

CHAPTER XXIV

TIBERIUS and Livia never met now. Livia had offended Tiberius by dedicating a statue to Augustus in their joint names and putting her name first. He retaliated by doing the one thing that she could not even pretend to forgive—when ambassadors came to him from Spain asking that they might erect a temple to him and his mother he refused on behalf of both. He told the Senate that he had, perhaps in a moment of weakness, allowed the dedication of a temple in Asia to the Senate and its leader (namely, himself)—together symbolizing the paternal government of Rome. His mother's name also occurred in the dedicatory inscription as High-Priestess of the cult of Augustus. But to assent to the deification of himself and his mother would be carrying indulgence too far. A.D. 25

“For myself, my Lords, that I am a mortal man, that I am bound by the trammels of human nature, and that I fill the principal place among you to your satisfaction—if I do—I solemnly assure you is quite enough for me: this is how I prefer to be remembered by posterity. If posterity believes me to have been worthy of my ancestors, watchful of your interest, unmoved in dangers and, in defence of the commonwealth, fearless of private enmities, I shall be sufficiently remembered. The loving gratitude of the Senate and people of Rome and of our allies, is the fairest temple I would raise—a temple not of marble but more enduring than marble, a temple of the heart. Marble temples, when the hallowed beings to whom they are raised fall into disrepute, are despised as mere sepulchres. I therefore invoke Heaven to grant me until the end of my life an untroubled spirit and the

power of clear discernment in all duties human and sacred: and therefore too I implore our citizens and allies that whenever dissolution comes to this mortal body of mine, they will celebrate my life and deeds (if they are so worthy) with inward thankfulness and praise rather than with outward pomp and temple-building and annual sacrifice. The true love that Rome felt for my father Augustus when he was among us as a man is already obscured both by the awe which his Godhead excites in the religious-minded and by the indiscriminate use of his name as a market-place oath. And while we are on the subject, my Lords, I propose that we henceforth make it a criminal offence to use the sacred name of Augustus for any but the most solemn occasions and that we enforce this law vigorously." No mention of Livia's feelings in the matter. And the day before he had refused to appoint one of her nominees to a vacant judgeship, unless he were permitted to qualify the appointment with: "This person is the choice of my mother, Livia Augusta, to whose importunities in his interest I have been forced to give way, against my better knowledge of his character and capacities."

Soon after this Livia invited all the noblewomen of Rome to an all-day entertainment. There were jugglers and acrobats and recitations from the poets and marvellous cakes and sweetmeats and liqueurs and a beautiful jewel for each guest as a memento of the occasion. To conclude the proceedings Livia gave a reading of Augustus's letters. She was now eighty-three years old and her voice was weak and she whistled a good deal on her s's, but for an hour and a half she held her audience spellbound. The first letters she read contained pronouncements on public policy, all of which seemed especially written as warnings against the present state of affairs at Rome. There were some very apposite remarks about treason trials, including the following paragraph:

"Though I have been bound to protect myself legally against all sorts of libel I shall exert myself to the utmost, my dear Livia, to avoid staging so unpleasant a spectacle as a trial,

for treason, of any foolish historian, caricaturist or epigram-maker who has made me a target of his wit or eloquence. My father Julius Cæsar forgave the poet Catullus the most filthy lampoons imaginable: he wrote to Catullus that if he were trying to show that he was no servile flatterer like most of his fellow-poets, he had now fully proved his case and could return to other more poetical subjects than the sexual abnormalities of a middle-aged statesman: and would he come to dinner the next day and bring any friend he liked? Catullus came and thenceforward the two were fast friends. To use the majesty of law for revenging any petty act of private spite is to make a public confession of weakness, cowardice and an ignoble spirit."

There was a notable paragraph about informers: "Except where I am convinced that an informer does not expect to benefit directly or indirectly by his accusations, but brings them from a sense of true patriotism and public decency, I not only discount their importance as evidence but I put a black mark against that informer's name and never afterwards employ him in any position of trust . . ."

