

## CHAPTER XXIII

ONE day Sejanus had told me that I ought to marry again, as I did not seem to get on well with my wife. I said that Urgulanilla had been the choice of my grandmother Livia and that I could not divorce her without Livia's permission.

"Oh, no, of course not," he said. "I quite understand that, but it must be very unhappy for you without a wife."

"Thank you," I said, "I manage all right."

He pretended to find this a good joke and laughed loudly, calling me a very wise man, but afterwards said that if by any chance I found it possible to divorce my wife I was to come to him. He had just the woman for me in mind—well-born, young and intelligent. I thanked him but felt uncomfortable. As I was going away he said: "My friend Claudius, I have a word of advice to you. Back Scarlet to-morrow in every race and don't mind losing a bit of money at first: you'll not lose in the long run. And *don't back Leek Green*: it's an unlucky colour these days. And don't tell anyone that I gave you the tip." I felt much relieved that Sejanus thought me still worth cultivating, but I couldn't make sense of what he told me. However, at the chariot-race next day—it was the festival of Augustus—Tiberius saw me take my seat in the Circus and, being in an affable mood, sent for me and asked, "What are you doing these days, nephew?"

I stammered that I was writing a history of the ancient Etruscans, if it pleased him.

He said: "Oh, really? That does credit to your judgment. There's no ancient Etruscan left to protest and no

modern Etruscan who cares: so you can write as you please. What else are you doing?"

"Wr-r-iting a history of the ancient C-C-C-C-C-Carthaginians, if you please."

"Splendid! And what else? Hurry up with that stammer. I'm a busy man."

"At the m-m-moment I'm b-b-b-b——"

"Beginning a history of C-C-C-Cloud C-C-C-Cuckoo Land?"

"N-no, sir, b-b-b-backing Scarlet."

He looked at me very shrewdly and said: "I see, nephew, that you are not altogether a fool. What makes you back Scarlet?"

I was in difficulties, because I couldn't say that Sejanus had given me the tip. So I said: "I dreamed that Leek Green was d-disqualified for using his whip on his c-c-c-competitors and Scarlet c-c-came in first with Sea-b-b-blue and White nowhere."

He gave me a purse of money and muttered in my ear: "Tell nobody that I'm staking you, but put this on Scarlet and let's see what happens."

It proved to be Scarlet's day, and by betting with young Nero on every race I won close on two thousand gold pieces. That evening I thought it wise to visit Tiberius at the Palace and to say: "Here's the lucky purse, sir, with a family of little purses which it littered during the day."

"All mine?" he exclaimed. "Well, I *am* in luck. Scarlet's the colour, eh?"

This was just like my uncle Tiberius. He hadn't made it clear who was to keep the winnings and I had supposed that I was. But if I had lost all the money he would have said something to make me feel in his debt to that amount. He might at least have given me a commission.

The next time I came up to Rome I found my mother in such a distracted state that I did not dare at first utter a word in her presence for fear of her flying into a temper and boxing my ears. I gathered that her trouble was connected with

Caligula, then aged twelve, and Drusilla, then aged thirteen, who were staying with her. Drusilla was confined to her room without food and Caligula was at liberty but looking thoroughly frightened. He visited me that evening and said: "Uncle Claudius. Beg your mother not to tell the Emperor. We were doing no wrong, I swear. It was just a game. You can't believe it of us. Say you can't."

When he explained what he did not want told to the Emperor, and swore by his father's honour that he and Drusilla were entirely innocent, I felt bound to do what I could for the children. I went to my mother and said: "Caligula swears you are mistaken. He swears by his father's honour, and if there is the least possible doubt in your mind about his guilt you ought to respect that oath. For my part, I can't believe that a boy of twelve——"

"Caligula's a monster and Drusilla's a she-monster, and you're a blockhead, and I believe my eyes more than their oaths or your nonsense. I shall go to Tiberius the first thing to-morrow."

"But, Mother, if you tell the Emperor, it will not be only those two who will suffer. For once let's talk frankly, and be damned to informers! I may be a blockhead, but you know as well as I do that Tiberius suspects Agrippina of having poisoned Castor to get her elder boys made heirs to the monarchy, and that he lives in terror of a sudden rising in their favour. If you, as their grandmother, accuse these children of incest, do you suppose that he won't find a way of involving the elder members of the family in the charge?"

