



TWILIGHT EMPRESS



FAITH L. JUSTICE



RAGGEDY MOON BOOKS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

*To Gordon Rothman,
without whom I couldn't write about love.*

“The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.”

Edward Gibbon
The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

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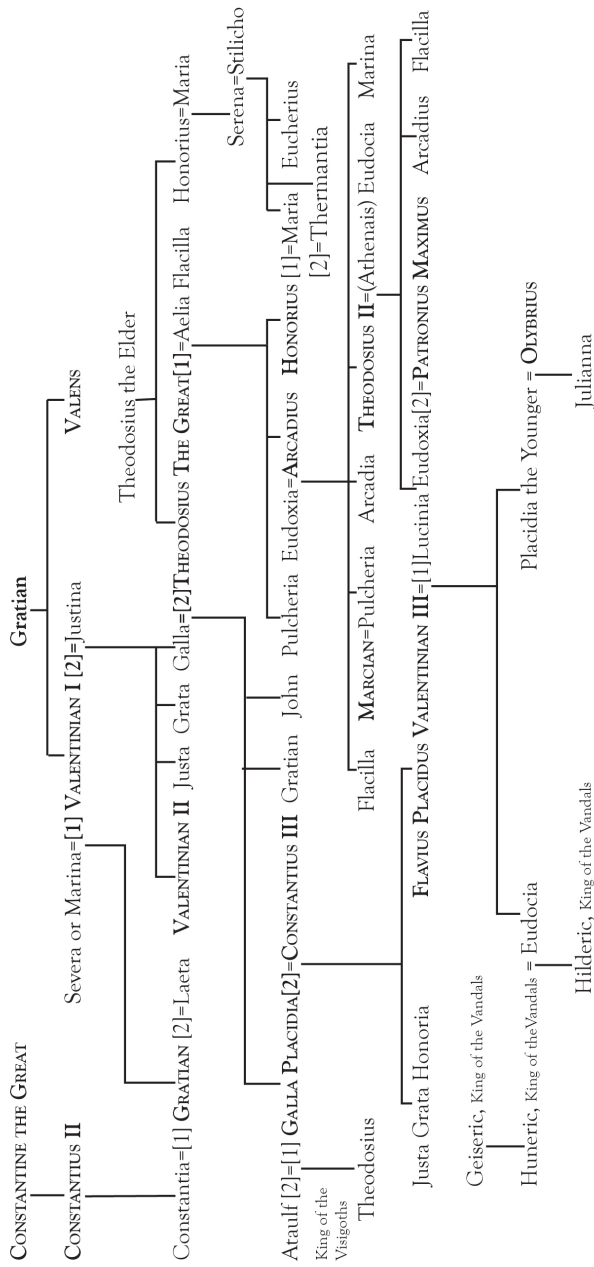
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Theodosian Genealogy

Emperors shown in BOLD SMALL CAP LETTERING.



NOTE ON IMPERIAL TITLES AND PLACE NAMES

Imperial titles evolved over time. The title AUGUSTUS (Latin for “majestic”, “the increaser”, or “venerable”) is the equivalent of the modern Emperor and was conferred on the first emperor Octavian (great-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar) by the senate in 27 BC. Every emperor after held the title of Augustus, which always followed the family name. The first emperor conferred the title AUGUSTA on his wife Livia in his will. Other imperial wives (but not all) earned this supreme title. By the fifth century, sisters and daughters also could be elevated to this status, but only by a sitting Augustus. I use Emperor/Empress and Augustus/Augusta interchangeably throughout the text.

Octavian took his adoptive father’s name, Gaius Julius Caesar, but dropped the Gaius Julius later. CAESAR became the imperial family name and was passed on by adoption. When the Julio-Claudian line died out, subsequent emperors took the name as a sign of status on their accession, adoption, or nomination as heir apparent. By the fifth century, it was the title given to an official heir to the Augustus. (Note: it’s also the root for the modern titles Kaiser and Czar.)

