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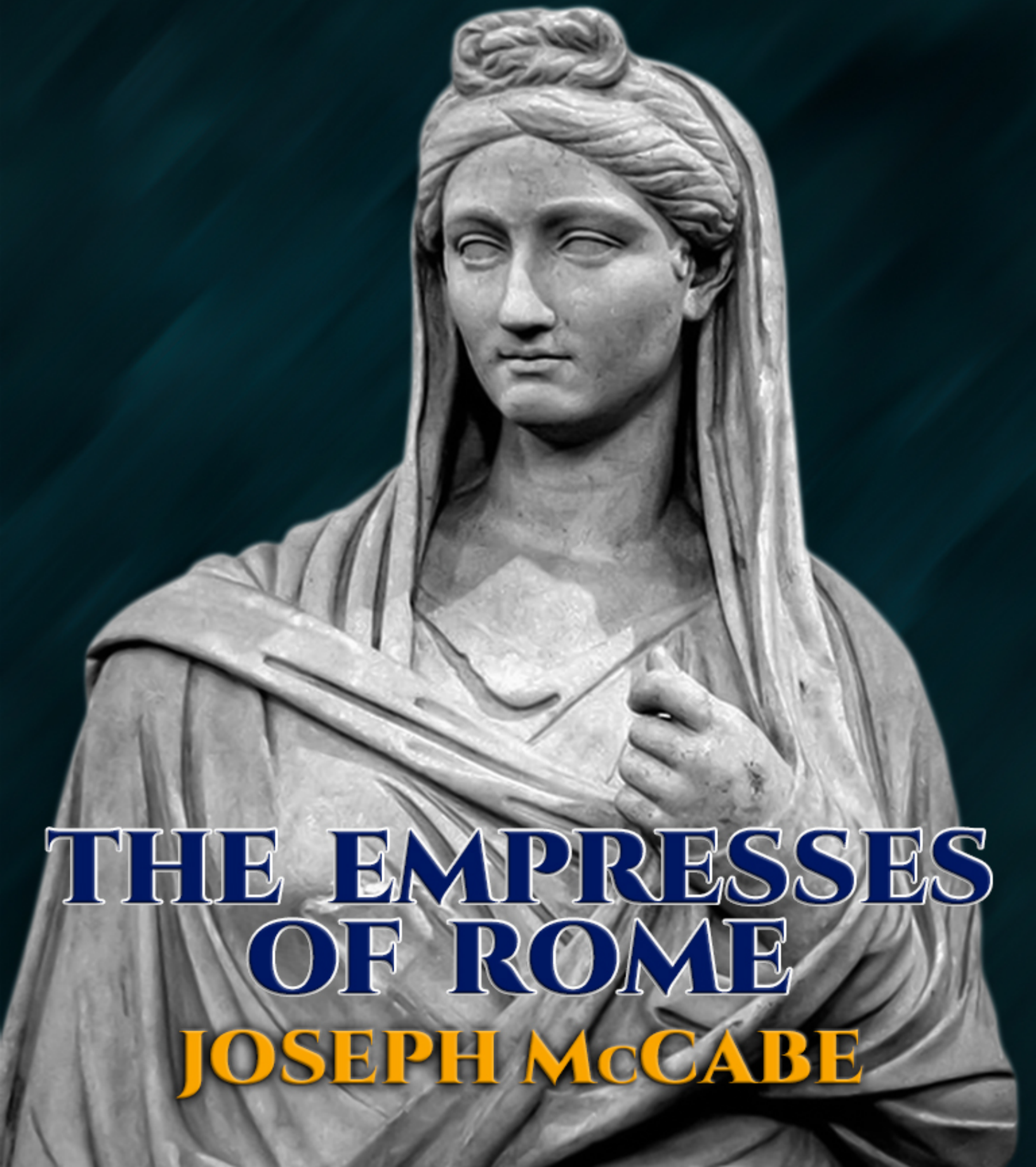

