

CHAPTER VIII

URGULANIA was Livia's only confidant and bound to her by the strongest ties of interest and gratitude. She had lost her husband, a partisan of Young Pompey's, in the Civil Wars and with her infant son had been sheltered by Livia, then still married to my grandfather, from the brutality of Augustus's soldiers. Livia, on marrying Augustus, insisted that he should restore to Urgulania her husband's confiscated estates, and invite her to live with them as a member of the family. By Livia's influence—for in Augustus's name Livia could force Lepidus, the High Pontiff, to make whatever appointments she pleased—she was set in a position of spiritual authority over all the married noblewomen of Rome. I must explain that. Every year, early in December, these women had to attend an important sacrifice to the Good Goddess presided over by the Vestal Virgins, on the proper conduct of which would depend the wealth and security of Rome for the ensuing twelve months. No man was allowed to profane these mysteries on pain of death. Livia, who had put herself into the good graces of the Vestals by rebuilding their Convent, furnishing it in luxurious style, and winning them, through Augustus, many privileges from the Senate, suggested to the Chief Vestal that the chastity of some of the women who attended these sacrifices was not beyond suspicion. She said that the troubles of Rome during the Civil Wars might well have been due to the Good Goddess's anger at the lewdness of those who attended her mysteries. She suggested further that if a solemn oath were to be given to any woman who confessed to a lapse from moral strictness that her confession

would not be reported to any ear of man, and thus not involve her in public disgrace, there would be a greater chance of the Goddess being served only by the chaste, and her anger appeased.

The Chief Vestal, a religiously-minded woman, approved of the idea but asked Livia's authority for this innovation. Livia told her that she had seen the Goddess in a dream only the night before, and that she had asked that, since the Vestals themselves were not experienced in matters of sex, a widow of good family should be appointed Mother Confessor for this very purpose. The Chief Vestal asked whether the sins confessed should pass unpunished. Livia replied that she could not have expressed an opinion had not the Goddess fortunately made a pronouncement on this point in the same dream: that the Mother Confessor would be empowered to prescribe expiatory penances and that the penances should be a matter of holy confidence between the criminal and the Mother Confessor. The Chief Vestal, she said, would be informed merely that such-and-such a woman was unfit to take part in the mysteries of this year; or that such-and-such had now performed her penance. This suited the Chief Vestal well, but she was afraid to suggest a name for fear that Livia would turn it down. Livia then said that the High Pontiff was obviously the man to make the appointment, and that if the Chief Vestal permitted her, she would explain matters to him and ask him to name a suitable person, after performing the necessary ceremonies to ensure a choice favourable to the Goddess. So Urgulania was appointed, and of course Livia did not tell Lepidus or Augustus the powers that the appointment carried. She spoke of it casually as a position of advisory assistant to the Chief Vestal in moral matters, "the Chief Vestal, poor woman, being so unworldly".

The sacrifice was customarily held at the house of a Consul, but now always at Augustus's palace, because he ranked above the Consuls. This was convenient for Urgulania, who made the women come into her room there

(which was arranged in a way to inspire fear and truthfulness), bound them to tell the truth by the most frightful oaths, and when they had confessed, dismissed them while she considered the appropriate penance. Livia, who was in the room concealed behind a curtain, would then suggest one. The two got a great deal of amusement out of this game and Livia plenty of useful information and assistance in her plans.

As Mother Confessor in the service of the Good Goddess, Urgulania considered herself above the law. Later I shall tell how once, when summoned by a senator to whom she owed a large sum of money to appear before the magistrate in the Debtors' Court, she refused to obey the summons; and how, to avoid the scandal, Livia paid up. On another occasion she was subpoenaed as a witness in a Senatorial inquiry: having no intention of being cross-examined she excused herself from attending and a magistrate was sent to take her deposition down in writing instead. She was a dreadful old woman with a cleft chin and hair kept black with lamp-soot (the grey showing plainly at the roots), and she lived to a great age. Her son, Silvanus, had recently been Consul and was one of those whom Æmilius approached at the time of his plot. Silvanus went straight to Urgulania and told her about Æmilius's intentions. She passed the news on to Livia and Livia promised to reward them for this valuable information by marrying Silvanus's daughter Urgulanilla to me and so allying them with the Imperial family. Urgulania was in Livia's confidence and was pretty sure that my uncle Tiberius—not Postumus, though he was Augustus's nearest heir—would be the next Emperor: so this marriage was even more honourable than it seemed.

