ROBERT GRAVES

THE TENEMENT: A VISION OF IMPERIAL ROME

'GREETINGS, MY LORD! Red dawn and a clear sky,' says Sophron, as he gently opens the shutters of an unglazed window. I can see climbing plants on my balcony, and the similar balcony of a tenement house opposite. Throwing off blanket and quilt, I look about me at the familiar square room, unfurnished except for my bed, a bedside table, and a wooden chest painted with a spirited scene of cupids mounted on hares and hunting a weasel.

We Romans sleep in loincloth and tunic, so the old Syrian slave merely hands me my shoes and lifts the toga (a huge semicircle of thick white woollen material) from its peg. He shakes his head sadly at last night's wine stain. 'Arrange the folds carefully, Sophron, and it won't show,' I say.

He drapes one toga-end over my left shoulder, letting it fall to the thigh; next, winds the straight edge round the back of my neck and under the right arm, then grabs the mass of material low down and throws the other toga-end past the first, so that it hangs behind me. Finally, he fixes the 'navel boss' at my midriff. That leaves me warmly swathed, except for the right shoulder, and provides a capacious pocket at chest level. Whenever possible, one wears only a tunic, supplemented by a rough, hooded poncho if the weather is bad; because togas are clumsy, burdensome, and difficult to keep clean in this filthy city, though required dress on all formal occasions. Into the pocket go my wax tablets and stilus, my handkerchief, and a small heap of money from the table. The coins are mainly those of the Emperors Augustus, Tiberius and Caligula; but here's the latest issue -- a bright bronze piece with Claudius's head on one side, on the other an oak-wreath, commemorating his recent fantastic conquest of Britain.

'Hand me the goblet, Sophron!'

I rinse my mouth with water, spit out into the street, drink the rest. 'Send Alexander for the mule! And, while you are waiting, empty the chamber pot.'

I married three years ago. My maternal uncle arranged the match when he paid my debts. I did not love Arruntia, nor she me, but the creditors were savage as wolves, and her substantial dowry, inherited from a great-- aunt, was tempting. Arruntius, my father-in-law, is armourer to the Imperial School of Gladiators on the Via Labicana, which this uncle runs. He lets me live, rent-free, in a first-storey apartment above his armoury, so long as I help him with the business. A terrible man, though! Sentenced to death ten years ago for the brutal murder of Arruntia's mother, pardoned on condition

that he became a gladiator -- gladiators are public slaves -- took up the net-and-trident style of fighting and killed or maimed twenty-five opponents in his first two years. When he had brought the score to fifty, a vociferous Amphitheatre crowd demanded his release, and Caligula sent him the customary wooden foil; but also an insulting message: 'Rude rite donatur ignavus' -- 'The coward is duly granted freedom.' Arruntius angrily snapped the foil in two, and re-engaged. His score had crept up to seventy by the time of Caligula's assassination. When the crowd again demanded his release, Claudius, the new Emperor, sent him another wooden foil with the characteristic message: 'Desine: tridens tibi nimium placet' -- 'Fight no more; you take too much pleasure in your trident!' So he obeyed, was given back his forfeited possessions plus ten years' interest, and bought this six-storey tenement house near the Subura.

At Rome almost everyone lives in tenements like ours; the whole city of a million people can't contain more than a thousand private houses. Apartments are excessively hard to find; besides, Arruntius's ground floor has real running water, piped from a reservoir, which he puts at our disposal -- the other tenants depend on the dirty goatskins of thievish water carriers. He also has an oven heated by the forge, and we may use this in the afternoons; otherwise we should have to get our joints and poultry roasted at the baker's two streets off.

Since I collect Arruntius's rents, I know that he makes a profit of over twenty per cent on his investment. The rooms are more and more crowded, the higher one climbs. Fifty-five poor wretches jammed in the attic -- Cilicians, Syrians, Moors -- jointly pay almost the same rent as we first-floor tenants. They buy space by the square yard -- just enough to put down a mattress and a small cooking stove -- and dispute possession with fleas, bedbugs and mice. Nor do they dare ask Arruntius to mend the hazardous roof.

'Any message for the Lady Arruntia, my lord, if she rises before your return?'

'Say that I'll ride straight home after my duty call.'