THE EMPRESSES OF ROME

JOSEPH McCABE

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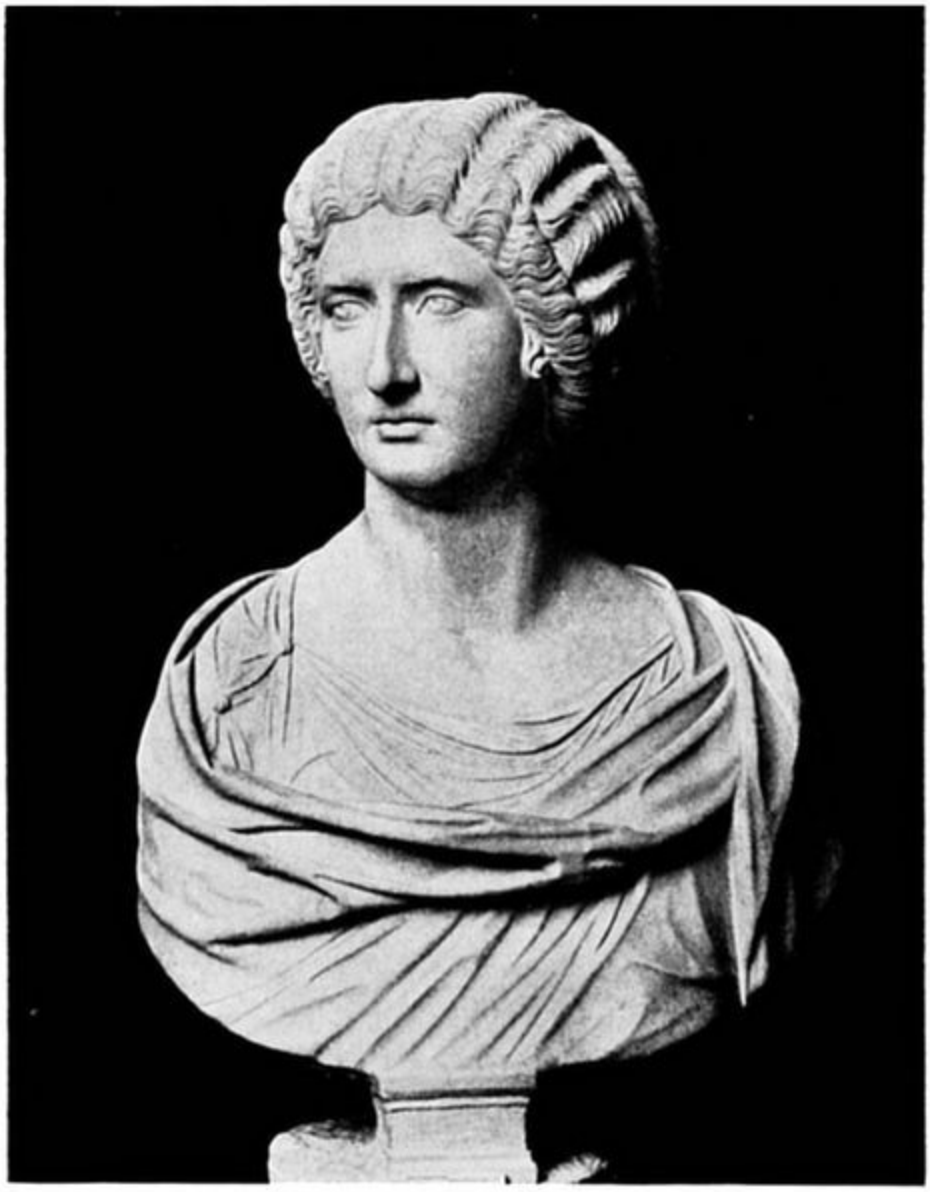

CRISPINA

BUST IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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INTRODUCTION

THE story of Imperial Rome has been told frequently and impressively in our literature, and few chapters in the long chronicle of man's deeds and failures have a more dramatic quality. Seven centuries before our era opens, when the greater part of Europe is still hidden under virgin forests or repellent swamps, and the decaying civilizations of the East cast, as they die, their seed upon the soil of Greece, we see, in the grey mist of the legendary period, a meagre people settling on one of the seven hills by the Tiber. As it grows its enemies are driven back, and it spreads confidently over the neighbouring hills and down the connecting valleys. It gradually extends its rule over other Italian peoples, bracing its arm and improving its art in the long struggle. It grows conscious of its larger power, and sends its legions eastward, over the blue sea, to gather the wealth and culture of Egypt, Assyria, Persia, and Greece; and westward and northward, over the white Alps, to sow the seed in Germany, Gaul, Britain, and Spain. A hundred years before the opening of the present era the tiny settlement on the Palatine has become the mistress of the world. Its eagles cross the waters of the Danube and the Rhine, and glitter in the sun of Asia and Africa. But, with the wealth of the dying East, it has inherited the germs of a deadly malady. Rome, the heart of the giant frame, loses its vigour. The strong bronze limbs look pale and thin; the clear cold brain is overcast with the fumes of wine and heated with the thrills of sense; and Rome passes, decrepit and dishonoured, from the stage on which it has played so useful and fateful a part.

The fresh aspect of this familiar story which I propose to consider is the study of the women who moulded or marred the succeeding Emperors in their failure to arrest, if not their guilt in accelerating, the progress of Rome's disease. Woman had her part in the making, as well as the unmaking, of Rome. In the earlier days, when her work was confined within the walls of the home, no consul ever guided the momentous fortune of Rome, no soldier ever bore its eagles to the bounds of the world, but some woman had taught his lips to frame the syllables of his national creed. However, long before the commencement of our era, the thought and the power of the Roman woman went out into the larger world of public life; and when the Empire is founded, when the control of the State's mighty resources is entrusted to the hands of a single ruler, the wife of the monarch may share his power, and assuredly shares his interest for us. Even as mere women of Rome, as single figures and types rising to the luminous height of the throne out of the dark and indistinguishable crowd, they deserve to be passed in review.

