CHAPTER XXXIII

MESSALINA was an extremely beautiful girl, slim and quick-moving with eyes as black as jet and masses of curly black hair. She hardly spoke a word and had a mysterious smile which drove me nearly crazy with love for her. She was so glad to have escaped from Caligula and so quick to realize the advantages that marriage with me gave her, that she behaved in a way which made me quite sure that she loved me as much as I loved her. This was practically the first time I had been in love with anyone since my boyhood; and when a not very clever, not very attractive man of fifty falls in love with a very attractive and very clever girl of fifteen it is usually a poor look-out for him. We were married in October. By December she was pregnant by me. She appeared very fond of my little Antonia, who was aged about ten, and it was a relief to me that the child now had someone whom she could call mother, someone who was near enough to her in age to be a friend and could explain the ways of society to her and take her about, as Calpurnia had not been able to do.

Messalina and I were invited to live at the Palace again. We arrived at an unfortunate time. A merchant called Bassus had been asking questions of a captain of the Palace Guards about Caligula's daily habits—was it true that he walked about the cloisters at night because he could not sleep? At what time did he do this? Which cloisters did he usually choose? What guard did he have with him? The captain reported the incident to Cassius and Cassius reported it to Caligula. Bassus was arrested and cross-examined. He was forced to admit that he had intended to
kill Caligula but denied even under torture that he had any associates. Caligula then sent a message to Bassus’s old father, ordering him to attend his son’s execution. The old man, who had no notion that Bassus had been planning to assassinate Caligula or even that he had been arrested, was greatly shocked to find his son groaning on the Palace floor, his body broken by torture. But he controlled himself and thanked Caligula for his graciousness in summoning him to close his son’s eyes. Caligula laughed. “Close his eyes indeed! He’s going to have no eyes to close, the assassin! I’m going to poke them out in a moment. And yours too.”

Bassus’s father said: “Spare our lives. We are only tools in the hands of powerful men. I’ll give you all the names.”

This impressed Caligula, and when the old man mentioned the Guards’ Commander, the Commander of the Germans, Callistus the Treasurer, Cæsonia, Mnester and three or four others, he grew pale with alarm. “And whom would they make Emperor in my place?” he asked.

“Your uncle Claudius.”

“Is he in the plot too?”

“No, they were merely going to use him as a figure-head.”

Caligula hurried away and summoned the Guards’ Commander, the Commander of the Germans, the Treasurer and myself to a private room. He asked the others, pointing to me: “Is that creature fit to be Emperor?”

They answered in surprised tones, “Not unless you say so, Jove.”

Then he gave them a pathetic smile and exclaimed, “I am one and you are three. Two of you are armed and I am defenceless. If you hate me and want to kill me, do so at once and put that poor idiot into my place as Emperor.”

We all fell on our faces and the two soldiers handed him their swords from the floor, saying, “We are innocent of any such treacherous thought, Lord. If you disbelieve us, kill us!”

Do you know, he was actually about to kill us! But while
he hesitated I said: "Almighty God, the colonel who summoned me here told me of the charge brought against these loyal men by Bassus’s father. Its falsity is evident. If Bassus had really been employed by them, would it have been necessary for him to question the captain about your movements? Would he not have been able to get all the necessary information from these generals themselves? No, Bassus’s father has tried to save his own life and Bassus’s by a clumsy lie."

Caligula appeared to be convinced by my argument. He gave me his hand to kiss, made us all rise, and handed the swords back. Bassus and his father were thereupon hewn to pieces by the Germans. But Caligula could not rid his mind of the dread of assassination, which was presently increased by a number of unlucky omens. First the porter’s lodge at the Palace was struck by lightning. Then Incitatus, when he was brought in to dinner one evening, reared up and cast a shoe which broke an alabaster cup that had belonged to Julius Cæsar, spilling the wine on the floor. The worst omen of all was what happened at Olympus, when, in accordance with Caligula’s orders, the temple workmen began to take the statue of Jove to pieces for conveyance to Rome. The head was to come off first, to be used as a measure for the new head of Caligula that would be substituted when the statue was reassembled. They had got the pulley fixed to the temple roof and a rope knotted around the neck and were just about to haul, when suddenly a thunderous peal of laughter roared out through the whole building. The workmen rushed away in panic. Nobody could be found bold enough to take their places.

