

Decline and Fall

by Angie

"Lately I feel that I'm living in a badly written, badly directed foreign movie that's running on late-night TV in black-and-white with lots of static and inadequate subtitles."

— Sheri S. Tepper, Gibbon's Decline and Fall

Catherine and Vincent were relaxing in the den of their brownstone, enjoying a rare evening alone. Their son Jacob was staying below for the night, having spent the day participating in a chess tournament. Vincent was pleased his son was interested in the game of kings at such a young age.

"What are you reading," Catherine asked, seeing an unfamiliar book in her husband's hands.

"*Gibbon's Decline and Fall*," he told her.

Catherine laughed, a response which drew a puzzled look from Vincent.

"Why is that funny?" he asked her finally, when it seemed she was not going to elaborate. His curiosity was always active and both of them knew it. Catherine enjoyed puzzling him, but always relented and elaborated.

This time, however, she looked at him with a serious expression, not what he had expected from her laugh.

"I read a book with that title, not long ago," she commented with a sigh. "Jenny said it was terrific, and passed her copy on to me. I agreed with her. I read it over three days, finding it almost impossible to put down."

"Who wrote it," Vincent asked.

"The author is a woman, Sheri S Tepper. She wrote amazingly insightful science fiction stories that usually revolved around women. This one was about a group of women who became friends in college and swore on a copy of Gibbon's '*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*' to remain friends and meet once a year. It's the most ... incredible ... story, the more so because what it posits is so ... plausible."

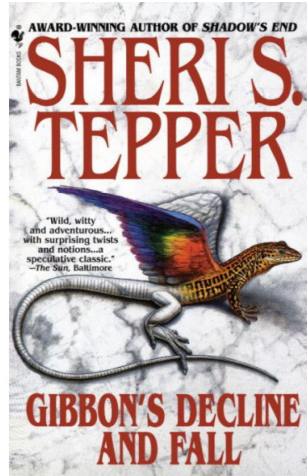
"Odd choice for a group of women. What is plausible about it?" he urged her, now even more curious.

Catherine looked at her husband and lover and realized, not for the first time, that Vincent was unlike any other male on the planet - as far as she knew, at least - and not just because of his outward appearance. Inside he was also different. He, and the world he grew up in, had left a lot of the battle of the sexes behind when they formed their community in the tunnels.

He knew of the problems, of course, as she had not been immune to them during the course of her career, and he had seen some of the results in new arrivals to the tunnels. But he could not know the depth and breadth of the problem, which crossed borders, only becoming more or less depending on the tenor of the rulers or politicians.

She wasn't sure she could explain the book in a few words, and perhaps shouldn't try. She remembered where she had put her paperback copy and found it quickly in the bookcase she used in the den for her own collection. She presented it to Vincent, who regarded the cover, an image of a

lizard with wings, shading from greys to multi-coloured, as if emerging from marble into sunlight. An apt description, she reflected, watching him.



"Science fiction," he remarked at last. "Something about genetic issues?"

"Not exactly. Not in the sense of a scientific prediction," Catherine replied. "Vincent, you should read it. It will tell you a lot more about the women in my world than anything else could. I suspect the underlying situation will never change much, so this novel will still be relevant 20 years from now."

He nodded and opened the book, leafing slowly through the title pages until he reached the opening chapter. He looked at her, and caught her looking at him with an intense expression.

"What?" he asked.

Catherine shook her head, musingly. "If any man but you had asked why I laughed, I would probably have made a joke about Edward Gibbon. This is a book that's almost painful for a woman to read, so full of the discrimination we all know exists, and all of us have experienced to some degree - but which we also often shrug off as being a normal part of our lives. It shouldn't be.

"The book is revealing, terrible, bleak, forgiving, courageous. It didn't get the recognition it deserved because it's often brutal as well. But there's also hope, and that saves it - if it's read to the end. Read it and let me know what you think."

She left him to go below to say goodnight to their son.

Vincent nodded and began to read. He was still reading the book hours later when Catherine was ready to go up to bed. She kissed the top of his furry nose and he smiled at her. She wondered if he would read through the night, but she fell asleep before she knew the answer.