Some such review we have, no doubt, in the two great works which spread the panorama of Imperial Rome before the eyes of English readers. In the graceful and restrained chapters of Merivale we find the earlier Empresses delineated with no less charm than learning. In the more genial and voluptuous narrative of Gibbon we may, at intervals, follow the fortunes and appreciate the character of the later Empresses. But, no matter how nice a skill in grouping the historian may have, his stage is too crowded either for us to pick out the single character with proper distinctness, or for him to appraise it with entire accuracy. The fleeting glimpses of the Empresses which we catch, as the splendid panorama passes before us, must be blended in a fuller and steadier picture. The tramp and shock of armies, the wiles of statesmen, the social revolutions, which

absorb the historian, must fall into the background, that the single figure may be seen in full contour. When this is done it will be found that there are many judgments on the Empresses, both in Merivale and Gibbon, which the biographer will venture to question.

For the study of the earlier Empresses the English reader will find much aid in Mr. Baring-Gould's "Tragedy of the Cæsars" (1892). Here again, however, though the Empresses are drawn with discriminating freshness and full knowledge, they are constantly merging in the great crowd of characters. The aim of the present work is to place them in the full foreground, and to continue the survey far beyond the limits of Mr. Baring-Gould's work. It differs also in this latter respect from Stahr's brilliant "Kaiser-Frauen," which is, in fact, now almost unobtainable; and especially from V. Silvagni's recent work, of unhappy title, "L'Impero e le Donne dei Cesari," which merely includes slight and familiar sketches of four Empresses in a general study of the period.

The work differs in quite another way from the learned and entertaining book of the old French writer Roergas de Serviez, of which an early English translation has recently been republished under the title "The Roman Empresses, or the History of the Lives and Secret Intrigues of the Wives of the Twelve Cæsars"—an improper title, because the work is far from confined to the wives of the Cæsars. The work is an industrious compilation of original references to the Empresses, interwoven with considerable art, so as to construct harmonious pictures, and adorned with much charm and piquancy of phrase, if some hollowness of sentiment. But it is so intent upon entertaining us that it frequently sacrifices accuracy to that admirable aim. Serviez has not invented any substantial episode, but he has encircled the facts with the most charming imaginative haloes, and where the authorities differ, as they frequently do, he has not hesitated to grant his verdict to the writer

who most picturesquely impeaches the virtue of one of his Empresses. Roergas de Serviez was a gentleman of Languedoc in the days of the “grand monarque.” His Empresses and princesses reflect too faithfully the frail character of the ladies at the Court of Louis XIV. For him the most reliable writer is the one who betrays least inclination to seek virtue in courtly ladies.

It need hardly be said that the present writer is indebted to these authors, to the learned Tillemont, and to others who will be named in the course of the work. But this study is based on a careful examination of all the references to the Empresses in the Latin and Greek authorities, with such further aid as is afforded by coins, statues, inscriptions, and the incidental research of commentators. We shall consider, as we proceed, the varying authority of these writers. We shall find in them defects which impose a heavy responsibility on the writer whose aim it is to restore those faded and delicate portraits of the Empresses, over which later artists have spread their sharper and more crudely coloured figures. One may, however, say at once that it is not contemplated to urge any very revolutionary change in the current estimate of the character of most of them. If a few romantic adventures must be honestly discarded, we shall find Messalina still flaunting her vices in the palace, Agrippina still pursuing her more masculine ambition, Poppæa still representing the gaily-decked puppet of that luxurious world, and Zenobia, in glittering helmet, still giving resonant commands to her troops.

But it will be well, before we introduce the first, and one of the best and greatest of the Empresses, to glance at the development of Roman life which prepared the way for woman to so exalted a dignity. The condition of woman in early Rome has often been restored. We see the female infant, her fate trembling in the hand of man from the moment when her eyes open to the light, brought before

the despotic father for the decision of her fate. With a glance at the little white frame he will say whether she shall be cast out, to be gathered by the merchants in human flesh, or suffered to breed the next generation of citizens. We follow her through her guarded girlhood, as she learns to spin and weave, and see her passing from the tyranny of father to the tyranny of husband at an age when the modern girl has hardly begun to glance nervously at marriage as a remote and mystic experience. We then find her, not indeed so narrowly confined as her Greek sister, yet little more than the servant of her husband. Public feeling, it is true, mitigated the harsher features, and forbade the graver consequences, of this ancient tradition. For many centuries divorce was unknown at Rome. Yet woman's horizon was limited to her home, while her husband boasted of his share in controlling the Commonwealth's increasing life.

In the second century before Christ we find symptoms of revolt. The wealthier women of Rome resent the curtailing of their finery by the Oppian Law, now that the war is over (195 B.C.). Old-fashioned Senators are dismayed to find them holding a public meeting, besetting all the approaches to the Senate, demanding their votes, and even invading the houses of the Tribunes and coercing them to withdraw their opposition. The truth is that Rome has changed, and the women feel the pervading change. The passage of the victorious Roman through the cities of the East had corrupted the patriarchal virtues. Roman officers could not gaze unmoved on the surviving memorials of the culture of Athens, or make festival in the drowsy chambers of Corinthian courtesans or the licentious groves of Daphne, without altering their ideal of life. The splendour of Eastern wisdom and vice made pale the old standard of Roman *virtus*. The vast wealth extorted from the subdued provinces swelled the pride of patrician families until they disdainfully

burst the narrow walls of their fathers' homes. The hills of Rome began to shine with marble mansions, framed in shady and spacious gardens, from which contemptuous patrician eyes looked down on the sordid and idle crowds in the valleys of the Subura and the Velabrum. Rome aspired to have its art and its letters.