"You're a blockhead, I say. I can't bear the way your head twitches and your Adam's ample goes up and down." But I could see that I had made an impression on her, and decided that if I kept out of her sight for the rest of my visit to Rome, so that my presence was not a reminder to her of my advice, it was likely that Tiberius would hear nothing from her about the matter. I packed up a few things and went to my brother-in-law Plautius's house, to ask him to put

me up. (By now Plautius was well advanced in his career and in four years would be Consul.) Supper was long over by the time I called and he was reading legal documents in his study. His wife had gone to bed, he said. I asked, "How is she? She looked rather worried when I saw her last."

He laughed. "Why, you rustic fellow, haven't you heard? I divorced Numantina a month ago or more. When I said 'my wife' I meant my new one, Apronia, daughter of the man who gave Tacfarinas such a beating recently!"

I apologized and said that I supposed I ought to offer my congratulations. "But why did you divorce Numantina? I thought you two got on very well together."

"Not badly at all. But, to tell the truth, I've been in rather a fix lately with debts. I had bad luck some years ago as a junior magistrate. You know how much one is expected to spend out of one's own pocket on Games. Well, to begin with, I spent more than I could afford and had extremely bad luck besides, you may remember. Twice there was a mistake made in procedure half-way through the Games and I had to start all over again the next day. The first time it was my own fault: I used a form of prayer which had been altered by statute two years previously. The next time a trumpeter who was blowing a long call had not taken a deep enough breath: he broke off short and that was enough to end things a second time. So I had to pay the sword-fighters and charioteers three times over. I have never been out of debt since. I had to do something about it at last, because my creditors were getting nasty. Numantina's dowry was spent long ago, but I managed to arrange matters with her uncle. He has taken her back without it on condition that I let him adopt our younger son. He wants an heir and has taken a fancy to the boy. And Apronia's very rich, so now I'm all right. Of course, Numantina didn't like leaving me at all. I had to tell her that I was only doing this because I had a hint from a Certain

Friend of a Certain Personage that if I didn't marry Apronia, who has been in love with me and has interest at Court, I'd be charged with blasphemy against Augustus. You see, the other day one of my slaves tripped and dropped an alabaster bowl full of wine in the middle of the hall. I had a riding whip with me and when I heard the crash I rushed at the fellow and fairly laced into him. I was blind with fury. He said "Steady on, Master, look where we are!" And the brute had one foot within that holy white square of marble around Augustus's statue. I dropped my whip at once but half a dozen freedmen must have seen me. I am confident that I can trust them not to inform against me, but Numantina was worried by the incident, so I used it to reconcile her to the divorce. By the way, this is entirely confidential. I trust you not to pass it on to Urgulanilla. I don't mind telling you she's rather annoyed about the Numantina business."

"I never see her now."

"Well, if you see her, you won't tell her what I've told you? Swear you won't."

"I swear by Augustus's Godhead."

"That's good enough. You know the bedroom that you used last time you were here?"

"Yes, thanks. If you're busy, I'll go to bed now. I've had a long journey from the country to-day and worries at home too. My mother practically threw me out of the house."

So we said good night and I went upstairs. A freedman gave me a lamp, with rather a queer look, and I went into the bedroom which was on the corridor nearly opposite Plautius's, and after shutting myself in began undressing. The bed was behind a curtain. I took off my clothes and washed my hands and feet in the little washplace at the other end of the room. Suddenly there was a heavy step behind me and my lamp was blown out. I told myself: "You're done for now, Claudius. Here's someone with a dagger." But I said aloud as calmly as I could: "Please light the lamp, whoever you may be, and see if we can't talk things over

quietly. And if you decide to kill me you'll be able to see better with the lamp lit."

A deep voice answered: "Stay where you are."

There was shuffling and grunting and the sound of someone dressing and then of flint and steel struck together and at last the lamp was lit. It was Urgulanilla. I had not seen her since Drusillus's funeral and she had not grown any prettier in those five years. She was stouter than ever, colossally stout, and bloated-faced; there was enough strength in this female Hercules to have overpowered a thousand Claudiuses. I am pretty strong in the arms; but she had only to throw herself on me and she would have crushed me to death.

She came towards me and said slowly: "What are you doing in my bedroom?"

I explained myself as well as I could, and said that it was a bad joke of Plautius's, sending me into her room without telling me that she was there. I had the greatest respect for her, I said, and apologized sincerely for my intrusion and would leave her at once and sleep on a couch in the Baths.

"No, my dear, now you're here you stay. It isn't often that I have the pleasure of my husband's company. Please understand that once you're here you can't escape. Get into bed and go to sleep and I'll join you later. I'm going to read a book until I feel sleepy. I've not been able to sleep properly for nights."

