Marcus Agrippa

Introduction

Of all the great names in Roman history no one has been paid less attention by biographers, no one has received less of the fame that is his due, than Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. To establish a new imperial system on the ruins of the old republican constitution destroyed by Julius Caesar was a task of immense difficulty—*tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*—far too great for the powers of any one person. The task was eventually performed with a fair measure of success, but in its initial stages it was performed not by one man but by a syndicate of four. Augustus, by common consent, was allowed to take the credit for all that his associates did, but the hardest part of the work was actually left to Agrippa, who was content all through his life to be his subordinate and eventually to marry his daughter.

There are periods when nothing of very great moment seems to happen, and the tide of affairs is stagnant without perceptible ebb or flow. There are other periods when all kinds of forces, destructive and constructive, are let loose, and the whole history of nations is changed for the better or the worse. To this latter class belongs the half-century in which Agrippa lived; and from the time when he first appears upon the scene as a youth of nineteen until the day of his death in 2
his fifty-first year, he played a prominent part in all the vicissitudes of his troubled age. We can read the accounts which historians, ancient and modern, have given us of that period; and when we have read them we may well ask ourselves a few questions. Who, for example, established a permanent Roman navy for the first time and put an end to the pirate bands which for a hundred years had scoured the Mediterranean seas? Who was in command of the Roman fleet at the battle of Actium, and by winning that battle settled the destiny of the ancient world for the next three centuries? Who found Rome a city continually disturbed by mob violence and lacking any adequate water-supply, and gave it both an organized water-board and a well-disciplined police force? Who, finally, on every frontier of the empire in a series of hard-fought campaigns secured the supremacy of Rome? To all these questions Augustus, in the account which he wrote of his administration, gives the answer 'I': but in actual fact the name should be not Augustus but Agrippa.

There are, of course, good reasons for the prominence that historians have given to Augustus and for the comparative obscurity that has been Agrippa's lot. To begin with, Agrippa died, 12 B.C., while the work of reconstruction was still going on, and Augustus survived him for another twenty-five years, although it must be remembered that in this later period he was far less happy than when he had Agrippa by his side. Secondly, the fierce civil wars which followed on 3
the death of Julius Caesar, and the failure of the Triumvirate to bring about a permanent settlement, had convinced the Roman people that the rule of one man was the only solution of the difficulties which beset them; and for that position the heir of Julius Caesar was both by birth and character so obviously the only choice that Agrippa, Livia, and Maecenas willingly consented to take a subordinate position and leave the credit to their official chief. Thirdly, Agrippa was of humble birth, and although Caesar had swept away many barriers the old oligarchic prejudice against 'new men' still remained, and it was thought well, if possible, to keep such fellows in the background. Until Nero's death, in A.D. 68, supreme power was reserved for members of the Julio-Claudian family, and even if Agrippa was admitted to the privileged circle by his marriage to Julia, his descendants and the writers they patronized did their best to forget him, while his grandson, the Emperor Gaius, went so far as to declare that his mother Agrippina was not the daughter of Agrippa but the result of an incestuous connection between Augustus and Julia.

It must, however, be admitted that Agrippa is neither a romantic hero nor a psychological case. In his private life there were none of those amorous episodes which so delightfully lightened the labours of Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius. In his public career there were none of those conflicts of conscience and concealments of purpose which make Augustus and Tiberius such tempting problems to the psychiatrist. But if we had to pick from the long list of 4
Roman worthies the finest example of the typical Roman virtues, we could not make a better choice than Agrippa. In the early days of the Republic when Rome was making herself mistress in Italy, and later when she was fighting for

her life against Hannibal, there were many men who did great deeds but did not desire fame, content to subordinate themselves to the welfare of the state. With the Scipios and the Gracchi there came a change, and the last century of the Republic was one long turmoil in which party strife and personal ambition took the place of the old unselfish patriotism.

