Getting to Know the Dragon

by

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I reached the theater at nine that morning,half an hour before the appointed time, for I knew only too well how unki Caesar Demetrius could be to the unpunctual. But the Caesar, it seemed, had arrived even earlier than that. I found Lab his personal guard and chief drinking companion, lounging by the theater entrance; and as I approached, Labienus smirked a "What took you so long? Caesar's been waiting for you."

"I'm half an hour early," I said sourly. No need to be tactful with the likes of Labienus—or Polycrates, as I should be calling him, now that has given us all new Greek names. "Where is he?"

Labienus pointed through the gate and turned his middle finger straight upward, jabbing it three times toward the heavens. I limped p without another word and went inside.

To my dismay I saw the figure of Demetrius Caesar right at the very summit of the theater, the uppermost row, his slight figure outlined against the brilliant blue of the morning sky. It was less than six weeks since I had broken my ankle hunting boar with the Caesa interior of the island; I was still on crutches, and walking, let alone climbing stairs, was a challenge for me. But there he was, above.

"So you've turned up at last, Pisander!" he called. "It's about time. Hurry on up! I've got something very interesting to show you."

Pisander. It was last summer when he suddenly bestowed the Greek names on us all. Julius and Lucius and Marcus lost the honest Roman praenomina and became Eurystheus and Idomeneus and Diomedes. I who was Tiberius Ulpius Draco was now Pisander. It latest fashion at the court that the Caesar maintained—at his Imperial father's insistence—down here in Sicilia, these Greek names: to be follow all supposed, by mandatory Greek hairstyles and sticky pomades, the wearing of airy Greek costumes, and, eventually, the introduction obligatory basis of the practice of Greek buggery. Well, the Caesars amuse themselves as they will; and I might not have minded it if he had nam something heroic, Agamemnon or Odysseus or the like. But Pisander? Pisander of Laranda was the author of that marvelous epic of world *Heroic Marriages of the Gods*, and it would have been reasonable enough for Caesar to name me for him, since I am an historian also. A there is the earlier Pisander, Pisander of Camirus, who wrote the oldest known epic of the deeds of Heracles. But there was yet another Pisa fat and corrupt Athenian politician who comes in for some merciless mockery in the *Hyperbolus* of Aristophanes, and I happen to know tha one of Caesar's special favorites. Since the other two Pisanders are figures out of antiquity, obscure except to specialists like me, I help but think that Caesar had Aristophanes's character in mind when coining my Greek name for me. I am neither fat nor corrupt, but the takes great pleasure in vexing our souls with such little pranks.

Forcing a cripple to climb to the top of the theater, for example. I went hobbling painfully up the steep stone steps, flight after flight after fligh emerged at last at the very highest row. Demetrius was staring off toward the side, admiring the wonderful spectacle of Mount Etna rising west, snowcapped, stained by ashes at its summit, a plume of black smoke coiling from its boiling maw. The views that can be ob up here atop the great theater of Tauromenium are indeed breathtaking; but my breath had been taken sufficiently by the effort of th and I was in no mood just then to appreciate the splendor of the scenery about us.

He was leaning against the stone table in the top-row concourse where the wine-sellers display their wares during intermissio enormous scroll was laid out in front of him. "Here is my plan for the improvement of the island, Pisander. Come take a look and what you think of it."

It was a huge map of Sicilia, covering the entire table. Drawn practically to full scale, one might say. I could see great scarlet perhaps half a dozen of them, marked boldly on it. This was not at all what I was expecting, since the ostensible purpose of the this morning was to discuss the Caesar's plan for renovating the Tauromenium theater. Among my various areas of expertise is a certain knowl architecture. But no, no, the renovation of the theater was not at all on Demetrius's mind today.

"This is a beautiful island," he said, "but its economy has been sluggish for decades. I propose to awaken it by undertaking th

ambitious construction program Sicilia has ever seen. For example, Pisander, right here in our pretty little Tauromenium there's a crying nee proper royal palace. The villa where I've been living these past three years is nicely situated, yes, but it's rather modest, wouldn't *you* say, residence of the heir to the throne?" Modest, yes. Thirty or forty rooms at the edge of the steep cliff overlooking town, affording a prospect of the sea and the volcano. He tapped the scarlet circle in the upper right-hand corner of the map surrounding the pla Tauromenium occupies in northeastern Sicilia. "Suppose we turn the villa into a proper palace by extending it down the face cliff a bit, eh? Come over here, and I'll show you what I mean."

I hobbled along behind him. He led me around to a point along the rim where his villa's portico was in view, and proceeded to des cascading series of levels, supported by fantastic cantilevered platforms and enormous flaring buttresses, that would carry the structure down th face of the cliff, right to the shore of the Ionian Sea far below. "That would make it ever so much simpler for me to get to the beach, wouldn say? If we were to build a track of some sort that ran down the side of the building, with a car suspended on cables? Instead of hav take the main road down, I could simply descend within my own palace."

I stared the goggle-eyed stare of incredulity. Such a structure, if it could be built at all, would take fifty years to build and cost a sesterces at the least. Ten billion, maybe.

But that wasn't all. Far from it.

"Then, Pisander, we need to do something about the accommodations for visiting royalty at Panormus." He ran his finger wes across the top of the map to the big port farther along the northern shore. "Panormus is where my father likes to stay wh comes here; but the palace is six hundred years old and quite inadequate. I'd like to tear it down and build a full-scale r of the Imperial palace on Palatine Hill on the site, with perhaps a replica of the Forum of Roma just downhill from it. He'd l make him feel at home when he visits Sicilia. Then, as a nice place to stay in the middle of the island while we're out hu there's the wonderful old palace of Maximianius Herculeus near Enna, but it's practically falling down. We could erect an entirely new pala Byzantine style, let's say—on its site, being very careful not to harm the existing mosaics, of course. And then—"

I listened, ever more stupefied by the moment. Demetrius's idea of reawakening the Sicilian economy involved building unthinkably exp royal palaces all over the island. At Agrigentum on the southern coast, for example, where the royals liked to go to see the mag Greek temples that are found there and at nearby Selinunte, he thought that it would be pleasant to construct an exact duplic Hadrianus's famous villa at Tibur as a sort of tourist lodge for them. But Hadrianus's villa is the size of a small city. It take an army of craftsmen at least a century to build its twin at Agrigentum. And over at the western end of the island he had some notion for a rugged, primordial Homeric style, or whatever he imagined Homeric style to be, clinging romantically to the summit of the citadel of Eryx. Ther at Syracusa—well, what he had in mind for Syracusa would have bankrupted the Empire. A grand new palace, naturally, but also a lighthouse one in Alexandria, and a Parthenon twice the size of the real one, and a dozen or so pyramids like those in Aiguptos, only perhaps bigger, and a bronze Colossus on the waterfront like the one that used to stand in the harbor at Rhodes, and—I'm unable down the entire list without wanting to weep.

"Well, Pisander, what do you say? Has there ever been a building program like this in the history of the world?"

His face was shining. He is a very handsome man, is Demetrius Caesar, and in that moment, transfigured by his own megalomaniac sche was a veritable Apollo. But a crazy one. What possible response could I have made to all that he had just poured forth? That I thought it w wildest lunacy? That I very much doubted there was enough gold in all his father's treasury to underwrite the cost of such an absurd enter That we would all be long dead before these projects could be completed? The Emperor Lodovicus his father, when assigning me service of the Caesar Demetrius, had warned me of his volatile temper. A word placed wrongly and I might find myself hurled sprawling the very steps up which I had just clambered with so much labor.

