

Chapter VI October 197

Greetings from Marilla to her Julia.

Thus, I greet you, at your own insistence.

You were surprised to leave Rome so suddenly but perhaps we should have expected it. Invading Mesopotamia after conquering Niger was a propaganda coup but it was always likely the Parthians would regroup. Indeed, our generals *must* have expected the counter attack because our response has been so prompt. I am sure Severus will have an easy victory and you will soon be home.

I've been thinking how troubles can suddenly resolve. When my ~~dearest~~ brother was brought back from Africa, our only hope was that we could give him a more comfortable death. Yet now, my father is sending his major domo, Polybius, to us – (he used to be my father's valet and is the best barber in Italy) - to give Lucillus his ceremonial first shave. Impossible to be stoical when I see his beard being placed in a gold casket in our family shrine. We will have rejoicing and feasting. I will cry with joy and Lucius will beg me to be self-controlled.

I'm so proud of my brother. You met him at his most frail. Now, he has two sons; Marcus, adopted by us as you know and Aulus, adopted by his father-in-law, Cornelius Cossus, who lost his only son many years ago. But Lucillus could well have afforded to raise both. People love his poetry and give him commissions and gifts and even legacies. He has bought a house by the sea at Ostia and still travels, despite his fevers.

It may be that a friend his, Publius Calpurnius Balbus, will apply for a tribunate in the first Parthian legion. It would certainly be a propitious time to do it. I beg you will speak well of him. His address may not be of the most polished, but he is competent, courageous and honest and, what he undertakes, he takes care to accomplish. He is also very well connected so I suppose any commendation of mine may be superfluous.

I greet you humbly and your royal sons whom I remember with affection,

your Marilla

CHAPTR VII October 197

‘The young master is as brown as a nut and happy as a songbird.’ Polybius said. ‘But why is he pursued by **this** spindly lamb that bleats like a baby?’

Demetrius grinned. ‘He delivered a stray ewe. She rejected her lamb **who** thinks Proculus is its mother.’

‘The creature won’t leave his side. When you ordered it out of the triclinium, it made such a racket **you had to let it back in**. It should have been served on a plate, not sprawled on the couch, ~~buried in cushions~~. Master, what will happen tomorrow, when Proculus goes to the schoolroom with young Marcus?’

‘We must chain it up here and put up with the bleating.’ Demetrius snapped the ledgers shut.

‘Master...., Master, there is a woman in Narnia.’

‘You surprise me.’

‘Called Julia.’

‘Remarkable.’

‘She is. Julia Felix. She has a wool business; **carding, dying, spinning, weaving**. A large workshop and skilled slaves. She makes Tarentine garments.’

‘Where does she get the fleece?’

‘Apulia.’

‘If she’s looking for a loan, you must deal with Melissus yourself, but **I don’t think you’ll tempt him.**’

‘She doesn’t need money. Her business prospers. But she wants to control all aspects of it, which means raising her own sheep.’

‘Tarentine, you say? You know what I think of that.’

‘But we **don’t** sell it. Julia’s girls card, spin and weave it and we sell the cloth. You’ll see the profit we’ll make. We already have an order from court.’

'From court? How –'

'I got an audience with the emperor's brother, Geta's, procurator and when he knew I was *your* slave, he gave us a massive order. 'We have spare land, master, and water. Our sheep are away in the hills half the year. She'd be happy to rent.'

Demetrius sighed. 'Put down some figures for me.'

CHAPTER VIII December 197

Julia to her Marilla, Greetings.

By the time I received your letter, your protégé had already received his command. ~~He's~~ a modest young man and personable, though laconic. I prefer gentlemen with some conversation. The generals speak well of him, however. I didn't meet his wife, Claudia. I believe he left her in Rome at his grandfather's house.

Plautus continues to torment me, even hinting to Severus that I am unfaithful. I should like to know who with, since my women and my sober, old philosophers never leave me. Despite their constant attention, studying philosophy is not so easy here. After some early successes, it has been decided to push further into Parthia and attack the royal city. We are deafened, day and night, by carpenters and metal workers making siege engines, armourers repairing weapons, braying pack animals being loaded with stores and squeals of beasts being slaughtered to feed the march. Where we are, camped on the banks of the Euphrates, a fleet is being built and, it seems shipwrights do not go about their business quietly.

There will be fierce engagements and I sometimes think, suppose, when Severus is standing on the viewing platform - a stray arrow is all it would take. What should I be then? What would become of my young sons? Would Plautus sweep us aside and claim the empire for himself?

