

CHAPTER IX

HIS name was Pollio and I shall recall the exact circumstances of our meeting, which took place just a week after my betrothal to Urgulanilla. I was reading in the Apollo Library when along came Livy and a little brisk old man in the robe of a senator. Livy was saying: "It seems then, that we may as well abandon all hope of finding it, unless perhaps. . . . Why, there's Sulpicius! He'll know if anyone does. Good morning, Sulpicius. I want you to do a favour for Asinius Pollio and myself. There's a book we want to look at, a commentary by a Greek called Polemocles on Polybius's *Military Tactics*. I seem to remember coming across it here once, but the catalogue does not mention it and the librarians here are perfectly useless." Sulpicius gnawed his beard for awhile and then said: "You've got the name wrong. Polemocrates was the name and he wasn't a Greek, in spite of his name, but a Jew. Fifteen years ago I remember seeing it on that top shelf, the fourth from the window, right at the back, and the title tag had just "A Dissertation on Tactics" on it. Let me get it for you. I don't expect it's been moved since then."

Then Livy saw me. "Hullo, my friend, how goes it? Do you know the famous Asinius Pollio?"

I saluted them and Pollio said: "What's that you're reading, boy? Trash, I'll be bound, by the shamefaced way you hide it. Young fellows nowadays read only trash." He turned to Livy: "I bet you ten gold pieces that it's some wretched 'Art of Love', or Arcadian pastoral nonsense, or something of that sort."

"I'll take the bet," said Livy. "Young Claudius is not

that sort of young man at all. Well, Claudius, which of us wins?"

I said, stammering, to Pollio: "I'm glad to say, sir, that you lose."

Pollio frowned angrily at me: "What's that you say? Glad that I *lose*, eh? Is that a proper way to speak to an old man like me, and a senator too?"

I said: "I said it in all respect, sir. I am glad that you lose. I should not like to hear this book called trash. It's your own history of the Civil Wars and, if I may venture to praise it, a very fine book indeed."

Pollio's face changed. He beamed and chuckled and pulled out his purse, pressing the coins on Livy. Livy, with whom he seemed on terms of friendly animosity—if you know what I mean—refused them with mock-serious insistence. "My dear Pollio, I couldn't possibly take the money. You were quite right: these young fellows nowadays read the most wretched stuff. Not another word, please: I agree that I've lost the bet. Here are ten gold pieces of my own and I'm glad to pay them."

Pollio appealed to me. "Now, sir—I don't know who you are but you seem to be a lad of sense—have you read our friend Livy's work? I appeal to you, isn't that at least trashier writing than mine?"

I smiled. "Well, at least it's easier to read."

"Easier, eh? How's that?"

"He makes the people of Ancient Rome behave and talk as if they were alive now."

Pollio was delighted. "He has you there, Livy, on your weakest spot. You credit the Romans of seven centuries ago with impossibly modern motives and habits and speeches. Yes, it's readable all right, but it's not history."

Before I record more of this conversation I must say a few words about old Pollio, perhaps the most gifted man of his day, not even excepting Augustus. He was now nearly eighty years old but in full possession of his mental powers and seemingly in better physical health than many a man

of sixty. He had crossed the Rubicon with Julius Cæsar and fought with him against Pompey, and served under my grandfather Antony, before his quarrel with Augustus, and had been Consul and Governor of Further Spain and of Lombardy, and had won a triumph for a victory in the Balkans and had been a personal friend of Cicero's until he grew disgusted with him, and a patron of the poets, Virgil and Horace. Besides all this he was a distinguished orator and writer of tragedies. But he was a better historian than he was either tragedian or orator, because he had a love of literal truth, amounting to pedantry, which he could not square with the conventions of these other literary forms. With the spoils of the Balkan campaign he had founded a public library, the first public library at Rome. There were now two others: the one we were in and another called after my grandmother Octavia; but Pollio's was much better organized for reading purposes than either.

Sulpicius had now found the book, and after a word of thanks to him they renewed their argument.

Livy said: "The trouble with Pollio is that when he writes history he feels obliged to suppress all his finer, more poetical feelings, and make his characters behave with conscientious dullness, and when he puts a speech into their mouths he denies them the least oratorical ability."

Pollio said: "Yes, Poetry is Poetry, and Oratory is Oratory, and History is History, and you can't mix them."