But I know how to manage things when speaking with royalty. Tactfully but not unctuously I said, "It is a project that inspir with awe, Caesar. I am hard pressed to bring its equal to mind."

"Exactly. There's never been anything like it, has there? I'll go down in history. Neither Alexander nor Sardanapalus nor A Caesar himself ever attempted a public-works program of such ambitious size. —You, of course, will be the chief architect of the entire Pisander."

If he had kicked me in the gut I would not have been more thoroughly taken aback.

I smothered a gasp and said, "I, Caesar? You do me too much honor. My primary field these days is his scholarship, my lord. I've dabbled a bit in architecture, but I hardly regard myself as qualified to—"

"Well, I do. Spare me your false modesty, will you, Draco?" Suddenly he was calling me by my true name again seemed very significant. "Everyone knows just how capable a man you are. You hide behind this scholarly pose becaus think it's safer that way, I would imagine, but I'm well aware of your real abilities, and when I'm Emperor I mean to ma most of them. That's the mark of a Great Emperor, wouldn't you say—to surround himself with men who are

themselves, and to inspire them to rise to their full potentiality? I do expect to be a great Emperor, you know, ten years now, twenty, whenever it is that my turn comes. But I'm already beginning to pick out my key men. You'll be one of He winked at me. "See to it that leg heals fast, Draco. I mean to start this project off by building the Tauromenium p which I want you to design for me, and that means that you and I are going to be scrambling around on the face of th looking for the best possible site. I don't want you on crutches when we do that. —Isn't the mountain beautiful Pisander?"

In the space of three breaths I had become Pisander again.

He rolled up his scroll. I wondered if we were finally going to discuss the theater-renovation job. But then I realize the Caesar, his mind inflamed by the full magnificence of his plan for transforming every major city of the island, was no interested just now in talking about a petty thing like replacing the clogged drainage channel running down the hillside ad to this theater than a god would be in hearing about somebody's personal health problems, his broken ankle, say, wh godlike intellect is absorbed with the task of designing some wondrous new plague with which he intends to destroy million yellow-skinned inhabitants of far-off Khitai a little later in the month.

We admired the view together for a while, therefore. Then, when I sensed that I had been dismissed, I took my without bringing up the topic of the theater, and slowly and uncomfortably made my way down the steps again. Jus reached the bottom I heard the Caesar call out to me. I feared for one dreadful moment that he was summoning me bac I would have to haul myself all the way up there a second time. But he simply wanted to wish me a good day. The Demetrius is insane, of course, but he's not really vicious.

"The Emperor will never allow him to do it," Spiculo said, as we sat late that night over our wine.

"He will. The Emperor grants his crazy son his every little wish. His every big one, too."

Spiculo is my oldest friend, well named, a thorny little man. We are both Hispaniards; we went to school together in Tarraco; when I t residence in Roma and entered the Emperor's service, so did he. When the Emperor handed me off to his son, Spiculo follow loyally to Sicilia too. I trust him as I trust no other man. We utter the most flagrant treason to each other all the time.

"If he begins it, then," said Spiculo, "he'll never go through with anything. You know what he's like. Six months after they ground for the palace here, he'll decide he'd rather get started on his Parthenon in Syracusa. He'll erect three columns there and go off to Par And then he'll jump somewhere else a month after that."

"So?" I said. "What business is that of mine? He's the one who'll look silly if that's how he handles it, not me. I'm only the architect."

His eyes widened. "What? You're actually going to get involved in this thing, are you?"

"The Caesar has requested my services."

"And are you so supine that you'll simply do whatever he tells you to, however foolish it may be? Piss away the next five or te of your life on a demented young prince's cockeyed scheme for burying this whole godforsaken island under mountains of marble? Get your linked with his for all time to come as the facilitator of this lunatic affair?" His voice became a harsh mocking soprano. *'Tiberius b Draco, the greatest man of science of the era, foolishly abandoned all his valuable scholarly research in order to devo remaining years of his life to this ill-conceived series of preposterously grandiose projects, none of which was ever comp and finally was found one morning, dead by his own hand, sprawled at the base of the unfinished Great Pyra Syracusa—'* No, Draco! Don't do it! Just shake your head and walk away!"

"You speak as though I have any choice about it," I said.

He stared at me. Then he rose and stomped across the patio toward the balcony. He is a cripple from birth, with a twisted and a foot that points out to the side. My hunting accident angered him, because it caused me to limp as well, which directs ad attention to Spiculo's own deformity as we hobble side by side through the streets, a grotesquely comical pair who might eas thought to be on their way to a beggars' convention.

For a long moment he stood glowering at me without speaking. It was a night of bright moonlight, brilliantly illuminating the villas of the we up and down the slopes of the Tauromenian hillside, and as the silence went on and on I found myself studying the triangular outlines of Sp form as it was limned from behind by the chilly white light: the broad burly shoulders tapering down to the narrow wai the spindly legs, with the big outjutting head planted defiantly atop. If I had had my sketchpad I would have begun to draw him. But of I have drawn him many times before.

He said at last, very quietly, "You astound me, Draco. What do you mean, you don't have any choice? Simply resign from his service a back to Roma. The Emperor needs you there. He can find some other nursemaid for his idiot princeling. You don't see think that Demetrius will have you thrown in jail if you decline to take on the job, do you? Or executed, or something?"

"You don't understand," I said. "I *want* to take the job on."

"Even though it's a madman's wet dream? Draco, have you gone crazy yourself? Is the Caesar's lunacy contagious?"

I smiled. "Of course I know how ridiculous the whole thing is. But that doesn't mean I don't want to give it a try."

"Ah," Spiculo said, getting it at last. "Ah! So that's it! The temptation of the unthinkable! The engineer in you wants to pile Pelion on Ossa find out whether he can manage the trick! Oh, Draco, Demetrius isn't as crazy as he seems, is he? He sized you u perfectly. There's only one man in the world who's got the *hybris* to take on this idiotic job, and he's right here in Tauromenium."

"It's piling Ossa on Pelion, not the other way around," I said. "But yes. Yes, Spiculo! Of course I'm tempted. So v it's all craziness? And if nothing ever gets finished, what of it? At least things will be started. Plans will be drawn; foundations will b Don't you think I want to see how an Aiguptian pyramid can be built? Or how to cantilever a palace thousands of feet down the side of this cli It's the chance of a lifetime for me."

"And your account of the life of Trajan VII? Only the day before yesterday you couldn't stop talking about the documents that are on the to you from the archive in Sevilla. Speculating half the night about the wonderful new revelations you were going to them, you were. Are you going to abandon the whole thing just like that?"

"Of course not. Why should one project interfere with another? I'm quite capable of working on a book in the evening while designing palaces during the day. I expect to continue with my painting and my poetry and my music too. —I think you underestimate me, old friend."

"Well, let it not be said that you've ever been guilty of doing the same."

I let the point pass. "I offer you one additional consideration, and then let's put this away, shall we? Lodovicus i sixty and not in wonderful health. When he dies, Demetrius is going to be Emperor, whether anybody likes that idea o and you and I will return to Roma, where I will be a key figure in his administration and all the scholarly and sci resources of the capital will be at my disposal. —Unless, of course, I irrevocably estrange myself from him while he's sti heir apparent by throwing this project of his back in his face, as you seem to want me to do. So I will take the job. investment leading to the hope of future gain, so to speak."