Children of imperial families were usually given the title *NOBILISSIMUS/NOBILISSIMA* (“Most Noble”—boy/girl). This is the closest equivalent to the modern Prince/Princess, but not an exact match. The title was usually conferred some years after birth, in anticipation that the child would take on higher office (Caesar or Augustus for a boy, Augusta for a girl). Throughout the text I use the modern title Princess instead of *Nobilissima*.

With few exceptions (Constantinople for modern Istanbul), I chose to use the modern names of cities and the anglicized rather than Latin names of provinces.

CHARACTERS

In order of appearance;
alternate spellings in parentheses, fictional in *italics*.

- **Galla Placidia Augusta**—half-sister to the Roman Emperor in the West, half-aunt to Roman Emperor in the East
- *Paulus*—maimed Vandal soldier who served in Stilicho's household, then Placidia's
- **Ataulf** (Athaulf, Adolphus)—Brother-in-law and successor to King Alaric of the Goths
- **Alaric**—King of the Goths
- **Gaatha**—Alaric's wife and Ataulf's sister
- **Valia** (Vallia, Wallia)—Gothic noble
- *Machaon*—Greek physician
- **Flavius Constantius**—General, advisor to Emperor Honorius
- **Flavius Honorius Augustus**—Roman Emperor in the West and half-brother to Placidia
- *Lucilla*—Placidia's personal servant
- **Priscus Attalus**—Prefect of Rome, Gothic choice for emperor
- **Bishop Sigesar**—personal Arian bishop to Alaric and Ataulf
- **Sergeric** (Singeric, Sigeric)—Goth chieftain, Sarus' brother
- **Vada**—Ataulf's oldest daughter
- **Lilla**—Ataulf's middle daughter
- **Maltha**—Ataulf's youngest daughter
- **Ediulf**—Ataulf's fourth child and son
- **Dardanus**—Praetorian Prefect of Gaul
- **Sarus**—former Gothic General in Roman army
- **Sigisvult**—Gothic warrior in Placidia's service, Roman General
- *Thecla*—midwife and Machaon's sister
- *Nikarete*—midwife and Thecla's daughter

- **Justa Grata Honoria**—daughter to Placidia and Constantius
- **Flavius Placidus Valentinian**—son to Placidia and Constantius
- **Castinus**—Roman General, advisor to Honorius
- **Felix**—Roman General in the West, Patrician
- **Padusa** (Spadusa)—Felix’s wife
- **Theodoric I** (Theoderic)—King of the Goths
- **Flavius Theodosius Augustus II**—Emperor in the East, nephew to Placidia
- **Aelia Pulcheria Augusta**—Theodosius’ older sister and chief advisor, niece to Placidia
- **Aelia Eudocia Augusta** called **Athenais**—Theodosius’ wife
- **Licinia Eudoxia Augusta**—Theodosius’ and Athenais’ daughter
- **Leontius**—curator, Placidia’s business and legal advisor
- *Angelus*—shepherd and “Angel of the Marshes”
- **John** (Johannes)—*primicerius notariorum* and usurper
- **Flavius Aetius**—Roman General in the West, Patrician
- **Ardaburius**—General (of infantry) in the East, Alan by birth
- **Aspar**—General (of cavalry) in the East, Ardaburius’ son
- **Helion**—Master of Offices in the East
- **Count Boniface**—Roman General, Count of Africa
- **Pelagia**—Boniface’s wife, an Arian Gothic noble woman
- **Maximinus**—Arian Bishop to Sigisvult’s army
- **Ruga** (Regila)—King of the Huns
- **Bleda**—Ruga’s nephew and co-heir with Attila
- **Attila**—succeeded Ruga as King of the Huns
- **Gaiseric** (Genseric, Gizericus)—King of the Vandals
- **Huneric**—Gaiseric’s son
- **Amaltha**—Huneric’s Gothic wife and daughter of King Theodoric
- **Eugenius**—Honorius’ chamberlain
- **Bassus Herculanius**—Roman Senator and Honorius’ fiance

PART I



PRINCESS



AUGUST 410 - SEPTEMBER 413



CHAPTER 1

Rome, August 410

GOD'S BLOOD, I'M TIRED.

