

CHAPTER XXXIV

WHAT had happened was this. Caligula had come out of the theatre. A sedan was waiting to take him the long way round to the New Palace between double ranks of Guards. But Vinicius said: "Let's go by the short cut. The Greek boys are waiting there at the entrance, I believe." "All right, then, come along," said Caligula. The people tried to follow him out but Asprenas dropped behind and forced them back. "The Emperor doesn't want to be bothered with you," he said. "Get back!" He told the gate-keepers to close the gates again.

Caligula went towards the covered passage. Cassius stepped forward and saluted. "The watchword, Cæsar?"

Caligula said, "Eh? O yes, the watchword, Cassius. I'll give you a nice one to-day—'Old Man's Petticoat.'"

The Tiger called from behind Caligula, "Shall I?" It was the agreed signal.

"*Do so!*" bellowed Cassius, drawing his sword, and striking at Caligula with all his strength.

He had intended to split his skull to the chin, but in his rage he missed his aim and struck him between the neck and the shoulders. The upper breastbone took the chief force of the blow. Caligula was staggered with pain and astonishment. He looked wildly around him, turned and ran. As he turned Cassius struck at him again, severing his jaw. The Tiger then felled him with a badly-aimed blow on the side of his head. He slowly rose to his knees. "Strike again!" Cassius shouted.

Caligula looked up to Heaven with a face of agony. "O Jove," he prayed.

"Granted," shouted The Tiger, and hacked off one of his hands.

A captain called Aquila gave the finishing stroke, a deep thrust in the groin, but ten more swords were plunged into his breast and belly afterwards, just to make sure of him. A captain called Bubo dipped his hand in a wound in Caligula's side and then licked his fingers, shrieking, "I swore to drink his blood!"

A crowd had collected and the alarm went round, "The Germans are coming." The assassins had no chance against a whole battalion of Germans. They rushed into the nearest building, which happened to be my old home, lately borrowed from me by Caligula as guest-apartments for foreign ambassadors whom he did not want to have about in the Palace. They went in at the front door and out at the back door. All got away in time but The Tiger and Asprenas. The Tiger had to pretend that he was not one of the assassins and joined the Germans in their cries for vengeance. Asprenas ran into the covered passage, where the Germans caught him and killed him. They killed two other senators whom they happened to meet. This was only a small party of Germans. The rest of the battalion marched into the theatre and closed the gate behind them. They were going to avenge their murdered hero by a wholesale massacre. That was the roar and screaming I had heard. Nobody in the theatre knew that Caligula was dead or that any attempt had been made against his life. But it was quite clear what the Germans intended because they were going through that curious performance of patting and stroking their assegais and speaking to them as if they were human beings, which is their invariable custom before shedding blood with those terrible weapons. There was no escape. Suddenly from the stage the trumpet blew the Attention, followed by the six notes which mean Imperial Orders. Mnester entered and raised his hand. And at once the terrible din died down into mere sobs and smothered groans, for when Mnester appeared on the stage it was

a rule that nobody should utter the least sound on pain of instant death. The Germans too stopped their patting and stroking and incantations. The Imperial Orders stiffened them into statues.

Mnester shouted: "He's not dead, Citizens. Far from it. The assassins set on him and beat him to his knees, so! But he presently rose again, so! Swords cannot prevail against our Divine Cæsar. Wounded and bloody as he was, he rose, so! He lifted his august head and walked, so! with divine stride through the ranks of his cowardly and baffled assassins. His wounds healed, a miracle! He is now in the Market Place loudly and eloquently haranguing his subjects from the Oration Platform."

A mighty cheer arose and the Germans sheathed their swords and marched out. Mnester's timely lie (prompted, as a matter of fact, by a message from Herod Agrippa, King of the Jews, the only man in Rome who kept his wits about him that fateful afternoon) had saved sixty thousand lives or more.