"Very nicely reasoned, Draco."

"Thank you."

"And suppose, when Demetrius becomes Emperor, which through some black irony of the gods he probably will too long, he decides he'd rather keep you down here in Sicilia finishing the great work of filling this island with secon architectural splendors instead of his interrupting your holy task by transferring you to the court in Roma, and that's wh do for the rest of your life, plodding around this backwater of a place supervising the completely useless and unnec construction of—"

I had had about enough. *"Look,* Spiculo, that's a risk I'm willing to take. He's already told me in just that many that when he's Emperor he plans to make fuller use of my skills than his father ever chose to do."

"And you believe him?"

"He sounded quite sincere."

"Oh, Draco, Draco! I'm beginning to think you're even crazier than he is!"

It was a gamble, of course. I knew that.

And Spiculo might well have been speaking the truth when he said that I was crazier than poor Demetrius. The C after all, can't help being the way he is. There has been madness, real madness, in his family for a hundred years or serious mental instability, some defect of the mind leading to unpredictable outbreaks of flightiness and caprice. I, on the hand, face each day with clear perceptions. I am hardworking and reliable, and I have a finely tuned intelligence cap succeeding at anything I turn it to. This is not boasting. The solidity of my achievements is a fact not open to question. I have built temples and pa have painted great paintings and fashioned splendid statues, I have written epic poems and books of history, I have even designed a flying mach I will someday build and test successfully. And there is much more besides that I have in mind to achieve, the secrets that in cipher in my notebooks in a crabbed left-handed script, things that would transform the world. Some day I will bring them all to perfection present I am not ready to do so much as hint at them to anyone, and so I use the cipher. (As though anyone would be comprehend these ideas of mine even if they could read what is written in those

notebooks!)

One might say that I owe all this mental agility to the special kindness of the gods, and I am unwilling to contradi pious thought; but heredity has something to do with it too. My superior capacities are the gift of my ancestors just as the f Demetrius Caesar's mind are of his. In *my* veins courses the blood of one of the greatest of our Emperors, the visionary Trajan VII, who wou

been well fit to wear the title that was bestowed sixteen centuries ago on the first Emperor of that name: Optimus Princeps, "b princes." Who, though, are the forefathers of Demetrius Caesar? Lodovicus! Marius Antoninus! Valens Aquila! Why, are these not some feeblest men ever to have held the throne, and have they not led the Empire down the path of decadence and decline?

Of course it is the fate of the Empire to enter into periods of decadence now and then, just as it is its supreme fortune to find, ever and always, a fresh source of rebirth and renewal when one is needed. That is why our Roma has been the preeminent in the world for more than two thousand years and why it will go on and on to the end of time, world without end, etc rebounding to new vigor.

Consider. There was a troubled and chaotic time eighteen hundred years ago, and out of it Augustus Caesar gave us the Imperial gove which has served us in good stead ever since. When the blood of the early Caesars ran thin and such men as Caligula and Nero disastrously to power, redemption was shortly at hand in the form of the first Trajan, and after him Hadrianus, succeeded by the capable Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius.

A later period of troubles was put to right by Diocletianus, whose work was completed by the great Constantinus; and when, inevitab declined yet again, seven hundred years later, falling into what modern historians call the Great Decadence, and w easily and shamefully conquered by our Greek-speaking brothers of the East, eventually Flavius Romulus arose among give us our freedom once more. And not long after him came Trajan VII to carry our explorers clear around the bringing back incalculable wealth and setting in motion the exciting period of expansion that we know as the Renais Now, alas, we are decadent again, living through what I suppose will someday be termed the Second Great Decadenc cycle seems inescapable.

I like to think of myself as a man of the Renaissance, the last of my kind, born by some sad and unjust accident two centuries out of this proper time and forced to live in this imbecile, decadent age. It's a pleasant fantasy and there's evidence, to my way of thinking, that it's true.

That this is a decadent age there can be no doubt. One defining symptom of decadence is a fondness for vast and nonsensical extravagance, and what better example of that could be provided than the Caesar's witless and imprudent scheme for reshaping Sicilia as a monument to his own grandeur? The fact that the structures he would have me constru him are, almost without exception, imitations of buildings of earlier and less fatuous eras only reinforces the point. But al are experiencing a breakdown of the central government. Not only do distant provinces like Syria and Persia blithely go own way most of the time, but also Gallia and Hispania and Dalmatia and Pannonia, practically in the Emperor's own ba yard, are behaving almost like independent nations. The new languages, too: what has become of our pure and beautiful Latin, the backbone of our Empire? It has degenerated into a welter of local dialects. Every place now has its own babb lingo. We Hispaniards speak Hispanian, and the long-nosed Gallians have the nasal honking thing called Gallian, and in Teutonic provinces they have retreated from Latin altogether, reverting to some primitive sputtering tongue known as Germanisch, and so on and so on. Why, even in Italia itself you find Latin giving way to a bastard child they call Roman which at least is sweetly musical to the ear but has thrown away all the profundity and grammatical versatility that makes the master language of the world. And if Latin is discarded entirely (which has not been the fate of Greek in the East), h will a man of Hispania be understood by a man of Britannia, or a Teuton by a Gallian, or a Dalmatian by anyone at all?

Surely this is decadence, when these destructive centrifugalities sweep through our society.

But is it really the case that I am a man of the Renaissance stranded in this miserable age? That's not so easy to say. In co speech we use the phrase "a Renaissance man" to indicate someone of unusual breadth and depth of attainment. I am certainly that. But w have truly felt at home in the swashbuckling age of Trajan VII? I have the Renaissance expansiveness of mind; but do I h flamboyant Renaissance temperament as well, or am I in truth just as timid and stodgy and generally piddling as everyone I see me? We must not forget that they were medievals. Could I have carried a sword in the streets, and brawled like a legionary slightest provocation? Would I have had twenty mistresses and fifty bastard sons? And yearned to clamber aboard a tiny creaking ship and beyond the horizon?

No, I probably was not much like them. Their souls were large. The world was bigger and brighter and far more mysterious to them seems to us, and they responded to its mysteries with a romantic fervor, a ferocious outpouring of energy, that may be impossible for any encompass today. I have taken on this assignment of Caesar's because it stirs some of that romantic fervor in me and makes me feel renewed with my great world-girdling ancestor Trajan VII, Trajan the Dragon. But what will I be doing, really? Discovering new worlds, as he did? N will be building pyramids and Greek temples and the villa of Hadrianus. But all that has been done once already, quite satisfactorily, and the need to do it again. Am I, therefore, as decadent as any of my contemporaries?

I wonder, too, what would have happened to great Trajan if he had been born into this present era of Lod

Augustus and his crackbrained son Demetrius? Men of great spirit are at high risk at a time when small souls rule the world. I mysel found shrewd ways of fitting in, of ensuring my own security and safety, but would he have done the same? Or would he have gone swaggering around the place like the true man of the Renaissance that he was, until finally it became necessary to do away w quietly in some dark alley as an inconvenience to the royal house and to the realm in general? Perhaps not. Perhaps, as I prefer t he would have risen like a flaming arrow through the dark night of this murky epoch and, as he did in his own time, cast a brilliant light over the of the world.

