

CHAPTER XXXII

HE called for the most recent official property-census and after examining it summoned all the richest men in France to Lyons, so that when the Palace-stuff arrived there from Rome he would be sure to get good prices for it. Just before the auction started, he made a speech. He said that he was a poor bankrupt with enormous liabilities, but trusted that, for the sake of the Empire, his affectionate provincial friends and grateful allies would not take advantage of his financial plight. He begged them not to offer less than the true value of the family heirlooms which, much to his grief, he was being forced to put up for sale.

There was no ordinary auctioneer's trick that he had not learned, and he invented a great many new ones too beyond the scope of the market-place cheap-jacks from whom he borrowed so much of his patter. For instance, he sold the same article several times over to different buyers with each time a different account of its quality and usefulness and history. And by "true value" he expected bidders to understand "sentimental value" which always turned out to be a hundred times greater than the intrinsic value. For instance he would say: "This was the favourite easy-chair of my great-grandfather Mark Antony"—"the God Augustus drank out of this wine-cup at his marriage feast"—"this dress was worn by my sister, the Goddess Panthea, at a reception given to King Herod Agrippa in celebration of his release from prison"—and so forth. And he sold what he called "blind bargains", small articles wrapped up in cloth. When he had inveigled a man into buying an old sandal or a piece of cheese for two thousand gold pieces, he was tremendously pleased with himself.

Bidding always started at the reserve price; for he would nod at some rich Frenchman and say, "I think you said forty thousand gold pieces for that alabaster casket? Thank you. But let's see if we can't do better. Who'll say forty-five thousand?" You can imagine that fear made the bidding brisk. He skinned the whole lot of all they had and celebrated the skinning by a magnificent ten-day festival.

He then continued his progress to the Rhine Provinces. He swore that he was about to fight a war against the Germans that would only end in their total extermination. He would piously complete the task begun by his grandfather and father. He sent a couple of regiments over the river to locate the nearest enemy. About a thousand prisoners were brought back. Caligula reviewed them and after picking out three hundred fine young men for his bodyguard he lined up the remainder against a cliff. A bald-headed man was at either end of the line. Caligula gave Cassius the order: "Kill them, from bald head to bald head, in vengeance for the death of Varus." The news of this massacre reached the Germans and they withdrew into their thickest forests. Caligula then crossed the river with his entire army and found the countryside deserted. The first day of his march, just to make things more exciting, he ordered some of his German bodyguard into a neighbouring wood, and then had news brought to him at supper that the enemy was at hand. At the head of his "Scouts" and a troop of Guards Cavalry he then dashed out to the attack. He brought back the men as prisoners, loaded with chains, and announced a crushing victory against overwhelming odds. He rewarded his comrades-in-arms with a new sort of military decoration called "The Scouts' Crown", a golden coronet decorated with the Sun, Moon and stars in precious stones.

On the third day the road lay through a narrow pass. The army had to move in column instead of in skirmishing order. Cassius said to Caligula, "It was in a place rather like this, Cæsar, that Varus got ambushed. I shall never

forget that day so long as I live. I was marching at the head of my company and had just reached a bend in the road, as it might be this one we are coming to, when suddenly there was a tremendous war-cry, as it might be from that clump of firs yonder, and three or four hundred assegais came whizzing down on us. . . .”

“Quick, my mare!” called Caligula in a panic. “Clear the road!” He sprang from his sedan, mounted Penelope (Incitatus was at Rome, winning races) and galloped back down the column. In four hours’ time he was at the bridge again, but found it so choked with baggage-wagons and was in such a hurry to cross that he dismounted and made soldiers hand him in a chair from wagon to wagon until he was safely on the other side. He recalled his army at once, announcing that the enemy were too cowardly to meet him in battle, and that he would therefore seek new conquests elsewhere. When the whole force had reassembled at Cologne he marched down the Rhine and then across to Boulogne, the nearest port to Britain. It so happened that the heir of Cymbeline, the King of Britain, had quarrelled with his father and, hearing of Caligula’s approach, he fled across the Channel with a few followers and put himself under Roman protection. Caligula, who had already informed the Senate of his total subjugation of Germany, now wrote to say that King Cymbeline had sent his son to acknowledge Roman suzerainty over the entire British archipelago from the Scilly Islands to the Orkneys.

I was with Caligula throughout this expedition and had a very difficult time trying to humour him. He complained of sleeplessness and said that his enemy Neptune was plaguing him all the time with sea-noises in his ears, and used to come by night and threaten him with a trident. I said: “Neptune? I wouldn’t allow myself to be browbeaten by that saucy fellow if I were you. Why don’t you punish him as you punished the Germans? You threatened him once before, I remember, and if he continues to flout you, it would be wrong to stretch your clemency any further.”

