

CHAPTER XXI

LIVIA and Tiberius shut themselves in their palaces and pretended to be so grief-stricken that they could not show their faces abroad. Agrippina should have come by the overland route, because the winter had already begun and the sailing season was over. But she put to sea in spite of storms and a few days later reached Corfu, from where it is only a day's sail, with a good breeze, to the port of Brindisi. Here she rested for awhile, sending messengers ahead to say that she was coming to throw herself on the protection of the people of Italy. Castor, who was now back at Rome, her four other children and myself went out from Rome to meet her. Tiberius had immediately sent two Guards battalions forward to the port with directions that the magistrates of the country districts through which the ashes passed should pay his dead son the last offices of respect. When Agrippina disembarked, greeted with respectful silence by an immense crowd, the urn was put in a catafalque and carried towards Rome on the shoulders of the Guards' officers. The battalion standards were undecorated, as a sign of public calamity, and the axes and rods were borne reversed. As the procession, many thousands strong, passed through Calabria, Apulia and Campania, everyone came flocking, the country people dressed in black, the knights in purple robes, with tears and loud lamentations and burned offerings of perfumes for their dead hero's ghost.

We met the procession at Terracina, about sixty miles south-east of Rome, where Agrippina, who had walked dry-eyed and marble-faced, without a word to anyone all the way from Brindisi, let her grief break out afresh at the sight

of her four fatherless children. She cried to Castor: "By the love you had for my dear husband swear that you will defend the lives of his children with your own, and avenge his death! It was his last charge to you." Castor, weeping, for the first time perhaps since his childhood, swore that he would accept the charge.

If you ask why Livilla did not come with us, the answer is that she had just been delivered of twin boys; of which, by the way, Sejanus seems to have been the father. If you ask why my mother did not come, the answer is that Tiberius and Livia did not allow her even to attend the funeral. If overwhelming grief prevented their own attendance, as grandmother and adoptive father of the dead man, it was clearly quite impossible for her, as his mother, to attend. And they were wise not to show themselves. If they had done so, even with a pretence of grief, they would certainly have been assaulted by the populace; and I think that the Guards would have stood by and not raised a finger to protect them. Tiberius had neglected to make even such preparations as were customary at the funeral of far less distinguished persons: the family masks of the Claudians and Julians did not appear nor the usual effigy of the dead man himself, laid on a bed; no funeral speech was made from the Oration Platform; no funeral hymns sung. Tiberius's excuse was that the funeral had already been celebrated in Syria and that the Gods would be offended if the rites were repeated. But never was such unanimous and sincere grief shown in Rome as on that night. Mars Field was ablaze with torches, and the crowd about Augustus's tomb, in which the urn was reverently placed by Castor, was so dense that many people were crushed to death. Everywhere people were saying that Rome was lost, and that no hope remained: for Germanicus had been their last bulwark against oppression, and Germanicus was now foully murdered. And everywhere Agrippina was praised and pitied, and prayers were offered for the safety of her children.

Tiberius published a proclamation a few days later saying

that though many illustrious Romans had died for the commonwealth, none had been so universally and vehemently regretted as his dear son. But it was now time for the people to compose their minds and return to their daily business: princes were mortal, but the commonwealth eternal. In spite of this, All Fool's Festival at the end of December passed without any of the usual jokes and jollity, and it was not until the Festival of the Great Mother in April that mourning ended and normal public business was resumed. Tiberius's suspicions were now concentrated on Agrippina. She visited him at the Palace on the morning after the funeral and fearlessly told him that she would hold him responsible for her husband's death until he had proved his innocence and taken vengeance on Piso and Plancina. He cut short the interview at once by quoting at her the Greek lines:

And if you are not queen, my dear,
Think you that you are wronged?