With Agrippa we return to the nobler ideals of the past. In his character the chief qualities are those which the Romans called *industria*, *perseverantia*, *fortitudo*, and *prudentia*; a love of work, persistent energy, stubborn endurance, and political foresight. These are not brilliant qualities, for the typical Roman was not a brilliant person; but they are the main ingredients of *virtus*, that which makes a man a man indeed. Agrippa's career is a practical instance of what one man, unhelped by fortune, can do by sheer force of character and energy. Moreover, Agrippa was as good as he was great, and history can give us no better example of a truly upright man. In an age when sexual morality was at its lowest ebb and personal gain was most men's guiding motive, he remained untouched by scandal and firmly loyal to the friend whom he helped to make master of the world. Of him Seneca writes: 'He was a great soul, the only person among those whom the civil wars raised to fame and power who was really happy in his public life.' And Cassius Dio, who in spite of his defects as historian was a good judge of character, gives this verdict: 'Of all the men of his time Agrippa manifestly was the best.'

For all readers Agrippa's life is a lesson, and for English readers it has a special interest. Not only did Agrippa lay the foundations of that empire in ancient times which comes nearest to our own, but he also was the first Roman who showed any perception of the importance of sea power.

Chapter I

Early Days

Of Agrippa's birthplace, of what manner of people his father and mother were, and of how he passed through infancy and childhood, we know nothing: and therefore none of those anecdotes of a great man's early life in which biographers take such delight will be found in this record. Still, if in the child we can often see the man, so in the man we can see the child; and we can imagine that Agrippa was a sturdy boy, strong-willed, self-reliant, and dependable; no more fond of his books than were most Romans, but clever with his hands and a leader among his comrades; the sort of boy who with us would be an excellent school prefect, taking more interest in motor cars and flying machines than in Latin and Greek. But all this is mere surmise, and, abandoning fancy, it will be better to put down the few facts that can be gleaned from our ancient authorities.[1]

The date of his birth, at least, is fairly certain, although even this cannot be fixed within a few months. Nicolaus of Damascus, a Syrian who flourished in the last quarter of the first century before Christ and wrote a 'Life of Caesar' 7
which has come down to us, states that Agrippa and Octavius were at school together. Octavius was born September 23rd, 63 B.C., the year of Cicero's consulship, and from Nicolaus' statement we may assume that the two boys were approximately of the same age. Cassius Dio, the historian, writing in the early years of the third century A.D. with full access to the imperial records, says that Agrippa died in the latter half of March, 12 B.C.; and Pliny, the Elder, in his *Natural History*, completes the story. Pliny tells us that 'Agrippa was snatched away in his fifty-first year'; but whether he means by this that he had completed his fifty-first year or was then in his fifty-first year is a matter of some doubt. In any case we can take it as definite that Agrippa was born in the period between March, 64 B.C., and March, 63 B.C., and was therefore some months older than Octavius.

One other fact, if it can be regarded as a fact, about Agrippa's birth is given us by Pliny, who says that he was called Agrippa, like others of that name before him, because he came feet foremost from his mother's womb, and that he alone of all such cases was fortunate in his later life. This may be merely a tale repeated by Pliny which was invented to support the derivation of the word Agrippa from *aeger partus*, 'difficult birth'; but it is curious that the younger Agrippina, Agrippa's grand-daughter, stated in her Memoirs that her son Nero was born in the same unnatural fashion. Of Agrippa's father we know only that his first name was Lucius; about his mother we have no information whatever.[2] 8
As regards the rest of the family it is certain that he had one brother older than himself and one sister. The brother was a friend of Cato Uticensis and fought with the senatorial armies against Julius Caesar. At the battle of Thapsus he was taken prisoner, but at the intercession of the young Octavius he was released and pardoned by Caesar. Of him, or of a younger brother, we hear again, for the historian Cassius Dio tells us that when Agrippa was at the height of his power and was approached in a matter where his brother was concerned, he refused to influence the consul's decision by expressing an opinion. Of the sister we have more tangible evidence. After Agrippa's death, A.D. 12, she began in accordance with his will to construct the colonnade which was called from her Porticus Vipsania, and was finally completed by Augustus.

Such details as these are of no great interest or value: the really important thing in Agrippa's early life is his friendship with the boy who was then called Gaius Octavius, and is known to us later, first as Octavian, and then as Augustus. There are many cases of notable friendships between men recorded in sacred and profane history—David and Jonathan, Alexander and Hephaestion, may serve as two examples—but usually they were friendships of an emotional type, and often they were cut short by death. With Augustus and Agrippa this was not so: in their friendship there was little 9

[1] These passages have been carefully collected by Meyer Reinhold in his *Marcus Agrippa*. Geneva, New York, 1933.