Roman women were not content to be secluded from the new culture, and could not escape the stimulation of their new world. The Roman husband must be kept away from the accomplished courtesans of Greece and the voluptuous sirens of Asia by finding no lesser attractions in his wife. So the near horizon of woman's mind rolled outward. An inscription found at Lanuvium, where the Empress Livia had a villa, shows that the little provincial town had a *curia mulierum*, a women's debating club. The walls of Pompeii, when the shroud of lava had been removed from its scorched face, bore election-addresses signed by women. The world was mirrored in Rome, and few minds could retain their primitive simplicity as they contemplated that seductive picture.

By the beginning of the first century of the older era the women of Rome had ample opportunity for culture and for political influence. In the great conflicts of the time their names are chronicled as the inspirers of many of the chief actors. They rise and fall with the cause of the Senate or the cause of the People. They unite culture with character, public interest with beauty and motherhood. At last the conflicting parties disappear one by one, and a young commander, Octavian, the great-nephew of Julius Cæsar, gathers up the power they relinquish. A youth of delicate and singularly graceful features, of refined and thoughtful, rather than assertive, appearance, he hears that Cæsar has made him heir to his wealth and his opportunities; he goes boldly to Rome, adroitly uses its forces to destroy those who had slain Cæsar, forces Mark Antony to share the rule of the

world with him and Lepidus, and then destroys Lepidus and Mark Antony. It is at this point, when he returns to Rome from his last victories, when the whole world wonders whether he will keep the power he has gathered or meekly place it in the hands of the Senate, that the story opens.

CHAPTER I

THE MAKING OF AN EMPRESS

ON an August morning of the year 29 B.C. the million citizens of Rome lined the route which was taken by triumphal processions, to greet the man who brought them the unfamiliar blessing of peace. From the Triumphal Gate to the Capitol, past the Great Circus and through the dense quarter of the Velabrum, with its narrow streets and high tenements, the chattering crowd was drawn out in two restless lines, on either side of the road, ready to fling back the resonant “Io Triumphe” of the bronzed soldiers, bubbling with discussion of the war-blackened stretch of the past and the more pleasant prospect of the future. The hedges of spectators were thicker, and the debate was livelier, under the cliff of the Palatine Hill and in the Forum, through which ran the Sacred Way to the white Temple of Jupiter, towering above them and crowning the Capitol at the end of the Forum. There the conqueror would offer sacrifice, before he sank back into the common rank of citizens of the Republic. Would the young Octavian really lay down his power, and become a citizen among many, now that he was master of the Roman world?

Possibly one woman, who looked out on the seething Forum and the glistening temple of Jupiter from a modest mansion on the Palatine Hill, knew the answer to the eager question. Possibly it was unknown to Octavian himself, her husband. She heard the blasts of the leading trumpeters, and saw the sleek white oxen, with their gilded horns and their green garlands, advance along the Sacred Way and

mount the Capitol. She saw the people rock and quiver with excitement as painted scenes of the remote Dalmatian forests, where her husband's latest victories had been won, and the gold and silver of despoiled Egypt, and the very children of the witch Cleopatra, were driven before the conqueror. She saw the red-robed lictors slowly pass, their fasces wreathed in laurel; she saw the band of dancers and musicians tossing joyful music in his path; and she saw at last the four white horses drawing a triumphal chariot, in which her husband and her two children received the frenzied ovation of the people.

Octavian was then in his thirty-fourth year. Fifteen years of struggle had drawn a manly gravity over the handsome boyish face, though the curly golden hair still seemed a strange bed for the chaplet of laurel that crowned it. His full impassive lips, steady watchful eyes, and broad smooth forehead gave a singular impression of detachment—as if he were a disinterested spectator of the day's events and the whole national drama, instead of being the central figure. The busts which portray him about this period seem to me, in profile, to recall David's Napoleon, without the slumbering fire and the hard egoism. Men would remind each other how, when he was a mere boy, fifteen years before, he had found his way through a maze of intrigue with remarkable dexterity. Now, Mark Antony was dead, Brutus and Cassius were dead, Lepidus was dead, and the followers of Pompey were scattered. It was natural to assume that dreams of further power were hidden behind that mask of strong repose.