Placidia put the parchment down, closed her eyes, and rubbed her temples in a futile attempt to ease her headache. She had had little sleep the night before, and less to eat, as she worked with the city elders to avert this most recent crisis. With the Visigoths at the gates of Rome for the third time in three years, the city was exhausted—little food, few defenders, and no hope of rescue from the Imperial Court, which was safe behind the protecting marshes of Ravenna. At twenty-two, she should have been safely married, raising children; not picking up the pieces of an empire dropped from the careless hands of her half-brother, the Emperor Honorius.

“Treason and betrayal, Mistress!”

The urgency in Paulus’ gruff voice drove all tiredness from her body. Nothing chilled her blood as much as the cry of ‘treason.’ The word summoned unwanted images of her adopted sister Serena, struggling against the executioner’s garrote, and Serena’s husband Stilicho’s head on a pike. The unwarranted death of the two people who raised her had precipitated her flight from the Ravenna court and her estrangement from her brother.

Placidia took a deep breath and steadied her hands.

“What treason?” She managed a calm voice despite her racing heart.

“Someone opened the Salarian Gate. The barbarians are in the streets. We must flee to safety.”

Placidia chewed her lower lip, rapidly forming and discarding options to save her household. There were rules to sacking a city, and Placidia hoped King Alaric would abide by them. One of those rules provided sanctuary in Christian churches. The Gothic King was purportedly a devout Christian, if of the Arian heresy.

“What are your orders, Mistress?” The light of battle gleamed in Paulus’ eyes. A Vandal soldier wounded in Stilicho’s service, he had been with her since she was a child.

“Deploy my personal guards at the bottom of the hill. Take the rest of the servants to the Basilica of St. Peter immediately and claim sanctuary. I’ll come with the guards as soon as I destroy these documents.”

Placidia grabbed the nearest of several piles of parchment—letters of support; reports on food and supplies throughout the Empire—and laid them in an unlit bronze brazier. She would give the enemy no helpful information. Her hands trembled as she poured oil on the papers and lit them from her lamp. Smoke curled from the parchment, irritating her eyes.

“I’ll send the servants away, Princess, but do not ask me to leave you alone. I’ve seen my share of sacked cities.”

“I want you to go with the servants, Paulus.”

His face set in a familiar stubborn cast.

“I don’t have time to argue. What can a crippled old man do here?”

The stubborn look gave way to one of hurt pride.

Placidia softened her tone. “I have lost all whom I love in the past two years. The man and woman who were more to me than father and mother, my cousins, my...betrothed.” Her voice caught. “I have no wish to lose the one person left from my past. I care for you, my friend, and want to see you safe.”

“Do you think I care less for you?” Paulus’ eyes glittered with unshed tears. “You are the last of my lord’s household. I am bound to

you by oath and blood.”

Screams echoed down the colonnade, accompanied by splintering wood and crashing crockery. Placidia froze like a rabbit before a snake. *My people are lost. The raiders must have ridden hard and fast to get to the palace so soon.*

Paulus grabbed the small knife Placidia used to break the wax seals on her letters, and rushed toward the door. “Come, Princess, we will go to the oratory. Perhaps they will honor sanctuary there.”

Placidia shook her head. “If King Alaric wants me dead, the chapel won’t shelter me. If he wants me alive, perhaps I can extend that privilege to my household by being bold rather than timid.”

A scream, choked off in the middle, sent Paulus through the door at a limping run. Placidia piled the rest of the papers onto the blaze and dashed out after him.

She faltered at the scene. Normally, the central garden with its splashing *nymphaeum* was a soothing refuge from the heat of the August sun. Now a cadre of at least fifty Gothic warriors systematically herded the palace servants into the leafy refuge, releasing the scent of lavender and rosemary as their leather-clad feet trampled herbs and flowers. They used the flats of their swords, sometimes striking a lagging slave, to push them into a tight knot of gibbering humanity.