Cæsonia now advised him, since by his immovable rigour he had made everyone tremble at the very sound of his name, to rule mildly and earn the people’s love instead of their fear. For Cæsonia realized how dangerously he was placed and that if anything happened to him she would certainly lose her life too, unless she was known to have done her best to dissuade him from his cruelties. He was behaving in a
most imprudent way now. He went in turn to the Guards’ Commander, the Treasurer and the Commander of the Germans and pretended to take each of them into his confidence saying, “I trust you, but the others are plotting against me and I want you to regard them as my deadliest enemies.” They compared notes; and that is why when a real plot was formed they shut their eyes to it. Caligula said that he approved Cæsonia’s advice and thanked her for it; he would certainly follow it when he had made his peace with his enemies. He called the Senate together and addressed us in this strain: “Soon I shall grant you all an amnesty, my enemies, and reign with love and peace a thousand years. That is the prophecy. But before that golden time comes heads must roll along the floor of this House and blood spurt up to the beams. A wild five minutes that will be.” If the thousand years of peace had come first, and then the wild five minutes, we should have preferred it.

The plot was formed by Cassius Chærea. He was an old-fashioned soldier, accustomed to blind obedience to the orders of his superiors. Things have to be extraordinarily bad before a man of this stamp can think of plotting against the life of his Commander-in-Chief, to whom he has sworn allegiance in the most solemn terms imaginable. Caligula had treated Cassius extremely badly. He had definitely promised him the command of the Guards and then without a word of explanation or apology had given it to a captain of short service and no military distinction as a reward for a remarkable drinking feat at the Palace: he had volunteered to drain a three-gallon jar of wine without removing it from his lips, and had really done so—I was watching—and kept the wine down into the bargain. Caligula had also made this man a senator. And Caligula employed Cassius on all his most unpleasant errands and tasks—collection of taxes that were not really due, the seizure of property for offences never committed, the execution of innocent men. Recently he had made him torture a beautiful girl, well born too, called Quintilia. The story was as follows. Several young
men had wanted to marry her, but the one whom her guardian had proposed, a member of the Scouts, she did not like at all. She begged him to let her choose one of the others; he consented, and the day for the marriage was fixed. The rejected Scout went to Caligula and brought an accusation against his rival, saying that he had blasphemed, speaking of his August Sovereign as “that bald-headed madame”. He cited Quintilia as a witness. Quintilia and her betrothed were brought before Caligula. Both denied the charge. Both were sentenced to the rack. Cassius’s face revealed his disgust, for only slaves could legally be put to torture. So Caligula ordered him to supervise Quintilia’s racking and turn the screws with his own hands. Quintilia did not utter a word or a cry throughout her ordeal and afterwards said to Cassius, who was so affected that he was weeping, “Poor Colonel, I bear you no grudge. Sometimes it must be hard to obey orders.” Cassius said bitterly: “I wish I had died that day with Varus in the Teutoburger Forest.”

She was taken again into Caligula’s presence and Cassius reported that she had made no confession and not allowed a cry to escape her. Cæsonia said to Caligula, “That was because she was in love with the man. Love conquers all. You might cut her in pieces but she would never betray him.”

Caligula said: “And would you too be so gloriously brave on my account, Cæsonia?”

“You know that I would,” she said.

So Quintilia’s betrothed was not tortured but given a free pardon, and Quintilia was awarded a dowry of eight thousand gold pieces from the estate of the Scout, who was executed for perjury. But Caligula heard that Cassius had wept during Quintilia’s torture and jeered at him for an old cry-baby. “Cry-baby” was not the worst name he found. He pretended that Cassius was an effeminate old pathetic, and was always making dirty jokes about him to the other Guards officers, who were obliged to laugh heartily at them. Cassius used to come to Caligula for the watchword every day at noon. It had always been “Rome” or “Augustus”
or "Jove" or "Victory" or something of the sort; but now to annoy Cassius, Caligula would give him absurd words like "Stay-laces" or "Lots of Love" or "Curling-irons" or "Kiss me, Sergeant," and Cassius had to take them back to his brother-officers and stand their chaff. He decided to kill Caligula.

