

I



THE MURDER OF GERMANICUS CAESAR

A murder is in progress. The most famous Roman of his day, heir apparent to Rome's imperial throne, lies on his bed, racked with pain and convinced that he has been poisoned. Thirty-three-year-old Germanicus Julius Caesar, grandson of Mark Antony, brother of Claudius, father of Caligula, grandfather of Nero, nephew, adopted son, and heir apparent of the emperor Tiberius, is a handsome, principled, dashing young Roman general adored by the Roman people. According to one Roman authority, Germanicus was seen as potentially the equal of Alexander the Great as a soldier and as a man.¹ Talented, courageous, and kind, he was, to many, the hope of Rome. And here he is just hours away from meeting his death.

It is early October in the year A.D. 19, twenty-three years after the birth of Christ. We are in the grand palace at Daphne (sometimes called Epidaphna), on the Orontes River, five miles west of Antioch, capital of the Roman province of Syria. That province takes in most of modern-day Syria plus Lebanon and part of Turkey. In A.D. 19, the palace at Daphne, along with temples to Jupiter, Apollo, and Diana, sat amid ten shaded and sacred square miles of tall cypress trees, cool ponds, and rippling streams. This October day, beyond lofty, pillared halls and lush courtyard gardens with their tumbling, perfumed fountains and sweet-smelling flowers, all attention is focused on the bed-chamber of the dying young general.

At the bedside kneels Germanicus's attractive thirty-two-year-old wife, Agrippina, granddaughter of the late emperor Augustus and

daughter of Augustus's loyal lieutenant Marcus Agrippa. She is alternatively giving Germanicus sips of water and dabbing his flushed face with a damp cloth. His redheaded young chief of staff and five of his best friends—generals and Roman senators—cluster around the bed. Some of them are looking worried, others, angry. Anxious servants hover in the background.

Germanicus Caesar's multifaceted fame has spread beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, as far as Parthia, Rome's traditional enemy farther to the east in latter-day Iraq and Iran. The Parthians know that as a youthful colonel Germanicus had played an important role in putting down a five-year revolt in the Balkans, leading flying columns that tracked down and eliminated rebel forces in Dalmatia. As Roman commander in chief on the Rhine he led massive counteroffensives against German armies led by Arminius—or Hermann, as the Germans called him—after the three Roman legions of General Publius Quintilius Varus had been notoriously wiped out by Hermann in Germany's Teutoburg Forest. Sweeping into central Germany, Germanicus had defeated the Germans in three major battles, and had kept the German hordes east of the Rhine. After recapturing two of the three sacred golden eagle standards of the legions of Varus destroyed by Hermann, Germanicus had consecrated those standards at Rome. In doing so, he gave Romans back their pride.

The Senate had voted Germanicus a Triumph for his achievements in Germany. When he drove through the streets of Rome in a golden four-horse chariot on his triumphal procession on May 25, A.D. 17, those streets were lined with as many as a million cheering Romans, many seated in the massive Circus Maximus, through which the Triumphal procession passed, others seated on the temporary wooden tiers erected along the broader city streets for Triumphs. That day, too, Germanicus had done something quite unique. Prior to this, generals celebrating a Triumph had shared the chariot with just a driver and an attendant. On the day of his Triumph, Germanicus had shared his chariot with his then five children, including four-year-old Caligula and even his youngest daughter, two-year-old Agrippina the Younger.

Sent by the emperor Tiberius to become commander in chief of the Roman East that same year, Germanicus had sailed across the Mediterranean, landed in southern Turkey, and marched into Armenia, a country tussled over by Rome and Parthia for centuries, to dethrone one king and make another. The king of Parthia, Artabanus,

had made his son king of Armenia, but Germanicus had other ideas. He hadn't gone into Armenia with an army. He went with just his personal staff. After crossing treacherous mountains and trekking hundreds of miles, he had entered the Armenian capital of Artaxata as the Parthian-installed ruler fled ahead of him. There, Germanicus had crowned the son of the king of Roman ally Pontus as Armenia's new King Artaxias, allying the country to Rome.

Half a century before, Germanicus's grandfather Mark Antony had achieved a similar result in the face of Parthian resistance, but he had taken a hundred thousand Roman soldiers into Armenia to do it. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, King Artabanus of Parthia—the King of Kings, as he was styled—was in dread of Germanicus,² and in dread of the possibility that the reputedly unbeatable Germanicus would lead his legions on an invasion of Parthia. To pacify Germanicus, the Parthian king had sent envoys with gifts of crowns of gold for the prince of Rome. And then he had come himself to the bank of the Euphrates River, the border between Parthia and Roman Syria, to meet with Germanicus and seal a peace treaty with Rome.