He looked at me, uncomfortably, through narrowed eyelids. "Do you think I'm mad?" he asked, after a time.

I laughed nervously. "*Mad, Cæsar?* You ask whether I think you *mad?* Why, you set the standard of sanity for the whole habitable world."

"It's a very difficult thing, you know, Claudius," he said confidentially, "to be a God in human disguise. I've often thought I was going mad. They say that the hellebore cure at Anticyra is very good. What do you think of it?"

I said: "One of the greatest Greek philosophers, but I can't remember now which of them it was, took the hellebore cure just to make his clear brain still clearer. But if you are asking me to advise you, I should say, 'Don't take it! Your brain is as clear as a pool of rock-water.'"

"Yes," he said, "but I wish I could get more than three hours' sleep a night."

"Those three hours are because of your mortal disguise," I said. "Undisguised Gods never sleep at all."

So he was comforted and the next day drew up his army in order of battle on the sea-front: archers and slingers in front, then the auxiliary Germans armed with assegais, then the main Roman forces, with the French in the rear. The cavalry were on the wings and the siege-engines, mangonels and catapults, planted on sand-dunes. Nobody knew what on earth was going to happen. He rode forward into the sea as far as Penelope's knees and cried: "Neptune, old enemy, defend yourself. I challenge you to mortal fight. You treacherously wrecked my father's fleet, did you? Try your might on me, if you dare." Then he quoted from Ajax's wrestling match with Ulysses, in Homer:

Or let me lift thee, Chief, or lift thou me.
Prove we our force . . .

A little wave came rolling past. He cut at it with his sword and laughed contemptuously. Then he coolly retired and ordered the "general engagement" to be sounded. The

archers shot, the slingers slung, the javelin-men threw their javelins; the regular infantry waded into the waters as far as their arm-pits and hacked at the little waves, the cavalry charged on either flank and swam out some way, slashing with their sabres, the mangonels hurled rocks and the catapults huge javelins and iron-tipped beams. Caligula then put to sea in a war-vessel and anchored just out of range of the missiles, uttering absurd challenges to Neptune and spitting far out over the vessel's side. Neptune made no attempt to defend himself or to reply, except that one man was nipped by a lobster, and another stung by a jelly-fish.

Caligula finally had the rally blown and told his men to wipe the blood off their swords and gather the spoil. The spoil was the sea-shells on the beach. Each man was expected to collect a helmet-full, which was added to a general heap. The shells were then sorted and packed in boxes to be sent to Rome in proof of this unheard-of victory. The troops thought it great fun, and when he rewarded them with four gold pieces a man cheered him tremendously. As a trophy of victory he built a very high lighthouse, on the model of the famous one at Alexandria, which has since proved a great blessing to sailors in those dangerous waters.

He then marched us up the Rhine again. When we reached Bonn Caligula took me aside and whispered darkly: "The regiments have never been punished for the insult they once paid me by mutinying against my father, during my absence from this Camp. You remember, I had to come back and restore order for him."

"I remember perfectly," I said. "But that's rather long ago, isn't it? After twenty-six years there can't be many men still serving in the ranks who were then there. You and Cassius Chærea are probably the only two veteran survivors of that dreadful day."

"Perhaps I shall only decimate them, then," he said.

The men of the First and Twentieth Regiments were ordered to attend a special assembly and told that they might leave their arms behind, because of the hot weather. The

Guards cavalry were also ordered to attend but instructed to bring their lances as well as their sabres. I found a sergeant who looked as though he might have fought at Philippi, he was so old and scarred. I said, "Sergeant, do you know who I am?"

"No, sir. Can't say that I do, sir. You seem to be an ex-Consul, sir."

"I am the brother of Germanicus."

"Indeed, sir. Never knew that there was such a person, sir."

"No, I'm not a soldier or anyone important. But I've got an important message for you fellows. *Don't leave your swords too far away when you go to this afternoon's assembly!*"

"Why, sir, if I may ask?"

"Because you may need them. Perhaps there will be an attack by the Germans. Perhaps by someone else."

He stared hard at me and then saw that I really meant it.

"Much obliged to you, sir, I'll pass the word around," he answered.

The infantry were massed in front of the tribunal platform and Caligula spoke to them with an angry scowling face, stamping his feet and sawing with his hands. He began reminding them of a certain night in early autumn, many years before, when under a starless and bewitched sky . . . Here some of the men began sneaking away through a gap between two troops of cavalry. They were going to fetch their swords. Others boldly pulled theirs out from under their military cloaks where they had been hiding them. Caligula must have noticed what was happening, for he suddenly changed his tone, in the middle of a sentence. He began drawing a happy contrast between those bad days, happily forgotten, and the present reign of glory, wealth and victory. "Your little playfellow grew to manhood," he said, "and became the mightiest Emperor this world has ever known. No foeman, however fierce, dares challenge his unconquerable arms."