So much for your predicting an early return to Rome.

Greet your dear Lepidus and kiss your precious Lepidina for me, your Julia

CHAPTER IX December 197

Demetrius sat at his work table facing a stocky middle-aged woman with a square jaw and a direct gaze.

'What I want out of this deal,' she began, 'is to marry Polybius so he can have a stake in the business. Neither is possible unless he is a free man.'

'I assumed as much.'

'I have some savings but the rest and the tax you must take as shares in the business.'

'So, I pay for half the business, minus what you owe me for Polybius' freedom and half the manumission tax. I will also buy your workers because I won't have people on my land who don't answer to me.' He reached for a tablet and stylus. 'You owe me for the rent on the land, half the construction costs for the byre, half the costs of the flock and the shepherd. We should set this down.' He turned and looked behind his chair. 'Please join us—pull up a chair and sit down.'

Polybius did neither. He threw himself on Julia and kissed her to suffocation.

Demetrius frowned when he heard a sob, but he held out his hand saying, 'Congratulations on your freedom Lucius Marius Polybius.'

Polybius choked; tears streamed down his face. 'Forgive me, I never thought I should see this day.' Julia put a hand on his arm. 'Come, my sweet, you're a Roman citizen. Behave like one.'

CHAPTER X January 198

Julia to her Marilla, greetings.

Beloved friend, I shouldn't tell you yet, but I can't resist, and I count on your discretion. Severus is to make Antoninus his co-emperor. If anything should happen to him, Antoninus will be in place and the succession automatic. I should be regent for him and so the future of all three of us is assured. You can imagine how hard I worked to achieve this and how much it dismays some parties. It's true that Antoninus is only nine years old and has not yet received the toga of manhood but his accession is certain. Plans for the celebrations are underway. I am dizzy with happiness; not just because Severus has granted me a request – something he hasn't done for years – but because the future is bright for us all.

My young Geta now has the title, 'Caesar.' It's my dearest wish that, one day, my boys will rule jointly. Their talents are complementary in so many ways. Your young Marcus must be in the schoolroom now. How time flies! How is your Lepidina? You will soon be thinking about who she should marry.

Here, all the talk is of further action. I deplore it and so does my kinsman, Papinian, a most clever and judicious man who is a great support to me. Severus has made him Lord Chancellor – another nod in my direction, I like to think.

Your young protégé distinguished himself in the battle for Ctesiphon and has been promoted. He's popular with the soldiers who do as he does. It's as well they don't do as he says, else they would do nothing at all.

Commend me to Lepidus and your little ones. Your happy Julia

Proculus looked up from his tablet and poked his stylus behind his ear, saying, 'It's stuffy in here.'

Gisco sighed. 'That's what you always say, young master and, the last time I moved the class outside to please you, you spent the day staring around and finished by running off to shout at the hands.'

'Well, they shouldn't beat olive trees. Lazy way to harvest. Damages the fruit.' Proculus took the stylus again and bent himself to his task. The smile of gratified surprise spread over the teacher's face too soon. Proculus looked up at him.

'I need to finish promptly today because I have to oversee the delivery of our Tarentine sheep.' Turning to Marcus he said, 'You'd like to see sheep wearing coats like humans, wouldn't you?'

'Very much, because I don't think they exist.'

'Very well,' said Gisco, 'since you both desire it, if Proculus can complete his assignment before too long, we will take a stroll over to Demetrius' place and inspect the new herd.'

'If they were any use,' said Marcus, 'we would have them.'

'No you wouldn't,' said Proculus. 'Because your father's a bad farmer.'

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'Not walking right?' said Perperna to Proculus. 'How do you mean?'

'Every now and then, she stumbles, which is because her left hind knee is hot and swollen.'

'Let me see.' Perperna felt all four limbs and, though he was gentle as only an expert can be, the beast moaned as he felt each knee and, when he touched her left hind leg, she lashed out and kicked him. 'Ah!' he said, 'Will you hold her head so I can look in her mouth?'

Proculus peered over the vet's shoulder and saw the sores on her gums. 'She hasn't been feeding well,' he said. 'I guess that's why.'

'Young master, has this ewe of yours been with the herd at all.'

'No, she's not happy with the herd. She's with me or she waits for me near the house.'

'But you walk with her in the hills.'