In any case here was I, undeniably intelligent and putatively sane, voluntarily linking myself with our deranged young Caesar's project, because I was unable to resist the wonderful technical challenge that it represented. A grand romantic gesture, or simply a mad one? Ver Spiculo *was* right in saying by accepting the job I demonstrated that I was crazier than Demetrius. Any genuinely sane man would have run scr away.

One did not have to be the Cumaean Sybil to be able to foresee that a long time would go by before Demetrius mentioned the projec again. The Caesar is forever flitting from one thing to another; it is a mark of his malady; two days after our conversation in the th left Tauromenium for a holiday among the sand dunes of Africa, and he was gone more than a month. Since we had not yet c much as choose a location for the cliffside palace, let alone come to an understanding about such things as a design and a construction budget, I whole matter out of my mind pending his return. My hope, I suppose, was that he would have forgotten it entirely by the time he came back to

I took advantage of his absence to resume work on what had been my main undertaking of the season, my study of the life of Trajan VII.

Which was something that had occupied me intermittently for the past seven or eight years. Two things had led me back to it time. One was the discovery, in the dusty depths of the Sevilla maritime archives, of a packet of long-buried journals purporting Trajan's own account of his voyage around the world. The other was the riding mishap during the boar hunt that had left me on crutches for t being: a period of enforced inactivity that gave me, willy-nilly, a good reason to assume the scholar's role once more.

No adequate account of Trajan's extraordinary career had ever been written. That may seem strange, considering our long tradition of great historical scholarship, going back to the misty figures of Naevius and Ennius in the time of the Republic, and, of course, Sallu Livius and Tacitus and Suetonius later on, Ammianus Marcellinus after them, Drusillus of Alexandria, Marcus Andronicus— a come closer to modern times, Lucius Aelius Antipater, the great chronicler of the conquest of Roma by the Byzantines time of Maximilianus VI.

But something has gone awry with the writing of history since Flavius Romulus put the sundered halves of Imperial Roma t gether in the year 2198 after the founding of the city. Perhaps it is that in a time of great men—and certainly the era of Flavius R and his two immediate successors was that—everyone is too busy making history to have time to write it. That was used to believe, at any rate; but then I broke my ankle, and I came to understand that in any era, however energetic it may be, th always someone who, from force of special circumstances, be it injury or illness or exile, finds himself with sufficient leisure to hand to writing.

What has started to seem more likely to me is that in the time of Flavius Romulus and Gaius Flavillus and Trajan the I publishing any sort of account of those mighty Emperors would not have been an entirely healthy pastime. Just as the finest account lives of the first twelve Caesars—I speak of Suetonius's scathing and scabrous book—was written during the relatively benign reign of the first and not when such monsters as Caligula or Nero or Domitian were still breathing fire in the land, so too may it have seemed unw scholars in the epoch of the three Hispaniard monarchs to set down anything but a bare-bones chronicle of public events and sig legislation. To analyze Caesar is to criticize him. That is not always safe.

Whatever the reason, no worthwhile contemporary books on the remarkable Flavius Romulus have come down to us, only mere chronicles and some fawning panegyrics. Of the inner nature of his successor, the shadowy Gaius Julius Flavillus, we know practically nothi such dry data as where he was born—like Flavius Romulus, he came from Tarraco in Hispania, my own native city—and governmental posts he held during his long career before attaining the Imperial throne. And for the third of the three great Hisp Trajan VII—whose surname happened by coincidence to be Draco but who earned by his deeds as well, throughout the world, the name of the Dragon—we have, once again, just the most basic annals of his glorious reign.

That no one has tackled the job of writing his life in the two centuries since his death should come as no surprise. One can writ about a dead Caesar, yes, but where was the man to do the job? The glittering period of the Renaissance gave way all too quickly to the dawn of industrial development, and in that dreary, smoky time the making of money took priority over everything else, art and scholarship include now we have our new era of decadence, in which one weakling after another has worn the Imperial crown and the Empire itself seems grad be collapsing into a congeries of separate entities that feel little or no sense of loyalty to the central authority. Such vigor as our can manage to muster goes into inane enterprises like the construction of gigantic pointy-headed tombs in the Pharaonic styl

in this isle of Sicilia. Who, in such an age, can bear to confront the grandeur of a Trajan VII? Well, I can.

And have a thick sheaf of manuscript to show for it. I have taken advantage of my position in the Imperial serv burrow in the subbasements of the Capitol in Roma, unlocking cabinets that have been sealed for twenty centurie bringing into the light of day official papers whose very existence had been forgotten. I have looked into the private re of the deliberations of the Senate: no one seemed to mind, or to care at all. I have read memoirs left behind by high o of the court. I have pored over the reports of provincial excise-collectors and tax commissioners and inspectors of the markets, which, abstract and dull though they may seem, are in fact the true ore out of which history is mined. From all I have brought Trajan the Dragon and his era back into vivid reality—at least in my own mind, and on the pages unfinished book.

And what a figure he was! Throughout the many years of his long life he was the absolute embodiment of strength, implacable purpose, and energy. He ranks with the greatest of Emperors: with Augustus; with Trajan I and Hadrianus Constantinus; with Maximilianus HI, the conqueror of the barbarians; with his own countryman and predecessor F Romulus. I have spent these years getting to know him—getting to know the Dragon!—and the contact with his grea that I have enjoyed during these years of research into his life has ennobled and enlightened my days.

And what do I know of him, this great Emperor, this Dragon of Roma, this distant ancestor of mine?

That he was born illegitimately, for one thing. I have combed very carefully through the records of marriages and bir Tarraco and surrounding regions of Hispania for the entire period from 2215 to 2227 a.u.c., which should have been m than sufficient, and although I have found a number of Dracos entered in the tax rolls for those years, Decimus Draco ar Numerius Draco and Salvius Draco, not one of them seems to have been married in any official way or to have brought progeny that warranted enumeration in the register of births. So his parents' names must remain unknown. All I can repo that one Trajan Draco, a native of Tarraco, is listed as enrolling in military service in the Third Hispanic Legion in the ye 2241, from which I conclude that he was born somewhere between 2220 and 2225 a.u.c. In that period it was most us enter the army at the age of eighteen, which would place his date of birth at 2223, but, knowing Trajan Draco as I do, I would h a guess that he went in even younger, perhaps when he was sixteen or only fifteen.

The Empire was still under Greek rule at that time, technically; but Hispania, like most of the western provinces, was virtually independent. T Emperor at Constantinopolis was Leo XI, a man who cared much more about filling his palace with the artistic treasures of ancient Greece than about what might be going on in the Europan territories. Those territories were nominally under the control of the Western Emperor, anyway, h distant cousin Nicephoros Cantacuzenos. But the Western Emperors during the era of Greek domination were invariably idle puppets, and Nicephoros, the last of that series, was even more idle than most. They say he was never even to be seen in Roma, but spent all hi in comfortable retreat in the south, near Neapolis.

The rebellion of the West, I am proud to say, began in Hispania, in my very own native city of Tarraco. The bold and dynamic Flavius Ro a shepherd's son who may have been illiterate, raised an army of men just as ragged as he, overthrew the provincial government, and procl himself Emperor. That was in the year 2193; he was twenty-five or thirty years old.