No Roman had ever before brought the Parthians to heel like this; certainly no Roman who marched without an army at his back and who achieved success purely on the strength of his reputation and his personality. Running out of honors for Germanicus, the Senate voted him an Ovation, a form of Triumph where the recipient rode through the streets of Rome on horseback on his triumphal progress rather than in a chariot.

Even before he came to the East, Germanicus, said the Roman biographer Suetonius, had won such popular devotion that he was “in danger of being mobbed to death whenever he arrived at or left Rome.”³ No Roman before or after Germanicus won such popularity. From comforting his wounded soldiers at their bedsides to talking with people in the city streets, in the words of first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Germanicus had never let his royal dignity “prevent him being familiar with them all, as if they were his equals.”⁴

Germanicus's charismatic image was enhanced by his gutsy, much-admired wife, Agrippina, herself a member of the royal family of the Caesars, who devotedly went everywhere with her husband. Imagine a glamorous pair of young royals today who were also movie stars—such was the status achieved by Germanicus and his Agrippina in their day and long after it. If there had been celebrity magazines in those times,

young Germanicus Caesar and Agrippina would have dominated their covers year in, year out.

Now Germanicus is dying. And he knows it. Weeks before, in September, he had been hit by the first violent symptoms. News of his sudden illness, which quickly laid him low, swept around the Roman Empire. At that time, the government courier service, the *Cursus Publicus Velox*—literally “the State’s very fast runner”—could take news to Rome from the farthest edge of the empire in just ten days via its express riders and fast stage coaches. At Rome, when the news of Germanicus’s serious illness arrived late one day in the early fall, people rushed in their thousands to the temples on the Capitoline Mount with burning torches in their hands and leading sacrificial animals. According to Roman biographer Suetonius, the crush of devotees was so great that the gates to the Capitoline complex were nearly torn down.⁵

The next day, says Tacitus, the courts of Rome were deserted. Shops closed down, business ceased.⁶ Barges lay idle at the Tiber River docks. Streets were eerily deserted. Private houses, which usually only closed their outer doors at night, left their doors shut and bolted throughout the day. People would not venture out unless it was to seek the latest news of Germanicus’s condition or to make offerings at temples for his recovery. Rome had come to a standstill; the city had never before experienced a paralysis like it.

When a merchant ship from Syria soon after arrived at Ostia, the port of Rome, with the news that Germanicus had recovered, the word spread rapidly and the city rejoiced. Tacitus says that people ran through the streets shouting the news—Germanicus is alive and well, thanks be to the gods!⁷ Suetonius says that the emperor Tiberius was awoken by crowds in the city below his Palatine Hill palace singing that all was well again at Rome now that their Germanicus was well again.⁸ Life went back to normal.

But the rejoicing had been premature. Even as Romans returned to their daily lives believing that their prince had fully recovered, at Daphne, within weeks of the first attack, Germanicus’s symptoms had returned, only worse than before. Vomiting racked Germanicus’s strong body until he had no strength left. This was a man who had never been seriously ill in his life. He was a soldier—young, fit, and athletic. Suetonius says that when Germanicus was a youth his legs were weak but he deliberately strengthened them with regular exercise. He trained every day; marched hundreds of miles; and, unlike many

Roman generals, fought the enemies of Rome hand-to-hand at the head of his troops. No one had been fitter than Germanicus Caesar. Surviving carved marble busts of him depict Germanicus as big-boned, with a square face, jutting jaw, Roman nose, and the same thick neck as his grandfather Mark Antony. "Germanicus is described everywhere as being of outstanding physical and moral stature," Suetonius was to say.⁹ Unlike most wealthy Romans, the prince did not even employ a personal doctor.

Now, on his deathbed, Germanicus himself has become convinced that he had been poisoned, and equally convinced that he knows who is responsible. Ever since he'd arrived in the East, he'd been hindered by the new *propraetor*, or imperial governor, of Syria, Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso. Appointed by the emperor Tiberius at the same time that Germanicus received his posting, Piso, in late middle age, is a former consul of Rome who had previously governed the provinces of Africa and Farther Spain under the emperor Augustus. Germanicus's unique appointment as commander in chief of the entire eastern half of the empire—it would be centuries before a similar division of power would be made by a Roman emperor—made Piso the prince's subordinate.

