

SUPERMARIUS

Prologue.

Surrounded by his bodyguards, a man, a king, is riding silently through the empty road. He stops a first time, looks at the city from which he has been chased away, takes again his way, stops a second time. He looks a long time, always silent and from afar, at *fora*, palaces, temples, houses, like he was trying a new detail in that net of walls and history, the light that can suddenly put him into the midst of a different truth. But nothing changes his conviction. No, everything in that city - including power- is bought and sold. " City for sale and doomed to quick destruction, if it should find a buyer!" he suddenly talks aloud. He touches by his heels his horse's flanks and takes again his road without looking back and without speaking anymore.

That city is Rome, that man is Jugurtha, king of Numidia.

A dangerous young man.

Jugurtha is the son of a prince and of a concubine. Growing up, he despises idleness and likes riding, hunting and handling weapons. When he orphaned, the king Micipsa, his uncle, adopts him , regretting almost immediately: that young man is too ambitious, too intelligent, too impetuous, too popular, he may create unrest. Micipsa sends him to fight together with the Romans in the war against Numantia, hoping that his own nephew fall in battle.

Jugurtha, however, comes back, safe and sound, full of new knowledge (especially about how the Romans fight and how they can... be bribed) and important friends, laden with honours. The legendary Carthage's conqueror, the consul Publius Scipio Aemilianus in person, praises him. Micipsa needs to start all over again. Now he tries to soften his fiery nephew by giving him responsibility and by appointing him his heir, like his sons Hiempsal and Adherbal.

He should never have done it. On the death of the king(118 BC), Jugurtha conceals his true intentions , he seems to play the game, but he aspires to something else. He began by calling the abolition of all laws issued by Micipsa during the past five years, because, according to him, those laws were issued by an half -fuddled king. His is a resounding own goal. Among those laws there is also an "*ad personam*" law, the law by which the King puts him among his heirs. Cornered, Jugurtha throws the mask, he murders treacherously Hiempsal (Livius will provide a different version) and defeats Adherbal in battle (112BC), forcing him to flee from Numidia and to seek shelter in Rome .

Auri sacra fames.

Rome's reaction is up to date with the bad norm of those times: at the beginning it is outraged; then, as soon as Jugurtha's gold from Numidia takes the way to Rome and goes into the right pockets , the indignation becomes less strong. The senators, "worked" by those who have taken advantage by Jugurtha's bribes, call to the Senate Adherbal and the ambassadors of Numidia to listen to their reasons.

Adherbal speaks from his heart : my father died, my brother was murdered, my friends have been crucified or thrown in jail, I have no more allies. Perhaps I have not even dignity. Everybody turns away from me. Will even Rome turn away from me ? Rome , to which since the days of my grandfather Masinissa , we Numidians have sworn allegiance, beside which we have fought the common Carthaginian enemy , to which we are still loyal?

That is a pack of lies! Jugurtha's ambassadors reply: Hiempsal was killed by the Numidians because of his cruelty and Adherbal is an aggressor and was kicked out for this reason. Loyalty to Rome? Our King distinguished himself in combat in the rank of the Roman legions. Could he ever betray Rome?

It is time to decide and the Roman senators, because of the gold of the king, do not see that issue in the same way: some of them support Adherbal while others, instead, support Jugurtha's reasons. Finally, the Conscript Fathers instead of forming an army, appoint a delegation and send it to Numidia to fix things. And what does Jugurtha? He exploits his connections with powerful Roman families, but more importantly, knowing whom he is dealing with, he hands out money, buys the members of the delegation and, in the division of the kingdom followed by the peace arrangements, gets the best territories. Adherbal bites the bullet: he has got very, very little, but little is still better than nothing. And so he prefers to keep quiet.

But a couple of years later, Jugurtha tries again. Pressed closely, Adherbal takes refuge in his own capital, Cirta (today Constantine, in Algeria), this time determined to hold. From Rome, for the second time, instead of an army, a delegation arrives. An incorruptible delegation? Wait and hope! With their pockets bulging with coins of the realm, the Roman delegates in Numidia close more than an eye. Jugurtha takes advantage of this situation, conquers Cirta and kills Adherbal. But - fatal mistake- he passes to the sword many Italians and some Roman citizens. At this point the Senate takes action and declares war to the impious faithless.

Souk mundi.

The name of the consul who has to command the Roman army in Numidia is Lucius Calpurnius Bestia. He is experienced, courageous, intelligent, but also greedy for money and wealth (*aeger avaritiae*). Sallust writes: Calpurnius was a concentration of excellent qualities, but they are made useless by that abominable attitude.