"I am very sorry indeed if I woke you up just now . . ."

"Get into bed."

"I am very sorry indeed about Numantina's divorce. I knew nothing about it until the freedman told me a moment ago."

"Get into bed and stop talking."

"Good night, Urgulanilla. I really am very . . ."

"Shut up." She came over and drew the curtain.

Although I was dead tired and could hardly keep my eyes open I did my best to stay awake. I was convinced

that Urgulanilla would wait until I went to sleep and then strangle me. Meanwhile she was reading to herself very slowly from a very dull book, a Greek love-story of the most idiotic sort, rustling the pages and spelling out each syllable slowly to herself in a hoarse whisper:

*"O scholar," she said, "you have tast-ed now both hon-ey and gall. Be care-ful that the sweet-ness of your pleas-ure does not turn to-morr-ow in-to the bit-ter-ness of re-pent-ancel"* "Pshaw," I re-turned, "My sweet-heart, I am read-y, if you give me an-oth-er kiss like that last one to be roast-ed up-on a slow fire like a-ny chick-en or duck-ling."

She chuckled at this and then said aloud, "Go to sleep, husband. I'm waiting until I hear you snore."

I protested, "Then you shouldn't read such exciting stories."

I heard Plautius go to bed after a time. "O Heavens," I thought. "He'll be asleep in a few minutes and with two doors between us he won't hear my cries when Urgulanilla throttles me." Urgulanilla stopped reading and I had no muttering and crackling of paper to help me fight against my sleepiness. I felt myself falling asleep. I was asleep. I knew that I was asleep and I simply must wake up. I struggled frantically to be awake. At last I was awake. There was a thud and a rustle of paper. The book had blown off the table on to the floor. The lamp had gone out; I was aware of a strong draught in the room. The door must be open. I listened attentively for about three minutes. Urgulanilla was certainly not in the room.

As I was trying to make up my mind what to do I heard the most dreadful shriek ring out—from quite close it seemed. A woman screamed, "Spare me! Spare me! This is Numantina's doing! O! O!" Then came the bump of a heavy metal object falling, then the crash of splintering glass, another shriek, a distant thud, then hurried footsteps across the corridor. Somebody was in my room again. The door was softly closed and barred. I recognized Urgulanilla's panting breath. I heard her clothes being taken off

and laid on a chair, and soon she was lying beside me. I pretended to be asleep. She groped for my throat in the dark. I said, as if half-waking: "Don't do that, darling. It tickles. And I've got to go to Rome to-morrow to buy some cosmetics for you." Then in a more wakeful voice: "O Urgulanilla! Is that you? What's all that noise? What's the time? Have we been asleep long?"

She said, "I don't know. I must have been asleep about three hours. It's just before dawn. It sounds as though something dreadful has happened. Let's go and see."

So we got up and put on our clothes in a hurry and unlocked the door. Plautius, naked except for a coverlet hastily wrapped round him, stood in the middle of an excited crowd armed with torches. He was quite distracted and kept saying "I didn't do it. I was asleep. I felt her torn from my arms and heard her borne through the air screaming for help, and then a crash of something falling and another crash as she went through the window. It was pitch dark. She called out: 'Spare me! It's Numantina's doing.'"

"Tell that to the judges," said Apronia's brother, striding up, "and see whether they'll believe you. You've killed her all right. Her skull's smashed in."

"I didn't do it," said Plautius. "How could I have done? I was asleep. It was witchcraft. Numantina's a witch."

At dawn he was taken before the Emperor by Apronia's father. Tiberius cross-examined him severely. He said now that while he was sound asleep she had torn herself from his arms and leaped across the room, shrieking and crashed through the window into the courtyard below. Tiberius made Plautius accompany him at once to the scene of the murder. The first thing that he noticed in the bedroom was his own wedding-gift to Plautius, a beautiful Egyptian bronze-and-gold candelabra taken from the tomb of a queen, now lying broken on the ground. He glanced up and saw that it had been wrenched from the ceiling. He said: "She clung to it and it came down. She was being carried towards the window on somebody's shoulders. And look how high



up in the window the hole is! She was pitched through, she did not jump through."

"It was witchcraft," said Plautius. "She was carried through the air by an unseen power. She shrieked and blamed my former wife Numantina."