But the real news had by now reached the Palace, where it caused the most utter confusion. A few old soldiers thought that the opportunity for looting was too good to be missed. They would pretend to be looking for the assassins. Every room in the Palace had a golden door-knob, each worth six month's pay, easy enough to hack off with a sharp sword. I heard the cries, "Kill them, kill them! Avenge Cæsar!" and hid behind a curtain. Two soldiers came in. They saw my feet under the curtain. "Come out of there, assassin. No use hiding from us."

I came out and fell on my face. "Don't k-k-k-k-kill me, Lords," I said. "I had n-nothing to d-d-d-d-do with it."

"Who's this old gentleman?" asked one of the soldiers who was new at the Palace. "He doesn't look dangerous."

"Why! Don't you know? He's Germanicus's invalid brother. A decent old stick. No harm in him at all. Get up, sir. We won't hurt you." This soldier's name was Gratus.

They made me follow them downstairs again into the banqueting-hall where the sergeants and corporals were holding a council-of-war. A young sergeant stood on a table waving his arms and shouting, "Republic be hanged! A new Emperor's our only hope. Any Emperor so long as we can persuade the Germans to accept him."

"Incitatus," someone suggested, guffawing.

"Yes, by God! Better the old nag than no Emperor at all. We want someone immediately, to keep the Germans quiet. Otherwise they'll run amok."

My two captors pushed their way through the crowd dragging me behind them. Gratus called out, "Hey, Sergeant! Look whom we have here! A bit of luck, I think. It's old Claudius. What's wrong with old Claudius for Emperor? The best man for the job in Rome, though he do limp and stammer a bit."

Loud cheers, laughter, and cries of "Long live the Emperor Claudius!" The Sergeant apologized. "Why, sir, we all thought you were dead. But you're our man, all right. Push him up, lads, where we can all see him!" Two burly corporals caught me by the legs and hoisted me on their shoulders. "Long live the Emperor Claudius!"

"Put me down," I cried furiously. "Put me down! I don't want to be Emperor. I refuse to be Emperor. Long live the Republic!"

But they only laughed. "That's a good one. He doesn't want to be Emperor, he says. Modest, eh?"

"Give me a sword," I shouted. "I'll kill myself sooner."

Messalina came hurrying towards us. "For my sake, Claudius, do what they ask of you. For our child's sake! We'll all be murdered if you refuse. They've killed Cæsonia already. And they took her little girl by the feet and bashed out her brains against a wall."

"You'll be all right, sir, once you get accustomed to it," Gratus said, grinning. "It's not such a bad life, an Emperor's isn't."

I made no more protests. What was the use of struggling

against Fate? They hurried me out into the Great Court, singing the foolish hymn of hope composed at Caligula's accession, "*Germanicus is come Again, To Free the City from her Pain.*" For I had the surname Germanicus too. They forced me to put on Caligula's golden oak-leaf chaplet, recovered from one of the looters. To steady myself I had to cling tightly to the corporals' shoulders. The chaplet kept slipping over one ear. How foolish I felt. They say that I looked like a criminal being haled away to execution. Massed trumpeters blew the Imperial Salute.