Nicephoros, the Western Emperor, chose to regard the Hispanic uprising as an insignificant local uproar, and it is doubtful that news of it re the Basileus Leo XI in Constantinopolis at all. But very shortly the nearby province of Lusitania had sworn allegiance to the rebel banner, and th Britannia, and Gallia next; and piece by piece the western lands fell away from their fealty to the feckless government in Roma, unti Flavius Romulus marched into the capital, occupied the Imperial palace, and sent troops south to arrest Nicephoros and carry him into exile in Aiguptos. By the year 2198 the Eastern Empire had fallen also. Leo XI made a somber pilgrimage from Constantinopolis to Ravenna to sign a recognizing Flavius Romulus not only as Emperor of the West but as monarch ot the eastern territories too. .

Flavius ruled another thirty years. Not content with having reunited the Empire, he distinguished himself by a second asto exploit, a voyage around the tip of Africa that took him to the shores of India and possibly even to the unknown lands beyond. He was the firs Maritime Emperors, setting a noble example for that even more extraordinary traveler, Trajan VII, two generations later.

We Romans had made journeys overland to the Far East, Persia and even India, as far back as the time of the first Augustus. And in the the Eastern Empire the Byzantines had often sailed down Africa's western coast to carry on trade with the black kingdoms of that continent had led a few of the more venturesome Emperors of the West to send their own expeditions all the way around Africa and onw Arabia, and from there now and then to India. But these had been sporadic adventures. Flavius Romulus wanted permanent trade relations w Asian lands. On his great voyage he carried thousands of Romans with him to India by the African route and left them there to mercantile colonies; and thereafter we were in constant commercial contact with the dark-skinned folk of those far-off lan only that, he or one of his captains—it is not clear—sailed onward from India to the even more distant realms of Khitai and Cipangu, wh

yellow-skinned people live. And thus began the commercial connections that would bring us the silks and incense, the gems and spices, the ja ivory of those mysterious lands, their rhubarb and their emeralds, rubies and pepper, sapphires, cinnamon, dyes, perfumes.

There were no bounds to Flavius Romulus's ambitions. He dreamed also of new westward voyages to the two continents o Roma on the other side of the Ocean Sea. Hundreds of years before his time, the reckless Emperor Saturninus had undertaken a foolhardy a to conquer Mexico and Peru, the two great empires of the New World, spending an enormous sum and meeting with overwh defeat. The collapse of that enterprise so weakened us, militarily and economically, that it was an easy matter for the Greeks t control of the Empire two generations later. Flavius knew from that sorry precedent that we could never achieve the conquest of fierce nations of the New World, but he hoped at least to open commercial contact with them, and from the earliest years of his re made efforts to that end.

His successor was another Hispaniard of Tarraco, Gaius Julius Flavillus, a man of nobler birth than Flavius whose family fortun have underwritten the original Flavian rebellion. Gaius Flavillus was a forceful man in his own right and an admirable Emperor, but, reigning b two such mighty figures as Flavius Romulus and Trajan Draco, he seems more of a consolidator than an innovator. During his time throne, which covered the period from 2238 to 2253, he continued the maritime policy of his predecessor, though giving more emphasis on v to the New World than to Africa and Asia, while also striving to create greater unity between the Latin and Greek halves of the Empire something to which Flavius Romulus had devoted relatively little attention.

It was during the reign of Gaius Flavillus that Trajan Draco rose to prominence. His first military assignments seem to have been in Africa, w he won early promotion for his heroism in putting down an uprising in Alexandria, and then for suppressing the depredations of bandits in the desert south of Carthago. How he came to the attention of Emperor Gaius is unclear, though probably his Hispanic birth had somet to do with it. By 2248, though, we find him in command of the Praetorian Guard. He was then only about twenty-five years old. Soon had acquired the additional title of First Tribune, and shortly Consul too, and in 2252, the year before his death, Gaius formally adopted Trajan son and proclaimed him as his heir.

It was as though Flavius Romulus had been born again, when Trajan Draco, soon afterward, assumed the purple under the n Trajan VII. In the place of the aloof patrician Gaius Flavillus came a second Hispaniard peasant to the throne, full of the same boisterous ene had catapulted Flavius to greatness, and the whole world echoed to the resonant sound of his mighty laughter.

Indeed, Trajan was Flavius redone on an even grander scale. They were both big men, but Trajan was a giant. (I, his remote descend quite tall myself.) He wore his dark hair to the middle of his back. His brow was high and noble; his eyes flashed like an eagle's; hi could be heard from the Capitoline Hill to the Janiculum. He could drink a keg of wine at a sitting with no ill effect. In the eighty years of his life five wives—not, I hasten to add, at the same time—and innumerable mistresses. He sired twenty legitimate children, the tenth of whom was n ancestor, and such a horde of bastards that it is no unusual thing today to see the hawk-faced visage of Trajan Draco staring back at one in the of almost any city in the world.

He was a lover not only of women but of the arts, especially those of statuary and music, and of the sciences. Such fields as mathemat astronomy and engineering had fallen into neglect during the two hundred years of the West's subservience to the soft, l loving Greeks. Trajan sponsored their renewal. He rebuilt the ancient capital at Roma from end to end, filling it with palaces and universi theaters as though such things had never existed there before; and, perhaps for fear that that might seem insufficient, he moved on eastward province of Pannonia, to the little city of Venia on the River Danubius, and built himself what was essentially a second capital there, with its ow university, a host of theaters, a grand Senate building, and a royal palace that is one of the wonders of the world. His reasoning was that Venia, darker and rainier and colder than sunny Roma, was closer to the heart of the Empire. He would not allow the partition of the Empire once ag eastern and western realms, immense though the task of governing the whole thing was. Placing his capital in a central location like Venia allow to look more easily westward toward Gallia and Britannia, northward into the Teuton lands and those of the Goths, and eastward to the Greek while maintaining the reins of power entirely in his own hands.

Trajan did not, however, spend any great portion of his time at the new capital, nor, for that matter, at Roma either. He was constantly move, now presenting himself at Constantinopolis to remind the Greeks of Asia that they had an Emperor, or touring Syria or Aiguptos or I or darting up into the far north to hunt the wild shaggy beasts that live in those Hyperborean lands, or revisiting his Hispania, where he had transformed the ancient city of Sevilla into the main port of embarkation for voyages to the New World. He was a man.

And in the twenty-fifth year of his reign—2278 a.u.c.—he set out on his greatest journey of all, the stupendous deed for which his name forever remembered: his voyage completely around the world, beginning and ending at Sevilla, and taking into its compass almost every natio civilized and barbaric that this globe contains.

Had anyone before him conceived of such an audacious thing? I find nothing in all the records of history to indicate it.

No one has ever seriously doubted, of course, that the world is a sphere, and therefore is open to circumnavigation. Common alone shows us the curvature of the Earth as we look off into the distance; and the notion that there is an edge somewhere, off wh mariners must inevitably plunge, is a fable suited for children's tales, nothing more. Nor is there any reason to dread the existenc impassable zone of flame somewhere in the southern seas, as simple folk used to think: it is twenty-five hundred years since ships first sailed aro southern tip of Africa and no one has seen any walls of fire yet.

But even the boldest of our seamen had never even thought of sailing all the way around the world's middle, let alone attem before Trajan Draco set out from Sevilla to do it. Voyages to Arabia and India and even Khitai by way of Africa, yes, and voyages to th World also, first to Mexico and then down the western coast of Mexico along the narrow strip of land that links the two New World contine the great empire of Peru was reached. From that we learned of the existence of a second Ocean Sea, one that was perhaps even greater than that separates Europa from the New World. On its eastern side were Mexico and Peru; on its western side, Khitai and Cipangu, with India on. But what lay in between? Were there other empires, perhaps, in the middle of that Western Sea— empires mightier than and Cipangu and India put together? What if there were an empire somewhere out there that put even Imperial Roma shade?