Unlike the wildly varying dress and armor of most barbarian warriors, these wore more or less matching knee-length green tunics trimmed with scarlet at the neck and hem. Most also sported mail shirts and Roman-style helmets—rare, these days, even among Roman troops.

At least King Alaric sent an elite corps to take me.

One warrior spied her under the colonnade and rushed forward, grinning.

Paulus jumped in front of the man, threatening him with the letter knife. “Don’t touch her! She’s the...”

The barbarian brushed the knife aside with a sweep of his arm and struck Paulus with the silvered hilt of his sword.

The old man sank to the ground, senseless or dead, a large gash bleeding profusely on his forehead.

Placidia stalked into the garden, back rigid, face pale.

“Stop at once!” Her voice pierced the scene, turning it momentarily into a tableau.

The advancing warrior bared his teeth and said, in execrable Latin, “Roman woman not a mouse—more my liking.”

“I am Princess Galla Placidia, sister of Emperor Honorius, daughter of Emperor Theodosius the Great, Granddaughter of Emperor Valentinian. On pain of death, I demand you leave us in peace.”

The barbarian hesitated, confusion clouding his eyes.

Placidia suppressed an inappropriate smile. Her impressive list of relationships didn’t square with her ink-stained fingers, plain blue linen gown, and unadorned curly brown hair.

“Leave her, Berig.” A commanding voice rose from among the warriors.

A red-haired barbarian muscled his way through the pack. She had not seen him because he stood half a head shorter than most of his companions. He looked her over speculatively.

“You have the bearing of a royal, if not the accouterments.” He motioned to the slaves nearest them. “Is this your mistress?”

To their credit, they all looked to Placidia before answering. She nodded permission.

Watching the by-play, the warrior said, “I commend you on your servants, Princess. They are most loyal.” He smiled, showing white, even teeth in a tanned face framed by a red beard. Lines gathered at the corners of his green eyes. “I am Ataulf, General and Master of King Alaric’s cavalry.”

The Gothic King honors me by sending his heir and second-in-command. “General.” Placidia drew her slender form into a commanding pose. “Have these...men...vacate my residence at once.”

“We will leave shortly, Princess. King Alaric sent me to escort you to our camp. You are to be the guest of the King and the Gothic people.”

“Do not pretty the package, sir. I am a hostage. For what other reason would you force me from my home?” She waved her right arm in a sweeping arc. “You strip Rome and seek to squeeze additional

treasure from my brother.”

“King Alaric recognizes your...value.”

His hesitation hinted at deeper motives for her detainment. Perhaps Alaric wished more than gold from her estranged brother. *And little will he get—gold or otherwise—from that lack-wit.*

Ataulf donned his helmet. “Come, Princess.” He took her arm.

Placidia sniffed. He reeked of horses, smoke, and sweat. In many ways comforting scents, evoking her martial father and, later, her guardian Stilicho. But she shook off his hand. “Not until we have medical care for Paulus.” She indicated her fallen chamberlain.

Berig brandished his sword. “Bugger that. Let me finish him.”

“No!” Placidia strode forward, blocking Berig with her body. “He is mine! You will not harm him.”

Berig looked at Ataulf, who shook his head. The twice-disappointed warrior shrugged and backed down.

Ataulf touched her shoulder.

She flinched.

“Your man will be tended at our camp.”

“And the rest of my people?” She indicated the crowd of servants, some weeping, some stiff with anger or fear, others standing in slack-jawed bewilderment. “I cannot travel without servants.”

The skin tightened around Ataulf’s mouth. His eyes narrowed. “The contents of this city are ours. Any slave from our tribes will be freed. We claim the rest as booty.”

“But...”

Ataulf raised a hand. “You may take three personal maids and a cook.”

“And Paulus. He is a free man and has pledged his service to me.”

“I doubt he would bring much on the slave market.” The hint of a smile played about his lips. “You may keep him.”

