

CHAPTER XXV

AND so I come to the account of my dinner with Livia. She greeted me very graciously, seeming genuinely delighted with my gift. During the meal, at which nobody else was present but old Urgulania and Caligula, now aged fourteen—a tall pale boy with a blotched complexion and sunken eyes—she surprised me by the sharpness of her mind and the clearness of her memory. She asked me about my work, and when I began talking about the First Punic War and discrediting certain particulars given by the poet Nævius (he had served in this war) she agreed with my conclusions but caught me out in a misquotation. She said: "You're grateful to me now, grandson, aren't you, for not letting you write that biography of your father! Do you think that you'd be dining here to-day if I hadn't intervened?"

Every time the slave filled my cup I had drunk it straight up, and now at the tenth or twelfth draught I felt like a lion. I answered boldly: "Extremely grateful, Grandmother, to be safe among the Carthaginians and Etruscans. But will you tell me just *why* I'm dining here to-day?"

She smiled: "Well, I admit that your presence at table still causes me a certain amount of . . . But never mind. If I have broken one of my oldest rules that is my affair, not yours. Do you dislike me, Claudius? Be frank."

"Probably as much as you dislike me, Grandmother." (Could this be my own voice speaking?)

Caligula sniggered, Urgulania tittered, Livia laughed: "Frank enough! By the way, have you noticed that monster there? He's been keeping unusually quiet during the meal."

"Who, Grandmother?"

"That nephew of yours."

"Is he a monster?"

"Don't pretend you don't know it. You *are* a monster aren't you, Caligula?"

"Whatever you say, Great-grandmother," Caligula said with downcast eyes.

"Well, Claudius, that monster there, your nephew—I'll tell you about him. *He's going to be the next Emperor.*"

I thought it was a joke. I said smilingly: "If you tell me so, Grandmother, it is so. But what are his recommendations? He's the youngest of the family and though he has given evidences of great natural talent . . ."

"You mean that they won't any of them stand a chance against Sejanus and your sister Livilla?"

I was astounded at the freedom of the conversation. "I didn't mean anything of the sort. I never concern myself with high politics. I only meant that he's young yet, much too young to be Emperor; and that as a prophecy it seems rather a long shot."

"Not a long shot at all. Tiberius will make him his successor. No question of it. Why? Because Tiberius is like that. He has the same vanity as poor Augustus had: he can't bear the idea of a successor who will be more popular than himself. But at the same time he does all he can to make himself hated and feared. So, when he feels that his time's nearly up, he'll search for someone just a little worse than himself to succeed him. And he'll find Caligula. There is one deed that Caligula has already done which puts him in a far higher rank of criminality than Tiberius can ever now attain."

"Please, Great-grandmother . . ." Caligula pleaded.

"All right, monster, your secret's safe with me so long as you behave."

"Does Urgulania know the secret?" I asked.

"No. It's between the monster and myself."

"Did he confess it voluntarily?"

"Certainly not. He's not the confessing sort. I found

out about it by accident. I was searching his bedroom one night to see if he was trying any schoolboy tricks on me—whether he was doing any amateur black magic, for instance, or distilling poisons or anything of the sort. I came across . . .”

“Please, Great-grandmother.”

“A green object that told me a very remarkable story. But I gave it back to him.”

Urgulania said grinning: “Thrasyllus said I’m going to die this year, so I won’t have the pleasure of living in your reign, Caligula, unless you hurry up and murder Tiberius!”

I turned to Livia: “Is he going to do that, Grandmother?”

Caligula said: “Is it safe for Uncle Claudius to be told things? Or are you going to poison him?”

She answered: “Oh, he’s quite safe, without any poison. I want you two to know each other better than you do. That’s one reason for this dinner. Listen, Caligula. Your uncle Claudius is a phenomenon. He’s so old-fashioned that because he’s sworn an oath to love and protect his brother’s children you can always impose on him—as long as you live. Listen, Claudius. Your nephew Caligula is a phenomenon. He’s treacherous, cowardly, lustful, vain, deceitful, and he’ll play some very dirty tricks on you before he’s done: but remember one thing, he’ll never kill you.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, draining my cup again. The conversation was like the sort one has in dreams—mad but interesting.

“Because you’re the man who’s going to avenge his death.”

“I? Who said so?”

“Thrasyllus.”

“Does Thrasyllus never make mistakes?”

“No. Never. Caligula’s going to be murdered and you’re to avenge his death.”

A gloomy silence suddenly fell and continued until dessert, when Livia said: “Come, Claudius, the rest of our talk shall be in private.” The other two rose and left us alone.

I said: “That seemed to me a very odd conversation,

Grandmother. Was it my fault? Had I been drinking too much? I mean, some jokes aren't safe, nowadays. It was rather dangerous fooling. I hope the servants . . ."

"Oh, they're deaf-mutes. No, don't blame the wine. There's truth in wine, and the conversation was perfectly serious so far as I was concerned."