Behind Octavian went the body of Senators, with purple-striped togas, and silver crescents on their sandals. The lines of spectators broke into gossiping groups when the tail of the procession had passed on. The white oxen fell before the altar of Jupiter. Octavian gave the customary address to the Senate, and joined Livia in the small mansion on the

Palatine. But for many a day afterward Rome bubbled in praise of him. Not for years had such combats reddened the sands of the amphitheatre, such clowns and conjurors and actors filled the stage of the theatre, such sports fired the 300,000 citizens at the circus. Never before had the uncouth form of the rhinoceros or hippopotamus been seen at Rome. Not since the beginning of the civil wars had so much money flowed through the shops of the Velabrum and the taverns of the Subura. Such wealth had been added to the public store by the despoiling of Egypt that the bankers had to reduce the rate of interest. To a people grown parasitic the temptation to make a king was overpowering; and it was easy to point out, to those who clung to the strict democratic forms, that Octavian was extraordinarily modest for a man who had reached so brilliant and resourceful a position. So within a few months Octavian was Imperator, and Livia became, in modern phrase, the Empress of Rome.[1]

Livia, unhappily for Rome, gave Octavian no direct heir to the purple, and we may therefore speak briefly of her extraction. She came of the Claudii, one of the oldest and proudest families of the Republic, one that numbered twenty-eight consuls and five dictators in its line. A strong, haughty race, more useful than brilliant, religiously devoted to the old Republic, they had helped much to make Rome the mistress of the world. Livia’s father, Livius Drusus Claudianus, had taken arms against Octavian and Antony, and had killed himself, with Roman dignity, when Brutus and Cassius fell, and he saw the shadow of despotism coming over the city.

Livia was then in her sixteenth year,[2] and had early experience of the storms of Roman political life. Her husband, Tiberius Claudius Nero, had been promoted more than once by Julius Cæsar, but, after the assassination of Cæsar, he had passed into what he regarded as the more

favourable current. He seems to have steered his course with some skill until the year 41 B.C., when, like many other small schemers, he came under the influence of Mark Antony’s wife, Fulvia. Antony was caught at the time in the silken net with which Cleopatra prevented him from carrying out the ambition of Rome at the expense of her country. Fulvia, a virile and passionate woman, tried to draw Antony from her arms by provoking a revolt against Octavian. She induced her brother-in-law and other nobles to rebel, and Nero, who was then prefect of a small town in Campania, joined the movement.

Octavian swung his legions southward, and scattered the thin ranks of the insurgents. With her infant—the future Emperor Tiberius—in her arms the girl-wife fled to the coast with her husband, and endured all the horrors of civil warfare. So close were the soldiers of Octavian on their heels that at one point the cry of the baby nearly destroyed them. Octavian had little mercy on rebellious nobles before he married Livia. At last they reached the coast, where the galleys of Sextus Pompeius hovered to receive fugitives, and sailed for Sicily. They were cordially received there by the Pompeians, but went on to Greece, and were again hunted by the troops. Long afterwards in Rome they used to tell how the delicate girl, the descendant of all the Claudii, fled through a burning forest by night before Roman soldiers, and singed her hair and garments as she rushed onward with her baby in her arms. The troubled history of Rome for a hundred years was stamped on her mind by a personal experience that she could never forget. With worn feet and aching heart, she and her husband at last found shelter, until the feud between Antony and Octavian had been composed.

From the straits of exile they returned to their pretty home on the Palatine Hill, and the story of her adventures ran, and gathered substance, in Roman society. If the

experts be right in assigning to Livia a small mansion which has been uncovered on the hill, we find that she was, in the year 38 B.C., living only a short distance from the house of Octavian. Among the palatial buildings which now whitened the slopes of the Roman hills, Nero's house—later, Livia's house—was poor, but its mural paintings are amongst the most delicate that have been discovered under the overlying centuries of mediæval rubbish. A small portico gave shelter from the summer sun, and the small, cool atrium (hall) led only to some half dozen modest rooms. But Livia was happy in her husband, and sober in her tastes. She was then in her nineteenth year, a young woman of regular and pleasing, though scarcely beautiful, features and rounded form, one of those who happily united the old matronly virtue to the new love of society and gaiety. All Rome discussed her adventures, and the generous feeling which her romance engendered made people give her an exceptional beauty and wit—qualities which neither her marble image nor her recorded career permits us to accept in any large measure. There was no whisper of slander against her until the days of her power. From this peaceful and happy little world she was now to be suddenly removed.

Octavian, who mingled very freely with his fellows, and often supped with the literary men who were now multiplying at Rome, heard the gossip about the youthful Livia, and sought her. He was already married, and a word may be said about the *impératrices manquées* before we unite him to Livia.

In early youth he had been affianced to the girlish daughter of Publius Servilius Isauricus, but a mere betrothal had little strength at a time when even the marriage bond was so frail. When he came to face Mark Antony, with many grim legions at his command, and a fresh civil war was threatened, peacemakers suggested that the storm might be turned from the fields of Italy by a matrimonial alliance.