Sharp words, a blow and a whimper from next door indicate that the new slave girl is at work on Arruntia's tedious toilet. Arruntia always keeps up with the fashions. She has discarded the simple Republican coiffure (hair parted down the middle and coiled into a bun at the nape) for the latest style which piles her tresses high in curls and braids, supported by a good deal of false hair from the Orient, and held by gold pins and combs until it suggests the wall of a fortress. But first the slave girl slaps lotions and pomades on Arruntia's face and neck; applies chalk and white lead to her arms, eye-black to her eyes, rouges her cheeks with ochre, reddens her lips with wine-lees, dabs scent behind her ears... Not being vulgarians, Arruntia and I occupy separate bedrooms, and I am forbidden to see her until she is wearing a load of rings, earrings, necklace, brooches, pendants, bangles, bracelets, and that long violet silk tunic,

gathered at the waist by an embroidered belt, not to mention the Tyrian shawl.

'Allow me to pass a comb through your lordship's hair,' says Sophron.

Meanwhile Alexander, my younger slave, mutters a surly 'Good day!', unbars the apartment door, and pads out. Soon I follow him down the stairs and step inside the armoury. The master-smith has no time for chat. 'My lord Egnatius, excuse me! We're sadly shorthanded since that prize-fool Hylas insulted his master.'

Sophron carries the chamber pot past me to the street corner. Tenement houses have no plumbing at all. Night soil is dumped on a midden at the dead end of the nearest alley. Chamber pots are emptied into a big tank outside the laundry; the laundrymen use its contents to clean woollens, with the help of potash and fuller's earth. They pay a City tax for this privilege.

I cross the street, and glance up. A bulge in the wall of our second storey worries me; so does the wide crack near our front window. It may be my imagination, but both seem more pronounced than in September when I last looked. Most modern houses in Rome are jerry-built, because the building contractor need not submit his plans to a municipal architect, and because only temples are erected for eternity. Still, Arruntius swears that the fabric is sound, and continues to live underneath us.

By now the last straggling cart has left the city. To end traffic jams once and for all, Julius Caesar prohibited all wheeled vehicles -- with the exception of ceremonial chariots and wagons engaged in the building trade -- from using the streets between sunrise and dusk. As a result, our nightly sleep is forever broken by rumbles, creaks, bumps, shouts and oaths as the carts pass. Rome's streets and alleys, none of them lit or marked with its name, run higgledy-piggledy in every direction. Carters often lose their bearings, and when two lines of traffic meet in an alley, argue half an hour as to which of them must back out again. Carts caught by police patrols after sunrise must stay empty and immobilized for the next twelve hours; so traffic quarrels grow more violent at first cockcrow.

Several stores have opened, and their stock is being piled on either side of the street, leaving only a narrow passage between -- and a foul one at that. Near me, under an awning, a boys' school is already at work. No history, geography, literature, religion, or rhetoric taught here! It's reading, writing, arithmetic all the year round, from dawn to noon, without a break; except summer holidays, and one day off in eight. The schoolmaster, a ferocious wretch in a rickety chair, sits waggling his birch rod. Frightened pupils huddle together on benches. He distributes bead-frames among them, one to every group of three and, while I am waiting, sets them a problem. 'Add seventeen, two thousand, and one hundred and fifty-four. Hurry, villains! And no prompting!' Each boy moves beads along the wires for his third-share of the problem, and when everyone has finished, the tyrant checks results. There follow heavy blows of

the rod, dealt out by groups -- he never bothers to find out which boy has miscalculated.

Alexander leads up Bucephalus, harnessed. As I mount him from a handy barrel, he backs into a pyramid of earthenware pots. Several break. The shopkeeper explodes with rage, schoolchildren shout and cheer; the master rains blows on them indiscriminately. 'Two sesterces will cover the damage,' I tell Alexander, dipping into my pocket for the coins. 'Street vendors display breakable goods at their own risk.'

My beard is so fair that I can get by with a shave every other day. Oh, what a bore shaving can be, even though my rank allows me to jump the queue! Our street barber happens to be a patient, painless operator, who softens one's whiskers with warm water, hones his iron razor frequently, and takes at least half an hour over the job; but I'd rather be bored by his gossip than trust myself to the assistant -- a slapdash fellow who shaves four customers to his one, and never apologizes for a gash as he stanches the blood with spiders' webs and vinegar.

I clatter off to pay my morning duty call on Lucius Vitellius. Some years ago, I served as commissariat officer in Northern Italy under his eldest son, recently Consul. Old Vitellius, a close friend of the Emperor's, is a model patron. When Sophron got wrongfully arrested this summer, after a brawl in the Fish Market, Vitellius sprung him at once and had the charge withdrawn. At New Year, he always gives me a handsome present of table silver, or a toga. Last time it was Bucephalus. I try to be a model client, and frequently perform delicate missions for him -- sometimes with the help of two ex-gladiators, Arruntius's cronies.