"But . . . but if you really think him a monster why do you encourage him? Why not give Nero your support? He's a fine fellow."

"Because Caligula, not Nero, is to be the next Emperor."

"But he'll make a marvellously bad one if he's what you say he is. And you, who have devoted your whole life to the service of Rome . . ."

"Yes. But you can't fight against Fate. And now that Rome has been ungrateful and mad enough to allow my blackguardly son to put me on the shelf, and insult me—*me*, can you imagine it, perhaps the greatest ruler that the world has ever known, and his mother, too . . ." Her voice grew shrill.

I was anxious to change the subject. I said, "Please, calm yourself, Grandmother. As you say, you can't fight against Fate. But isn't there something particular that you want to tell me, Grandmother, connected with all this?"

"Yes, it's about Thrasyllus. I consult him frequently. Tiberius doesn't know that I do, but Thrasyllus has been here often. He told me some years ago what would happen between Tiberius and me—that he'd eventually rebel against my authority and take the Empire wholly into his own hands. I didn't believe it then. He also told me another thing: that though I would die a disappointed old woman I would be acknowledged a Goddess many years after my death. And previously he had said that one who must die in the year which I know now is the year in which I must die, will become the greatest Deity the world has ever known and that, finally, no temples at Rome or anywhere in the Empire will be dedicated to anyone else. Not even to Augustus."

"When are you to die?"

"Three years hence, in the spring. I know the very day."

"But are you so anxious to become a Goddess? My uncle Tiberius isn't at all anxious, it seems."

"It is all I think about, now that my work is over. And why not? If Augustus is a God, it's absurd for me to be merely his priestess. I did all the work, didn't I? He no more had it in him to be a great ruler than Tiberius has."

"Yes, Grandmother. But isn't it enough for you to *know* what you have done without wanting to be worshipped by the ignorant rabble?"

"Claudius, let me explain. I quite agree about the ignorant rabble. It's not so much my fame on earth that I'm thinking about as the position I am to occupy in Heaven. I have done many impious things—no great ruler can do otherwise. I have put the good of the Empire before all human considerations. To keep the Empire free from factions I have had to commit many crimes. Augustus did his best to wreck the Empire by his ridiculous favouritism: Marcellus against Agrippa, Gaius against Tiberius. Who saved Rome from renewed Civil War? I did. The unpleasant and difficult task of removing Marcellus and Gaius fell on me. Yes, don't pretend you haven't ever suspected me of poisoning them. And what is the proper reward for a ruler who commits such crimes for the good of his subjects? The proper reward, obviously, is to be deified. Do you believe that the souls of criminals are eternally tormented?"

"I have always been taught to believe that they are."

"But the Immortal Gods are free from any fear of punishment, however many crimes they commit?"

"Well, Jove deposed his father and killed one of his grandsons and incestuously married his sister, and . . . yes, I agree. . . . They none of them have a good moral reputation. And certainly the Judges of the Mortal Dead have no jurisdiction over them."

"Exactly. You see now why it's all-important for me to

become a Goddess. And this, if you must know, is the reason why I tolerate Caligula. He has sworn that if I keep his secret he will make a Goddess of me as soon as he's Emperor. And I want you to swear that you'll do all in your power to see that I become a Goddess as soon as possible, because—oh, don't you see?—until he makes me a Goddess I'll be in Hell, suffering the most frightful torments, the most exquisite ineluctable torments."

The sudden change in her voice, from cool Imperial arrogance to terrified pleading, astonished me more than anything I had yet heard. I had to say something so I said: "I don't see what influence poor Uncle Claudius is ever likely to have, either on the Emperor or on the Senate."

"Never mind about what you see or don't see, idiot! Will you swear to do as I ask? Will you swear by your own head?"

I said: "Grandmother, I'll swear by my head—for what that's worth now—on one condition."

"You dare to make conditions to *me*?"

"Yes, after the twentieth cup; and it's a simple condition. After thirty-six years of neglect and aversion you surely don't expect me to do anything for you without making conditions, do you?"

She smiled. "And what is this one simple condition?"

"There are a lot of things that I'd like to know about. I want to know, in the first place, who killed my father, and who killed Agrippa, and who killed my brother Germanicus, and who killed my son Drusillus. . . ."

"Why do you want to know all this? Some imbecile hope of avenging their deaths on me?"

"No, not even if you were the murderess. I never take vengeance unless I am forced to do so by an oath or in self-protection. I believe that evil is its own punishment. All I want now is just to know the truth. I am a professional historian and the one thing that really interests me is to find out how things happen and why. For instance, I write histories more to inform myself than to inform my readers."

"Old Athenodorus has had a great influence on you, I see."

"He was kind to me and I was grateful, so I became a Stoic. I never meddled with philosophical argument—that never appealed to me—but I adopted the Stoic way of looking at things. You can trust me not to repeat a word of what you tell me."