'Every day. It's what she likes. But not with the herd – they are further up the hills now.'

'And do you ever go outside our estate?'

'Well, sometimes but don't tell my father. How long will it take you to make her well?'

Perperna looked down. 'Young sir, she will not be well.'

'But you can ease the pain and perhaps she'll get used to not walking so much.'

'She has erysipelas. She cannot get well.'

'You are the best vet in Etruria. You can make her better.'

'As you say, sir, I can cure some diseases and treat many, but this is one I can't. The beast must be culled.'

Seeing Proculus' mutinous expression, he said, 'Stay with her and do not move from here, while I... see what I can do.'

He returned with Demetrius and Commatus, who did not spare him the facts. The disease was inevitably fatal and spread like wildfire. The ewe could not be saved and would infect the new Tarentine flock. They would carry it off the estate, slaughter it and burn the carcass.

'No,' said Proculus. 'If it has to be done, I will do it.'

Demetrius carried her to remote field and laid her on the grass. She printed the air with her legs and bared her belly for Proculus to fondle. He knelt, stroked with his left hand and felt her neck with his right. Perperna knelt beside him and slipped the killing knife into

his hand. His sturdy fingers parted the soft, thick wool beneath her left ear. All the time, he spoke to her; throaty, tender words. She looked into his eyes with complete trust, her black fleshy lips quivering in anticipation. He laid his first finger along the blade. Perpenna whispered, '~~Now~~. Press harder.'

A scarlet stream spurted and gushed into the white wool. The knife stopped still. Perpenna whispered, 'shall I do it, ~~young sir~~?'

Proculus scowled, clenched his lip between his teeth and swept the knife in a broad arc to the opposite ear, oblivious of the blood that splattered his face. He only looked deep into her eyes. They were still trusting. She shuddered but the adoration was still there. After a fleeting expression of enquiry, her eyes began to cloud. Another shudder and a third; a small shiver and she was still. Perpenna retrieved his knife from the grass and wiped it on the beast's hind leg. 'Don't cry for a sheep, sir.' he said. 'That's not Roman.'

'This time'. sobbed Proculus. 'This once I *will*. But never again.'

CHAPTER XII April 200

Nerysa had forgotten the flat above the bank was so small. It was as well she had left her attendants below in the street.

‘Forgive me for not calling sooner,’ she said as she climbed the steep staircase.

‘I didn’t expect it, my lady, I know how busy you are at the farm.’

‘Sweet Heaven, Charis!’ She shouted to make herself heard above the wailing.

‘Where do you put all the foundlings?’

‘In these wicker baskets.’

Bending over the baskets, they rocked one in each hand and crooned softly until the crying subsided. Charis pulled up a cane chair for Nerysa and a wooden stool for herself and each sat jiggling a fussing baby on her lap.

‘The baskets last them until four months or so and we have mostly placed them by then.’

‘How many have you?’ asked Nerysa, casting her eyes around.

‘Fifteen.’

‘Fifteen! In this flat! ~~How do you cope?~~’

‘Some Christian widows come ~~most days~~ to help with feeding.’

‘Where do you all sleep?’

‘Gaius, Lucius and Eucharis sleep in the other room with Melissus and me and the cook, Elpis and the wet nurses sleep downstairs. Melissus is very tolerant but he doesn’t like smells in the banking hall when customers come. It’s hard to sleep. Our own children slept through the night after two months, but new-borns keep coming and we never get an unbroken night.’

Nerysa saw a frayed rope slung across one corner of the room and an assortment of swathing bands hanging from it and asked, ‘Who does the washing?’

‘Elpis mostly. She’s at the fountain at the corner of the street now and our Eucharis fetches and carries for her, although she’s only four.’

The baby Nerysa held stopped squalling, looked enquiringly at her, burped and spewed vomit into her lap.

‘Oh, Madam!’ Charis cried, ‘All over your beautiful dress.’ She had taken the precaution of covering her own knees with a towel. Once she had snatched up both infants and replaced them in their baskets, she fell on her knees in front of Nerysa and began to swab the silk. Looking down on her bowed head, Nerysa winced at the sight of so many grey hairs.

‘Please don’t cry,’ she said. ‘It was my fault, I bounced him too much.’

When Charis lifted her wet face, Nerysa noticed the dark circles under her eyes and she was flooded with hot shame.

‘I deserve more than a stain on my dress,’ she said. ‘I started this, took the credit and did nothing. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You trusted me with the Lord’s work. I didn’t want you to think I couldn’t cope.’