Having tethered Bucephalus outside Vitellius's mansion on the Quirinal Hill, I enter the marble-walled lobby. Clients by the hundred are assembled here, among them a dozen senators. We are admitted in strict order of precedence to the hall, which is flanked by ancestral statues. Old Vitellius has a nod or a joke for each of us. He asks me: 'How's the mule, Spaniard?' 'Magnificently frisky, my lord.' 'Kicked anyone of importance today?' 'No, my lord, we met none of your enemies. He merely pulverized a display of Sicilian glassware. The merchant is claiming fifty denarii damages.' 'Then he'll accept twenty? Very well, my lad. Collect them and, in future, give your steed less food and more exercise.'

Noble Bucephalus! He's earned me nineteen denarii. I collect from the steward, who stands behind his master's ivory chair, and will soon be dealing out the daily food allowance -- six sesterces per man -- to all the poorer clients.

Back again. Since Arruntia is still inaccessible, I remove my toga and set off for the Fish Market with Sophron, who shoulders the baskets. Our women are not trusted to do the shopping; in theory, they sit at home and spin. (Imagine Arruntia handling a spindle!) I try Zeno's stall, and my luck is in: he offers large red mullets at only half a

denarius the pound! We shall be six to dinner; no, seven with Arruntius. I buy accordingly. Thence to the poultry and vegetable markets. A sauce for grilled red mullet, Sophron says, demands rue, mint, green coriander, basil, lovage, fennel -- all fresh; also Indian pepper, honey, oil and stock, which we have in the larder. Agreed. And after the fish, chicken? I insist on Fronto's recipe: pullets first browned and then braised with stock, oil, dill, leeks, savory and coriander. One each will be enough. I buy seven large pullets at the price of six. The dessert? Let us say pomegranates, quinces stewed in honey, and a couple of melons. At Oppian's fruit and vegetable stall I pick out all I need, bargain loudly for a while, and beat Oppian down to nine sesterces -- he has asked twelve. 'Put these in the other basket, away from the fish, Sophron!'

I find Arruntia looking like Messalina, Caesar's naughty wife, or like some ruinously expensive Greek courtesan from Baiae; and tell her my morning's adventures. When she grows restless, wondering whether I have forgotten her birthday, I produce a square silver cosmetic-box engraved with the Judgement of Paris, and underneath: 'Formosissimae adjudicatur' -- 'The verdict goes to the most beautiful.' She kisses me tenderly. The fact is, I can't yet afford to divorce Arruntia, and her latest lover happens to be an aedile -- one of the City magistrates responsible, among other things, for prosecuting breaches of the civil decencies, such as flagrant immorality, or betting (except on chariot races), or throwing filth into the street from windows. If I cross her, she may easily get him to frame me.

We breakfast together on bread, cheese and grapes. The bread is a tough, flat, wholemeal cake baked in a mould. We rub garlic on our slices and dip them in oil. Arruntia asks after the investments which I manage for her. 'Remind me about them in a month's time, and I'll have good news,' I smile. She need not know that I bought the silver box with a bribe given me by the owner of a tile factory: not to foreclose on her mortgage, but let him have another month to find the interest.

'What are you doing this morning, my beloved?' 'Oh,' she says, 'I have to attend a coming-of-age ceremony across the Tiber. Later, my friend Pyrrha will be taking me... I forget the street -- somewhere in the same district -- at any rate, it's a recital of poems by that boring Marcus What's-his-name...' She invites me to join her there. I excuse myself: Arruntius needs me to examine the shields and weapons for tomorrow's gladiatorial fight, and make sure that they'll pass muster. Owing to the shortage of smiths he's including some second-hand stuff from the provinces.

Arruntia sends her slave girl round the corner to hire a 'senatorial' litter. Evidently she means to create an impression on someone. On whom? That Indian scent she's wearing was not intended merely to please me, and her aedile lover will be busy in Court all morning. Still, what do I care?