And, to finish up, she read a series of very illuminating letters. Livia had tens of thousands of Augustus's letters, written over a stretch of fifty-two years, carefully sewn into book-form and indexed. She chose from these thousands the fifteen most damaging ones she could find. The series began with complaints against Tiberius's disgusting behaviour as a little boy, his unpopularity with his schoolfellows as a big boy, his close-fistedness and haughtiness as a young man, and so on, with signs of growing irritation and the phrase, often repeated, "and if it were not that he was your son, my dearest Livia, I should say——" Then came complaints of his brutal severity with the troops under his command—"almost an encouragement to mutiny"—and his dilatoriness in pressing his attacks on the enemy, with unfavourable comparisons between his methods and my father's. Then an angry refusal to consider him as a son-in-law, and a detailed list of his moral shortcomings. Then more letters relating to the

painful Julia story, written for the most part in terms of almost insane loathing and disgust for Tiberius. She read one important letter written on the occasion of Tiberius's recall from Rhodes:

"DEAREST LIVIA:

"I take advantage of this forty-second anniversary of our marriage to thank you with all my heart for the extraordinary services you have rendered the State ever since we joined forces. If I am styled the Father of the Country it seems absurd to me that you should not be styled the Mother of the Country: I swear you have done twice as much as I have in our great work of public reconstruction. Why do you ask me to wait another few years before asking the Senate to vote you this honour? The only way that I can show my absolute confidence in your disinterested loyalty and profound judgment is to give way at last to your repeated pleas for the recall of Tiberius, a man to whose character I confess I continue to feel the greatest repugnance, and I pray to Heaven that by giving way to you now I do not inflict lasting damage on the commonwealth."

Livia's last choice was a letter written about a year before Augustus's death:

"I had a sudden feeling of profoundest regret and despair, my dearest wife, when discussing State policy with Tiberius yesterday, that the people of Rome should be fated to be glared at by those protruding eyes of his and pounded by that bony fist of his and chewed by those dreadfully slow jaws of his and stamped on by those huge feet of his. But I was for the moment reckoning without yourself and our dear Germanicus. If I did not believe that when I am dead he will both be guided by you in all matters of State and shamed by Germanicus's example into at least a semblance of decent living, I would even now, I swear, disinherit him and ask the Senate to revoke all his titles of honour. The man's a beast and needs keepers."

When she had finished she rose and said: "Perhaps, ladies, it would be best to say nothing to your husbands about these

peculiar letters. I did not realize, in fact, when I began to read, how—how peculiar they were. I am not asking you this on my own account but for the sake of the Empire.”

Tiberius heard the whole story from Sejanus just as he was about to take his seat in the Senate, and he was overcome with shame and rage and alarm. It so happened that his business that afternoon was to hear a charge of treason brought against Lentulus, one of the pontiffs who had incurred his suspicion in the matter of the prayer for Nero and Drusus, and also because he had voted for the mitigation of Sosia's sentence. When Lentulus, a simple old man, distinguished equally for his birth, his victories in Africa under Augustus and his unassuming mildness—his nickname was “The Bell-Wether”—heard that he was accused of plotting against the State, he burst out laughing. Tiberius, already distracted, lost all self-control and said, nearly weeping, to the House: “If Lentulus too hates me, I am unworthy to live.”

Gallus replied: “Cheer up, Your Majesty—I beg your pardon, I had forgotten that you dislike the title—I should say, cheer up, Tiberius Cæsar! Lentulus was not laughing *at* you, he was laughing *with* you. He was rejoicing with you that for once there should come before the Senate a charge of treason that was absolutely unfounded.” So the charge against Lentulus was dropped. But Tiberius had already been the cause of Lentulus's father's death. He was immensely rich and was so frightened by Tiberius's suspicions of him that he had killed himself, and as a proof of loyalty had left his entire fortune to Tiberius, who thereafter could not believe that Lentulus, now left very poor, harboured no resentment against him.