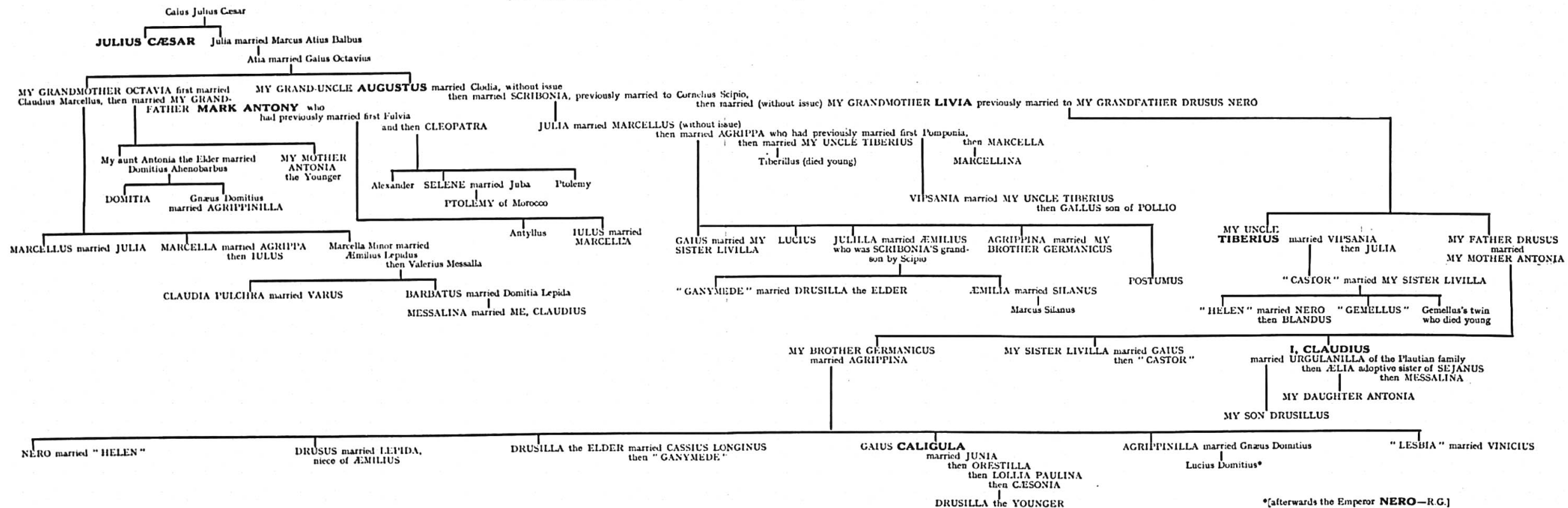
The Germans came streaming towards us. They had just heard for certain of Caligula's death, from a senator who came to meet them in deep mourning. They were furious at having been tricked and wanted to go back to the theatre, but the theatre was empty now, so they were at a loss what to do next. There was nobody about to take vengeance on except the Guards, and the Guards were armed. The Imperial Salute decided them. They rushed forward shouting: "Hoch! Hoch! Long live the Emperor Claudius!" and began frantically dedicating their assegais to my service and struggling to break through the crowd of Guardsmen to kiss my feet. I called to them to keep back, and they obeyed, prostrating themselves before me. I was carried round and round the Court.

And what thoughts or memories, would you guess, were passing through my mind on this extraordinary occasion? Was I thinking of the Sibyl's prophecy, of the omen of the wolf-cub, of Pollio's advice, or of Briseis's dream? Of my grandfather and liberty? Of my father and liberty? Of my three Imperial predecessors, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, their lives and deaths? Of the great danger I was still in from the conspirators, and from the Senate, and from the Guards battalions at the Camp? Of Messalina and our unborn child? Of my grandmother Livia and my promise to deify her if ever I became Emperor? Of Postumus and Germanicus? Of Agrippina and Nero? Of Camilla? No, you would never guess what was passing through my mind.

But I shall be frank and tell you what it was, though the confession is a shameful one. I was thinking, "So, I'm Emperor, am I? What nonsense! But at least I'll be able to make people read my books now. Public recitals to large audiences. And good books too, thirty-five years' hard work in them. It won't be unfair. Pollio used to get attentive audiences by giving expensive dinners. He was a very sound historian, and the last of Romans. My *History of Carthage* is full of amusing anecdotes. I'm sure they'll enjoy it."

That was what I was thinking. I was thinking too, what opportunities I should have, as Emperor, for consulting the secret archives and finding out just what happened on this occasion or on that. How many twisted stories still remained to be straightened out! What a miraculous fate for a historian! And as you will have seen, I took full advantage of my opportunities. Even the mature historian's privilege of setting forth conversations of which he knows only the gist is one that I have availed myself of hardly at all.

Tree of the Imperial Family and Connexions
(To the Year A.D. 41.) Giving Names as abbreviated in this Book.



*[afterwards the Emperor **NERO**—R.G.]