My old sergeant rushed forward. "All is lost, Cæsar," he shouted. "The enemy has crossed the river at Cologne—three hundred thousand strong. They're out to sack Lyons—then they'll cross the Alps and sack Rome!"

Nobody believed this nonsensical story but Caligula. He turned yellow with fear, dived from the platform, grabbed hold of a horse, tumbled into the saddle and was out of the camp like a flash. A groom galloped after him and Caligula called back to him, "Thank God I still hold Egypt. I'll be safe there at least. The Germans aren't sailors."

How everyone laughed! But a colonel went after him on a good horse and caught him before very long. He assured Caligula that the news was exaggerated. Only a small force, he said, had crossed the river and had been beaten back: the Roman bank was now quite clear of the enemy. Caligula stopped at the next town and wrote a dispatch to the Senate, informing them that all his wars were now successfully over and that he was coming back at once with his laurel-garlanded troops. He blamed those cowardly stay-at-homes most severely for having, from all accounts, lived life in the City just as usual—theatres, baths, supper-parties—while he had been undergoing the severest hardships of campaign. He had eaten, drunk and slept no better than a private soldier.

The Senate was puzzled how to pacify him, being under strict orders from him to vote him no honours on their own initiative. They sent him an embassy, however, congratulating him on his magnificent victories and begging him to hasten back to Rome where his presence was so sadly missed. He was dreadfully angry that no triumph had been decreed him even in spite of his orders, and that he was not referred to as Jove in the message but merely as the Emperor Gaius Cæsar. He rapped his hand on his sword-pommel and shouted: "Hasten back? Indeed I will, and with this in my hand."

He had made preparations for a triple triumph: over Germany, over Britain and over Neptune. For British captives

he had Cymbeline's son and his followers, to which were added the crews of some British trading vessels whom he had detained at Boulogne. For German captives he had three hundred real ones and all the tallest men he could find in France, wearing yellow wigs and German clothes and talking together in a jargon supposed to be German. But, as I say, the Senate had been afraid to vote him a formal triumph, so he had to be content with an informal one. He rode into the City in the same style as he had ridden across the bridge at Baiæ, and it was only on the intercession of Cæsonia, who was a sensible woman, that he refrained from putting the entire Senate to the sword. He rewarded the people for their alms-giving generosity to him in the past by showering gold and silver from the Palace roof. But he mixed red-hot discs of iron with this largesse, to remind them that he had not yet forgiven them for their behaviour in the amphitheatre. His soldiers were told that they could make as much disturbance as they pleased and get as drunk as they liked at the public expense. They took full advantage of this licence, sacking whole streets of shops and burning down the prostitutes' quarter. Order was not restored for ten days.

This was in September. While he was away the workmen had been busy on the new temple on the Palatine Hill at the other side of the Temple of Castor and Pollux from the New Palace. An extension had been made as far as the Market Place. Caligula now turned the Temple of Castor and Pollux into a vestibule for the new temple, cutting a passage between the statues of the Gods. "The Heavenly Twins are my door-keepers," he boasted. Then he sent a message to the Governor of Greece to see that all the most famous statues of Gods were removed from the temples there and sent to him at Rome. He proposed to take off their heads and substitute his own. The statue he most coveted was the colossal one of Olympian Jove. He had a special ship built for its conveyance to Rome. But the ship was struck by lightning just before it was launched. Or this, at least, was the report

—I believe, really, that the superstitious crew burned it on purpose. However, Capitoline Jove then repented of his quarrel with Caligula (or so Caligula told us) and begged him to return and live next to him again. Caligula replied that he had now practically completed a new temple; but since Capitoline Jove had apologized so humbly he would make a compromise—he would build a bridge over the valley and join the two hills. He did this: the bridge passed over the roof of the Temple of Augustus.