Tiberius did not enter the Senate again for two whole months: he could not look the senators in the face with the knowledge that their wives had heard Augustus's letters about him. Sejanus suggested that it would be good for his health to leave Rome for a while and stay a few miles away at one of his villas, where he would escape from the daily

throng of Palace visitors and the noise and bustle of the City. He followed this advice. The action that he took against his mother was to superannuate her, to omit her name from all public documents, to discontinue her customary birthday honours, and to make it clear that any coupling of her name with his or any praise of her in the Senate would be regarded as little short of treason. More active vengeance he did not dare take. He knew that she still had the letter which he had written from Rhodes promising her his lifelong obedience and that she was quite capable of reading it, even though it might incriminate her as the murderess of Gaius and Lucius.

But this wonderful old woman was not defeated yet, as you shall read. One day I had a note from her. "The Lady Livia Augusta expects her dear grandson Tiberius Claudius to visit and dine with her on the occasion of her birthday: she hopes that he is in good health." I could not make it out. Her dear grandson! Tender inquiries after my health! I did not know whether to laugh or be afraid. I had never in my life been allowed to visit her on her birthday. I had never even dined with her. I had not spoken to her, except ceremonially at the Augustan festival, for ten years. What could her motive be? Well, I should know in three days, and meanwhile I must buy her a really magnificent present. I finally bought her something which I was sure she would appreciate—a gracefully-shaped wine-vase in bronze, with serpent-head handles and a complicated design of gold and silver inlay. It was, in my opinion, of far finer workmanship than any of the Corinthian vessels that collectors give such absurd prices for nowadays. It came from China! In the centre of the design had been sunk a gold medallion of Augustus which had somehow strayed to that wonderfully distant land. That vase cost me five hundred gold pieces, though it stood no more than eighteen inches high.

But before I tell of my visit and my long interview with her I must clear up a point on which I may perhaps have misled you. From my accounts of the treason-trials and

similar atrocities it will probably be deduced that the Empire under Tiberius was intolerably misgoverned in all departments. This was far from being the case. Though he undertook no new public works worth speaking of, merely contenting himself with completing those begun by Augustus, he kept the Army and the Fleet efficient and up to strength, paid his officials regularly and made them send in detailed reports four times a year, encouraged trade, assured a regular supply of corn for Italy, kept the roads and aqueducts in repair, limited public and private extravagance in a variety of ways, stabilized food prices, put down piracy and banditry and built up a considerable reserve of public money in case of any national emergency. He maintained his provincial governors in office for many years at a time, if they were any good, so as not to unsettle matters, keeping a careful watch on them however. One governor, to show his efficiency and loyalty, sent Tiberius more tribute than was due. Tiberius gave him a reprimand: "I want my sheep shorn, not shaved." As a result there were few frontier wars after the German trouble was settled by Maroboduus's welcome to Rome and Hermann's death. Tacfarinas was the chief enemy. He was for a long time known as the "Laurel-giver" because three generals—my friend Furius, and Apronius, the father of Apronia, and a third, Blæsus, Sejanus's maternal uncle, had each in turn defeated him and been awarded triumphal ornaments. Blæsus, who scattered Tacfarinas's army and captured his brother, was given the unusual honour of being made a field-marshal, an honour reserved in general only for the Imperial family. Tiberius told the Senate that he was glad to honour Blæsus in this way because of his kinship with his trusted friend Sejanus; and when, three years later, a fourth general, Dolabella, put a final end to the African War, which had broken out again with redoubled force, by not only defeating Tacfarinas but killing him, Dolabella was granted only triumphal ornaments "lest the laurels of Blæsus, uncle of my trusted friend Sejanus, should thereby lose their lustre".