The soldiers, weary of slaying each other, acclaimed the proposal. Servilia was sacrificed, and Octavian was married to the young and hardly marriageable daughter of Fulvia. As we saw, there was a fresh rupture with Antony in the year 41, and Octavian sent back the maiden, as he described her, to her infuriated mother. Some of our authorities declare that Fulvia had tried to draw Antony from the arms of Cleopatra by making love to his handsome rival, but one can only suppose that Antony would smile if he were told that his unpleasant spouse—the woman who is said to have gloated over the bloody head of Cicero, and thrust her hair-pin through his tongue—was offering her heart to Octavian. We cannot, therefore, accept the rumour that, when Octavian sent back her daughter to Fulvia, he maliciously explained that he was anxious to spare Fulvia the mortification of thinking that he had preferred the pretty insipidity of Clodia to her own more assertive qualities.

The marriage with Clodia had been frankly political, and it naturally broke down in the new political dissolution. The second marriage had the same origin, and the same welcome termination. He had married Scribonia, a woman older than himself, during the rupture with Antony, because her brother was one of the chief members of the Pompeian faction. The leader of this party, Sextus Pompeius, held Sicily, and not only welcomed fugitives from Octavian’s anger, but commanded the sea-route to Rome. Through his devoted friend Mæcenas, the famous patron of letters, Octavian proposed a marriage with Scribonia. It would not be unnatural for a woman in her thirties, who had already outlived two husbands, eagerly to espouse, and probably love, so graceful, ambitious, and advancing a youth as Octavian; but to him the alliance was only one more move in the great game he was playing. He could bear the strain of a diplomatic marriage with ease, since there is no reason

to reject the statement of Dio and Suetonius that he found affection among the wives of his nobler friends.

It has been commonly held that Octavian masked a tense and unwavering ambition with an affectation of simple joviality, and his irregularities have been excused on the ground that he used them as means to detect political whispers in Roman society. But this view of Octavian's character may be confidently questioned. His tastes, we shall see, remained extremely simple when he might safely have indulged any feeling for luxury, when every rival had been removed. That he was ambitious it would be foolish to question; but his ambition must not be measured by his success. There are few other cases in history in which fortune so wantonly smoothed the path and drew onward an easy and vacillating ambition. Octavian could well believe the assurances of the Chaldæan astrologers that he was born to power.

With all his simplicity, however, Octavian had some sense of luxury in love-matters, and his imagination wandered. Scribonia's solid virtue was unrelieved by any of the graces of the new womanhood of Rome, her sparing charms had already faded under the pitiless sun of Italy, and she had a sharp tongue. Moreover, his marriage with her had proved a superfluous sacrifice. Fulvia's stormy career had come to a close shortly after the return of her daughter, and Antony and Octavian had divided the Roman world between them. Antony married his colleague's sister, but the pale virtue of Octavia had no avail against the burning caresses, if not the calculated patriotism, of Cleopatra. At the second rupture between Antony and Octavian she was driven from Antony's palace at Rome, where she was patiently enduring his distant infidelity, and sent back to her brother. In the meantime Octavian had discovered a pleasanter way of obtaining peace with the Pompeians than by the endurance of Scribonia's jarring

laments of his infidelity. He found, or alleged, that Sextus Pompeius did not curb the pirates of the Mediterranean as he ought, and he determined to wrest from him the rich appointments that he held. He was in this mood when, in the year 38 B.C., the young Livia came to Rome, and the exaggerated story of her adventures and her beauty began to circulate among the mansions of the Palatine.

Some of the authorities describe Octavian as hovering about her for some time, and say that the splendour with which he celebrated his *barbatoria*, or first shave of the beard, was due to the generosity of his new passion. It is more probable that he at once informed Nero of his resolution to marry Livia. Tacitus expressly says that it is unknown whether Livia consented or not to the change of husband. Great as was the liberty then enjoyed by Roman women, they were rarely consulted on such matters. Scribonia received a letter of divorce, in which it was suggested that the perversity of her character made her an unsuitable spouse for so roving a husband. She had given birth to a daughter a few days before, and we shall find the later chapters of this chronicle lit up more than once by the lurid hatred which was begotten of this despotic dismissal. For the moment I need only point out that later Roman writers borrowed their estimate of the character of Livia from Scribonia’s great-grandchild, the Empress Agrippina, and we must be wary in accepting their statements. Scribonia herself, who came so near to being an Empress, we must now dismiss, save that we shall catch one more glimpse of her when she follows her dissolute daughter into exile.

Roman law imposed a fitting delay on the divorced wife before she could marry again, but Octavian was impatient. He consulted the sacred augurs, and, if the legend is correct, the diviners gave admirable proof of their art. They gravely reported that the omens were auspicious for an

immediate marriage *if* the petitioner had ground to believe that it would be fruitful. The verdict entertained Rome, because Livia was well known to be far advanced in pregnancy, and Octavian was widely regarded as the father. Whether that be true or no, Octavian intimated to Nero that he must divorce Livia, and we cannot think that she felt much pain at being invited to share the mansion in the Palatine to which all Roman eyes were now directed. An anecdote of the time lightly illustrates the ease with which such matrimonial transfers were accomplished at Rome. Dio says that, during the festive meal, one of those bejewelled boys who then formed part of a Roman noble's household, and whose vicious services were rewarded with an extraordinary license, said to Livia, as she reclined at table with Octavian: "What do you here, mistress? Your husband is yonder." The pert youngster pointed to Nero at another table. He had given away the bride, and was cheerfully taking part in the banquet.