It was to the everlasting glory of Trajan VII Draco that he was determined to find out, even if it cost him his life. He must h utterly secure in his throne, if he was willing to abandon the capital to subordinates for so long a span of time; either that, or he d care a fig about the risk of usurpation, so avid was he to make the journey.

His five-year expedition around the world was, I think, one of the most significant achievements in all history, rivaling, perhap creation of the Empire by Augustus and its expansion across almost the whole of the known world by Trajan I and Hadrianus. It one thing, above all else that he achieved, that drew me to undertake my research into his life. He found no empires to rival Roma on that jo no, but he did discover the myriad island kingdoms of the Western Sea, whose products have so greatly enriched our live moreover, the route he pioneered through the narrow lower portion of the southern continent of the New World has given us permanent ac sea to the lands of Asia from either direction, regardless of any opposition that we might encounter from the ever-troublesome Mexica Peruvians on the one hand or the warlike Cipanguans and the unthinkably multitudinous Khitaians on the other.

But—although we are familiar with the general outlines of Trajan's voyage—the journal that he kept, full of highly specific detail, has bee for centuries. Which is why I felt such delight when one of my researchers, snuffling about in a forgotten corner of the C Maritime Affairs in Sevilla, reported to me early this year that he had stumbled quite accidentally upon that very journal. It had been filed all t amongst the documents of a later reign, buried unobtrusively in a pack of bills of lading and payroll records. I had it shipped to me Tauromenium by Imperial courier, a journey that took six weeks, for the packet went overland all the way from Hispania to I would not risk so precious a thing on the high sea—and then down the entire length of Italia to the tip of Bruttium, across the strait by ferry to M and thence to me.

Was it, though, the richly detailed narrative I yearned for, or would it simply be a dry list of navigators' marks, longi and latitudes and ascensions and compass readings?

Well, I would not know that until I had it in my hands. And as luck would have it, the very day the packet arrived w day the Caesar Demetrius returned from his month's sojourn in Africa. I barely had time to unseal the bulky packet a my thumb along the edge of the thick sheaf of time-darkened vellum pages that it contained before a messenger came with word that I was summoned to the Caesar's presence at once.

The Caesar, as I have already said, is an impatient man. I paused only long enough to look beyond the title page beginning of the text, and felt a profound chill of recognition as the distinctive backhanded cursive script of Trajan Drac to my astonished eyes. I allowed myself one further glimpse within, perhaps the hundredth page, and found a passag dealt with a meeting with some island king. Yes! Yes! The journal of the voyage, indeed!

I turned the packet over to the major-domo of my villa, a trustworthy enough Sicilian freedman named Pantaleo told him exactly what would happen to him if any harm came to a single page while I was away.

Then I betook myself to the Caesar's hilltop palace, where I found him in the garden, inspecting a pair of camels t had brought back with him from Africa. He was wearing some sort of hooded desert robe and had a splendid c scimitar thrust through his belt. In the five weeks of his absence the sun had so blackened the skin of his face and hand he could have passed easily for an Arab. "Pisander!" he cried at once. I had forgotten that foolish name in his absenc grinned at me and his teeth gleamed like beacons against that newly darkened visage.

I offered the appropriate pleasantries, had he had an enjoyable trip and all of that, but he swept my words away flick of his hand. "Do you know what I thought of, Pisander, all the time of my journey? Our great project! Our gl enterprise! And do you know, I realize now that it does not go nearly far enough. I have decided, I think, to make Sici

capital when I am Emperor. There is no need for me to live in the cool stormy north when I can so easily be this cl
Africa, a place that I now see I love enormously. And so we must build a Senate house here too, in Panormus, I thin
great villas for all the officials of my court, and a library—do you know, Pisander, there's no library worthy of the na
this whole island? But we can divide the holdings of Alexandria and bring half here, once there's a building worthy of h
them. And then—"

I will spare you the whole of it. Suffice it to say that his madness had entered an entirely new phase of uninhibited grandiosity. And I was th
victim of it, for he informed me that he and I were going to depart that very night on a trip from one end of Sicilia to the
searching out sites for all the miraculous new structures he had in mind. He was going to do for Sicilia what Augustu
done for the city of Roma itself: make it the wonder of the age. Forgotten now was the plan to begin the building program with t
palace in Tauromenium. First we must trek from Tauromenium to Lilybaeum on the other coast, and back again from Eryx to Syracusa t
pausing at every point in between.

And so we did. Sicilia is a large island; the journey occupied two and a half months. The Caesar was a cheerful enough traveling companio
is witty, after all, and intelligent, and lively, and the fact that he is a madman was only occasionally a hindrance. We traveled in great luxury a
half-healed state of my ankle meant that I was carried in a litter much of the time, which made me feel like some great par
potentate of antiquity, a Pharaoh, perhaps, or Darius of Persia. But one effect of this suddenly imposed interruption in my studies was
became impossible for me to examine the journal of Trajan VII for many weeks, which was maddening. To take it with me while we t
and study it surreptitiously in my bedchamber was too risky; the Caesar can be a jealous man, and if he were to come in unann
and find me diverting my energies to something unconnected to his project, he would be perfectly capable of seizing the journal from me
spot and tossing it into the flames. So I left the book behind, turning it over to Spiculo and telling him to guard it with his life;
many a night thereafter, as we darted hither and yon across the island in increasingly more torrid weather, summer having
arrived and Sicilia lying as it does beneath the merciless southern sun, I lay tossing restlessly, imagining the contents of the jo
my fevered mind, devising for myself a fantastic set of adventures for Trajan to take the place of the real ones that the Caesar Demetrius ha
blithe selfishness prevented me from reading in the newly discovered journal. Though I knew, even then, that the reality, once I had the ch
discover it, would far surpass anything I could imagine for myself.

And then I returned at last to Tauromenium; and reclaimed the book from Spiculo and read its every word in three astonishin
and nights, scarcely sleeping a moment. And found in it, along with many a tale of wonder and beauty and strangeness, many things that i
would not have imagined, which were not so pleasing to find.

Though it was written in the rougher Latin of medieval days, the text gave me no difficulties. The Emperor Trajan VII was an admirable
whose style, blunt and plain and highly fluent, reminded me of nothing so much as that of Julius Caesar, another great leader who could handle
as well as he did a sword. He had, apparently, kept the journal as a private record of his circumnavigation, very likely not mean
have it become a public document at all, and its survival in the archives seems to have been merely fortuitous.

His tale began in the shipyards of Sevilla: five vessels being readied for the voyage, none of them large, the greatest being only
tons. He gave detailed listings of their stores. Weapons, of course, sixty crossbows, fifty matchlock arquebuses (this weapon
newly been invented then), heavy artillery pieces, javelins, lances, pikes, shields. Anvils, grindstones, forges, bellows, lanterns, imp
with which fortresses could be constructed on newly discovered islands by the masons and stonecutters of his crew; drugs, medicines, sal
wooden quadrants, six metal astrolabes, thirty-seven compass needles, six pairs of measuring compasses, and so forth. For use in t
with the princes of newly discovered kingdoms, a cargo of flasks of quicksilver and copper bars, bales of cotton, velvet, satin, and bro
thousands of small bells, fishhooks, mirrors, knives, beads, combs, brass and copper bracelets, and such. All this was enumerated
clerk's finicky care: reading it taught me much about a side of Trajan Draco's character that I had not suspected.