As expert soldier, Bestia immediately understands one thing: his army can not compete with Jugurtha's invincible cavalry, favoured by the terrain and by the knowledge of the places; as man who is slave of *avaritia*, Bestia can not resist the *auri sacra fames* (literally: abominable gold hunger). One of his deputies, Emilio Scaurus, is no exception. He is only smarter (or more circumspect) than Bestia, he has a lot of ambitions, but he is able to disguise them very well. That being the case, the two, instead of fighting, prefer to come to terms. And to take bribes. Result: a peace is concluded, Jugurtha gets by also in this situation and Rome, for the second time, flies into a rage.

Lucius Memmius, *tribunus plebis* (tribune of the people, plebeian tribune), rides the discontent. In Rome, as on the Numidian battlefield, the Republic was offering for sale, he thunders (*domi militiaeque res publica venalis fuit*). And he insists: let Jugurtha come here, protected by a safe-conduct, in order to spill the beans. Bestia and Scaurus tremble; the nobility, fearing a dangerous precedent that may threaten its privileges, closes the ranks around the two. All for nothing: Memmius succeeds and the praetor Lucius Cassius is sent to Numidia with a mandate to bring the king in Rome. Jugurtha knows he has a guilty conscience, he does not trust, he fears traps. Cassius insists, he resorts to the usual bullshits (Rome can exert as its force as its mercy, I give you my word, etc.. etc..) and, bullshit after bullshit, he convinces him.

Meanwhile, in Numidia, corruption does not stop. There are some who resell to Jugurtha the war elephants confiscated as a result of the peace agreements; some who return the deserters on payment; some who make forays into neighbouring countries and some who are guilty of who knows what other atrocities. Exceptional events? Not so. According to Memmius, at least. Once, in the Senate, he had noted bitterly: the embezzlement? the

extortion against the Allies? They are serious, very serious matters, but now they are of no importance since they are so common (*tamen consuetudine iam pro nihilo habentur*).

Then he had continued: Look around. Wherever you look, there are cowardly and greedy nobles: they have enriched themselves illegally and are forgetful of the ancient virtues, but they do not shame to flaunt prestigious positions, to exercise the consulate, and to celebrate undeserved triumphs. Do you not realize, *Quirites*, that you have been deprived of your authority and your reputation?

Is Jugurtha right when he thinks that Rome looks like a souk, more than the centre of the world (*Caput mundi*)?

What happens afterwards, seems to prove him right. The people grumble noisily when the king arrives to the Senate, ordinary dressed and with a humble attitude. This is a move designed to avoid offending the sensibility of those who must listen to him. Jugurtha does not care much about the people's grumbles. He is aware that he is well covered. And not only by the Senate's safe-conduct. Because of his military past, in Rome he has friends in high places, and especially in Rome he has not arrived empty-handed. And just stepped in the City, he has begun to distribute gifts on all sides, gaining to his cause a big gun, Memmius' colleague, the tribune Gaius Bebius. And so, when is asked to spill the beans, Jugurtha, on the advice of Bebius, exercises the right to remain silent, while Bebius himself exercises his veto.

This move catches everybody off guard; Scaurus and Bestia breathe a big sigh of relief, the nobility takes heart again, and the king becomes even more impudent and cheeky. So impudent and cheeky enough to make assassinate a possible rival in exile in Rome, a cousin of his, Massiva, to whom, fishing in troubled waters, the consul Spurius Albinus, intended to Numidia, had advised to reclaim the throne. When the news of the assassination of Massiva becomes public domain, as we would say today, Jugurtha is invited to leave Rome. In time to deliver to the history the prophecy of the city waiting for its buyer.

The war resumes between ups and lows, between military operations and power games. That, in fact, is a war like no other. On Numidia's battlefields lengthen the shadows of the political and social contradictions of Rome in those times. Times when the struggle between the nobility and the plebeians, after the tragic death of the Gracchi, had become more critical. Sallust writes: In ancient times, the problems were common and the fear of enemies favoured the civil harmony; with the disappearance of the enemy, with the increasing wealth and the extension of the Republic, who had less (*plebs*) wanted to have more and those who had more (*nobilitas*) did not want less. Hence the conflicts, the struggles, the momentary lulls, the claims, the riots, the abuse, the rise of "new men", *optimates vs. populares* and vice versa.

With this instability in the background, the consul Spurius Albinus reaches Numidia, determined to make a short work of Jugurtha, but once in Africa he seems more eager to amass personal benefits than to safeguard the Republic's interests. More than at Numidia, in short, he looks at Rome, more than at the Senate's power, he looks at his own power. And, as soon as he may, he returns to the City to act as anchorman of the electoral *Comitia Centuriata*.

His "inept full of himself" (the definition is by Sallust) brother Aulus Albinus, remained in Numidia as a pro-praetor, driven by the hurry, by the ambition or by the desire to seize Jugurtha's treasure, makes a right mess and suffers, in Suthul, a resounding defeat. As at the time of the Samnite wars, the Roman legionaries must pass under the yoke.