‘I’ve been so proud of honouring Marcia’s memory, but I left it all to you and you’re being crushed by it.’

‘But Madam, when we started, we’d had no idea how many there would be. They just keep coming. One girl told me she’d killed three already – that’s what they all do at the brothel. But when she heard her new-born could be saved, she got straight up from the child bed and came. I fear all her colleagues will do the same and I just don’t know how we can cope. She was so weak, I tried to persuade her to stay here for a few hours, but she was afraid her master would notice she wasn’t there and punish her as a runaway.’

‘So you don’t know if she ever got back?’

‘Melissus took her back but, the funny thing is, the whore master made him pay up for being with her.’

Nerysa said, ‘This is a wicked world.’

‘Yes, it’s dark but a kind act shines like a star.’

'You're not a star. You're a beacon.'

'A beacon?'

'A huge bonfire. When people see it from far away, they light their own. The next group sees it and lights another. That way, Britons can spread a message hundreds of miles, far more quickly than down a paved Roman road which, in any case, we don't have.'

Charis leapt towards a basket that rocked on the ground and snatched up a wriggling child with a puce face. She reached on the ground for an earthenware pot, set it on her lap and, snatching off the bands from around its buttocks, held the child above it. A fart, a squirt and a giggle, then he gave a seraphic smile. Charis stroked his downy head and dropped a kiss on it. 'The problem is,' she gulped as she wiped him and replaced the swaddling bands, 'we don't have time to *love* them.'

'How long does it take to find adoptive parents?'

'Not so long for the boys. The girls though - but just look at this one. She's special.' They bent over the basket and cooed over a tiny, porcelain face, sweeping lashes and coral lips. Nerysa gasped. 'What a beauty! If her mother could see her now, I don't think she could bear to part with her.'

Charis whispered, 'I don't think I can. ~~I haven't said anything yet to Melissus. He is so good but this -~~'

Nerysa moved back to the chair saying, 'Demetrius is pleased with how the bank is doing.'

'So is Melissus - except for one thing.'

'What's that?'

'He tests a sample of the coins that come in and he says the latest issue from the mint has a lower silver content than usual.'

'So, the soldiers have had a massive pay rise with money that's worth less.'

'Melissus says with so much money around, more people will buy goods and so prices will go up. And it's a bad thing if people lose confidence in money.'

'Has he talked to Demetrius?'

‘Yes. *He* says there aren’t so many soldiers compared with the rest of us and so he thinks the effect won’t be so great but, obviously he doesn’t like to see the coinage debased.’

In a corner of the room, next to the only window, Charis lit a fire from the lamp, coaxed it to flame and set a **trivet** and a stew pot over it.

‘Melissus loves home cooking,’ she said. ‘He lived so long from take-away cookshops before I came.’

‘The money I’ve been sending you isn’t enough. Tell me what you need.’

Head on one side, Charis considered. ‘A larger chest to store clothes and tokens we find on the babies, in case the parents ever come back to claim them. **Some herbs against moths for the clothes.**’

‘But you’ve no space. Is any adjoining property for sale or rent? I’ll send you a woman to help care for the babies.’

‘I don’t like to ask for a bigger house. I worry about Polybius being so jealous.’

‘Oh, he and Julia have their own comfortable house on the estate now and a fine business. They say he’s a harsh master but they are making money **and the strangest thing -** he wants a son. Says he’s building an empire and it must be *for* someone.’

‘How long have they been married?’

‘Nearly three years now and she’s not much younger than him. They’ve tried everything; temples and doctors, **twice daily** baths – they’ve even built their own bath house.’

‘She has a daughter?’

‘Yes, Julilla, and granddaughters.’

‘So. **her** womb did open once. Did someone curse her?’

‘Come Charis, we’re Christians. Do we believe in curses?’

‘Have you offered your remedies?’

'Oh, yes; red clover and anise as concoctions and pessaries and the midwives came and inserted a gourd and a lodestone.'

'Poor Julia.'

'She submits because she hates to disappoint Polybius. Every month she dreads him asking her.'

'But it would be a great thing for one of our baby boys!'

'I suggested that, but he's set his heart on having his own, freeborn son.'

'That's odd. Most people are just as happy to adopt.'

'I think he wants his own relation. In some ways, Julia is the mother he never had, but she's not a blood relative.'

'It's true. He has no one of his own flesh and blood.'