Tiberius scoffed. Plautius's friends realized that he would be convicted of murder and executed, and his property confiscated. His grandmother Urgulania therefore sent him a dagger, telling him to think of his heirs, who would be allowed to keep the property if he anticipated the verdict by immediate suicide. He was a coward and could not bring himself to drive the dagger home. Eventually he got into a hot bath and ordered a surgeon to open his veins for him; he slowly and painlessly bled to death. I felt very badly about his death. I had not accused Urgulanilla of the murder at once because I would have been asked why when I heard the first shrieks I had not jumped up and rescued Apronia. I had decided to wait until the trial and only come forward if Plautius seemed likely to be condemned. I knew nothing about the dagger until it was too late. I comforted myself by the thought that he had treated Numantina very cruelly and had been a bad friend to me, besides. To clear Plautius's memory his brother brought a charge against Numantina of having disordered Plautius's wits by witchcraft. But Tiberius intervened and said that he was satisfied that Plautius had been in full possession of his faculties at the time. Numantina was discharged.

There was not another word spoken between Urgulanilla and myself. But a month later Sejanus paid me a surprise visit as he was passing through Capua. He was in Tiberius's company, on the way to Capri, an island near Naples, where Tiberius had twelve villas and frequently went for amusement. Sejanus said: "You'll be able to divorce Urgulanilla now. She's due to have a child in about five months' time, so my agents inform me. You have me to thank for this. I knew Urgulanilla's obsession about Numantina. I happened to see a young slave, a Greek, who might have been

Numantina's male twin. I made her a present of him and she fell in love with him at once. His name's Boter."

What could I do but thank him? Then I said, "And who's my new wife to be?"

"So you remember our conversation? Well, the lady I have in mind is my sister by adoption—Ælia. You know her of course?"

I did, but I hid my disappointment, and merely asked whether anyone so young, beautiful and intelligent would be content to marry an old lame, sick, stammering fool like myself.

"Oh," he answered brutally, "she won't mind it in the least. She'll be marrying Tiberius's nephew and Nero's uncle, that's all she thinks about. Don't imagine that she's in love with you. She might bring herself to have a child by you for the sake of its ancestry, but as for any sentiment——"

"In fact, apart from the honour of becoming your brother-in-law, I might just as well not divorce Urgulanilla for all the improvement it will make to my life?"

"Oh, you'll manage," he laughed. "You don't live too lonely a life here, by the look of this room. There's a nice woman about somewhere, I can see. Gloves, a hand-mirror, an embroidery frame, that box of sweets, flowers carefully arranged. And Ælia won't be jealous. She has her own men friends, probably, though I don't pry into her affairs."

"All right," I said. "I'll do it."

"You don't sound very grateful."

"It's not ingratitude. You have taken great trouble on my account and I don't know how to thank you properly. I was only feeling rather nervous. From what I know of Ælia she's rather critical, if you understand what I mean."

He burst out laughing. "She has a tongue like a sacking-needle. But surely by now you're hardened against mere scolding? Your mother has given you a good enough training, hasn't she?"

"I am still a little thin-skinned," I said, "in places."

"Well, I mustn't stay here any longer, my dear Claudius. Tiberius will be wondering where I've gone. So it's a bargain?"

"Yes, and I thank you very much."

"Oh, by the way, it *was* Urgulanilla, wasn't it, who killed poor Apronia? I rather expected a tragedy. Urgulanilla had a letter from Numantina begging her to avenge her. Numantina didn't really write it, you understand."

"I know nothing. I was sound asleep at the time."

"Like Plautius?"

"Sounder even than Plautius."

"Sensible fellow! Well, good-bye, Claudius."

"Good-bye, Ælius Sejanus." He rode off.

I divorced Urgulanilla, after first writing to my grandmother for permission. Livia wrote that the child should be exposed as soon as born; this was her wish and the wish of Urgulania.

I sent a reliable freedman to Urgulanilla at Herculaneum to tell her the orders I had been given, warning her that if she wanted the child to live she must exchange it, as soon as born, for a dead baby; I had to have a baby of sorts to expose, and so long as it wasn't too long dead, any dead baby would serve the purpose. So the child was saved that way and later Urgulanilla took it back from its foster parents, from whom she had got the dead baby. I don't know what happened to Boter, but the child, who was a girl, grew up the living image of Numantina, they say. Urgulanilla has been dead many years now. When she died they had to break down a wall to get her enormous body out of the house—and it was all honest bulk, not dropsy. In her will she paid a curious tribute to me: "I don't care what people say, but Claudius is no fool." She left me a collection of Greek gems, some Persian embroideries, and her portrait of Numantina.