In Rome, the indignation, especially among the plebs, rises. What is this? Are we not even able to prevail over a little king of a small kingdom? And what is the Senate doing, if we are moving from one defeat to another? And then, why do the commanders come back

defeated from Africa, but filthy rich? A commission, of course, is established. It has the task of examining the positions of the alleged corrupt. And who was called to take part of it? Emilius Scaurus. Yes, that Emilius Scaurus once Calpurnius Bestia's deputy, bearing the stench of bribes.

It is a bad situation, it is necessary to fix it. This time the Senate appoints (109 BC) the consul Quintus Caecilius Metellus to save Rome's honour in Numidia. Metellus, a honest and incorruptible man, is accepted by everybody and is a good general. He finds the Army in pitiful condition and he reorganizes it; he tries to fight Jugurtha by turning money and promises in an attempt to gain to his cause the Numidian dignitaries; he obtains some military sporadic success (near river Methul, for example), immediately transformed by Roman people and Senate into a decisive victory; he comes several times on the verge of the victory, without ever being able, however, because of the guerrilla war in which Jugurtha is a master, to bring the final blow. And, moreover, he must hold off an experienced, brave and determined soldier: his deputy Gaius Marius.

Marius is a commoner, a *homo novus* with a lot of ambitions. He aspires to the consulate and, on paper, he has got every requirement: he makes of the *virtus* -a mixture of military bravery and personal excellence - his belief; he aspires to glory, he is honest, has gained experience in more than a battle, is frugal, is insensitive to the vices of the time. However he lacks the main requirement: the blue blood. But to his part he has the prophecy of a soothsayer, met in Utica: nothing will be foreclosed to you, the gods will be favourable, you can do it.

So why do not try it?

Metellus does not think in the same way: the consulate? It is not for you. The consulate is for those who can brag about ancient ancestries and if you go to Rome, it will be denied to you. As it should be. So put your mind at rest: I will not give you the permission to leave. Why this refusal? Why a so intransigent attitude? Is there bad blood between them? Maybe, but Metellus' refusal is, somehow, the mirror of those times, in which a broader comparison is reflected: *status quo* against change, old against new. As we would say today: Policy against anti-politics?

Marius, however, is a tough nut and does not waive. Eventually Metellus gives up and allows him to leave. Back in Rome, Marius rides the tiger of anti-politics and he does not spare anyone: The corrupt and coward *nobilitas*, covetous of privileges and sinecures, unworthy of its ancestors; Metellus himself, who is accused by Marius to prolong the war against Jugurtha in order to obtain personal benefits.

Pure music for the people's ears and not only for theirs. Marius gets the consulate and Metellus if does not falls into depression, is not far off from it. Certainly, he has to give up the command of operations and, if at home he is hailed as a winner and rewarded by the title of "Numidicus", he seethes.

Before leaving to Africa by people's will, Marius makes the things clear with the Senate: I need another army, a different army. The Republic does not need citizen-soldiers, but professional soldiers, even destitute, unemployed, underclass. Is it not good for you? Take me out of the office and put in my place one of those noble descendants of ancient families, always ready to cram the glories of their ancestors into their mouth, but unable of doing anything. For my part, I have no actions of ancestors to show, but I can show the scars of the wounds that I have received in battle.

How to say: the personal bravery, *virtus*, is what makes the difference, not blood.

Marius can boast a lot of personal bravery, but Jugurtha is a tough nut: he hits and disappears, he is expert of the places and of the Roman fighting techniques. And, what is more important, now he has an ally: Bocchus, king of Mauritania.

As one time Metellus, Marius has more than a difficulty to obtain now a victory here, now a narrow success there. Then a Ligurian legionary, seeking snails, opens to him,

accidentally, the doors of King's treasure room, and his *quaestor* Lucius Cornelius Sulla (he, yes, from an ancient family) persuades the King Bocchus to leave Jugurtha. Without money to pay his troops, without allies, Jugurtha fights with the strength of despair, but his fate is doomed. It will be delivered by Bocchus to Sulla and he will die by starvation in the city that perhaps he had hoped to buy (104 BC). On the throne of Mauritania ascends Gauda, Jugurtha's half brother and weak-minded.

Epilogue

That seemingly "minor" war was decisive for the fate of the Republic. How did it end? Badly, needless to say. Marius had his triumph, Sulla felt cheated, the conflict between the two soured, and the contrast between *optimates* and *populares* became open warfare. The Republic experienced blacklists, internal uprisings, external attacks, civil war, an unprecedented bloodbath.

And not many years passed before a dictator, called by the most, appeared on the horizon.