The next day, when she woke up, she didn't see Vincent. She worked in her office in the brownstone after she had finished breakfast - alone. This was not unusual when he had an early work party to join. Later, as lunchtime loomed, he had still not appeared and she was now a little worried. On a hunch, she went into the den, and found him sitting exactly where she had left him the night before, looking somewhat the worse for wear.

"Vincent?"

He looked at her, his eyes red with lack of sleep and haunted. He resolutely put the book down and rose with a sigh.

"You were right, Catherine. It's a very difficult book to put down. But I must. I need some sleep."

She hugged him and he shuffled upstairs to their bedroom. Curious, she picked up the book to see where his bookmark was. He was more than two-thirds through!

Obviously, there were no urgent matters below, she reflected. She went down, however, and joined the tunnel community for lunch, sitting next to Father in the dining hall, noting that Jacob was entrenched in a group of children who seemed to be laughing a great deal.

"What's so funny?" she asked him, realizing with a grin that Vincent had asked her almost that same question about something quite different.

"I think they're planning a surprise for Vincent," the patriarch replied.

"Well, they may have a longish wait. He was reading for about 16 hours straight and just went to bed."

Jacob looked at her in amazement. "What on earth was he reading? He hasn't done that for a long time."

Catherine hesitated. "It was a book I recommended to him. A dystopian science fiction set in a period much like the present."

"Ah. Vincent always did like alternate histories. What's the title?"

"Gibbon's Decline and Fall."

Jacob chuckled. "Isn't he reading the actual history at the moment? He asked me where a copy was - and I believe he found one."

"Yes, he was reading that - and it reminded me of the other. I hope you didn't have any great need of him for a few hours. He looked beat. It's a very intense book."

"I'm sure we can muddle along here without him, Catherine. We have no crises at the moment and the children will just have to be patient. They need to learn a little of that."

"They do indeed," Catherine commented softly, thinking of their son. She decided she had better corner him and tell him to stay below, until after supper time at least. Vincent deserved some peace and quiet.

So she approached the merry crowd of children and when she had their attention, asked them to please not expect to see Vincent for a few hours.

"Why?" Jacob asked, looking a little put out.

"Because he stayed up very late reading and will be sleeping for some time yet. I don't want you to bother him. He'll come below when he's ready."

"All right," Jacob said. The other children began to whisper, so Catherine left them and went to Rebecca's chandlery. It was her turn to help with candles, and she had become quite good at it, to her own surprise. And it helped to pass the time.

The afternoon did fly by and she was ready for supper when the signal sounded on the pipes. She washed up and went into the dining hall, surprised to see Vincent talking with Father. He looked a little tired, but not as tired as she would have been with only a few hours sleep.

She sat beside him and he turned to her with a sheepish grin. She looked him over, seeing no bulge that might hide a book.

"Rejoined us from the world of literature, have you?" she asked.

"Yes. I will not do that again. But I will finish the book. I must."

"I did warn you. I'm glad you're finding it ... interesting."

"Yes, it cannot be called enjoyable, but it is engaging and fascinating. I had no idea, Catherine."

"Most people don't, Vincent. And women are particularly reluctant to recognize the obvious. And they seldom speak of it to men."

"Yet women have such power - birth, love of family, caring for the weak. Men do not view these things as women do."

"Exactly. And if these were important, the world would be a different place."

"Yet, we've had thousands of years to recognize it and are still incapable." This from the tunnel patriarch.

"Yes," agreed Catherine. "But this is because women's ideals are considered inferior to those of men. History and many religions reinforce this."

"Why?" Vincent asked. "Are men and women so different? "

"Not all men and women are so conflicted," Catherine replied. "The answer isn't simple, as the book makes clear."

Father nodded. "There are many reasons for the dichotomy. It's one Robert Graves speculated upon in *'The White Goddess'* - yet even he could not pinpoint how female deities became so suborned and scorned. There have been matriarchal societies - but their premise is often unacceptable to men. Men prefer to fight, and demeaning women allows them a reason to do so. They pretend to fight for home and hearth, when almost any reason would be sufficient, and most often it is pride and hatred that initiates it."