'But he has, hasn't he?'

Charis' cheeks flamed. She crouched lower over the stew pot and stirred it hard.

'That was so long ago I'd forgotten, and Gaius has never known any father but Melissus.'

An awkward moment followed, dispelled by the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Charis leapt up. 'That'll be the boys, home from school. Tell me what you think of Gaius. He doesn't seem so lively lately. But then he's growing like bindweed – you can almost watch him at it.'

The two boys entered shouting, 'We got the bread!' and saluted Nerysa before kissing their mother. Nerysa asked, 'Where's your pedagogue?'

They grinned. Gaius said, 'We don't have one. I'm his and he's mine.'

Nerysa stood and drew her cloak around her.

'So, this is what we'll do. I'll send you some women from the farm and a pedagogue for your boys – it's not safe to let them go about unattended because, you know, they are far too good looking. I think Davos would do. He's big and strong - not too polished but he'll

serve. Maybe we should find a building not too close to here. If he knew, Demetrius might not want an orphanage on top of his bank.'

### CHAPTER XIII May 200

A bevy of nurse maids and tutors had shared a picnic with the children and now lay in the long grass, drowsy with heat and wine. Proculus, Marcus and Lepidina wandered away through the fields and came upon a domed hillock bulging like a huge, green mole hill from the faded grass.

'Don't go near it!' said Marcus, falling behind. 'It's a giant beehive, full of more bees than you can imagine.'

'Don't be daft!' sneered Proculus. 'It's not a hive and, if it is, all the bees will be out foraging, except for the king.'

'Bighead! You think you know everything.'

'Let's look,' Lepidina said and began running. Proculus went after her and Marcus stalked off in the opposite direction. As she reached the hillock, Lepidina tripped and fell. She began to cry and, seeing blood staining her dress, Proculus struggled with her modesty to expose a clean cut on her shin. Then he lost interest in her.

*Odd, he thought, what's in grass to cause that?*

Parting the undergrowth, he saw the glint from a shard of glass lying on a dressed stone. He tugged at the matted grass and brambles until he uncovered a threshold.

'Look!' he cried, and Lepidina stopped crying and ran to help. Feverish pulling revealed a flight of steps leading down to a small clearing overhung with roots and debris which Proculus pushed aside as he took Lepidina's hand and led her inside a dark, airy cavern. They could hear Marcus calling and clung to each other, giggling as his cries became ever more furious. His threats to tell his father and bring dire punishments on them made them laugh aloud until they realised, because he was now silent except for panting and rustling, that he had discovered their hiding place. With a crash and an avalanche of dirt, he tore down the curtain of foliage and fell at their feet, flooding the cave with light.

All three were struck dumb with astonishment. They were in a vaulted chamber with a ceiling painted to simulate tiles and with walls covered in bright frescoes. Lepidina gasped,

‘What a lovely blue - or is it green? And those browns and orange and terracottas, so beautiful!’

Mimicking the dancing women in flounced dresses, she lifted one leg, raised her arms in a graceful oval and pirouetted around the room exclaiming, ‘Look! They’ve got flutes and tambourines!’

The boys disputed the breed of the birds flying among the dancers before turning their attention to the far wall, where a banquet was laid out before them. Men reclined on couches spread with chequered drapes and women sat among them.

‘Why are the women all white-skinned and the men brown?’ Marcus asked.

‘Because the men work out in the fields and the women sit indoors spinning, of course.’ Proculus said.

‘They’re enjoying themselves. Their dinner wreaths are enormous and they’re not drinking out of cups, they’re tipping it down their throats from great amphora.’

‘That dog under the table has almost dislocated his jaw,’ said Proculus. ‘They must have good food.’

They looked at each other. ‘Who *are* these people?’

‘Are they coming back?’ Lepidina shivered. ‘The place looks as though they just left.’

~~The right hand~~ wall also showed a couch and a man lying prone with a woman beneath him. Marcus whistled and announced, ‘They’re doing sex.’

‘Nonsense!’ scorned Proculus, ‘That’s not how you do sex. You do it from behind standing up.’

Marcus laughed. ‘That’s how farm animals do it. Watch your slaves ~~at it.~~’

‘Our people, behave with Christian modesty.’

‘I wouldn’t shout about *that* if I were you. And one of them, at least, is no univira.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t you know my adopted father and my natural father are father and son?’

‘I don’t understand.’

'You so clever and don't know that your mother was my father's whore!'