[2] This is not strictly exact, for there is an allusion to her in Manilius: '*matrisque sub armis miles Agrippa suae*.' Astronomica, I, 797. But even the ingenuity of Prof. Housman could find no sense in the words.

romantic sentiment; it was based on the attraction of opposite—or at least of complementary—qualities; it lasted for life without any serious break; it was equally advantageous to both persons, and it left its permanent memorial in the work which they accomplished together, the foundation of the Roman Empire.

To some it has seemed surprising that a youth of lowly origin like Agrippa should have been the intimate friend of one who had a father of senatorial rank and was himself adopted into the proud Julian family. The Gens Vipsania to which Agrippa belonged was one of the most humble in Rome, and his father Lucius apparently never distinguished himself in any way. In troubled times it is possible for a man to rise quickly, but the point is that Agrippa's father had not risen and was a man of no importance; and yet we are told that Agrippa was educated with Octavius, and at the age of seventeen was his closest friend. There is a possible explanation, but it is a hazardous one, and will probably not be accepted, for it is unsupported by anything which the legal mind would consider as evidence.

Aristotle remarks that Nature tries to produce good offspring from good stock, although she is not always able to do so. The converse holds, and for a great man to be the son of commonplace parents is possible but rare. In all Roman history there is only one man who equals Agrippa in organizing ability, in military skill, and in unlimited capacity for
10 work: and that man could possibly have been Agrippa's father. Julius Caesar was a person of notoriously loose life: 'Every woman's man, and every man's woman,' he was called in his younger days, and he did not alter his habits as he grew older. 'Romans, shut up your wives,' his soldiers sang at his triumph, 'the bald adulterer is coming to town.' That he had many illegitimate children whom he never openly recognized is a probable inference, and it is not impossible that Agrippa was his natural son. In that case we should have a reason for Agrippa receiving an education usually reserved for rich men's sons, a reason for Caesar bidding Agrippa as well as Octavius to accompany him on his Spanish expedition, a reason for both the young men being sent to study at Apollonia together. We should also have a reason for the likeness between Octavius and Agrippa, and for the fact that Gaius, son of Julia and Agrippa, whose resemblance to his father was notorious, was in appearance a typical Julian. And while there is nothing which can be called evidence, there are many trifling points which perhaps deserve consideration. Why did Agrippa usually cut out his middle name Vipsanius and call himself simply Marcus Agrippa? Why was Maecenas thought to be malicious when he drew the attention of Augustus to an orator arguing against the adoption of an illegitimate son? Why did Herod, naming his grandson after Agrippa, call him Marcus Julius Agrippa? Why did the people of Ilium call Agrippa their kinsman, as though he too
11 were descended from Julus, son of Aeneas? Why did the people of Nemausus, when they set the heads of Augustus and Agrippa together on their crocodile coins, put this inscription, which would normally refer to both, *IMP: P.P.: DIVI F*? None of these questions in themselves carry much weight, but combined they may give the theory to seekers of mares' nests a certain attractiveness. It is often said that if there had been no Julius, there would have been no Augustus; and it may be that if there had been no Julius, there would have been no Agrippa.

In any case it must be remembered that Octavius on his father's side was not of a very distinguished family. His grandfather, who lived in the little country town of Velitrae, was a money-changer and money-lender; and by strict attention to business and opportune foreclosures he made a considerable fortune. His father used the money he inherited to improve his social position, and purchased office from the Roman electors in the recognized manner. He began by holding minor posts, but eventually became praetor and governor of the province of Macedonia, where he won some distinction by exterminating a band of runaway slaves. He was also fortunate enough to marry Atia, the niece of Julius Caesar, who was then coming to the front as leader of the democratic party, and on his return from his province in 59 B.C. he was marked out as a likely candidate for the consulship; an expectation falsified by his early death in 58 B.C., after which his widow married again.