Caligula was madder than ever. He came into my room one day and said without any introductory remark: "I shall have three Imperial cities, and Rome won't be one of them. I shall have my city on the Alps, and I shall rebuild Rome at Antium because that's where I was born and deserves the honour, and because it's on the sea, and then I shall have Alexandria in case the Germans capture the other two. Alexandria is a very cultivated place."

"Yes, God," I said humbly.

He then suddenly remembered that he had been called a bald-headed madame—his hair was certainly very thin on top now—and shouted out, "How dare you go about with a great ugly bush of hair in my presence? It's blasphemy."

He turned to his German guard, "Cut his head off!"

Once more I thought I was done for. But I had the presence of mind to say sharply to the Guard who was running at me with his sword, "What are you doing, idiot? The God didn't say 'head', he said 'hair'! Run off and fetch the shears at once!" Caligula was taken aback and perhaps really thought that he had said "hair". He allowed the German to fetch the shears. My crown was shorn clean. I asked permission to dedicate the clippings to his Deity and he graciously gave consent. So now he had everyone in the Palace shorn, except the Germans. When it came to Cassius's turn Caligula said, "Oh, what a pity! Those darling little ringlets that the Sergeant loves so much!"

That evening Cassius met Lesbia's husband. He had been Ganymede's best friend and from something that Caligula had said that morning was not likely to live much longer. He said, "Good evening, Cassius Chærea, my friend. What's the watchword to-day?"
Cassius had never been called “my friend” before by Lesbia’s husband and looked intently at him.

Lesbia’s husband—his name was Marcus Vinicius—said again, “Cassius, we have much in common and when I call you ‘friend’, I mean it. What’s the watchword?”

Cassius answered, “The watchword to-night is ‘Little Ringlets’. But, my friend Marcus Vinicius, if I may indeed call you friend, give me the watchword ‘Liberty’ and my sword is at your service.”

Vinicius embraced him. “We are not the only two who are ready to strike for Liberty. The Tiger is also with me.” “The Tiger”—his real name was Cornelius Sabinus—was another Guards colonel, who relieved Cassius whenever he went off duty.

The great Palatine Festival started the next day. This festival in honour of Augustus had been instituted by Livia at the beginning of Tiberius’s monarchy and was held annually in the Southern Court of the Old Palace. A.D. 41

It began with sacrifices to Augustus and a symbolic procession, and continued for three days with theatrical pieces, dancing, singing, juggling and the like. Wooden stands were erected with seating for sixty thousand people. When the festival ended the stands were taken down and stored away until the following year. This year Caligula had prolonged the three days to eight, interspersing the performances with chariot-races in the Circus and sham naval-fights in the Basin. He wanted to be continuously amused until the day he sailed for Alexandria, which was to be the twenty-fifth of January. For he was going to Egypt to see the sights, to raise money by immovable rigour and the same sort of trickery he had used in France, to make plans for the rebuilding of Alexandria and, lastly, so he boasted, to put a new head on the Sphinx.

The Festival started. Caligula sacrificed to Augustus, but in a somewhat perfunctory and disdainful way—like a master who in some emergency or other has to perform some menial service for one of his slaves. When this was
over he proclaimed that if any citizen present asked a boon that it was in his power to grant he would graciously grant it. He had been angry with the people lately for their lack of enthusiasm at the last wild-beast show and had punished them by shutting the city granaries for ten days; but perhaps he had forgiven them now because he had just scattered largesse from the Palace roof. So a glad shout went up, “More bread, less taxes, Caesar! More bread, less taxes!” Caligula was very angry. He sent a platoon of Germans along the benches and a hundred heads were chopped off. This incident disturbed the conspirators; it was a reminder of the barbarity of the Germans and the marvellous devotion that they paid Caligula. By this time, there can hardly have been a citizen in Rome who did not long for the death of Caligula, or would not willingly have eaten his flesh, as the saying is; but to these Germans he was the most glorious hero the world had ever known. And if he dressed as a woman; or galloped suddenly away from his army on the march; or made Caesonia appear naked before them and boasted of her beauty; or burned down his most beautiful villa at Herculaneum on the ground that his mother Agrippina had been imprisoned there for two days on her way to the island where she died—this inexplicable sort of behaviour only made him the more worthy of their worship as a divine being. They used to nod wisely to each other and say, “Yes, the Gods are like that. You can’t tell what they are going to do next. Tuisco and Mann, at home in our dear, dear Fatherland, are just the same.”