But I was talking of Tiberius's good deeds, not his weaknesses: and really, from the point of view of the Empire as a whole, he had been for the last twelve years a wise and just ruler. That nobody can deny. The canker in the core of the apple—if the metaphor may be forgiven—did not show on the skin or impair the wholesomeness of the flesh. Of five million Roman citizens, a mere two or three hundred suffered for Tiberius's jealous fears. And I do not know how many scores of millions of slaves and provincials, and allies who were subjects in all but name, benefited solidly by the Imperial system as perfected by Augustus and Livia and carried on in this tradition by Tiberius. But I was living in the apple's core, so to speak, and I can be pardoned if I write more about the central canker than about the still unblemished and fragrant outer part.

Once you give way to a metaphor, Claudius, which is rare, you pursue it too far. Surely you remember Athenodorus's injunctions against this sort of thing? Well, call Sejanus the maggot and get it done with; then return to your usual homely style!

Sejanus decided to use Tiberius's sense of shame as a means of keeping him away from the City for a longer time than a mere two months. He encouraged one of his Guards officers to accuse a celebrated wit called Montanus of blackening Tiberius's private character. Whereas hitherto the accusers had been restrained from reporting any but the most general abuse of Tiberius—as haughty, or cruel or domineering—this soldier came forward and credited Montanus with libels of a most particular and substantial kind. Sejanus took care that the libels were as true as they were disgusting; though Montanus, not having Sejanus's knowledge of what went on in the Palace, had not uttered them. The witness, who was the best drill-instructor in the Guards, bawled out Montanus's alleged obscenities at the top of his voice, not slurring over the most obscene words or phrases, and refusing to let himself be cried down by the shocked protests of the senators. "I swore to tell the whole truth," he bellowed, "and

for the honour of Tiberius Cæsar I shall not omit a single article of the accused's loathsome conversation overheard by me on the said date and in the said circumstances. Accused further declared that our gracious Emperor is fast becoming impotent from said alleged debauches and said over-indulgence in aphrodisiac medicines, and that in order to rally his waning sexual powers he holds private exhibitions every three days or so in a specially decorated underground room of the Palace. Accused declared that the performers at these exhibitions, Spintrians as they are called, come prancing in, three at a time, stark naked . . ."

He went on in that strain for half an hour and Tiberius did not dare to stop him—or perhaps he wanted to find out just how much was known—until the witness said one thing too many (never mind what it was). Tiberius, forgetting himself, leaped up suddenly, his face crimson, and declared that he would instantly clear himself of these monstrous charges or establish a judicial investigation. Sejanus tried to calm him down, but he remained on his feet glaring angrily about him, until Gallus rose and gently reminded him that it was Montanus, not he, who was the accused party; that his private character was beyond suspicion; and that if news that such an investigation was about to be held reached the frontier provinces and the allied states, it would be completely misunderstood.

Shortly afterwards Tiberius was warned by Thrasyllus—whether this was arranged by Sejanus, I do not know—that he would shortly leave the City and that it would be death for him to re-enter it. Tiberius told Sejanus that he would move to Capri and leave him to look after things at Rome. He attended one more treason-trial—that of my cousin Claudia Pulchra, Varus's widow, who, now that Sosia was banished, was Agrippina's most intimate friend. She was charged with adultery, prostituting her daughters, and witchcraft against Tiberius. She was, I think, completely innocent of all these charges. As soon as Agrippina heard about it she hurried to the Palace and by chance found

Tiberius sacrificing to Augustus. Almost before the ceremony was over she came close up to him and said:

"Tiberius, this is illogical behaviour. You sacrifice flamingoes and peacocks to Augustus and you persecute his grandchildren."

He said slowly: "I do not understand you. Which grandchildren of Augustus have I persecuted that he did not himself persecute?"

"I am not talking about Postumus and Julilla. I mean myself. You banished Sosia because she was my friend. You forced Silius to kill himself because he was my friend. And Calpurnius because he was my friend. And now my dear Pulchra is doomed too, though her only crime is her foolish fondness for me. People are beginning to avoid me, saying that I am unlucky."