12 Three years before that time Julius Caesar had divorced his wife Cornelia on the ground that Caesar's wife should be above suspicion, a condition which Cornelia emphatically did not fulfil; and in 59 B.C. he married a younger woman, Calpurnia, by whom, since he himself was a man of notorious virility, there seemed every prospect that he would have children. It is true that Calpurnia eventually proved barren, although the marriage was a happy and lasting one, but even so while there was any possibility of her bearing a son few people paid much attention to the young great-nephew. Moreover, in 47 B.C., the dictator, then a man past middle age, fell a victim to Cleopatra's youthful charms, and the next year defied public opinion by installing his foreign mistress in a villa at Rome, by allowing her to call their child Caesarion, and finally by setting up her statue in the temple which he had built to Venus Genetrix by the side of his divine ancestress. How much further Caesar would have gone if he had returned victorious from his Parthian expedition we cannot tell; but it is possible that Brutus and his confederates on the Ides of March, 44 B.C., not only saved Rome from an eastern despotism but also saved for Octavius his inheritance.

Reputable historians have often said that Octavius was Caesar's nearest male relative; but this, like many other

statements in history concerning him, while not exactly a falsehood is also not exactly the truth. Caesar had two sisters, Julia major and Julia minor, and the elder of these is sometimes conveniently forgotten. Both sisters married and had children, and at the time of his death Caesar had three great-nephews alive, two of whom, Lucius Pinarius and Quintus 13
Pedius, were the grandsons of his elder sister, while Gaius Octavius was the grandson of the younger Julia, whose funeral oration he delivered in public when he was twelve years old. Obviously none of the three great-nephews were very near relatives; but if it comes to a question of fact Octavius stands not first but third.

As regards these other two kinsmen Pinarius seems to have been quite insignificant: but Pedius was a man of some distinction and military experience. He had served with Caesar in Gaul as commander of a legion, and although we are not told of any great exploit which he performed, he took his fair share in the fighting and emerged with credit. In the campaigns that ended with Pharsalus in 48 and with Thapsus in 46, he must have shown some ability, for when after Thapsus the Pompeians made their way from Africa to Spain, Caesar sent him and Fabius to conduct operations there. That Pedius was unsuccessful was not entirely his own fault, for Cassius, the governor whom Caesar had appointed, had made himself hated by his avarice, and the name of Pompey was still remembered with reverence by the Spanish tribes. The country rose to support his two sons, Cnaeus and Sextus, and by the summer of 46 they had raised an army against which Pedius could do little.

This was Pedius' first independent command, and his failure in it had important results. Caesar abandoned any idea he might have had of making him his successor and turned his attention to his youngest great-nephew, and in his triumph allowed him to ride in a chariot while he also bestowed upon him the military decorations which usually were 14
only given to officers who had taken part in the previous campaign. That he should have thus honoured his young kinsman is natural, but it is plain that in the next months he not only made a close study of Octavius' character, but also extended his notice to the young man's friends; and nothing shows better his unique faculty for judging men's capacity than his next action. In the autumn of 46 reports from Spain showed that the situation there was growing steadily worse and that Caesar's presence was imperatively required. But before he left Rome he gave instructions that Octavius, Agrippa, and Salvidienus Rufus should follow him as soon as possible and serve on his staff. Neither Agrippa nor Salvidienus belonged to the class for whom such positions were commonly reserved, and they were both quite young. But Caesar, as always, relied upon his own judgment, and never was it more amply justified, for within a few years these young men were in command of armies and holding their own against experienced generals.

Caesar left Rome early in November and in twenty-seven days was at the front in Spain. The three friends were preparing to follow him when Octavius fell ill, and on his mother's advice postponed his departure. Agrippa and Salvidienus, however, set off at once without him and arrived in time to take part in Caesar's last and hardest campaign. The Pompeians had thirteen legions, four of them veterans, the others new Spanish levies of first-class fighting material. 15
Cnaeus Pompeius was nominally in command, but the real direction of the army was in the hands of Labienus, the most skilful of all Caesar's Gallic commanders and the only one who had sufficient confidence in himself to go over to the senatorial party. Against him Caesar had only eight legions, so that Agrippa had the signal advantage of seeing at close quarters how a great general can overcome inferiority of numbers. The fighting was chiefly in the valley of the Baetis, where the Pompeians held Corduba and most of the other towns. By a series of marches, feints, and swift attacks Caesar gradually drove them southwards, and finally on March 17th, 45, gave them battle outside the town of Munda, where Agrippa had his first experience of what war really means. Caesar was giving his opponents the advantage of ground and numbers, but he was confident both of himself and his men. On his left wing he placed the third and fifth legions, on his right the famous tenth—the 'Alauda'—and began the battle with a charge of his African cavalry under the command of Bogud, Prince of Mauretania. Then the two lines of infantry met, and for hours the battle wavered, until at last Caesar himself, at the head of the tenth legion, drove back the Pompeian left wing, which was the signal for Bogud to charge again. Labienus had foreseen this and withdrew some troops from his right to check the cavalry; but the Pompeian centre and left thought that these men were retreating and themselves broke and fled. Labienus fell fighting, Cnaeus Pompeius escaped, but three weeks later was captured and killed. 16