I had never seen Urgulanilla. Nobody had. We knew that she lived with an aunt at Herculaneum, a town on the slopes of Vesuvius, where old Urgulania had property, but she never came to Rome even on a visit. We concluded that she must be delicate. But when Livia wrote me one of her curt cruel notes, to the effect that it had just been decided at

a family council that I should marry the daughter of Silvanus Plautius, and that this was a more appropriate match for me, considering my infirmities, than the two previously projected, I suspected that there was something much more seriously wrong with this Urgulanilla than mere ill-health. A cleft palate, perhaps, or a strawberry-mark across half her face? Something at any rate that made her quite unpresentable. Perhaps she was a cripple like myself. I wouldn't mind that. Perhaps she was a very nice girl really, but misunderstood. We might have a lot in common. Of course, it would not be like marrying Camilla, but it might at least be better than marrying Æmilia.

The day was chosen for our betrothal. I asked Germanicus about Urgulanilla, but he was as much in the dark as I was, and seemed a little ashamed of having consented to the marriage without making careful enquiries beforehand. He was very happy with Agrippina and wanted me to be happy too. Well, the day came, a "lucky" one, and there I was again in my chaplet and clean gown again waiting at the family-altar for the bride to arrive. "The third time's lucky," said Germanicus. "I am sure she's a beauty, really, and kind and sensible and just the sort for you." But was she? Well, in my life I have had many cruel bad jokes played on me, but I think that this was the cruellest and worst. Urgulanilla was—well, in brief, she lived up to her name, which is the Latin form of Herculianilla. A young female Hercules she indeed was. Though only fifteen years old, she was over six foot three inches in height and still growing, and broad and strong in proportion, with the largest feet and hands I have ever seen on any human being in my life with the single exception of the gigantic Parthian hostage who walked in a certain triumphal procession many years later. Her features were regular but heavy and she wore an almost perpetual scowl. She stooped. She talked as slowly as my uncle Tiberius (whom, by the way, she resembled closely—there was even talk of her being really his daughter). She had no learning, wit, accomplishments,

or any endearing qualities. And it is strange, but the first thoughts that struck me when I saw her were: "This woman is capable of murder by violence" and "I shall be very careful from the first to hide my repugnance to her, and give her no just cause to harbour resentment against me. For if once she comes to hate me, my life is not safe." I am a pretty good actor, and though the solemnity of the ceremony was broken by smirks, whispered jokes and repressed titters from the company, Urganilla had no cause to blame me for this indecorousness. After it was over the two of us were summoned into the presence of Livia and Urganilla. When the door was shut and we stood there facing them—myself nervous and fidgety, Urganilla massive and expressionless and clenching and unclenching her great fists—the solemnity of these two evil old grandmothers gave way, and they burst into uncontrolled laughter. I had never heard either of them laugh like that before and the effect was frightening. It was not decent healthy laughter but a hellish sobbing and screeching, like that of two old drunken prostitutes watching a torture or crucifixion. "Oh, you two beauties!" sobbed Livia at last, wiping her eyes, "What wouldn't I give to see you in bed together on your wedding night! It would be the funniest scene since Deucalion's Flood!"

"And what happened particularly funny on that famous occasion, my dear?" asked Urganilla.

"Why, don't you know? God destroyed the whole world with a flood, except Deucalion and his family, and a few animals that took refuge on the mountain tops. Haven't you read Aristophanes's *Flood*? It's my favourite play of his. The scene is laid on Mount Parnassus. Various animals are assembled, unfortunately only one of each kind, and each thinks himself the sole survivor of his species. So in order to replenish the earth somehow with animals they have to mate with one another in spite of moral scruples and obvious difficulties. The Camel is betrothed by Deucalion to the She-Elephant:"

"Camel and Elephant! That's a fine one!" cackled Urgulania. "Look at Tiberius Claudius's long neck and skinny body and long silly face. And my Urgulanilla's great feet and great flapping ears, and little pig-eyes! Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha! And what was their offspring? Giraffe? Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!"

"The play doesn't get that far. Iris comes on the stage for the messenger speech and reports another refuge of animals on Mount Atlas. Iris breaks off the nuptials just in time."

"Was the Camel disappointed?"

"Oh, most bitterly."

"And the Elephant?"

"The Elephant just scowled."

"Did they kiss on parting?"

"Aristophanes does not tell. But I'm sure they did. Come on, Beasts. Kiss!"

I smiled foolishly, Urgulanilla scowled.

"Kiss, I say," Livia insisted in a voice that meant that we had to obey.

So we kissed, and started the old women on their hysterics again. When we were outside the room again I whispered to Urgulanilla: "I'm sorry. It's not my fault." But she did not answer except to scowl more deeply than before.

There was still a year before we were actually to marry, for the family had decided that I should not come of age until I was fifteen and a half, and much might happen in that time. If only Iris would come!

But she didn't. Postumus had his troubles too: he had already come of age now and it was only a few months before Domitia would be of marriageable age. My poor Postumus, he was still in love with Livilla, though she was married. But before I continue with the story of Postumus I must tell of my meeting with the "Last of the Romans".