"Can't I? Indeed I can," said Livy. "Do you mean to say that I mustn't write a history with an epic theme because that's a prerogative of poetry or put worthy eve-of-battle speeches in the mouths of my generals because to compose such speeches is the prerogative of oratory?"

"That is precisely what I do mean. History is a true record of what happened, how people lived and died, what they did and said; an epic theme merely distorts the record. As for your generals' speeches they are admirable as oratory but damnably unhistorical: not only is there no particle of evidence for any one of them, but they are inappropriate.

I have heard more eve-of-battle speeches than most men and though the generals that made them, Cæsar and Antony especially, were remarkably fine platform orators, they were all too good soldiers to try any platform business on the troops. They *spoke* to them in a conversational way, they did not orate. What sort of speech did Cæsar make before the Battle of Pharsalia? Did he beg us to remember our wives and children and the sacred temples of Rome and the glories of our past campaigns? By God, he didn't! He climbed up on the stump of a pine-tree with one of those monster-radishes in one hand and a lump of hard soldiers' bread in the other, and joked, between mouthfuls. Not dainty jokes but the real stuff told with the straightest face: about how chaste Pompey's life was compared with his own reprobate one. The things he did with that radish would have made an ox laugh. I remember one broad anecdote about how Pompey won his surname The Great—oh, that radish!—and another still worse one about how he himself had lost his hair in the Bazaar at Alexandria. I'd tell you them both now but for this boy here, and but for your being certain to miss the point, not having been educated in Cæsar's camp. Not a word about the approaching battle except just at the close: "Poor old Pompey! Up against Julius Cæsar and his men! What a chance he has!"

"You didn't put any of this in your history," said Livy.

"Not in the public editions," said Pollio. "I'm not a fool. Still if you like to borrow the private *Supplement* which I have just finished writing, you'll find it there. But perhaps you'll never bother. I'll tell you the rest: Cæsar was a wonderful mimic, you know, and he gave them Pompey's dying speech, preparatory to falling on his sword (the radish again—with the end bitten off). He railed, in Pompey's name, at the Immortal Gods for always allowing vice to triumph over virtue. How they laughed! Then he bellowed: 'And isn't it true, though Pompey says it? Deny it if you can, you damned fornicating dogs, you!' And he flung the half-radish at them. And the roar that went up!

Never were there soldiers like Cæsar's. Do you remember the song they sang at his French triumph?

‘Home we bring the bald whore-monger,
Romans, lock your wives away.’”

Livy said: “Pollio, my dear fellow, we were not discussing Cæsar's morals, but the proper way to write history.”

Pollio said: “Yes, that's right. Our intelligent young friend was criticizing your method, under the respectful disguise of praising your readability. Boy, have you any further charges to bring against the noble Livy?”

I said: “Please, sir, don't make me blush. I admire Livy's work greatly.”

“The truth, boy! Have you ever caught him out in any historical inaccuracies? You seem to be a fellow who reads a good deal.”

“I would rather not venture . . .”

“Out with it. There must be something.”

So I said: “There *is* one thing that puzzles me, I confess. That is the story of Lars Porsena. According to Livy, Porsena failed to capture Rome, being first prevented by the heroic behaviour of Horatius at the bridge and then dismayed by the astounding daring of Scævola; Livy relates that Scævola, captured after an attempt at assassinating Porsena, thrust his hand into the flame on the altar and swore that three hundred Romans like himself had bound themselves by an oath to take Porsena's life. And so Lars Porsena made peace. But I have seen the labyrinth tomb of Lars Porsena at Clusium and there is a frieze on it of Romans emerging from the City gate and being led under a yoke. There's an Etruscan priest with a pair of shears cutting off the beards of the Fathers. And even Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who was very favourably disposed towards us, states that the Senate voted Porsena an ivory throne, a sceptre, a golden crown and a triumphal robe; which can only mean that they paid him sovereign honours. So per-

haps Lars Porsena *did* capture Rome, in spite of Horatius and Scævola. And Aruns the priest at Capua (he's supposed to be the last man who can read Etruscan inscriptions) told me last summer that according to Etruscan records the man who expelled the Tarquins from Rome was not Brutus but Porsena, and that Brutus and Collatinus, the first two Consuls at Rome, were merely the City Stewards appointed to collect his taxes."

Livy grew quite angry. "I am surprised at you, Claudius. Have you no reverence for Roman tradition that you should believe the lies told by our ancient enemies to diminish our greatness."

"I only asked," I said humbly, "what really happened then."