Cassius was reckless and did not care what happened to him personally, so long as Caligula was assassinated, but the other conspirators, who did not feel so strongly, began to wonder what vengeance the Germans would take on the murderers of their wonderful hero. They began making excuses and Cassius could not get them to agree on a proper plan of action. They suggested leaving it to chance. Cassius grew anxious. He called them cowards and accused them of playing for time. He said that they really wanted
Caligula to get safe away to Egypt. The last day of the festival came, and Cassius had with great difficulty persuaded them to agree to a workable plan, when Caligula suddenly gave out that the festival would go on for another three days. He said that he wanted to act and sing in a masque which he had himself composed for the benefit of the Alexandrians, but which he thought it only fair to show his own countrymen first.

This change of plans gave the more timorous of the conspirators a new opportunity for hedging. "Oh, but Cassius, this quite alters matters. It makes everything much easier for us. We can kill him on the last day, just as he comes off the stage. That's a far better plan. Or as he goes on. Whichever you prefer."

Cassius answered: "We've made a plan and sworn to keep it, and keep it we must. It's a very good plan too. Not a flaw in it."

"But we have plenty of time now. Why not wait another three days?"

Cassius said: "If you won't carry that plan out to-day as you all swore you would, I shall have to work single-handed. I won't have much of a chance against the Germans—but I'll do my best. If they are too strong for me I'll call out, 'Vinicius, Asprenas, Bubo, Aquila, Tiger, why aren't you here as you promised?'

So they agreed to carry out the original plan. Caligula was to be persuaded by Vinicius and Asprenas to leave the theatre at noon for a plunge in the swimming pool and a quick lunch. Just before this Cassius, The Tiger, and the other captains who were in the plot were to slip out unobtrusively by the stage-door. They were to go round to the entrance of the covered passage which was the short cut from the theatre to the New Palace. Asprenas and Vinicius would persuade Caligula to take this short cut.

The play that day had been announced as Ulysses and Circe and Caligula had promised to scatter fruit and cakes and money at the end of it. He would naturally do this
from the end nearest the gate, where his seat was, so everyone came as early as possible to the theatre to secure seats at that end. When the gates were opened the crowd rushed in and raced for the nearest seats. Usually all the women sat together in one part, and there were seats reserved for knights, and for senators, and for distinguished foreigners and so on. But to-day everyone was muddled up together. I saw a senator who had come in late forced to sit between an African slave and a woman with saffron-dyed hair and the dark-coloured gown that common prostitutes wear as their professional dress. "So much the better," said Cassius to The Tiger. "The more confusion there is, the better chance we have."

Apart from the Germans and Caligula himself almost the only person at the Palace who had not by now heard of the plot was poor Claudius. This was because poor Claudius was going to be killed too, as Caligula’s uncle. All Caligula’s family were to be killed. The conspirators were afraid, I suppose, that I would make myself Emperor and avenge his death. They had determined to restore the Republic. If only the idiots had taken me into their confidence this story would have had a very different ending. For I was a better Republican than any of them. But they mistrusted me, and very cruelly doomed me to death. Even Caligula knew more about the plot than I did, in a sense, for he had just been sent a warning oracle from the Temple of Fortune at Antium: "Beware of Cassius." He misunderstood it, and recalled Drusilla’s first husband, Cassius Longinus, from Asia Minor, where he was Governor. He thought that Longinus was angry with him for murdering Drusilla and remembered that he was a descendant of that Cassius who helped to assassinate Julius Cæsar.

I came into the theatre that morning at eight o'clock and found that a place had been reserved for me by the ushers. I was between the Guards’ Commander and the Commander of the Germans. The Guards’ Commander leant across me and asked: "Have you heard the news?"
"What news?" asked the Commander of the Germans.
"They are playing a new drama to-day."
"What is it?"
"The Tyrant's Death."
The Commander of the Germans gave him a quick look and quoted frowning:

"Brave comrade, hold thy peace
Lest someone hear thee, of the men of Greece."

