

BOOK NINE

LETTER 19

To Russo

YOU have read, it seems, in a letter of mine, that Virginius Rufus directed the following lines to be inscribed upon his tomb:

"Here Rufus lies, who raised in victory's hour
His country, not himself, to sovran power:"

for which you blame him, adding that Frontinus acted much more worthily in forbidding any monument whatsoever to be erected to his memory. And in the conclusion of your letter you desire my sentiments upon each. I loved them both; but I confess I admired him more whom you condemn; and to such a degree, that so far from imagining I ever should have occasion to rise up in his defence, I thought he could never be sufficiently applauded. In my opinion, every man who has acted a great and memorable part, deserves not only to be excused but extolled, if he pursues that glorious immortality of fame he has merited and endeavours to perpetuate an everlasting remembrance of himself, even by an epitaph.

Yet hardly could I name a man, who had performed such great achievements, so modestly reserved upon the subject of his own actions, as Virginius was. I can bear him witness (and I had the happiness to enjoy his intimacy and affection) that I never but once heard him mention his own conduct; and that was, in giving an account of a conversation which passed between him and Cluvius: "You well know, Virginius," (said Cluvius to him,) "the fidelity required in an historian; you will pardon me therefore, I hope, if you should meet with any thing in my works, that is not agreeable to you." "O Cluvius," he replied, "can you be ignorant that what I did, was done in order that you historians might enjoy the liberty of writing what you please?"

But let us compare Frontinus with him in that very instance wherein you think the former is more modest and reserved. He forbid a monument to be erected to him, it is true; but in what words? "The expense of a monument," says he, "is superfluous; my memory will endure if my actions deserve it." Is there less vanity, do you think, thus to put on record for all the world to read that his memory would endure; than to mark upon a single tombstone, in two lines, the actions one has performed? It is not, however, my design to condemn your favourite; I only mean to defend Virginius; and what defence can be more prevailing with you, than one drawn from a comparison between him and the person you prefer? In my own opinion, indeed, neither of them is blameworthy, since they both pursued glory with equal passion, but by different roads; the former in desiring those monumental honours he had merited: the latter in rather choosing the appearance of despising them. Farewell.