Caligula was now publicly Jove. He was not only Latin Jove but Olympian Jove, and not only that but all the other Gods and Goddesses, too, whom he had decapitated and re-headed. Sometimes he was Apollo and sometimes Mercury and sometimes Pluto, in each case wearing the appropriate dress and demanding the appropriate sacrifices. I have seen him go about as Venus in a long gauzy silk robe with face painted, a red wig, padded bosom and high-heeled slippers. He was present as the Good Goddess at her December festival: *that* was a scandal. Mars was a favourite character with him, too. But most of the time he was Jove: he wore an olive-wreath, a beard of fine gold wires and a bright blue silk cloak, and carried a jagged piece of electrum in his hand to represent lightning. One day he was on the Oration Platform in the Market Place dressed as Jove and making a speech. "I intend shortly," he said, "to build a city for my occupation on the top of the Alps. We Gods prefer mountain-tops to unhealthy river-valleys. From the Alps I shall have a wide view of my Empire—France, Italy, Switzerland, the Tyrol and Germany. If I see any treason hatching anywhere below me, I shall give a warning growl of thunder so! [He growled in his throat.] If the warning is disregarded I shall blast the traitor with this lightning of mine, so! [He hurled his piece of lightning at the crowd. It hit a statue and bounced off harmlessly.] A stranger in the crowd, a shoemaker from Marseilles on a sight-seeing visit to Rome, burst out laughing. Caligula had the fellow arrested and brought nearer the platform, then bending

down he asked frowning: "Who do I seem to you to be?" "A big humbug," said the shoemaker. Caligula was puzzled. "Humbug?" he repeated. "I a humbug!" "Yes," said the Frenchman, "I'm only a poor French shoemaker and this is my first visit to Rome. And I don't know any better. If anyone at home did what you're doing he'd be a big humbug."

Caligula began to laugh too. "You poor half-wit," he said. "Of course he would be. That's just the difference."

The whole crowd laughed like mad, but whether at Caligula or at the shoemaker was not clear. Soon after this he had a thunder-and-lightning machine made. He lit a fuse and it made a roar and a flash and catapulted stones in whatever direction he wanted. But I have it on good authority that whenever there was a real thunderstorm at night he used to creep under the bed. There is a good story about that. One day a storm burst when he was parading about dressed as Venus. He began to cry: "Father, Father, spare your pretty daughter!"

The money he had won in France was soon spent and he invented new ways of increasing the revenue. His favourite one now was to examine judicially the wills of men who had just died and had left him no money: he would then give evidence of the benefits that the testators had received from him and declare that they had been either ungrateful or of unsound mind at the time of drawing their wills and that he preferred to think that they had been of unsound mind. He cancelled the wills and appointed himself principal heir. He used to come into Court in the early morning and write up on a blackboard the sum of money that he intended to win that day, usually two hundred thousand gold pieces. When he had won it, he closed the Court. He made a new edict one morning about the hours of business permitted in various sorts of shops. He had it written in very small letters on a tiny placard posted high on a pillar in the Market Place where nobody troubled to read it, not

realizing its importance. That afternoon his officers took the names of several hundred tradesmen who had unwittingly infringed the edict. When they were brought to trial he allowed any of them who could do so to plead in mitigation of sentence that they had named him as co-heir with their children. Few of them could. It now became customary for men with money to notify the Imperial Treasurer that Caligula was named in their wills as the principal heir. But in several cases this proved unwise. For Caligula made use of the medicine chest that he had inherited from my grandmother Livia. One day he sent round presents of honied fruits to some recent testators. They all died at once. He also summoned my cousin, the King of Morocco, to Rome and put him to death, saying simply: "I need your fortune, Ptolemy."

During his absence in France there had been comparatively few convictions at Rome and the prisons were nearly empty: this meant a shortage of victims for throwing to the wild beasts. He made the shortage up by using members of the audience, first cutting out their tongues so that they could not call out to their friends for rescue. He was becoming more and more capricious. One day a priest was about to sacrifice a young bull to him in his aspect of Apollo. The usual sacrificial procedure was for a deacon to stun the bull with a stone axe, and for the priest then to cut its throat. Caligula came in dressed as a deacon and asked the usual question: "Shall I?" When the priest answered "Do so," he brought the axe down smash on the priest's head.

I was still living in poverty with Briseis and Calpurnia, for though I had no debts, neither had I any money except what little income came to me from the farm. I was careful to let Caligula know how poor I was and he graciously permitted me to remain in the Senatorial Order though I no longer had the necessary financial qualifications. But I felt my position daily more insecure. One midnight early in October I was awakened by loud knocking at the front door.

I put my head out of the window. "Who's there?" I asked.

"You're wanted at the Palace immediately."

I said: "Is that you, Cassius Chærea? Am I going to be killed, do you know?"

"My orders are to fetch you to him immediately."

