremendous ovation

at the quay as he stepped ashore. He chose to land at Ostia because it was the summer headquarters of the Fleet, of which his father Agrippa had been Admiral. His vessel flew a green pennant which Augustus had given Agrippa the right to fly whenever he was at sea (and his sons after him) in memory of his sea-victory off Actium. Agrippa's memory was honoured at Ostia almost beyond that of Augustus.

Postumus was in great danger of his life, being still under sentence of banishment and therefore outlawed by his public reappearance in Italy. He made a short speech of thanks to the crowd for their welcome. He said that if Fortune was kind to him and if he won back the esteem of the Roman Senate and people which he had forfeited because of certain lying accusations brought against him by his enemies—accusations which his grandfather, the God Augustus, had realized too late were untrue—he would reward the loyalty of the men and women of Ostia in no niggardly fashion. A company of Guards was there with orders to arrest him, for Livia and Tiberius had got the news too, somehow. But the men would have had no chance against that crowd of sailors. The captain wisely made no attempt to carry out his commission; he ordered two men to change into sailors' slops and not lose sight of Postumus. But by the time they had changed he had disappeared and they could find no trace of him.

The next day Rome was full of sailors who picketed the principal streets: whenever they met a knight or senator or public official they asked him the pass-word. The pass-word was "Neptune", and if he did not already know it he was given it and made to repeat it three times unless he wanted a beating. Nobody wanted a beating, and popular feeling now ran so strongly in sympathy with Postumus and against Tiberius and Livia that if a single favourable word had come from Germanicus the whole City, including the Guards and the City battalions, would have come over to him at once. But without Germanicus's support any rising in favour of Postumus would have meant civil war; and

nobody had much confidence in Postumus's chances if it came to a struggle with Germanicus.

In this crisis the same Crispus who had antagonized Tiberius two years before by sending Clement to his death on the island (but had been forgiven) came forward and offered to redeem his fault by this time making sure of Postumus. Tiberius gave him a free hand. He found out somehow where Postumus's headquarters were and, going to him with a large sum of money which he said was for the payment of his sailors, who had already lost two working-days by this picketing work, he undertook to bring over the German bodyguard to Postumus's side as soon as he gave the signal. He had, he said, already given them enormous bribes. Postumus believed him. They arranged a meeting for two hours after midnight at a certain street corner where Postumus's sailors were also to assemble in force. They would march to Tiberius's Palace. Crispus would order the bodyguard to admit Postumus. Tiberius, Castor and Livia would be arrested, and Crispus said that Sejanus, while not active in the plot, had undertaken to bring the Guards over in support of the new regime as soon as the first blow had been successfully struck: on condition that he retained his command.

The sailors were punctual at the rendezvous but Postumus did not arrive. At that hour no citizens were in the street; so when a combined force of Germans from the bodyguard and picked men of Sejanus's suddenly fell on the sailors—who were mostly drunk and not in any regular formation—the pass-word "Neptune" lost its power. Many of them were killed on the spot, many more as they broke and ran, and the rest never once slowed down, it is said, before they reached Ostia again. Crispus and two soldiers had waylaid Postumus in a narrow alley between his headquarters and the rendezvous, stunned him with a sandbag, gagged and bound him, put him into a covered sedan and carried him off to the Palace. The next day Tiberius made a statement to the Senate. A certain slave of Postumus Agrippa's called

Clement, he said, had caused a deal of unnecessary alarm in the City by impersonating his dead former master. This bold fellow had run away from the provincial knight who had bought him when Postumus's estate was sold and had hidden in a wood on the coast of Tuscany until his beard grew long enough to hide his receding chin—the chief point of dissimilarity between himself and Postumus. Some rowdy sailors at Ostia had pretended to believe in him, but only as an excuse for marching to Rome and creating a disturbance there. They had assembled in the suburbs a little before dawn that morning under his leadership with the object of marching to the centre of the City and plundering shops and private houses. When challenged by a force of Watchmen they had dispersed and deserted their leader, who had since been put to death: so the House need have no further anxiety about the matter.

I heard later that Tiberius pretended not to recognize Postumus when he was brought before him at the Palace and asked him, mockingly: "How did you happen to become one of the Cæsars?" To which Postumus answered: "In the same way and on the same day as you did. Have you forgotten?" Tiberius told a slave to strike Postumus on the mouth for his insolence, and he was then put on the rack and asked to reveal his fellow-conspirators. But he would only tell scandalous anecdotes of the private life of Tiberius, which were so disgusting and so circumstantial that Tiberius lost his temper and battered his face in with his great bony fists. The soldiers finished the bloody work by beheading him and hacking him into pieces in the cellar of the Palace.

What greater sorrow can there be than to mourn a beloved friend as murdered—at the close of a long and undeserved exile, too—and then, after the brief joy and astonishment of hearing that he has somehow cheated his executioners, to have to mourn him a second time—this time without hope of error and without even seeing him in the interval—as treacherously recaptured and shamefully tortured and killed? My one consolation was that when Germanicus

heard what had happened—and I would at once write him the whole story so far as I knew it—he would leave his campaigns in Germany and march back to Rome at the head of as many regiments as could be spared from the Rhine and avenge Postumus's death on Livia and Tiberius. I wrote, but he did not answer; I wrote again, and still no answer. But eventually a long affectionate letter came in which there was a wondering reference to the success which Clement had had in impersonating Postumus—how in the world had he managed to do it? From this sentence it was quite clear that none of my important letters had arrived: the only one to arrive had been sent off by the same post as the second. In this I had merely given him particulars of a business matter which he had asked me to look into for him: he now thanked me for the information, which he said was exactly what he wanted. I realized with a sudden feeling of dread that Livia or Tiberius must have intercepted all the rest.

My digestion had always been bad and fear of poison in every dish did not improve it. My stammer returned and I had attacks of aphasia—sudden blanks in the mind which brought me into great ridicule: if they caught me in the middle of a sentence I would finish it anyhow. The most unfortunate result of this weakness was that I made a mess of my duties as priest of Augustus, which hitherto I had carried out without cause for complaint from anyone. There is an old custom at Rome that if any mistake is made in the ritual of a sacrifice or other service the whole thing has to be gone over again from the beginning. It now often happened when I was officiating that I would lose my way in a prayer and perhaps go on repeating the same sequence of sentences two or three times before I realized what I was doing, or that I would take up the flint knife for cutting the victim's throat before sprinkling its head with the ritual flour and salt—and this sort of thing meant going back to the beginning again. It was tedious to make three or four attempts at a service before I could get through it perfectly,

and the congregation used to get very restless. At last I wrote to Tiberius as High Pontiff and asked to be relieved from all my religious duties for a year on the ground of ill-health. He granted the request without comment.