After checking the weapons with Arruntius, who is in a jovial temper, I stroll along the

Subura towards the Forum; and have reached the Temple of Castor and Pollux when sudden shouts go up. 'Clear the way! Clear the way!' Lictors come swaggering down the street, six abreast, followed by the Imperial sedan and an escort of Praetorian Guards. Old Claudius reclines inside, head jerking, fingers trembling. The crowd cheer, and laugh. A young Gaul tosses Claudius a petition, which hits him in the face. He protests angrily: 'Is this the way to treat a fellow-citizen, my lord? You'll be throwing paving stones next, I shouldn't wonder!' 'Roses, only roses, never paving stones for the Conqueror of Britain!', the embarrassed Gaul cries. Claudius smiles indulgently, unrolls the petition, reads a few lines, and hands it to Secretary of State Pallas, who is riding beside him. 'Petition granted,' Claudius says. 'The man looks honest and can write a good clean Latin.'

I visit Sosius's publishing house, close by in the Forum, at the corner of the Tuscan quarter. The open patio holds some eighty desks, at each of which a scribe sits, bent over a long parchment scroll. A clear-voiced reader delivers the text which these slaves are copying: Claudius's own learned History of the Etruscans. He spells it out, letter by letter, warning them beforehand where each line ends; so that all copies will be uniform and mistakes easily checked. The book is to consist of twenty scrolls, at five denarii a scroll.

At Sosius's I meet the very man I have been looking for: Afer, just up from Herculaneum, near Naples. 'Is it true, Afer, that you have a redheaded British slave named Utherus for sale?' 'Well, maybe... if the price is right.' 'Then I'll be frank. One Glabrio, who wants to marry my sister, bought another of your Britons recently, but can't get him to work. The fellow spends most of his time weeping, and won't eat; and all because he's been separated from his brother Utherus. Glabrio is my neighbour, and I happen to need a porter. It would be a charity...'

Afer considers. 'What would you pay?'

'Twelve hundred. The slave's strong and healthy?'

'I'll guarantee that.'

An hour later we settle for fourteen hundred denarii, and strike hands on the bargain before witnesses. Glabrio's slave, let me confess, is not really pining; but has casually told Sophron that Utherus was one of King Caractacus's most experienced sword-smiths, and that if I could find him a job... I'm pretty sure I can sell Utherus to my father-in-law, and make a couple of thousand on the deal. Or, failing him, then to his rivals in the Via Impudica. This is a lucky day! I shall buy my pretty mistress Clyme a blue silk scarf.

Home to luncheon a little late. Arruntia is even later. Nobody excuses himself for not being on time in Rome, where only millionaires own water-clocks. We guess at the

hours from sunrise to noon, and then the official timekeeper at the Law Courts shouts: 'Midday, my lords!', and his cry is joyfully taken up and carried along all the streets and alleys. Tools are downed, shops shut, pleadings end: for no Romans work in the afternoon, apart from tavern keepers, barbers, policemen and public entertainers. And almost every other day, on one excuse or another, is a public holiday.

Questioned about Marcus What's-his-name's recital, Arruntia returns the vaguest possible answers; but I know where she's been, because I sent Alexander to tail her. Not content with the aedile, she's started a serious affair with Ascalus, the famous pantomime actor!

Luncheon consists of cold left-overs from last night: spiced Lucanian sausages and mock-anchovy pâté. For want of anchovies, Sophron took fillets of sea-perch, grilled and minced them, simmered them in stock with eggs, added pepper and a little rue, laid a fresh jellyfish on top to cook in the steam. None of us guessed the ingredients.

While Arruntia takes her siesta, I slip out to give Clyme the new silk scarf. How generously she shows her gratitude!

Later in the afternoon I escort Arruntia to the Hot Baths of Agrippa, beyond the Forum; her slave girl carrying the silver cosmetic-box, Alexander carrying my gear in a leather satchel. Mixed bathing is the rule there. Only shy young virgins and sour matrons who have lost their figures attend the private establishments reserved for women. At Agrippa's, neither sex wears a stitch while in the water, but the aediles' police are present in force to discourage loose behaviour. Arruntia undresses in the women's quarters; I in the men's. Then, clad in short tunics, we skip off to the enormous exercise room. Arruntia and two girl cousins play triangle-catch; she has brought three small balls of kidskin stuffed with feathers. The object is not to drop any of them, while gradually increasing the pace. Experts use both hands and six balls instead of three. The most popular sport is bladder-ball: anyone may join in and try to keep the bladder off the floor. Personally, I prefer harpastum: you grab the heavy pigskin ball, full of sand, and carry it hither and thither until robbed -- dodging, feinting, leaping, handing off. But first you oil yourself all over to get slippery. Tripping and low tackling are against the rules. Today I am in splendid form and twice break through a group of twenty players, running from wall to wall and back again, before someone jumps on my shoulders, and down I go. By an extraordinary coincidence, both of Arruntia's lovers have joined the party. I flash Licianus the aedile a pleasant smile, and rob Ascalus of the ball after a long run. Licianus congratulates me on my play; so does Ascalus.