Piso did not return to Rome for some time. He sent his son ahead to intercede for him with Tiberius while he himself went to visit Castor, who was now back with the legions on the Danube. He expected Castor to be grateful to him for his removal of a rival heir to the monarchy and willing to believe the story of Germanicus's treason. Castor refused to receive him and publicly told Piso's messenger that, if current rumours were true, it was on Piso that he would have to inflict the vengeance that he had sworn for his dear brother's death, and that Piso would be advised to keep away until he had plainly established his innocence. Tiberius received Piso's son without either particular graciousness or particular disfavour, as if to show that he would remain unprejudiced until a public inquiry had been made into Germanicus's death.

Eventually Piso appeared at Rome with Plancina. They came sailing down the Tiber and disembarked with a number of retainers at the tomb of Augustus, where they nearly

created a riot by strutting with broad smiles through the hostile crowd which soon gathered, and stepping into a decorated carriage drawn by a pair of well-matched white French cobs which was waiting for them on the Flaminian road. Piso had a house overlooking the Market Place and this was decorated too. He invited all his friends and relations to a banquet celebrating his return and made a great deal of disturbance: merely to show the people of Rome that he was not afraid of them and that he counted on the support of Tiberius and Livia. Tiberius had planned for Piso to be prosecuted in the ordinary Criminal Court by a certain senator who could be trusted to do it so clumsily, contradicting himself and neglecting to produce proper evidence in support of his charges, that the proceedings could only end in an acquittal. But Germanicus's friends, especially the three senators who had been on his staff in Syria and had returned with Agrippina, opposed Tiberius's choice. Tiberius was forced in the end to judge the case himself, and in the Senate too, where Germanicus's friends could count on all the support they needed. The Senate had voted a number of exceptional honours to Germanicus's memory—cenotaphs, memorial arches, semi-divine rites—which Tiberius had not dared to veto.

Castor now returned once more from the Danube and, though an ovation (or lesser triumph) had been decreed him for his management of the Maroboduus affair, he entered the City on foot as a private citizen instead of on horse-back with a chaplet on his head. After visiting his father he went straight to Agrippina and swore to her that she could count on him to see that justice was done.

Piso asked four senators to defend him; three of them excused themselves on the ground of sickness or incapacity; the fourth, Gallus, said that he never defended anyone on a murder charge of which he seemed guilty unless there was at least a chance of pleasing the Imperial family. Calpurnius Piso, though he had not attended his uncle's banquet, volunteered to defend him for the honour of the family, and three

others afterwards joined him because they were sure that Tiberius would acquit Piso, whatever the evidence, and that they would later be rewarded for their part in the trial. Piso was pleased to be judged by Tiberius himself, because Sejanus had assured him that it would be all properly managed, that Tiberius would pretend to be very severe but finally adjourn the court *sine die* for fresh evidence. Martina, the principal witness, had already been put out of the way—smothered by Sejanus's agents—and the prosecutors now had a poor case.

Two days only were allowed for the prosecution, and the man who had been originally commissioned to bungle it for Piso's benefit came forward and did his best to talk the time out by bringing stale charges against him of misgovernment and corruption in Spain under Augustus. Tiberius let him continue with this irrelevant matter for some hours, until the Senate, by scuffling feet, coughing and clattering writing-tablets together, warned him that the principal witnesses must be heard or there would be trouble. Germanicus's four friends had their case well prepared and each in turn rose and testified to Piso's corruption of military discipline in Syria, his insulting behaviour to Germanicus and themselves, his disobedience of orders, his intrigues with Vonones, his oppression of the provincials. They accused him of murdering Germanicus by poison and witchcraft, of offering thanksgiving sacrifices at his death and finally of having made an armed attack on the Province with private forces illegally raised.

Piso did not deny the charges of corrupting military discipline, of insulting and disobeying Germanicus, or of oppressing the provincials; he merely said that they were exaggerated. But he indignantly denied the charge of poison and witchcraft. The accusers did not mention the supernatural events at Antioch for fear of encouraging sceptical laughter, nor could they accuse Piso of interfering with Germanicus's household servants and slaves, because it had already been shown that they had nothing to do with the

murder. So Piso was accused of poisoning Germanicus's food while he sat next to him at a banquet in Germanicus's own house. Piso ridiculed this charge: how could he possibly have done such a thing without someone noticing it, when the whole table, not to mention the waiters, were watching every movement he made? By magic perhaps?