Tiberius took her by the shoulders and said once more:

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

Pulchra was condemned and executed. The Crown Prosecutor was a man called Afer, engaged because of his eloquence. A few days later Agrippina happened to see him outside the theatre. He appeared ashamed of himself and avoided meeting her eye. She went up to him and said: "There is no occasion for you to hide from me, Afer." Then she quoted from Homer, but with alterations to suit the context, Achilles's reassuring answer to the embarrassed heralds who came to him with a humiliating message from Agamemnon. She said:

He forced you to it. Though you were well fee'd
It was not yours but Agamemnon's deed.

This was reported to Tiberius (though not by Afer); the word "Agamemnon" caused him fresh alarm.

Agrippina fell ill and thought that she was being poisoned.

She went in her sedan to the Palace to make a last appeal to Tiberius for mercy. She looked so thin and pale that Tiberius was charmed: perhaps she would die soon. He said: "My poor Agrippina, you look seriously ill. What's wrong with you?"

She answered in a weak voice: "It may be that I have done you a wrong in thinking that you persecute my friends just because they are my friends. It may be that I am unlucky in my choice of them, or that my judgment is often at fault. But I swear you have done me equal wrong in thinking that I have the least feeling of disloyalty towards you or that I have any ambition to rule either directly or indirectly. All that I ask is to be left alone, and your forgiveness for any injuries that I have unintentionally done you, and . . . and . . ." She ended in sobs.

"And what else?"

"O Tiberius, be good to my children! And be good to me! Let me marry again. I am so lonely. Since Germanicus died I have never been able to forget my troubles. I can't sleep at night. If you let me marry I'll settle down and lose all my restlessness and be quite a different person, and then perhaps you won't suspect me of plotting against you. I am sure it's only because I look so unhappy that you think I have bad feelings towards you."

"Who's the man you want to marry?"

"A good, generous, unambitious man, past middle age and one of your most loyal ministers."

"What's his name?"

"Gallus. He says that he is ready to marry me at once."

Tiberius turned on his heel and walked out of the room without another word.

A few days later he invited her to a banquet. He used often to invite people to dine with him whom he particularly mistrusted and stare at them throughout the meal as if trying to read their secret thoughts: which shook the self-possession of all but very few. If they looked alarmed he read it as a proof of guilt. If they met his eye steadily he read it as an

even stronger proof of guilt, with insolence added. On this occasion Agrippina, still ill and unable to eat any but the lightest food without nausea, and stared constantly at by Tiberius, had a miserable time. She was not a talkative person, and the conversation, which was about the relative merits of music and philosophy, did not interest her in the least and she found it impossible to contribute anything to it. She made a pretence of eating, but Tiberius, who was watching her attentively, saw that she sent away plate after plate untouched. He thought that she suspected him of trying to poison her, and to test this he carefully picked an apple from the dish in front of him and said: "My dear Agrippina, you haven't made much of a meal. At any rate, try this apple. It's a splendid one. I had a present of young apple trees from the King of Parthia three years ago and this is the first time they have borne fruit."

Now almost everyone has a certain "natural enemy"—if I may call it that. To some people honey is a violent poison. Others are made ill by touching a horse or entering a stable or even by lying on a couch stuffed with horse-hair. Others again are most uncomfortably affected by the presence of a cat, and going into a room will sometimes say, "There has been a cat here, excuse me if I retire." I myself feel an overpowering repugnance to the smell of hawthorn in bloom. Agrippina's natural enemy was the apple. She took the present from Tiberius and thanked him, but with an ill-concealed shudder, and said that she would keep it, if she might, to eat when she reached home.

"Just one bite now, to taste how good it is."

"Please forgive me, but really I could not." She handed the apple to a servant and told him to wrap it carefully in a napkin for her.

Why did Tiberius not immediately try her on a treason-charge, as Sejanus urged? Because Agrippina was still under Livia's protection.