

MARCUS AURELIUS AT LANUVIUM

Letter from Celsus to Lucian

I arrived at Lanuvium last night. The Court are here for the summer; that is to say, the Emperor, the Empress, the Heir Apparent, and the Emperor's nephew, Ummidius Quadratus, and the Senator who is on duty. As soon as I arrived I was taken by Eclectus, the Chamberlain, to my apartments, which are small, but from which one obtains a beautiful view of the Alban Hills. I was told that I would be expected to come to supper, and that I must take care not to be late, as the Emperor was punctual to a minute, and the water clocks in the villa were purposely an hour fast according to ordinary time.

A few minutes before the hour of supper a slave was sent to fetch me, and I was ushered into a large room, opening on to a portico from whence you have a gorgeous view of the whole country, where the Emperor and his family meet before going into the dining-room.

I had never seen the Emperor before. He is short and looks delicate and a great deal older than he really is. His eyes have a weary expression, and the general impression of the man would be one of great benevolence and dignity were it not marred by a certain stiffness and primness in his demeanour. When he greets you with great affability, you say to yourself, "What a charming man!" Then he stops short, and it is difficult, nay, impossible, to continue the conversation. After a prolonged pause he asks you a question or makes some remark on the weather or the topics of the day. But he does not pursue the subject, and the result is a succession of awkward pauses and a general atmosphere of discomfort.

Whether it be from the reserve which at once strikes you as being the most salient feature of his character, or whether it be from the primness and the slight touch of pedantry which are the result of the peculiar way in which he was brought up, there is a certain lack, not of dignity, indeed, but of impressiveness in the man. He strikes you more as a dignified man than as a dignified monarch. Indeed, were I to meet Marcus Aurelius in the streets of Rome or Athens, dressed as a simple mortal, I should be inclined to take him for a barber who catered for the aristocracy. As it was, when I was first introduced into that ante-room and saw the Emperor for the first time, a wild longing rose in me to say to him, "I will be shaved at half-past eight to-morrow morning."

The Empress Faustina is quite unlike what I had expected. There is no trace of Imperial or any other kind of dignity about her. She is not very tall; she has a delicate nose, slightly turned up, laughing eyes which will surely remain eternally young, and masses of thick, curly fair hair. I had imagined from the pictures and effigies of her that she was dark; possibly she may have dyed it lately, but I do not think so. She is restless in her movements; she is never still, but is always on the move, and one has the impression that she is longing to, and would if she dared, skip and jump about the room like a child. As it is, her arms, and especially her hands, are never for a moment still, and her eyes shift quickly from one person to another, smiling and laughing. She made one feel that she was trying the whole time to be on

her best behaviour, to curb her spirits, and not to overstep the bounds in any way, nor to do anything which would displease the Emperor or offend his sense of etiquette and decorum.

We waited four or five minutes for the Heir Apparent, who was late. The Emperor remarked with some acidity to the Empress that if Commodus could not learn to be punctual he had better have his meals in his own villa with his tutor. The Empress said that the poor boy was given such long lessons and so many of them that he scarcely had time even to dress; that he was overworked and a martyr to discipline.

At that moment the "poor boy" entered the room. For a boy of sixteen he is enormous: very tall, large, and fat. He has dark hair, a low forehead, with a thick and rebellious tuft of hair growing over it, rather coarse features, and thick lips. He must be immensely strong, but although you could not find a greater contrast to his pale, prim, and dapper father, there is a strong family likeness, nevertheless. You see at once that he is a son of Marcus Aurelius. It is as though the gods had wished to play a huge joke, and had made in the son a caricature, on a large scale, of the father. It is as if one saw the caricature of the most delicate ivory statuette made in coarse clay. He was told to salute me, which he did somewhat awkwardly.

The Empress said: "You must excuse him; he is very shy."

Upon which I saw that he with difficulty suppressed a shout of laughter by stuffing his fist into his mouth, while his whole body was shaking.

The Emperor did not notice this. He led the way into the dining-room, and we all reclined.

At first there was a dead silence, and then Ummidius Quadratus, who seems to me far the most lively member of the family, said that the quails this year were much fatter than he had ever remembered them.

"Is that so?" said the Emperor. "The best quails I ever ate," he added, "were those we got near the Danube. Unfortunately, my physician does not allow me to touch meat."

After this, there was a prolonged silence, which was broken by the Empress saying she did not believe in doctors. "Whenever they are at a loss as to what to prescribe, they ask you what you are fond of eating, and tell you to stop eating it."

Commodus, as if to show his agreement with his mother's ideas, at that moment put almost an entire quail into his mouth, and choked in the process. His mother hit him on the back, and told him to look up towards the ceiling. A slave brought him some water.

The Emperor frowned, and told him not to eat so fast.

"It is my habit," he said, "and a habit which you would do well to imitate, to count twenty-six between each mouthful."

But Commodus, who had turned purple in the face, merely went on choking, and this lasted several minutes.

The Emperor asked me a few questions about Athens, and what was being done and said and written in our city. I answered him as best I could, but he did not seem to take notice of my replies, and went on, as though he were a machine, to other topics and other questions. I spoke of you, and I mentioned your latest book, but he changed the subject as though it were distasteful to him. I suspect that your ideas are too frivolous for him, and may even shock him.