He had a bundle of letters in his hand which everyone knew, by the size and colour and the way they were tied, were from Tiberius. Germanicus's friends moved that any instructions that Piso had been sent from Rome should be read. Piso refused to read the letters on the ground that they were sealed as with the Sphinx seal (originally Augustus's), which made them "secret and confidential": it would be treasonable to read them. Tiberius ruled against the motion, saying that it would be a waste of time to read the letters, which contained nothing of importance. The Senate could not press the point. Piso handed the letters to Tiberius as a sign that he trusted him to save his life.

Angry noises were now heard from the crowd outside, which was being kept informed of the progress of the trial, and a man with a huge raucous voice shouted through a window: "He may escape you, my Lords, but he won't escape us!" A messenger came to tell Tiberius that some statues of Piso had been seized by the crowd and were being dragged to the Wailing Stairs to be broken up. The Wailing Stairs were a flight of steps at the foot of the Capitoline Hill where the corpses of criminals were customarily exposed before being dragged by a hook in the throat to the Tiber and thrown in. Tiberius ordered the statues to be rescued and replaced on their pedestals. But he complained that he could not continue to judge a case under such conditions and adjourned it until the evening. Piso was conveyed away under escort.

Plancina, who had hitherto boasted that she would share her husband's fate whatever it might be, and if necessary die with him, now grew alarmed. She decided to make a separate defence and counted on Livia, with whom she had

been on intimate terms, to get her off. Piso knew nothing of this treachery. When the trial was resumed Tiberius gave him no sign of sympathy, and though he told the accusers that they should have provided more conclusive evidence of poisoning, he warned Piso that his armed attempt to win back his province could never be forgiven. At home that evening Piso shut himself in his room and was found the next morning stabbed to death with his sword beside him. It was not, as a matter of fact, suicide.

For Piso had retained the most incriminating letter of all, one written to him by Livia but in the names of Tiberius and herself, and not stamped with the Sphinx seal (which Tiberius reserved for his own use). He told Plancina to bargain for their lives with it. Plancina went to Livia. Livia told her to wait while she consulted Tiberius. Livia and Tiberius then had their first open quarrel. Tiberius was furious with Livia for having written the letter, and Livia said that it was his own fault for not allowing her to use the Sphinx seal and complained that he had been behaving very insolently to her lately. Tiberius asked, who was Emperor, he or she? Livia said that if he was, it was by her contrivance and that it was foolish of him to be rude to her, because as she had found means to make him, so she could find means to break him. She took a letter from her purse and began reading it: it was an old letter written to her by Augustus during Tiberius's absence in Rhodes, accusing him of treachery, cruelty and bestiality and saying that if he were not her son he would not live another day. "This is only a copy," she said. "But I have the original in safe keeping. It's only one of many letters in the same strain. You wouldn't like them handed about the Senate, would you?"

Tiberius controlled himself and apologized for his bad temper: he said that it was clear that he and she were each able to ruin the other and that therefore it was absurd for them to quarrel. But how could he spare Piso's life, especially after having said that, if the charge of raising private forces and trying to win back Syria with them was

proved, this would mean the death penalty, beyond hope of pardon?

"Plancina didn't raise any forces, though, did she?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it. I can't get the letter back from Piso merely by promising to spare Plancina."

"If you promise to spare Plancina, I'll get the letter from Piso: leave that to me. If Piso's killed that will satisfy public opinion. And if you are afraid of sparing Plancina on your own responsibility you can say that it was I who pleaded for her. That's fair enough, because I admit that it is a letter I wrote that all the trouble is about."

So Livia went to Plancina and told her that Tiberius refused to listen to reason, and that he would rather sacrifice his own mother to popular hatred than risk his own skin in standing by his friends. All that she had been able to get from him, she said, was a grudging promise of pardon for her if the letter were given up. So Plancina went to Piso with a letter in Tiberius's name, forged by Livia, and said that she had arranged everything beautifully and here was the promise of acquittal. As Piso handed her the letter in exchange she suddenly stabbed him in the throat with a dagger. As he lay dying she dipped the point of his sword in blood, clasped his sword-hand around the pommel and left him. She took the letter, and the forged promise, back to Livia as arranged.