"Come on, Livy," said Pollio. "Answer the young student. What really happened?"

Livy said: "Another time. Let's keep to the matter in hand now, which is a general discussion of the proper way to write history. Claudius, my friend, you have ambitions that way. Which of us two old worthies will you choose as a model?"

"You make it very difficult for the boy, you jealous fellows," put in Sulpicius. "What do you expect him to answer?"

"The truth will offend neither of us," answered Pollio.

I looked from one face to the other. At last I said, "I think I would choose Pollio. As I am sure that I can never hope to attain Livy's inspired literary elegance, I shall do my best to imitate Pollio's accuracy and diligence."

Livy grunted and was about to walk off, but Pollio restrained him. Bottling down his glee as well as he could he said: "Come, Livy, you won't grudge me one little disciple, will you, when you have them in regiments all over the world? Boy, did you ever hear about the old man from Cadiz? No, it's not dirty. In fact, it's rather sad. He came on foot to Rome, what to see? Not the temples or the theatres or the statues or the crowds or the shops or the

Senate House. But a Man. What man? The man whose head is on the coins? No, no. A greater than he. He came to see none other than our friend Livy, whose works, it seems, he knew by heart. He saw him and saluted him and went straight back to Cadiz—where he immediately died; the disillusion and the long walk had been too much for him.”

Livy said: “At any rate my readers are genuine readers. Boy, do you know how Pollio has built up his reputation? Well, he’s rich and has a very large, beautiful house and a surprisingly good cook. He invites a great crowd of literary people to dinner, gives them a perfect meal and afterwards casually picks up the latest volume of his history. He says humbly, ‘Gentlemen, there are a few passages here that I am not quite sure about. I have worked very hard at them but they still need the final polish which I am counting on you to give them. By your leave. . . .’ Then he begins to read. Nobody listens very carefully. Everyone’s belly is stuffed. ‘The cook’s a genius,’ they are all thinking. ‘The mullet with piquant sauce, and those fat stuffed thrushes and the wild-boar with truffles—when did I eat so well last? Not since Pollio’s last reading, I believe. Ah, here comes the slave with the wine again. That excellent Cyprian wine. Pollio’s right: it’s better than any Greek wine on the market.’ Meanwhile Pollio’s voice—and it’s a nice voice to listen to, like a priest’s at an evening sacrifice in summer—goes smoothly on and every now and then he asks humbly, ‘Is that all right, do you think?’ And everyone says, thinking of the thrushes again, or perhaps of the little simnel cakes: ‘Admirable. Admirable, Pollio.’ Now and then he will pause and ask: ‘Now which is the right word to use here? Shall I say that the returning envoys *persuaded* or *excited* this tribe to revolt? Or shall I say that the account they gave of the situation *influenced* the tribe in its decision to revolt? Actually, I think, they gave an impartial account of what they had seen.’ Then a murmur goes up from the couches, ‘*Influenced*, Pollio. Use *influenced*!’ ‘Thank you,

friends,' he says, 'you are very kind. Slave, my penknife and pen! I'll change the sentence at once if you'll forgive me.' Then he publishes the book and sends each of the diners a free copy. They say to their friends, chatting at the Public Baths: 'Admirable book, this. Have you read it? Pollio's the greatest historian of our age; and not above asking advice in small points of style from men of taste, either. Why, this word *influenced* I gave him myself.'"

Pollio said: "That's right. My cook's too good. Next time I'll borrow yours and a few dozen bottles of your so-called Falernian wine and then I'll get really honest criticism."

Sulpicius made a gesture of deprecation: "Gentlemen, gentlemen, this is becoming personal."

Livy was already going away. But Pollio grinned at the retreating back and said in a loud voice for his benefit:

"A decent fellow, Livy is, but there's one thing wrong with him. It's a disease called Paduanity."

This made Livy stop and turn round. "What's wrong with Padua? I won't hear a word against the place."

Pollio explained to me. "It's where he was born, you know. Somewhere in the Northern Provinces. There's a famous hot-spring there, of extraordinary properties. You can always tell a Paduan. By bathing in the water of the spring or drinking it—and I'm told that they do both things simultaneously—Paduans are able to believe whatever they like and believe it so strongly that they can make anyone else believe it. That's how the city has got such a wonderful commercial reputation. The blankets and rugs they make there are really no better than any other sort, in fact rather inferior, because the local sheep are yellow and coarse-fleeced, but to the Paduans they are soft and white as goose-feathers. And they have persuaded the rest of the world that it's so."