Provincial governors usually had free rein in their provinces, to rule as they pleased, being answerable to no one but the emperor at Rome. More than once, this virtually unrestricted power tempted a corrupt or vicious governor to plunder his subjects or treat them cruelly. But here in Syria, Piso had to give way to the emperor's nephew and adopted son. All Piso's administrative decisions in the province, civil and military, were subject to Germanicus's approval or overrule. Nor was Piso the most senior judge in his own province; while the governor of Syria had previously presided in major court cases, now Germanicus sat in judgment, as his seniority dictated. Even before he arrived in Syria, the haughty Piso had been notorious for respecting no one, not even the emperor himself. And to compound the governor's humiliation, Germanicus, his superior, was half his age.

From the commencement of his appointment, Germanicus had allowed Piso to govern without interference, deliberately leaving Antioch, the provincial capital, to Piso, and taking up residence outside the city at Daphne so that their paths crossed only when absolutely necessary. This Daphne palace that Germanicus made his home had frequently been used in the past by his grandfather Mark Antony, and also had been visited by the likes of Antony's lover Cleopatra and

Antony's close friend King Herod the Great. Yet, over the two years since taking up his post, whenever Germanicus was away, Piso had deliberately and provocatively ignored or reversed his orders in a variety of matters, particularly in relation to the legions in Syria and the annexed subprovince of Judea, whose governor, the prefect of Judea, reported to the much more senior *propraetor* of Syria in Antioch. At official dinners attended by both Germanicus and Piso, Piso had done his best to embarrass Germanicus. Clearly, Piso had been bent on making life difficult for Germanicus.

After Germanicus had fallen ill for the first time, the prince had been reminded that at a banquet shortly before, Piso had occupied the position beside him on the dining couch, as his rank required, giving him the opportunity to introduce poison to Germanicus's food or drink. To compound suspicions, since Germanicus had become ill, Piso and his wife, Munatia Plancina, were known to have been delighted. What was more, Piso had audaciously sent members of his staff to disrupt the religious observances of locals who were making vows at the temples of Antioch for Germanicus's recovery.

When he heard this, Germanicus had sent Piso a letter, terminating their friendship, such as it was, using a traditional formula, and ordering the governor home to Rome. After the furious, humiliated Piso had set sail in a small fleet of ships with his wife, son, adherents, and hundreds of slaves, Germanicus had sent men to search the vacated governor's palace, which occupied an island in the middle of the Orontes River at Antioch. There at Piso's former palace, hidden under the floor and in the walls, the investigators had found the remains of unidentified bodies taken from tombs, and cinders smeared with blood. On lead tablets they found the name of Germanicus engraved, as well as incantations and spells.¹⁰ This all cried witchcraft, with which, it was now rumored, Piso's wife, Plancina, had been involved. Now, too, envoys from Piso began to arrive at the palace at Daphne, asking about the current state of Germanicus's health.

Those present at Germanicus's palace in his final weeks and days would say that he'd become angry when these "spies" were detected in his palace. According to them, Germanicus had said, "If my doors are to be besieged, if I must breathe my last breath under the gaze of my enemies, what hope is there for my grieving wife and my little children?" Piso, he observed, seemed to be in a hurry to regain control of Syria and its garrison of twenty thousand Roman legionaries. "But

Germanicus is not yet dead,” said the dying prince, “nor will the murderer keep his reward for the fatal deed, if I do die.”¹¹

With his first recovery, Germanicus’s spirits had been buoyed, and he had thought himself safe. But now, even though every precaution had been taken at the palace to make sure his food and drink were untainted, this time the poison seemed even stronger than before, its symptoms plainly more violent. Somehow Germanicus’s enemies had circumvented the security, and with an increased dosage were achieving with a new batch of poison what they’d failed to do the first time. The usual treatment for poisoning during Roman times involved using purgatives to induce the victim to vomit. This was supposed to remove the poison from the body. But a major symptom of all of the most deadly plant poisons was vomiting, so more often than not, all the use of purgatives achieved was the further weakening of the patient.

The actual poison administered to Germanicus would never be identified by Roman authorities. Roman physicians did occasionally conduct autopsies on the dead. One such famous autopsy following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. indicated that only one of twenty-three stab wounds received by Caesar, that to the heart, had been fatal. But the science of forensics was not sophisticated in those times, and there was no test in existence to identify a particular poison in the system of a murder victim.