Livia's second son, Drusus Nero, was born three months after her marriage, and was sent by Octavian to Nero's house. Nero died soon afterwards, and made Octavian the guardian of his sons, so that they returned to the care of their mother. The extreme fondness of Octavian for the younger boy lends no colour to the rumour that Drusus was his own son. The probability is that Octavian, in his impetuous way, married Livia as soon as his fancy rested on her. The accepted busts of Drusus do not give any support to the calumny that Octavian was his father. He loved both the boys, and assisted in educating them, in their early youth. It is only when his daughter Julia brings her handsome children into the household that we detect a beginning of an estrangement between him and his successor, Tiberius.

The household in which these first seeds of tragedy slowly germinated was, in the year 38 B.C., one of great

simplicity and sobriety. They lived in the comparatively small house in which Octavian had been born, and Livia adopted his plain ways with ease and dignity. In that age of deadly luxury, when the veins of Rome were swollen with the first flush of parasitic wealth, Octavian and Livia were content with a prudent adaptation of the old Roman ideal to the new age. The noble guests whom Octavian brought to his table found that his simple taste shrank, not only from the peacocks' brains and nightingales' tongues which were served in their own more sumptuous banquets, but even from the pheasant, the boar, and the other ordinary luxuries of a patrician dinner. Rough bread, cream cheese, fish, and common fruit composed his customary meal. Often was he seen, as he came home in his litter from some fatiguing public business, such as the administration of justice, to munch a little bread and fruit, like some humble countryman. Of wine he drank little, and he never adopted the enervating nightly carousal which was draining away the strength of Rome. While wealthy senators and knights prolonged the hours of entertainment after the evening meal, and hired sinuous Syrian dancing girls and nude bejewelled boys and salacious mimes to fire the dull eyes of their guests, as they lay back, sated, on the couches of silk and roses, under fine showers of perfume from the roof, sipping choice wine cooled with the snow of the Atlas or the Alps, Octavian withdrew to his study, after a frugal supper, to write his diary, dictate his generous correspondence, and enjoy the poets who were inaugurating the golden age of Latin letters. When there were guests, he provided fitting dishes and music for them, but often retired to his study when the meal was over. After seven hours' sleep in the most modest of chambers he was ready to resume his daily round.

Since Octavian retained these sober habits to the end of his life, years after they could have had any diplomatic aim,

it is remarkable that so many writers have regarded them as an artful screen of his ambition. Nor can we think differently of Livia. If Octavian presents a healthy contrast to the sordid sensuality of some of his successors, his wife contrasts no less luminously with later Empresses, and is no less unjustly accused of cunning. How far she developed ambition in later years we shall consider later. In the fullness of his manhood, at least, she was content to be the wife of Octavian. With her own hands she helped to spin, weave, and sew his everyday garments. She carefully reared her two boys, tended the somewhat delicate health of Octavian, and cultivated that nice degree of affability which kept her husband affectionate and the husbands of other noble dames respectful. Dio would have us believe that her most useful quality was her willingness to overlook the genial irregularities of Octavian; but Dio betrays an excessive eagerness to detect frailties in his heroes and heroines. We have no serious evidence that Octavian continued the loose ways of his youth after he married Livia. The plainest and soundest reading of the chronicle is that they lived happily, and retained a great affection for each other, even when fate began to rain its blows on their ill-starred house.

But before we reach those tragic days, we have to consider briefly the years in which Octavian established his power. His first step after his marriage with Livia was to destroy the power of the Pompeians. Livia followed the struggle anxiously from her country villa a few miles from Rome. Sextus Pompeius was experienced in naval warfare, and, as repeated messages came of blunder and defeat on the part of Octavian’s forces, she trembled with alarm. Her confidence was restored by one of the abundant miracles of the time. An eagle one day swooped down on a chicken which had just picked up a sprig of laurel in the farm-yard. The eagle clumsily dropped the chicken, with the laurel, near Livia, and so plain an omen could not be

misinterpreted. Rumour soon had it that the eagle had laid the laurel-bearing chick gently at Livia’s feet. As in all such cases, the sceptic of a later generation was silenced with material proof. The chicken became the mother of a brood which for many years spread the repute of the village through southern Italy; the sprig of laurel became a tree, and in time furnished the auspicious twigs of which the crowns of triumphing generals were woven.

Whether it was by the will of Jupiter, or by the reinforcement of a hundred and fifty ships which he received from Antony, Octavian did eventually win, and, to the delight of Rome, cleared the route by which the corn-ships came from Africa. Only two men now remained between Octavian and supreme power—the two who formed with him the Triumvirate which ruled the Republic. The first, Lepidus, was soon convicted of maladministration in his African province, and was transferred to the innocent duties of the pontificate, under Octavian’s eyes, at Rome. Octavian added the province of Africa to his half of the Roman world, and found himself in command of forty-five legions and six hundred vessels. Fresh honours were awarded him by the Senate, in which his devoted friend Mæcenas, who foresaw the advantage to Rome of his rule, was working for him.