Calpurnia cried and Briseis cried and both kissed me good-bye very tenderly. As they helped me to dress I hurriedly told them how to dispose of my few remaining possessions, and what to do with little Antonia, and about my funeral, and so on. It was a most affecting scene for all of us, but I did not dare prolong it. Soon I was hopping along at Cassius's side to the Palace. He said gruffly, "Two more ex-Consuls have been summoned to appear with you." He told me their names and I was still more alarmed. They were rich men, just the sort whom Caligula would accuse of a plot against him. But why me? I was the first to arrive. The two others came rushing in almost immediately after, breathless with haste and fear. We were taken into the Hall of Justice and made to sit on chairs on a sort of scaffold looking down on the tribunal platform. A guard of German soldiers stood behind us, muttering together in their own language. The room was in complete darkness but for two tiny oil lamps on the tribunal. The windows behind were draped, we noticed, with black hangings embroidered with silver stars. My companions and I silently clasped hands in farewell. They were men from whom I had had many insults at one time or another, but in the shadow of death such trifles are forgotten. We sat there waiting for something to happen until just before daybreak.

Suddenly we heard a clash of cymbals and the gay music of oboes and fiddles. Slaves filed in from a door at the side of the tribunal, each carrying two lamps, which they put on tables at the side; and then the powerful voice of a eunuch began singing the well-known song *When the long watches of the night*. The slaves retired. A shuffling sound was heard and presently in danced a tall ungainly figure in a

woman's pink silk gown with a crown of imitation roses on its head. It was Caligula.

The rosy-fingered Goddess then
Will roll away the night of stars . . .

Here he drew away the draperies from the window and disclosed the first streaks of dawn, and then, when the eunuch reached the part about the rosy-fingered Goddess blowing out the lamps one by one, brought this incident into the dance too. Puff. Puff. Puff.

And where clandestine lovers lie
Entangled in sweet passion's toils . . .

From a bed which we had not noticed, because it was in an alcove, the Goddess Dawn then pulled out a girl and a man, neither of them with any clothes on, and in dumb show indicated that it was the time for them to part. The girl was very beautiful. The man was the eunuch who was singing. They parted in opposite directions as if profoundly distressed. When the last verse came:

O Dawn, of Goddesses most fair,
Who with thy slow and lovely tread
Dost give relief to every care . . .

I had the sense to prostrate myself on the ground. My companions were not slow in following my example. Caligula capered off the stage and soon afterwards we were summoned to breakfast with him. I said "O God of Gods, I have never in my life witnessed any dance that gave me such profound spiritual joy as the one I have just witnessed. I have no words for its loveliness."

My companions agreed with me and said that it was a million pities that so matchless a performance had been given to so tiny an audience. He said, complacently, that it was

only a rehearsal. He would give it one night soon in the amphitheatre to the whole City. I didn't see how he would manage the curtain-drawing effect in an open-air amphitheatre hundreds of yards long, but I said nothing about that. We had a very tasty breakfast, the senior ex-Consul sitting on the floor alternately eating thrush-pie and kissing Caligula's foot. I was just thinking how pleased Calpurnia and Briseis would be to see me back when Caligula, who was in a very pleasant humour, suddenly said: "Pretty girl, wasn't she, Claudius, you old lecher?"

"Very pretty indeed, God."

"And still a virgin, so far as I know. Would you like to marry her? You can if you like. I took a fancy to her for a moment, but it's a funny thing, I don't really like immature women any more. . . . Or any mature woman, for that matter, except Cæsonia. Did you recognize the girl?"

"No, Lord, I was only watching you, to tell the truth."

"She's your cousin Messalina, Barbatus's daughter. The old pander didn't utter a word of protest when I asked for her to be sent along to me. What cowards they are, after all, Claudius!"

"Yes, Lord God."

"All right, then, I'll marry you two to-morrow. I'm going to bed now, I think."

"A thousand thanks and homages, Lord."

He gave me his other foot to kiss. Next day he kept his promise and married us. He accepted a tenth of Messalina's dowry as a fee but otherwise behaved courteously enough. Calpurnia had been delighted to see me alive again and had pretended not to mind about my marriage. She said in a business-like way: "Very well, my dear, I'll go back to the farm and look after things for you there again. You won't miss me, with that pretty wife of yours. And now you have money you'll have to live at the Palace again."

I told her that the marriage was forced on me and that I would miss her very much indeed. But she pooh-poohed that: Messalina had twice her looks, three times her brains,

and birth and money into the bargain. I was in love with her already, Calpurnia said.

I felt uncomfortable. Calpurnia had been my only true friend in all those four years of misery. What had she not done for me? And yet she was right: I *was* in love with Messalina, and Messalina was to be my wife now. There would be no place for Calpurnia with Messalina about.

She was in tears as she went away. So was I. I was not in love with her, but she was my truest friend and I knew that if ever I needed her she would be there to help me. I need not say that when I received the dowry money I did not forget her.