"Love of country is often the stated reason for war," Catherine remarked.

"Many men die in wars. Is this how the world above distracts men from 'women's issues'?" Vincent asked.

"No," declared Jacob. "The men who instigate wars are never the ones fighting them. Neither do they care about the disadvantaged, or the poor in society, who often join armed forces to escape their lot. War is almost always about money. A few men make a great deal of money as armies are equipped for the machinery of war. As a distraction, I suppose it works at some level - but to the detriment of society as a whole."

"I fear I will never understand such thinking," Vincent sighed. "I read about it, I think I grasp the concept, yet I cannot feel it in my heart."

"For which you should be grateful, Vincent," Catherine declared.

"We are all grateful," Jacob remarked. "That kind of thinking is not acceptable here. We all work for the common good, each to his or her level of competence."

"We're not utopian, because there are chores that women have more patience for. But they are not required to do them exclusively. That wouldn't be fair. We all take turns doing laundry, cleaning, cooking, mending, making candles."

"Yet in my world and my day," Catherine commented, "no boys were required to learn to sew or cook in school. Girls had Home Economics. Equally silly, girls were not given any instructions on how to change a car tire, or even read a dipstick."

"It was worse in my day," Father commented. "Women were expected to stay home and mind children, wash, iron and cook. World War Two, and the munitions factories, changed all that. So war did enforce some equality of the sexes."

"Yet, there is still a lot of inequality," Catherine remarked. "Men make decisions about women's health that they'd never consider for themselves."

Father and Vincent regarded each other, and said nothing. Vincent knew himself to be often conflicted where Catherine was concerned, wanting her safe and without risk in her work. But he consoled himself with the thought that he would never try to force her to do, or not do, anything.

Father grunted, "I suppose women's role as the life giver has distorted a great many men's minds. There is no life without men in the equation somewhere - at least not yet - yet they do not apparently feel they have enough control."

Vincent rose. "I must finish the book. Please give my apologies to the children. I will have to devise a new lesson for them. We need to explain even those things they won't experience here. News reaches us. It needs to be understood in context."

He left and Father and Catherine looked at each other.

"I suppose regular history books don't really explain this kind of thing," Catherine mused.

"History is written by the victors," Father quoted sadly. "They are rarely women, or even considered."

"That's what's wrong with my world, Father. No one considers what's really important. We are supposed to stand for and protect life, liberty and happiness, yet war is the very antithesis of these."

"Peace is expensive, Catherine, not just financially, but because it gives people time to realize that their lives could be better, and they naturally blame the government. So wars are a convenient distraction, even if also very expensive. They most often decimate the class of humanity where unrest starts, and give power to those who have the money to buy it."

"Is there a way out of this vicious circle?" Catherine asked. "Tepper thought so. Her books can be brutal, but they always express some hope and reason by the end. As if she couldn't let herself give up, and that women shouldn't either."

"Literature is our hope for change," Father replied. "It's not where you would expect it to start, but it can effect thinking in profound ways. If enough people get the message and demand change, governments have to listen."

Catherine sighed. Father seemed to always have the right words. "Thank you, Father. Of course you're right. We must do what we can to inform and make people aware. Vincent, I think, is going to do that now."

"Vincent has always followed his heart, Catherine. He instinctively knows how to express it. It can't be taught."

"We need more people like him," Catherine commented.

"Yes, but the ones we do have know what they have to do. Like your Sheri Tepper."

"You know of her?"

Father looked a little embarrassed. "Yes, but it wasn't intentional. The title intrigued me, and once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down. Much like Vincent. I loaned my copy to a Helper and I suspect they passed it on. That's what happens with really good books, you know, and that's how the message spreads. I believe the female perspective is what is going to save this world, Catherine, if anything can."

"Not if no men in power are listening, Father."

"All we can do is hope - and keep trying," he replied.

END