Then Octavian entered on his final conflict with Mark Antony. I have already protested against the plausible view that Octavian was pursuing a definite ambition under all his appearance of simplicity. Circumstances conspired first to give him power, and then to give him the appearance of a thirst for it. He really did not destroy Antony, however: Antony destroyed himself. The apology that has been made for Cleopatra in recent times only enhances Antony’s guilt. It is said that she used all that elusive fascination of her person, of which ancient writers find it difficult to convey an impression, all her wealth and her wit, only to benumb the hand that Rome stretched out to seize her beloved land. The

theory is not in the least inconsistent with the facts, and it is more pleasant to believe that the last representative of the great free womanhood of ancient Egypt sacrificed her person and her wealth on the altar of patriotism than that her dalliance with Antony was but a languorous and selfish indulgence in an hour of national peril. But if it be true that Cleopatra was the last Egyptian patriot, Antony was all the more clearly a traitor to Rome. The quarrel does not concern us. Octavian induced the Senate to make war on Egypt; and we can well believe that when, in a herald's garb, he read the declaration of war at the door of the temple of Bellona, the thought of his despised sister added warmth to his phrases. The pale, patient face and outraged virtue of Octavia daily branded Antony afresh in the eyes of Rome.

Livia and Antonia followed the swift course of the last struggle from Rome. They heard of the meeting of the fleets off Actium, the victorious swoop of Octavian, the flight of Antony and Cleopatra. What followed would hardly be known to Livia. It is said that Cleopatra offered to betray Antony to Octavian, and such an offer is in entire harmony with the patriotic theory of her conduct. While his able but ill-regulated rival, deserted by his forces, drew near the edge of the abyss, Octavian visited Cleopatra in her palace. Her seductive form was displayed on a silken couch, and from the slit-like eyes the dangerous fire caressed the young conqueror. Cleopatra probably relied on Octavian's weakness, but his sensuous impulses were held in check by a harder thought. He felt that he must have this glorious creature to adorn his triumph at Rome. Cleopatra saw that she had failed, and she went sadly, with a last dignity, before the throne of Osiris. Octavian returned to Rome with the immense treasures of Egypt, to enjoy the triumph I have already described and to await the purple.

The domestic life of Livia and Octavian lost none of its plainness after the attainment of supreme power. Some

time after the Senate had (27 B.C.) strengthened his position by inventing for him the title of “Augustus”—a title by which he is generally, but improperly, described in history after that date[3]—he removed from the small house which his father had left him to a larger mansion, built by the orator Hortensius, on the Palatine. This was burned down in the year 6 B.C., and the citizens built a new palace for Livia and Octavian by public subscription. At the Emperor’s command the contribution of each was limited to one *denarius*. If we may trust the archæologists, it was modest in size, but of admirable taste, especially in the marble lining of its interior. On one side it looked down, over the steep slope of the hill, on the colonnaded space, the Forum, in which the life of Rome centred. On the other side it faced a group of public buildings, raised by Octavian, which impressed the citizens with his liberality in the public service. The splendid temple of Apollo, the public library and other buildings, adorned with the most exquisite works of art that his provincial expeditions had brought to Rome, stood in fine contrast to his own plain mansion, of which the proudest decoration was the faded wreath over the door—the Victoria Cross of the Roman world—which bore witness that he had saved the life of a citizen.

In this modest palace Livia reared her two children in the finer traditions of the old Republic, while Octavian made the long journeys into the provinces which filled many years after his attainment of power. Livia was no narrow conservative. She took her full share in the decent distractions of patrician life, and, like many other noble women of the period, she built temples and other edifices of more obvious usefulness to the public. A provincial town took the name Liviada in her honour. We have many proofs that she was consulted on public affairs by Octavian, and exercised a discreet and beneficent influence on him. One of the anecdotes collected by later writers tells that she one

day met a group of naked men on the road. It is likely that they were innocent workers or soldiers in the heat, and not the “band of lascivious nobles” which prurient writers have made them out to be. However, Octavian impetuously demanded their heads when she told him, and Livia saved them with the remark that, “in the eyes of a decent woman they were no more offensive than a group of statues.” On another occasion she dissuaded Octavian from executing a young noble for conspiracy. At her suggestion the noble was brought to the Emperor’s private room. When, instead of the merited sentence of death, Cinna received only a kindly admonition, an offer of Octavian’s friendship, and further promotion, he was completely disarmed and won. We shall see further proof that the wise and humane counsels of Livia contributed not a little to the peace and prosperity which Rome enjoyed in its golden age.

LIVIA AS CERES

STATUE IN THE LOUVRE

For it was in truth an age of gold in comparison with the previous hundred years and the centuries to come. The flames of civil war had scorched the Republic time after time. The best soldiers of Rome were dying out; the best leaders were perishing in an ignoble contest of ambitions. Corruption spread, like a cancerous growth, through all