In the Senate next day Tiberius read a statement which he said that Piso had made before his suicide, pleading complete innocence of the crimes charged against him, protesting his loyalty to Livia and himself, and imploring their protection for his sons as having taken no part in the events which had been made the subject of his impeachment. Plancina's trial then began. She was proved to have been seen in the society of Martina, and Martina's reputation as a poisoner was sworn to, and it came out that when Martina's corpse was prepared for burial a phial of poison was found knotted in her hair. Old Pomponius, Germanicus's orderly, testified to the horrible putrid relics planted in the house

and to Plancina's visit there with Martina in Germanicus's absence; and when questioned by Tiberius he gave detailed evidence of the hauntings. Nobody came forward to defend Plancina. She protested her innocence with tears and oaths and said that she knew nothing of Martina's reputation as a poisoner and that her only business with her had been to buy perfumes. She said that the woman who had come with her to the house was not Martina but the wife of one of the colonels. And that surely it was an innocent thing to go calling and find nobody at home but a little boy. As for her insults to Agrippina, she was heartily sorry for them and begged Agrippina's pardon most humbly; but she had been obeying her husband's orders, as a wife was bound to do, and moreover her husband had told her that Agrippina was plotting with Germanicus against the State, so she had the more willingly done what was expected of her.

Tiberius summed up. He said that there seemed to be a certain doubt as to Plancina's guilt. Her connexion with Martina seemed proved, and so did Martina's reputation as a poisoner. But that it was a guilty connexion remained open to question. The prosecution had not even produced in court the phial found in Martina's hair nor any evidence that the contents were poisonous: it might well have been a sleeping draught or aphrodisiac. His mother Livia had a high opinion of Plancina's character and wished the Senate to give her the benefit of the doubt if the evidence of guilt was not conclusive; for the ghost of her beloved grandson had appeared to her in a dream and begged her not to allow the innocent to suffer for the crimes of a husband or father.

So Plancina was acquitted, and of Piso's two sons, one was allowed to inherit his father's estate and the other, who had taken part in the fighting in Cilicia, was merely banished for a few years. A senator proposed that public thanks be paid to the dead hero's family—to Tiberius, Livia, my mother Antonia, Agrippina and Castor—for having avenged his death. This motion was just about to be voted upon when a friend of mine, an ex-Consul who had been Governor of

Africa before Furius, rose to make an amendment. The motion was, he objected, not in order: one important name had been omitted, that of the dead hero's brother Claudius, who had done more than anyone to prepare the case for the prosecution and to protect the witnesses from molestation. Tiberius shrugged his shoulders and said that he was surprised to hear that I had been called upon for any assistance and that perhaps if I had not been, the charges against Piso would have been more clearly presented. (It was quite true that I had presided at the meeting of my brother's friends and decided what evidence each witness was to bring; and I had, as a matter of fact, advised them against accusing Piso of administering poison at the banquet with his own hands, but they had over-ruled me. And I had kept Pomponius and his grandsons and three of my brother's freedmen safely hidden in a farmhouse near my villa at Capua until the day of the trial. I had also tried to hide Martina away at the house of a merchant I knew at Brindisi, but Sejanus traced her.) Well, Tiberius let my name be included in the vote of thanks; but that meant little to me compared with the thanks that Agrippina gave me: she said that she understood now what Germanicus had meant when he told her, just before his death, that the truest friend he had ever had was his poor brother Claudius.

Feeling against Livia was so strong that Tiberius made it an excuse to her for again not asking the Senate to vote her the title that he had so often promised. Everyone was wanting to know what it meant when a grandmother gave gracious interviews to the murderess of her grandson and rescued her from the vengeance of the Senate. The answer could only be that the grandmother had instigated the murder herself and was so utterly unashamed of herself that the wife and children of the victim would not survive him long.