At last the day of sailing. Down the River Baetis from Sevilla to the Ocean Sea, and quickly out to the Isles of the Canaria, w
however, they saw none of the huge dogs for which the place is named. But they did find the noteworthy Raining Tree, from
gigantic swollen trunk the entire water supply of one island was derived. I think this tree has perished, for no one has seen it since.

Then came the leap across the sea to the New World, a journey hampered by sluggish winds. They crossed the Equator; the pole
longer could be seen; the heat melted the tar in the ships' seams and turned the decks into ovens. But then came better s
and swiftly they reached the western shore of the southern continent where it bulges far out toward Africa. The Emp
Peru had no sway in this place; it was inhabited by cheerful naked people who made a practice of eating human flesh, "but on
Emperor tells us, "their enemies."

It was Trajan's intention to sail completely around the bottom of the continent, an astounding goal considering that no one knew how far so
extended, or what conditions would be encountered at its extremity. For that matter, it might not come to an end in the south at a

so there would be no sea route westward whatever, but only a continuous landmass running clear down to the southern pole and blo all progress by sea. And there was always the possibility of meeting with interference by Peruvian forces somewhere along the way. But southw they went, probing at every inlet in the hope that it might mark the termination of the continent and a connection with the sea that lay on the side.

Several of these inlets proved to be the mouths of mighty rivers, but wild hostile tribes lived along their banks, which made exploration p and Trajan feared also that these rivers would only take them deep inland, into Peruvian-controlled territory, without bringing them to the sea continent's western side. And so they continued south and south and south along the coast. The weather, which had been very hot worsened to the south, giving them dark skies and icy winds. But this they already knew, that the seasons are reversed belo Equator, and winter comes there in our summer, so they were not surprised by the change.

Along the shore they found peculiar black-and-white birds that could swim but not fly; these were plump and p good to eat. There still appeared to be no westerly route. The coast, barren now, seemed endless. Hail and sleet assailed them, mountain floated in the choppy sea, cold rain froze in their beards. Food and water ran low. The men began to grumble. Although they had an Emperor midst, they began to speak openly of turning back. Trajan wondered if his life might be in danger.

Soon after which, as such wintry conditions descended upon them as no man had ever seen before, there came an actual mutin captains of two ships announced that they were withdrawing from the expedition. "They invited me to meet with them to discuss the situation," wrote. "Plainly I was to be killed. I sent five trusted men to the first rebel ship, bearing a message from me, with twenty more secretly in anothe When the first group came aboard and the rebel captain greeted them on deck, my ambassadors slew him at once; and th men of the second boat came on board." The mutiny was put down. The three ringleaders were executed immediately, and eleven men were put ashore on a frigid island that had not even the merest blade of grass. I would not have expected Trajan D treat the conspirators mildly, but the calm words in which he tells of leaving these men to a terrible death were chilling indeed.

The voyagers went on. In the bleak southern lands they discovered a race of naked giants—eight feet tall, says Trajan—and captured bring back to Roma as curiosities. "They roared like bulls, and cried out to the demons they worshipped. We put them on s ships, in chains. But they would take no food from us and quickly perished."

Through storms and wintry darkness they proceeded south, still finding no way west, and even Trajan began now to think they would h abandon the quest. The sea now was nearly impassable on account of ice: they found another source of the fat flightless birds, th and set up winter camp on shore, remaining for three months, which greatly depleted their stores of food. But when in s that was fairer, though still quite inhospitable, they decided finally to go on, they came almost at once to what is now known as the Strait of Traj the continent's uttermost point. Trajan sent one of his captains in to investigate, and he found it narrow but deep, with a strong tidal flow salty water throughout: no river, but a way across to the Western Sea!

The trip through the strait was harrowing, past needle-sharp rocks, through impenetrable mists, over water that surged and from one wall of the channel to another. But green trees now appeared, and the lights of the natives' campfires, and before long they emerge other sea: "The sky was wondrously blue, the clouds were fleecy, the waves were no more than rippling wavelets, burnished l brilliant sun." The scene was so peaceful that Trajan gave the new sea the name of Pacificus, on account of its tranquility.

His plan now was to sail due west, for it seemed likely to him then, entering into this uncharted sea, that Cipangu and Khitai only a short distance in that direction. Nor did he desire to venture northward along the continent's side because that would bring the territory of the belligerent Peruvians, and his five ships would be no match for an entire empire.

But an immediate westward course proved impossible because of contrary winds and eastward-bearing currents. So northward h anyway, for a time, staying close to shore and keeping a wary eye out for Peruvians. The sun was harshly bright in the cloudless sky, and ther no rain. When finally they could turn to the west again, the sea was utterly empty of islands and looked vast beyond all imaginin night strange stars appeared, notably five brilliant ones arranged like a cross in the heavens. The remaining food s dwindled rapidly; attempts at catching fish proved useless, and the men ate chips of wood and mounds of sawdust, and hunted the rats that infested the holds. Water was rationed to a single sip a day. The risk now was not so much another mutiny as out-an starvation.

They came then to some small islands, finally: poor ones, where nothing grew but stunted, twisted shrubs. But there were people there too or twenty of them, simple naked people who painted themselves in stripes. "They greeted us with a hail of stones and arrows. Two of ou were slain. We had no choice but to kill them all. And then, since there was no food to be found on the island except few pitiful fishes and crabs that these people had caught that morning and nothing of any size or substance was to be had off sh roasted the bodies of the dead and ate those, for otherwise we would surely have died of hunger."

I cannot tell you how many times I read and reread those lines, hoping to find that they said something other than they did. But they always were the same.

In the fourth month of the journey across the Pacificus other islands appeared, fertile ones, now, whose villagers grew dates a

sort from which they made bread, wine, and oil, and also had yams, bananas, coconuts, and other such tropical things with which we are familiar. Some of these islanders were friendly to the mariners, but most were not. Trajan's journal becomes a record of atrocities killed them all; we burned their village as an example to their neighbors; we loaded our ships with their produce." The same occur again and again. There is not a word of apology or regret. It was as if by tasting human flesh they had turne monsters themselves.

Beyond these islands was more emptiness—Trajan saw now that the Pacificus was an ocean whose size was beyond all compreh compared with which even the Ocean Sea was a mere lake—and then, after another disheartening trek of many weeks, came the discovery great island group that we call the Augustines, seven thousand islands large and small, stretching in a huge arc across more thousand miles of the Pacificus. "A chieftain came to us, a majestic figure with markings drawn on his face and a shirt of cotton fringed with carried a javelin and a dagger of bronze encrusted with gold, a shield that also sparkled with the yellow metal, and he wore earrings, armle bracelets of gold likewise." His people offered spices—cinnamon, cloves, ginger, nutmeg, mace—in exchange for the simple trinkets the Roma brought, and also rubies, diamonds, pearls, and nuggets of gold. "My purpose was fulfilled," Trajan wrote. "We had found a fabulous new em the midst of this immense sea."