As soon as Octavius recovered from his illness he in his turn set out for Spain. The journey by land in winter was long and dangerous, and he had only a few slaves for escort; but he made it successfully, and towards the end of March joined Agrippa at Caesar's headquarters. The dictator gave him a warm welcome, and openly expressed his approval both of his energy in making the journey and of his friends' conduct in the recent campaign. With him they saw the last stages of the war, which were marked by a relentless severity unusual on Caesar's part, and with him that summer they returned to Rome. By then Caesar had made up his mind about Octavius, and soon after his arrival he took a decisive step. Up till the year 49 B.C. Pompey, the husband of Caesar's daughter Julia, had been Caesar's heir. If Julia had borne a son before her death in 53, the course of history might well have been changed; but she died childless, and

when Pompey was killed in Egypt a fresh heir had to be found. For three years he deferred his decision, and then on the 15th of September 45 B.C. he made a new will. He was already committed to a Parthian campaign in the following spring, and there were three contingencies which he had to consider. Firstly, he himself might be killed in the course of the war. Secondly, Calpurnia might bear him a son in the near future. Thirdly, the person whom he named as heir might either die or refuse to accept responsibility. To understand this last point a short explanation is necessary. The Latin
17 word *heres*, which we translate as 'heir,' is rather equivalent to our residuary legatee; and if the estate was of doubtful value or encumbered with debts it was possible that the heir might refuse to accept the position. For example, Marcus Antonius—whom in future we shall call Antony—had refused to administer his father's estate, *a damnosa hereditas*, and although this was thought to be discreditable on a son's part he was within his legal rights.

Accordingly the will which Caesar drew up was in the following terms. To the Roman people he bequeathed his villa and gardens across the Tiber together with a gift of 300 sesterces—about £2, 10S. in our money—to each Roman citizen. The residue of the estate was left to his three great-nephews in the proportion of three-quarters to Octavius, one-quarter to Pedius and Pinarius. In the event of their refusal Antony, Decimus Brutus, and some others were appointed heirs in default. Account was taken of the possible birth of a son and guardians were named for the child. And in the last clause of the will Octavius was adopted into the Gens Julia. No one was informed of the contents of the document, and when it was written and sealed Caesar gave it for safe custody into the charge of the Vestal Virgins, directing the senior Vestal, head of the college, to keep it until his return, and only to break the seal in case of his death.

That his approval of Octavius included Agrippa and Salvidienus was shown by his next step. He was preparing, as we have said, for a Parthian expedition, and legions were gathering in Macedonia to join him on his march to the East.
18 He decided that the three young men should again be on his staff, and to occupy their time during the winter months of waiting he sent them in November to Apollonia, a pleasant coast town in the extreme south of Macedonia at the mouth of the river Aous, which was the headquarters of a legion. With them went as tutor Apollodorus of Pergamum, one of those learned Greeks whom Roman nobles at this time liked to have attached to their household in much the same position as that held by domestic chaplains in England during the seventeenth century. Apollodorus may have been the author of the very useful *Handbook to Greek Mythology* which we still possess; but in any case he was a skilful teacher, and instructed his three pupils in literature, rhetoric, and philosophy, the last study probably including lessons in practical politics such as Blossius gave to the Gracchi. While Apollodorus supervised their studies the commander of the legion took charge of their military training. They went route marching with the troops, they engaged in cavalry exercises, they watched the engineers working their catapults and battering-rams; and they made friends with the officers of the legion, who were delighted to have the great-nephew of the dictator among them. And while they were thus happily busy the bolt fell.