I said, playing up to him: "Yellow sheep! That's a rarity. How do they get that colour, sir?"

"Why, by drinking the spring-water. There's sulphur in it. All Paduans are yellow. Look at Livy."

Livy came slowly towards us. "A joke is a joke, Pollio, and I can take it in good part. But there's also a serious matter in question and that is, the proper writing of history. It may be that I have made mistakes. What historian is free from them? I have not, at least, told deliberate falsehoods: you'll not accuse me of that. Any legendary episode from early historical writings which bears on my theme of the ancient greatness of Rome I gladly incorporate in the story: though it may not be true in factual detail, it is true in spirit. If I come across two versions of the same episode I choose the one nearest my theme, and you won't find me grubbing around Etruscan cemeteries in search of any third account which may flatly contradict both—what good would that do?"

"It would serve the cause of the truth," said Pollio gently. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"And if by serving the cause of truth we admit our revered ancestors to have been cowards, liars and traitors? What then?"

"I'll leave this boy to answer the question. He's just starting in life. Come on, boy, answer it!"

I said at random: "Livy begins his history by lamenting modern wickedness and promising to trace the gradual decline of ancient virtue as conquests made Rome wealthy. He says that he will most enjoy writing the early chapters because he will be able, in doing so, to close his eyes to the wickedness of modern times. But in closing his eyes to modern wickedness hasn't he sometimes closed his eyes to ancient wickedness as well?"

"Well?" asked Livy, narrowing his eyes.

"Well," I fumbled. "Perhaps there isn't so much difference really between their wickedness and ours. It may be just a matter of scope and opportunity."

Pollio said: "In fact, boy, the Paduan hasn't made you see his sulphur fleeces as snow-white?"

I was very uncomfortable. "I have got more pleasure from reading Livy than from any other author," I repeated.

"Oh yes," Pollio grinned, "that's just what the old man of Cadiz said. But like the old man of Cadiz you feel a little disillusioned now, eh? Lars Porsena and Scævola and Brutus and company stick in your throat?"

"It's not disillusion, sir. I see now, though I hadn't considered the matter before, that there are two different ways of writing history: one is to persuade men to virtue and the other is to compel men to truth. The first is Livy's way and the other is yours: and perhaps they are not irreconcilable."

"Why, boy, you're an orator," said Pollio delightedly.

Sulpicius who had been standing on one leg with his foot held in his hand, as his habit was when excited or impatient, and twisting his beard in knots, now summed up: "Yes, Livy will never lack readers. People love being 'persuaded to ancient virtue' by a charming writer, particularly when they are told in the same breath that modern civilization has made such virtue impossible of attainment. But mere truth-tellers—'undertakers who lay out the corpse of history' (to quote poor Catullus's epigram on the noble Pollio)—people who record no more than actually occurred—such men can only hold an audience while they have a good cook and a cellar of Cyprian wine."

This made Livy really furious. He said, "Pollio, this talk is idle. Young Claudius here has always been considered dull-witted by his family and friends but I didn't agree with the general verdict until to-day. You're welcome to your disciple. And Sulpicius can perfect his dullness: there's no better teacher of dullness in Rome." Then he gave us his Parthian shot: *Et apud Apollinem istum Pollionis Pollinctorem diutissime polleat.* Which means, though the pun is lost in Greek, "And may he flourish long at the shrine of that Undertaker Apollo of Pollio's!" Then off he went, snorting.

Pollio shouted cheerfully after him: "*Quod certe pollicitur Pollio. Pollucibiliter pollebit puer.*" ("Pollio promises you he will; the boy will flourish mightily.")

When we two were alone, Sulpicius having gone off to find a book, Pollio began questioning me.

"Who are you, boy? Claudius is your name, isn't it? You obviously come of good family, but I don't know you."

"I am Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus."

"My God! But Livy's right. You're supposed to be a half-wit."

"Yes. My family is ashamed of me because I stammer, and I'm lame and usually ill, so I go about very little in society."

"But dull-witted? You're one of the brightest young fellows I have met for years."

"You are very kind, sir."

"Not at all. By God, that was a nasty hit at old Livy about Lars Porsena. Livy has no conscience, that's the truth. I'm always catching him out. I asked him once if he always had the same trouble as I had in finding the brass tablets he wanted among the litter of the Public Record Office. He said, 'Oh, no trouble at all.' And it turned out that he has never once been there to confirm a single fact! Tell me, why were you reading my history?"