Which they proceeded to conquer in the most brutal fashion. Though in the beginning the Romans had peaceful relations w natives of the Augustines, demonstrating hourglasses and compasses to them and impressing them by having their ships' guns fired a staging mock gladiatorial contests in which men in armor fought against men with tridents and nets, things quickly went wrong. Some of Trajan having had too much of the date wine to drink, fell upon the island women and possessed them with all the zeal that men who h touched a woman's breasts for close upon a year are apt to show. The women, Trajan relates, appeared willing enough at first; but hi treated them with such shameful violence and cruelty that objections were raised, and then quarrels broke out as the isla came to defend their women (some of whom were no more than ten years old), and in the end there was a bloody massacre, culminating murder of the noble island chieftain.

This section of the journal is unbearable to read. On the one hand it is full of fascinating detail about the customs of the islanders, how p sacrificed by old women who caper about blowing reed trumpets and smear the blood of the sacrifice on the foreheads of the men, and how m all ages have their sexual organs pierced from one side to the other with a gold or tin bolt as large as a goose quill, and so on and on with m strange detail that seems to have come from another world. But interspersed amongst all this is the tale of the slaughter islanders, the inexorable destruction of them under one pretext or another, the journey from isle to isle, the Romans alway greeted in peace but matters degenerating swiftly into rape, murder, looting.

Yet Trajan appears unaware of anything amiss here. Page after page, in the same calm, steady tone, describes these hor though they were the natural and inevitable consequence of the collision of alien cultures. My own reactions of shock and dismay, as I read make it amazingly clear to me how different our era is from his, and how very little like a Renaissance man I actually am. Trajan saw the crime men as unfortunate necessities at the worst; I saw them as monstrous. And I came to realize that one profound and complex aspect of the dec of our civilization is our disdain for violence of this sort. We are Romans still; we abhor disorder and have not lost our skill at the arts of wa when Trajan Draco can speak so blandly of retaliating with cannons against an attack with arrows, or of the burning of entire villa retribution for a petty theft from one of our ships, or the sating of his men's lust on little girls because they were unwil take the time to seek out their older sisters, I could not help but feel that there is something to be said in favor of our s decadence.

During these three days and nights of steady reading of the journals I saw no one, neither Spiculo nor the Caesar n of the women with whom I have allayed the boredom of my years in Sicilia. I read on and on and on, until my head be swim, and I could not stop, horrified though I often was.

Now that the empty part of the Pacificus was behind them, one island after another appeared, not only the m Augustines, but others farther to the west and south, multitudes of them; for although there is no continent in this ocean, are long chains of islands, many of them far larger than our Britannia and Sicilia. Over and over I was told of the ornamented with gold and peacock feathers bearing island chieftains offering rich gifts, or of horned fish and oysters th of sheep and trees whose leaves, when they fall to the ground, will rise on little feet and go crawling away, and kings rajahs who could not be addressed face-to-face, but only through speaking tubes in the walls of their palaces. Isles of s isles of gold, isles of pearls—marvel after marvel, and all of them now seized and claimed by the invincible Roman Em in the name of eternal Roma.

Then, finally, these strange island realms gave way to familiar territory: for now Asia was in sight, the shores of K Trajan made landfall there, exchanged gifts with the Khitaian sovereign, and acquired from him those Khitaian experts arts of printing and gunpowder-making and the manufacture of fine porcelains whose skills, brought back by him to K

gave such impetus to this new era of prosperity and growth that we call the Renaissance.

He went on to India and Arabia afterward, loading his ships with treasure there as well, and down one side of Afric up the other. It was the same route as all our previous far voyages, but done this time in reverse.

Trajan knew once he had rounded Africa's southernmost cape that the spanning of the globe had been achieved, a hastened onward toward Europa, coming first to Lusitania's southwestern tip, then coasting along southern Hispania u returned with his five ships and their surviving crew to the mouth of the River Baetis and, soon after, to the starting p Sevilla, "These are mariners who surely merit an eternal fame," he concluded, "more justly than the Argonauts of ol sailed with Jason in search of the golden fleece. For these our wonderful vessels, sailing southwards through the Ocea toward the Antarctic Pole, and then turning west, followed that course so long that, passing round, we came into the and thence again into the west, not by sailing back, but by proceeding constantly forward: so compassing about the gl the world, until we marvelously regained our native land of Hispania, and the port from which we departed, Sevilla."

There was one curious postscript. Trajan had made an entry in his journal for each day of the voyage. By his reck the date of his return to Sevilla was the ninth day of Januarius in 2282; but when he went ashore, he was told that th was Januarius 10. By sailing continuously westward around the world, they had lost a day somewhere. This remai mystery until the astronomer Macrobius of Alexandria pointed out that the time of sunrise varies by four minutes fo degree of longitude, and so the variation for a complete global circuit of three hundred sixty degrees would be 1,440 m or one full day. It was the clearest proof, if anyone had dared to doubt Trajan's word, that the fleet had sailed entirely a the world to reach the strange new isles of that unknown sea. And by so doing had unlocked a treasure chest of wonde the great Emperor would fully exploit in the two decades of absolute power that remained to him before his death at th of eighty.

And did I, having gained access at last to the key document of the reign of Trajan VII, set immediately about the t finishing my account of his extraordinary life?

No. No. And this is why.

Within four days of my finishing my reading of the journal, and while my head was still throbbing with all I had disco therein, a messenger came from Italia with news that the Emperor Lodovicus Augustus had died in Roma of an apoplex his son the Caesar Demetrius had succeeded to the throne as Demetrius II Augustus.

It happened that I was with the Caesar when this message arrived. He showed neither grief over his father's passi jubilation over his own ascent to the highest power. He simply smiled a small smile, the merest quirking of the corner mouth, and said to me, "Well, Draco, it looks as if we must pack for another trip, and so soon after our last one, too."

I had not wanted to believe—none of us did—that Demetrius would ever become Emperor. We had all hope Lodovicus would find some way around the necessity of it: would discover, perhaps, some hitherto unknown illegitimate son, o in Babylon or Londin all these years, who could be brought forth and given preference. It was Lodovicus, after all, who had cared s to witness the antics of his son and heir that he had packed Demetrius off to Sicilia these three years past and forbidden him to set foot mainland, though he would be free to indulge whatever whim he fancied in his island exile.

But that exile now was ended. And in that same instant also was ended all the Caesar's scheme to beautify Sicilia.

It was as though those plans had never been. "You will sit among my high ministers, Draco," the new Emperor told me. "I will make you I think, in my first year. I will have the other Consulship myself. And you will also have the portfolio of the Ministry of Public Works; for the beyond all doubt is in need of beautification. I have a design for a new palace for myself in mind, and then perhaps we can do something improving the shabby old Capitol, and there are some interesting foreign gods, I think, who would appreciate having temples erected honor, and then—"

If I had been Trajan Draco, I would perhaps have assassinated our crazy Demetrius in that moment and taken the throne for m both for the Empire's sake and my own. But I am only Tiberius Ulpius Draco, not Trajan of the same cognomen, and Demetrius has b Emperor and you know the rest.

And as for my book on Trajan the Dragon: well, perhaps I will complete it someday, when the Emperor has run short of proj me to design. But I doubt that he ever will, and even if he does, I am not sure that it is a book I still want to give public, now that I have read Trajan's journal of the circumnavigation. If I were to tell the story of my ancestor's towering achiev would I dare to tell the whole of it? I think not. And so I feel only relief at allowing my incomplete draft of the book to gather dust in its box. It w aim, in this research of mine, to discover the inner nature of my great royal kinsman the Dragon; but I delved too dee seems, and came to know him a little too well.