The best-known poison of classical times was hemlock. This was the poison famously used by Greek philosopher Socrates to take his own life in 399 B.C. There are two types of hemlock, and both have similar symptoms and results. Water hemlock is found naturally in northern temperate regions, and in Roman times was imported from Europe to Syria by apothecaries and physicians, who used deadly poisons in small doses as purgatives. This habit of using poisons as purgatives would continue until the present day in various parts of the world. In the same way, arsenic, which is deadly if ingested, is used today in small quantities as a skin treatment. Poison hemlock, the other variety of hemlock, was native to North Africa, and likewise was imported into Syria. The notoriously fatal plant poisons foxglove and larkspur are also, like water hemlock, temperate plants. Another deadly plant, belladonna, was found in both Europe and Asia, and was commonly available in Syria.¹² For a variety of reasons that will later become apparent, belladonna was most likely the poison used on Germanicus.

Roman historian Tacitus was to describe Germanicus's dying moments, his final words. "If I were dying a natural death," Germanicus says slowly, swallowing with difficulty as he lies on his deathbed, "I would have grounds to complain even against the gods for tearing me away, so young, by an untimely death, from my parents, my children, my country." His eyes fall on his friends, men who range in age from the thirties to the fifties. "Now cut down by Piso and Plancina, I leave you with my final wishes. Tell my father [the emperor Tiberius] and my brother [Drusus the Younger] how I was torn by persecutions and entrapped by plots, and ended my life by the worst of deaths. Those who were touched by my bright prospects and by family ties, even those who were once envious of me, they will weep when they learn that this once prosperous survivor of so many wars has perished by a woman's treachery."¹³

Germanicus believes that Governor Piso's wife, Plancina, has somehow introduced the poison to his palace. He must have assumed that she had accomplices among the servants at his palace, for she herself had left Syria with her husband by the time Germanicus became ill a second time.

"You will have the opportunity," says Germanicus now to his friends, talking in gasps, "to lay a murder complaint before the Senate, of an appeal to the laws. It isn't the chief duty of friends to tearfully follow the dead man's body, but to remember his wishes, to fulfill his commands. Even strangers will shed tears for Germanicus. Vengeance must come from *you*, if you have loved the man more than his position. Show the people of Rome the granddaughter of the divine Augustus, my companion in life." He grasps the hand of his wife. "Place before them my six children. Sympathy will be on the side of the accusers. Those who hide behind the excuse that they were only following orders will be neither believed nor forgiven."¹⁴

One by one, the friends of Germanicus kneel beside him and take his right hand. Even the Parthians believed the grasping of right hands to be a solemn gesture. And so, gripping his right hand, each of Germanicus's friends now swears that they would sooner die than fail to avenge him.

Once all his companions have given their sacred oath—and Romans believed that they would be cursed by the dead if they failed to keep to such an oath—Germanicus looks up at a now teary-eyed Agrippina. Knowing that she can be "rather excitable,"¹⁵ he urges her:

“When you return to Rome, honor my memory, and honor our children, by laying aside your ferocious pride. Accept what fortune throws at you. Don’t stir up political rivalry, or antagonize those who are more powerful than you.” He pulls her close and whispers a few words more. And then he closes his eyes.¹⁶

Had Germanicus been poisoned by water hemlock or foxglove he would have now gone into convulsions. With poison hemlock, he would have gone completely blind. Poisoned by larkspur, he would have suffered uncontrollable itching and respiratory distress. On the other hand, those who ingest belladonna and a number of other plant poisons slip into a coma before death claims them.¹⁷ Roman historian Tacitus’s account of Germanicus’s death says that he passed away “soon after” whispering to Agrippina. There is no mention of convulsions, itching, or respiratory distress.¹⁸ “Soon after” could refer to minutes; hours; or, at the outside, days, suggesting that Germanicus may well have lapsed into a coma before dying. Coma preceding death is a symptom of belladonna poisoning. Probably slipping into a coma then, and after lasting for several more hours, perhaps through the night and into the next day, Germanicus continued to breathe at most for an unconscious day or so, and then died.

Tacitus would say of Germanicus that he had been a dignified man whose greatness shone from him. Inspiring reverence by both his appearance and his voice, he said, Germanicus had avoided the hatred generated by arrogance.¹⁹ Another Roman historian, Cassius Dio, writing two hundred years later, also would lavish praise on Germanicus, saying that he had never acted oppressively or shown jealousy, that while he had been the bravest of men against the enemy, he had been the most gentle of men with his fellow countrymen.²⁰

The devastating news that brave and gentle Germanicus had been assassinated galloped toward Rome in the carriages of the *Cursus Publicus Velox* courier service and plowed west aboard merchant ships driven by the summer winds, to stun, stagger, and enrage the people of the empire and to bring Rome to the brink of revolution.