Then Commodus, having recovered from his choking fit, began to talk of a pugilistic match which was to take place in a neighbouring village. He described at great length the champions who were to take part in it, the chances and the odds, and entered into many technical details which were tedious, and indeed quite incomprehensible to me. But the Emperor and the Empress listened with smiling and patronizing approval, and with obvious admiration of their son's knowledge. The Emperor is extremely conservative, and does all he can to encourage national sports and pastimes. He never misses a single event of importance at the Games, and even when he is in a country retreat like this, he patronizes the local efforts in which his son seems to play so prominent a part.

After this dissertation on pugilism, which seemed to me interminable, had come to an end, Commodus related how he had played a practical joke on one of the freedmen who had been looking on at the sports. It appears that the man, who was old and rather fat, had been on the point of sitting down, and Commodus had pulled the chair from under him and he had come heavily to the ground, much to the amusement of the bystanders.

The Emperor thought this extremely funny, and indeed I was not a little bewildered by the mixture of severity and lenience with which the boy seems to be treated, for when a little later he asked if he might have a new toga to wear during the daytime, as his present one was getting worn out, the Emperor said, in a tone which admitted of no discussion, that it was quite out of the question; that boys should learn to be economical, and, as it was, he was a great deal too extravagant for his age, and already thought too much of such trifles. The Emperor said that his own toga was older than his son's, and yet he did not complain. It was certainly true that the Emperor seemed the perfection of neatness and tidiness, although it was obvious that his clothes were by no means new.

It was arranged that we should all go on a picnic on the lake next day and that I should be shown the country.

The Empress clapped her hands at the idea, and said there was nothing she enjoyed so much as a picnic. We should take our food with us and cook it ourselves. Commodus should catch us some fish and perhaps kill some game.

Commodus, for his part, looked sulky and sullen when this was mentioned; he evidently had some other plan in his mind. The Emperor said that he also found picnics a very pleasant relaxation; but a dismal expression came over the faces of the Chamberlain and of the few Court attendants who were present.

As I was most anxious to ascertain what was going on in the political

world at this moment, I hazarded a remark with regard to the recent disturbances at Lyons which have been caused by the Christians. The Emperor at once became chillingly formal, but did not decline to discuss the matter; in fact, he was evidently anxious that I should be in no doubt with regard to his ideas on the subject. He said that it had become necessary to take extreme measures, that the attitude of these fanatics was intolerable; that they were in the highest degree unpatriotic and were a positive danger to the State. He was, however, not going to tolerate this any longer; he had no patience with stubbornness, and had determined, once and for all, to put his foot down. Conciliatory measures had been tried and had proved a failure. There was not the slightest use in pandering to sentimentalism and hysteria. He said he had just drafted an edict ordering the authorities to take the very severest measures to overcome the obstinacy of the rebels, and that should these prove ineffectual they were to resort to wholesale capital punishment without further discrimination or delay.

The Empress said that the Christians were disgusting, and that such vermin ought to be stamped upon. I said that I could not conceive the attitude of the Christians. Personally I had taken some trouble to ascertain what their doctrines were, and had interviewed several of the leading Christians in Greece and Asia. I agreed that Christianity was the national religion of no one; it was a religion adopted as a protest against the national religion by men who were infected by the spirit of all secret societies; that if the Christians refused to observe public ceremonies and to render homage to those who presided over them they should also, logically, give up wearing the *toga virilis*. But if they wished to share the benefit of civil life they should then pay the necessary honours to those who are charged with administration. But I added that should they do this I could not understand why their religion should not be tolerated on the same footing as other religions, such as that of the Egyptians, since nothing was required of them which was contrary to their principles.

The Emperor said that the Christians had already made such a thing impossible. "It is not," he said, "as if we had ever forced a pious man to commit an impious action or to say a shameful thing. He would be quite right in that case to endure any tortures rather than do so. But it is quite a different thing when a man is ordered to celebrate the Sun or to sing a beautiful hymn in honour of Athene. These are merely outward forms of piety, and one cannot have too much piety."

Here Ummidius Quadratus broke in and said that the Christians argued that it was a matter which concerned their conscience, which was no business of the State, and that they were perfectly ready to fulfil any duties, either civil or military, which had no religious character.

The Empress said she did not know anything about the ideas of the Christians, but she did think it was a disgraceful thing that in the present enlightened age people should be allowed to cover children with flour, to massacre them, and eat them.

I said I did not think the Christians did this. But the Empress said she knew it was true; she had heard it on the best authority; in fact, her maid knew some one who had seen them do it.

Here Ummidius Quadratus observed that some people in the best society

had become Christians, and that he had even heard that--and here he mentioned the niece of a well-known patrician whose name I have forgotten--was one of them.

The Emperor drew himself up as though some dreadful solecism had been committed, and told his nephew that he had no right to say so shocking and so monstrous a thing at his table, especially before a stranger and a guest.

I will go on with my letter this evening, for a slave has just told me that we are to start for the picnic at once.