Choosing her attendants was not the first hard decision Placidia had to make, and it wouldn’t be her last, but that knowledge brought little comfort. She chose three of the youngest girls, hoping to shelter them from the horrors she imagined the rest would face, and a matronly cook to look after them.

Ataulf chose ten of his men to provide escort, and dismissed the rest to loot the palace. “Berig, you carry the old one.”

Berig slung Paulus over his shoulder like a sack of cabbages.

Placidia’s heart lightened when she heard Paulus moan. She turned to her four servants. “Stay close to our escort. Don’t try to escape. We have the word of General Ataulf we will not be harmed, but he cannot speak for the rest of the army if you are captured by someone else.”

The cook nodded and gathered the girls together in a tight knot. “You heard the Mistress, now. Stay close and you’ll be safe. Don’t go running off like stupid donkeys.”

They walked down the north face of the Palatine Hill, their escort grumbling about time wasted when they could be pillaging.

“You’ll share with the others,” Ataulf assured them.

At the bottom of the hill, several more warriors guarded a picket line of horses. Shields, spears, and a few bows hung from the four high horns at the corners of the saddles.

Placidia drew a sharp breath. *Does he plan to parade me through Rome before his horse, like a conquering general in a triumph?*

At the picket line, Ataulf swung up onto a skittish bay. One of the warriors brought a mounting block for Placidia.

Ataulf held out his hand. “I’m afraid we have no litter for you, Princess. You will have to ride with me.”

Knowing the royal litter or chariot would be a rallying point for resistance—if any—Placidia suspected Ataulf of duplicity.

“Can I not have a mount of my own? I am a capable rider.” The idea of dashing through the streets of Rome in the arms of the barbarian chief was almost as repugnant as the thought of pacing before his horse as a prisoner.

“No. Especially if you are a capable rider.” He held out his hand again. “Come.”

She swung up, settling with a knee around one of the horns for balance. The general’s mail pressed her back; his breath stirred her hair. She leaned slightly forward and grasped the horse’s mane.

“Perhaps I should ride pillion.” She turned to peer at Ataulf from

the corner of her eye.

“And have you slide off and disappear down an alley? No. You stay where I can see you.”

The bay stepped nervously to the side. Placidia felt the muscles in his arms tighten as Ataulf pulled sharply on the reins. His mount snorted to a stop, trembling. *I know how you feel.* She patted the animal’s sweating neck. *I’m about to jump out of my own skin.*

“You!” Ataulf pointed to a warrior, not in his troop, leading a donkey and cart half filled with bolts of cloth. “I need that cart.” The man looked startled but, recognizing Ataulf, meekly turned over the loot.

Berig tied Paulus’ limp body over the donkey’s back and installed the substantial form of Cook among the treasure. Her other servants rode pillion with three warriors.

The cavalcade started north on the Via Imperialia, through the monumental heart of Rome. Normally, Placidia never tired of gazing at the majestic buildings and memorials. Now she held back tears as the empty spaces echoed the clopping horses’ hooves. No colorful crowds cheered their passing. No self-important clerks strolled under the stoa. No vendors hawked their wares in voices gone harsh with use. Placidia had never seen such desolation. It matched the growing emptiness in her soul.

They hurried through the various fora, past Titus’ arch celebrating his triumph over the Jews, Caesar’s temple to Venus and Rome, Trajan’s markets—shuttered and silent. As they passed Marcus Aurelius’ triumphal column, showing his victories over the barbarian tribes of the north, the warriors laughed and spat.

They left the silence of the fora behind and slipped into the chaos of a dying city. Now the tears came, blurring her vision, stuffing her nose. But they could not mask the smell of roasted human flesh, or wash away the sound of howling men freed from any civilizing impulse. Rats and flies infested the bodies—animal and human—strewn about the streets. Placidia swallowed convulsively to keep down her bile.