The young men had been four months at Apollonia, and in that time many things had occurred at Rome. During the latter part of the year 45 B.C. Caesar came definitely under Cleopatra's influence. He had already been appointed
19 dictator for life, he had supreme command of all the armies of the state, he controlled the senate as censor, and as tribune he could veto any law of which he disapproved. But this was not sufficient for her purpose. An Eastern autocrat, such as she desired him to become, was to his people not a man but a god; and in the autumn of the year the first steps were taken to making Caesar divine. A new goddess, Venus Genetrix, was invented as his ancestress; his statue was placed in the shrine of Quirinus, the deified Romulus, and Antony was appointed its priest; his house on the Palatine was given a temple pediment as though it were now the abode of a god. We know from Cicero's letters the fierce indignation that all this roused among those of the old senatorial class who still survived; and when it became plain that the Parthian expedition, if it were successful, would give Caesar the unfettered power of an oriental monarch, it was decided that the tyrant must die. Marcus Brutus, the son of Caesar's old mistress Servilia, Decimus Brutus, and Cassius Longinus were the leading spirits in the conspiracy, to which about sixty senators were privy. On the Ides of March, 44 B.C., at a meeting of the senate called, it is said, to declare Caesar *rex*, the conspirators gathered round their victim, drew their daggers, and struck him down.

That night Rome waited in terror for what was to come: and nothing happened. Antony, who expected to be the next victim, barricaded himself in his house, but the liberators let their opportunity slip; the tyrant was dead, and they
20 wanted no more bloodshed, nor had they any definite plans for taking control of the government. Antony seized the chance which their torpor gave him, and at a meeting of the senate which as consul he summoned on March 17th Cicero, who had not been in the conspiracy, proposed a general amnesty. This was carried, and it was also agreed that Caesar's will—which the Vestal Virgins had now produced—together with his projected plans should be confirmed, and that his body should be given a public funeral. Antony then invited the conspirators to a dinner at his house to hear the will read. Most of those present, Antony included, expected that Antony was the heir, and probably there were malicious

smiles when it was found he was only in the second place and that Octavius was both Caesar's heir and adopted son. A lesser man would have been dismayed, but Antony faced the situation with his usual cheerful courage. He had in his possession all Caesar's papers together with the treasure in the temple of Ops, and he resolved to carry on as though Octavius did not exist.

Meanwhile Atia had sent a messenger across the sea in haste to her son, telling him of Caesar's murder, and the alarm in Rome, and begging him to be cautious. It is uncertain whether in a later letter she informed him of the terms of Caesar's will, but in any case the situation for an untried youth of nineteen was extremely difficult. The officers of the legion at Apollonia urged him to put himself at their head and march through Macedonia into Italy to take vengeance for Caesar's death. But this proposal, which meant immediate civil war, he was prudent enough to reject for the moment, 21
although later he took advantage of the offer. Fortunately he had in Agrippa a counsellor who was willing to take risks when risks were necessary but never rashly ran into danger, and they decided that the best course would be for Octavius to cross to Brundisium as a private individual, and there determine his future course of action.

But before they left Apollonia, Octavius thought it well to have their horoscopes cast. Like many very practical Romans he was a firm believer in omens of every kind, and later in this year he was greatly cheered by a halo which formed round the sun, and by the appearance in July of the comet to which the name of *Sidus Julium* was given. At that time there was living in Apollonia an astrologer of some repute called Theogenes, and Octavius persuaded Agrippa, who was less credulous, to accompany him on a visit to the seer's consulting room. Agrippa was taken in hand first, and when his calculations were complete Theogenes promised him a future of great and almost incredible success. This was not exactly what Octavius had come for, and it was with some reluctance that he gave the date of his own birth, since it seemed that nothing could surpass Agrippa's fortune. He need not have been afraid: Theogenes could not express in words the future which he foresaw for his young client, but fell at his feet and kissed the ground in homage to one who would, he said, be one day ruler of the world. This was at least encouraging; and before March ended our three musketeers decided to set out together to try their fortunes in Italy.