I convinced her that I meant what I said, and so for four hours or more I asked her the most searching questions; and each question she answered without evasion and as calmly as if she had been some country steward relating the minor casualties of the farm-yard to the visiting owner. Yes, she had poisoned my grandfather, and no, she had not poisoned my father in spite of Tiberius's suspicions—it was a natural gangrene; and yes, she had poisoned Augustus by smearing poison on the figs while they were still on the tree; and she told me the whole Julia story as I have related it, and the whole Postumus story—the details of which I was able to check; and yes, she had poisoned Agrippa and Lucius, as well as Marcellus and Gaius, and yes, she had intercepted my letters to Germanicus, but no, she had not poisoned him—Plancina had done that on her own initiative—but she had marked him out for death as she had marked out my father, and for the same reason.

"What reason was that, Grandmother?"

"He had decided to restore the Republic. No, don't mistake me: not in a way which violated his oath of allegiance to Tiberius, though it meant removing me. He was going to make Tiberius take the step himself voluntarily, and allow him all the credit for it, keeping in the background himself. He nearly persuaded Tiberius. You know what a coward Tiberius is. I had to work hard and forge a lot of documents and tell a lot of lies to keep Tiberius from making a fool of Sejanus. This republicanism is a persistent taint in the himself. I even had to come to an understanding with family. Your grandfather had it."

"I have it."

"Still? That's amusing. Nero has it too, I understand. It won't bring him much luck. And it's no use arguing with you republicans. You refuse to see that one can no more reintroduce republican government at this stage than one can reimpose primitive feelings of chastity on modern wives and husbands. It's like trying to turn the shadow back on a sundial: it can't be done."

She confessed to having had Drusillus throttled. She told me how close I was to death when I first wrote to Germanicus about Postumus. The only reason that she had spared me was that there was a possibility of my writing him information as to Postumus's whereabouts. The most interesting account she gave me was of her poisoning methods. I asked her Postumus's question—whether she favoured slow poisons or quick ones—and she answered without the least embarrassment that she preferred repeated doses of slow tasteless poisons which gave the effect of consumption. I asked how she managed to cover up her traces so well and how she managed to strike at such long distances: for Gaius had been murdered in Asia Minor, and Lucius at Marseilles.

She reminded me that she had never contrived a murder which might be held to benefit her directly and immediately. She had not, for instance, poisoned my grandfather until some time after being divorced from him, nor had she poisoned any of her female rivals—Octavia or Julia, or Scribonia. Her victims were mostly people by whose removal her sons and grandchildren were brought closer to the succession. Urgulania had been her only confidant, and she was so discreet and skilful and so devoted that not only was it most unlikely that the crimes they planned together would ever be detected but, even if they were, they would never have been brought home to *her*. The annual confessions made to Urgulania in preparation for the festival of the Good Goddess had been a useful means of removing several people who stood in the way of her plans. She explained this fully. It happened sometimes that confession was made not merely to adultery but to incest with a brother or son.

Urgulania would declare that the only possible penance was the death of the man. The woman then pleaded, was there no other possible penance? Urgulania would then say that there was perhaps an alternative that the Goddess would permit. The woman could purify herself by assisting the Goddess's vengeance—with the help of the man who had caused her shame. For, Urgulania would tell her, a similarly detestable confession had been made some time before by another woman, who had however shrunk from killing her ravisher, and so the wretch was still alive, though the woman herself had suffered. The "wretch" was successively Agrippa, Lucius, and Gaius. Agrippa was accused of incest with his daughter Marcellina—whose unexplained suicide gave colour to the story; Gaius and Lucius of incest with their mother before her banishment—and Julia's reputation gave colour to this story too. In each case the woman was only too glad to plan the murder and the man to execute it. Urgulania assisted with advice and suitable poisons. Livia's safety lay in the remoteness of the agent, who if he were to be suspected or even taken red-handed could not explain his motive for the murder without further incriminating himself. I asked whether she had had no compunction about murdering Augustus and either murdering or banishing so many of his descendants. She said: "I never for a moment forgot whose daughter I was." And that explained a great deal. Livia's father, Claudian, had been proscribed by Augustus after the Battle of Philippi and had committed suicide rather than fall into his hands.

In short, she told me everything that I wanted to know except about the haunting of Germanicus's house at Antioch. She repeated that she had not ordered it and that neither Plancina nor Piso had told her anything about it and that I was in as good a position to clear up the mystery as she was. I saw that it was useless to press her further, so I thanked her for her patience with me and at last took the oath by my head to do all in my power to make her a Goddess.

As I was going she handed me a small volume and told me

to read it when I was in Capua. It was the collection of rejected Sibylline verses that I have written about in the first pages of this story, and when I came across the prophecy called "The Succession of Hairy Ones" I thought I knew why Livia had invited me to dinner and made me swear that oath. If I had sworn it. It all seemed like a drunken dream.