"I was reading your account of the siege of Perusia. My grandfather, Livy's first husband you know, was there. I'm interested in that period and I'm getting together materials for a life of my father. My tutor Athenodorus referred me to your book: he said it was honest. My former tutor, Marcus Porcius Cato, had once told me that it was a tissue of lies, so I was the more ready to believe Athenodorus."

"Yes, Cato wouldn't like the book. The Cato's fought on the wrong side. I helped to drive his grandfather out of Sicily. But I think you are the first youthful historian I have ever met. History is an old man's game. When are you going to win battles like your father and grandfather?"

"Perhaps in my old age."

He laughed. "I don't see why a historian who has made a life-study of military tactics shouldn't be invincible as a commander, given good troops and courage—"

"And good staff-officers," I put in, remembering Cleon.

"*And* good staff-officers, certainly—though he's never actually handled a sword or shield in his life."

I was bold enough to ask Pollio why he was often called "The Last of the Romans". He looked pleased at the question and replied: "Augustus gave me the name. It was when he invited me to join him in his war against your grandfather Antony. I asked him what sort of a man he took me for: Antony had been one of my best friends. 'Asinius Pollio,' he said, 'I believe that you're the last of the Romans. The title is wasted on that assassin, Cassius.' 'And if I'm the last of the Romans,' I answered, 'whose fault is that? And whose fault will it be when you've destroyed Antony, that nobody but myself will ever dare hold his head up in your presence or speak out of turn?' 'Not mine, Asinius,' he said apologetically, 'it is Antony who has declared war, not I. And as soon as Antony is beaten I shall of course restore Republican government.' 'If the Lady Livia does not interpose her veto,' I said."

The old man then took me by the shoulders. "By the way, I'll tell you something, Claudius. I'm a very old man and though I look brisk enough I have reached the end. In three days I shall be dead; and I know it. Just before one dies there comes a strange lucidity. One speaks prophetically. Now listen! Do you want to live a long busy life, with honour at the end of it?"

"Yes."

"Then exaggerate your limp, stammer deliberately, sham sickness frequently, let your wits wander, jerk your head and twitch with your hands on all public or semi-public occasions. If you could see as much as I can see you would know that this was your only hope of safety and eventual glory."

I said: "Livy's story of Brutus—the first Brutus, I mean

—may be unhistorical, but it's apt. Brutus pretended to be a half-wit, too, to be better able to restore popular liberty."

"What's that? Popular liberty? You believe in that? I thought the phrase had died out among the younger generation."

"My father and grandfather both believed in it——"

"Yes," Pollio interrupted sharply, "that's why they died."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that's why they were poisoned."

"*Poisoned!* By whom?"

"Hm! Not so loud, boy. No, I'll not mention names. But I'll give you a sure token that I'm not just repeating groundless scandal. You're writing a life of your father, you say?"

"Yes."

"Well, you'll see that you won't be allowed to get beyond a certain point in it. And the person who stops you——"

Sulpicius came shuffling back at this point and nothing more was said of any interest except when I took my leave of Pollio and he drew me aside and muttered: "Little Claudius, good-bye! But don't be a fool about popular liberty. That cannot come yet. Things must be far worse before they can be better." Then he raised his voice: "And one thing more. If, when I'm dead, you ever come across any important point in my histories that you find unhistorical I give you permission—I'll stipulate that you have the authority—to put the corrections in a supplement. Keep them up to date. Books when they grow out of date only serve as wrappings for fish." I said that this would be an honourable duty.

Three days later Pollio died. He left me in his will a collection of early Latin histories, but they were withheld from me. My uncle Tiberius said that it was a mistake: that they were intended for him, our names being so similar. His stipulation about my having the authority to make corrections everyone treated as a joke; but I kept my promise to Pollio some twenty years later. I found that he had

written very severely on the character of Cicero—a vain, vacillating, timorous fellow—and while not disagreeing with this verdict I felt it necessary to point out that he was not a traitor too, as Pollio had made him out. Pollio was relying on some correspondence of Cicero's which I was able to prove a forgery by Clodius Pulcher. Cicero had incurred Clodius's enmity by witnessing against him when he was accused of attending the sacrifice of the Good Goddess disguised as a woman-musician. This Clodius was another of the bad Claudians.