Barbarians ran past, heaped with portable booty—jewelry, costly tunics, decorative armor. Many pushed or pulled two-wheeled carts

piled high with larger pieces—statues, furniture, carpets, gold and silver feasting services. What they couldn't carry or didn't value, the invaders despoiled. Bonfires frequented the open spaces. The barbarians laughed as they tossed on books, paintings, clothes, and broken furniture. Smoke gathered over the city; blood streamed in the gutters.

Honorius, my brother, you should see what you have wrought. This didn't have to happen.

Her father and Stilicho had told Placidia of the horrors of the battlefield, but that did not prepare her for the sight of the torn bodies of shopkeepers, seamstresses, children—none who should know war—littering the streets like so much refuse. Only the will not to disgrace herself kept Placidia upright. She wanted to bury her face in the horse's mane—not look, not smell, not hear, not feel—but she couldn't turn her face away. Placidia needed to brand these images in her mind and on her soul. She needed to remember.

"I would not have you see this, Princess, but my people hate the Romans for slaughtering their comrades, wives, and children—some in the churches where they fled for sanctuary."

"Don't make excuses. What my brother ordered was despicable, but is this any better?" She pointed to the bloody body of a woman clutching a dead infant. "You rightly chide us, but what of your Christianity?"

"It is our nature to return insult for insult, blood for blood. You cannot turn a wolf into a lap dog by dipping it in a basin and mumbling some words over it."

Raucous laughter burst from a small square to their left. A group of soldiers called advice and crude comments to a comrade raping a girl, urging him to hurry so they could have their turn. The girl lay naked and whimpering, bruises and dried blood on the battered left side of her face forming a grotesque mirror to the untouched right side. Blood from shallow cuts on her hands and breasts smudged her body.

The need to do something spurred Placidia. She gripped the general's arm. "Stop them! She's just a child."

"And the one in the next street, or the next?"

"I ask only for her life, if it's in your power to grant it."

"It is." He watched the soldiers for a moment, frowning. "Berig, guard the Princess."

Ataulf slid her to the ground. With a bellow, he rode through the knot of men, knocking them aside with his spear until he came on the one rutting with pleasure—a good-looking youth, only a few years older than the girl he raped. Ataulf leaped from his horse and yanked the boy off his whimpering victim. "King Alaric forbade rape. Don't you obey orders, boy?"

The lad's eyes widened in recognition. "B-b-but she's just a prostitute, Sir!"

Ataulf pointed at the battered girl, now curled up, knees and head pressed close to her chest, trembling. "That's no excuse."

The young soldier grew sullen. "'Tis our right. We took this city."

Ataulf struck the boy with his fist, splitting his lip and bloodying his nose. "No army can function without discipline. Your king gave you a direct order." He glared at every face in the square. "All of you understand? No rape. No burning churches. Sanctuary will be honored. Is that clear?" he roared.

"Yes, Lord," several, but not all, called out.

"You!" He pointed to one of the attackers draped in an elaborate silk cape. "Cover her. Filimer," he addressed one of his own guards. "Pick up the girl. She's coming with us."

Filimer, a broad-shouldered barbarian, wrapped the girl in the silk cloak. She cried out when he picked her up, out of pain or fear.

Placidia accompanied the girl to the cart. "You'll be safe with us." The girl turned vacant eyes on her and whimpered. "Cook, look after her. When we reach camp, make sure she gets help."

The matronly woman clucked at the girl, making nonsense sounds between assurances of safety. The servant girls clung to their protectors, fearful eyes darting to the despoiling soldiers.

Ataulf mounted his horse, and reached for Placidia.

The darkness creeping into her soul felt some small measure lighter. Taking his callused palm, she looked up and said, "Thank you, General."

“I hold no illusions, and neither should you, Princess. As soon as we are out of sight, they will find another. This scene is played out all over the city, with thousands of women.”

Placidia glanced back at the battered girl. “At least we saved one child from an ugly death.”

His shoulders slumped slightly and concern shadowed his eyes—concern for her, or for the girl?

“Will she thank you for a life filled with the memory of this day?”

Placidia shook her head. “I don’t know.”

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