Servius Tullius

On the death of Tarquin his son-in-law Servius Tullius was made king. As his name “Servius” indicates, he had been born a slave. He served in the household of King Tarquin and married the king’s daughter. Despite his lowly origin, the people chose Servius Tullius to be their next king.

Servius was a very good king. He had many good laws made and, like King Numa Pompilius, he divided some of the public lands among the poor people of the city.

King Servius was the first to have a census taken in Rome. He made a rule or law that once every five years all the people should assemble in the Campus Martius to be counted. The word census is a Latin word, meaning a counting or reckoning, and so we use it in our own country for the counting of the people which takes place every ten years.

Servius Tullius was killed by King Tarquin's son, who was also called Tarquin but got the name of Superbus, or Proud, because he was a very arrogant and cruel man. The dead body of Servius was left lying on the street where he had been killed, and Tullia, wife of the wicked Tarquin and daughter of the murdered king, drove her chariot over it.

Tarquinius Superbus

Tarquin the Proud (Tarquinius Superbus) now became king. It was during his reign that the Sibylline Books were brought to Rome. These books were not like our books. They were merely three bundles of loose pieces of parchment, having moral sentences on them written in the Greek language. This is the story of how the books were obtained:

One morning an old woman came to King Tarquin, carrying nine scrolls (or books) in her hands. She offered to sell them to the king, but when she named a large sum as the price he laughed at her and ordered her away. The next day the woman came again, but with only six scrolls. She had burned the other three. She offered to sell the six, but she asked the same price that she had asked the day before for the whole nine. The king again laughed at her and drove her away.

The same day Tarquin went to visit the priests in their temple, and he told them about the old woman and her books. The priests declared that she was certainly a sibyl and that her books doubtless contained important predictions about Rome. The sibyls were women who pretended to be able to foretell events. There were sibyls in many countries, but one most famous of was the Sibyl of Cumae, a town in the south of Italy. (The most famous sibyl of all was the one at Delphi in Greece.) The Sibyl of Cumae was the one who brought the scrolls to Tarquin.
Tarquin was now sorry he had not taken the scrolls, and he hoped the woman would come again. She did come on the following day, but she had only three scrolls instead of six. She had burned the other three the day before. The king was very glad to see her, and he bought the remaining three scrolls, but he had to pay more for them than the old woman had asked for the initial nine. Then the Sibyl disappeared, and was never seen again.

The Sibylline Books were put in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. Two officers were appointed to keep watch over them. Whenever the Romans were going to war, or had any serious trouble, they would consult the scrolls. The way they did it was this: one of the officers would open the stone chest where the scrolls were kept and take out the first one he laid his hand on. Then one of the Greek sentence would be randomly chosen and translated into Latin. It was sometimes very hard to tell what the sentence really meant. Often they had to guess. When they made sense out of it they said that it was a prophecy of the Sibyl and would surely come to pass.

The eldest son of Tarquin was named Sextus. He was a very bad man. He deeply injured a beautiful woman named Lucretia, the wife of his cousin. Lucretia was devastated. Weeping, she walked out into the center of the city and called upon the people of Rome to punish the Tarquins for all that evil they had done. Then she plunged a dagger into her own chest and fell dead as the crowd watched in horror.

The Romans vowed that Lucretia should be avenged and that there should be no more kings in Rome. They cried out, "Down with Tarquin! Down with Tarquin! No more kings! No more kings!"

Then they resolved to take the power of king away from Tarquin and to banish him and his family from Rome. They also decided to adopt the good laws which had been made years before by King Servius Tullius, and to choose two men each year to govern the nation, instead of a king. The men were to be called consuls and were to rule in turn—one for one month, the other for the next, and so on for twelve months. At the end of the year two new consuls were to be elected.

Meanwhile news of the revolt reached King Tarquin, who was at the time in camp with his army some distance from Rome. He instantly mounted his horse and rode in haste to the city. When he reached the gates he found them shut against him. As he stood impatiently demanding to be admitted, a Roman officer appeared on the wall and told him of the sentence of banishment. Tarquin rode away, and Rome was rid of him forever (510 B.C.).