I said: "Yes, there is a change in the programme. Mnester is to give us 'The Tyrant's Death.' It hasn't been played for years. It's about King Cinyras, who wouldn't come into the war against Troy, and got killed for his cowardice."

The play began and Mnester was at the top of his form. When he died at the hands of Apollo he spurted blood all over his clothes from a little bladder concealed in his mouth. Caligula sent for him and kissed him on both cheeks. Cassius and The Tiger escorted him to his dressing-room as if to protect him from his admirers. Then they went out by the stage-door. The captains followed during the confusion of the largesse-throwing. Asprenas said to Caligula: "That was marvellous. Now what about a plunge in the bath and a little light luncheon?"

"No," said Caligula. "I want to see those girl acrobats. They're said to be pretty good. I think I'll sit the show out. It's the last day." He was in an extremely affable mood.

So Vinicius rose. He was going to tell Cassius, The Tiger, and the rest, not to wait. Caligula pulled at his cloak. "My dear fellow, don't run away. You must see those girls. One does a dance called the fish-dance which makes you feel as if you were ten fathoms under water."

Vinicius sat down and saw the fish-dance. But first he had to sit through a short melodramatic interlude called Laureolus, or 'The Robber Chief.' There was a lot of slaughter
in it and the actors, a second-rate lot, had all found blood-bladders to put in their mouths in imitation of Mnester. You never saw such an ill-omened mess as they made of the stage! When the fish-dance was over Vinicius rose again: "To tell the truth, Lord, I would love to stay but Cloacina calls me. It's some confounded thing I ate.

"Soft but cohesive let my offerings flow,
Not roughly swift, nor impudently slow . . . ."

Caligula laughed. "Don't blame it on me, my dear fellow. You're one of my best friends. I wouldn't doctor your food for the world."

Vinicius went out by the stage-door and found Cassius and The Tiger in the court. "You'd better come back," he said. "He's sitting it out to the end."

Cassius said: "Very well. Let's go back. I'm going to kill him where he sits. I expect you to stand by me."

Just then a Guardsman came up to Cassius and said, "The boys are here at last, sir."

Now, Caligula had lately sent letters to the Greek cities of Asia Minor ordering them each to send him ten boys of the noblest blood to dance the national sword-dance at the festival and sing a hymn in his honour. This was only an excuse for getting the boys in his power: they would be useful hostages when he turned his fury against Asia Minor. They should have arrived several days before this, but rough weather in the Adriatic had held them up at Corfu. The Tiger said, "Inform the Emperor at once." The Guardsman hurried to the theatre.

Meanwhile I was beginning to feel very hungry. I whispered to Vitellius who was sitting behind me, "I do wish that the Emperor would set us the example of going out for a little luncheon."

Then the Guardsman came up with the message about the boys' arrival and Caligula said to Asprenas: "Splendid! They'll be able to perform this afternoon. I must see them at once and have a short
rehearsal of the hymn. Come on, friends! The rehearsal first, then a bathe, luncheon, and back again!"

We went out. Caligula stopped at the gate to give orders about the afternoon performance. I walked ahead with Vitellius, a senator named Sentius, and the two generals. We went by the covered passage. I noticed Cassius and The Tiger at the entrance. They did not salute me, which I thought strange, for they saluted the others. We reached the Palace. I said, "I am hungry. I smell venison cooking. I hope that rehearsal won’t take too long." We were in the ante-room to the banqueting-hall. "This is odd," I thought. "No captains here, only sergeants." I turned questioningly to my companions but—another odd thing—found that they had all silently vanished. Just then I heard distant shouting and screams, then more shouting. I wondered what on earth was happening. Someone ran past the window shouting, "It’s all over. He’s dead!" Two minutes later there came a most awful roar from the theatre, as if the whole audience was being massacred. It went on and on but after a time there was a lull followed by tremendous cheering. I stumbled upstairs to my little reading-room where I collapsed trembling on a chair.

The pillared portrait-busts of Herodotus, Polybius, Thucydides, and Asinius Pollio stood facing me. Their impassive features seemed to say: "A true historian will always rise superior to the political disturbances of his day." I determined to comport myself as a true historian.