Presently we remove our tunics and go naked into a duck-boarded sweat-bath, which lies above the main furnace. Sweat flows in rivers, and soon we totter to the warm bathroom. There our slaves sponge us with hot water from the central cauldron, scrape us with silver strigils, and rub us down with towels. Clean as cupids, and some

five pounds lighter, we make for the cool swimming pool, where we frisk about like dolphins.

Arruntia, mother-naked, swims up to the rope which divides the sexes. 'What shall we do?' she wails. 'Neither of my brothers can come to dinner, only my dreadful sisters-in-law!' 'They're not too bad,' I say, 'when on their own.' Then one of the gods -- perhaps Vulcan the Cuckold -- prompts me to add maliciously: 'I'll persuade two distinguished friends of mine to fill the vacant couches.'

'Do you know my wife Arruntia?' I ask the aedile as he swims by. 'This, my dear, is Licianus the Aedile, who has been playing a tough game of harpastum with me. May I invite him to dinner?' Ah, I do it all so innocently; and the aedile accepts so innocently; and Arruntia beams so innocently! To point the joke, my other guest must be Ascalus!

The day approaches its climax. Arruntia hurries away to get her face fixed up again -- she has kept the elaborate tresses well out of the water -- and then I take her home. She is unusually silent; and I unusually talkative. At nightfall the guests arrive. We recline around our expensive citrus-wood table. The red mullets are beautifully served, and Sophron has excelled himself with the braised pullets.

At first, Licianus and Ascalus address most of their conversation to the sisters-in-law or Arruntius, afraid of treating Arruntia too familiarly by mistake. And Arruntia is at pains to flatter me. Soon I produce a jar of the best Falernian. Licianus, our Master of Ceremonies, wearing his purple-bordered toga, insists on mixing it with as little water as is decently allowed -- none but thieves and gladiators drink neat wine -- and when the usual toping match begins, at dessert, shows his hand more boldly. He proposes toast after toast, always increasing the number of cups that must be downed for each: hoping, I suspect, to make us all dead drunk, keep a clear head himself, and end up in Arruntia's arms.

But the old Falernian is mischievous. I heave myself up from the couch and call for silence. 'Arruntia, dearest wife, listen to me! On my birthday gift which you admire so much, is engraved a Judgement of Paris. Prince Paris, Homer says, was ordered to present the loveliest of three goddesses with an apple -- a choice that needed remarkable tact. Paris chose the Goddess of Love, and thereby won the favours of Helen. Now, here's a "Judgement of Helen" for you! Give this pomegranate to the handsomest of us three young men... Pray, my dear, do not yield to self-interest as Paris did, but make an honest judgement. Consider neither the rank and eminence of Licianus, nor the fame of Ascalus, nor the wifely duty you owe Egnatius, your humble husband. Speak straight from the bottom of your truthful breast! I can count upon my equitable father-in-law to see fair play.'

Through her chalk and rouge Arruntia blushes a deep red. Licianus hides his aquiline nose in an agate wine-cup. Ascalus assumes a theatrical posture, like Ajax defying the

lightning. But Arruntius bursts into a roar of drunken laughter and thumps me on the back. 'Egnatius,' he yells, 'you're a man after my own heart! Go on! Roast that she-ass for us on the public spit!' Both sisters-in-law giggle nervously. They hate Arruntia, but are scared of scenes, especially when Arruntius has been drinking. He never knows his own strength; and this, indeed, was his plea long ago when, suspecting Arruntia's mother of infidelity...

'Choose, then, most beautiful of women, Rome's own Helen!' I insist, perfectly master of the situation. 'Choose!'

Arruntia cups her chin in deep thought. Will she? Won't she?

The dramatic hush is broken by a loud crash and horrified shrieks from somewhere high above us, followed almost immediately by an echoing boom and a still louder shriek. Fascinated, I watch the street wall slowly buckle and give... Then everything falls at once!

Did any of us survive? I doubt it. My next distinct memory is of being a child once more. Martial music sounds. Mother lifts me up to watch, through a well-glazed English nursery window, the decorated carriages and red-coated soldiers of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession.