

INCOMPARABLE ASPASIA

In a half circle, against a background of Olympian clouds, I see a lovely Greek. She steps forward, she raises her lovely arms, she smiles. Orators commence singing her praises; satirists ridicule her; philosophers consult her; the statesman turns to her with unfathomable questions. Is she a queen whose power extended from one coast to another, whose ships dotted the sea, and whose warriors peopled distant wastes? Did she trace her descent from the gods? Or was she at least the wife of a ruler or the mother of a poet? None of these. Her ancestry is unknown, as is also her real name. The dates of her birth and death are not known to a certainty. Not even the face that gave her her power is known, although many a marble head is supposed to represent hers.

She herself chose the name of *Aspasia*, the Beloved. Whether or not she actually came from Miletus to Athens, the daughter of a slave, no-

body knows. It is only known that at the age of twenty-five, thanks to the charm of her mind and body, she was one of the circle of brilliant, audacious skeptics who existed in Athens at its prime. And here she met the man who at that time was on the threshold of great power.

He was Pericles, and he was probably twenty years older than she. Pericles had a wife and children but in ancient Athens the wife was confined to the house, and had no claims on the husband, while he had all rights over her. Marriage served for nothing but the production of pureblooded children. At this time — the fifth century B.C. — it was even a subject for ridicule that a great war had once been caused by the abduction of a king's wife. Wives lived in obscurity, without honor or position, without social pleasures and fine clothes. Meanwhile, other women who had captured the fancies of the Athenians displayed their

beauty and wit, culture and charm at all the banquets for all the graces of art, love, conversation, and ironic discourse were expected of them.

Pericles, after meeting *Aspasia*, separated from his wife and began a brilliant life with *Aspasia*. He remained with her, one might almost say under her influence, for twenty years, until the plague carried him off. Just as he was far and above the greatest Greek of his time, so was she the only Greek woman who was decidedly a match for him. A great man willingly grants this position to a woman, since she is not in competition with him. Could *Aspasia*, or any of the *Aspasia*s who have followed her through the centuries, have interfered with the ambitions of a Pericles? No, they could act as nothing but a stimulus because they always strove to please him.

The importance of such a woman is that she existed — nothing more. In the morning she awoke thinking of her beauty; hours were spent in caring for it, for if she failed to please the man of her choice as a woman, all her influence vanished. When-

ever he came to her with a question, all her own interests had to be laid aside. Since a woman's insight into humanity — especially the insight of a superior woman — is naturally greater than that of a man, Pericles involved in wordly entanglements, found her his natural adviser. The devotion of her love — his mastery and his submission — bound the ties closer and closer over heart and mind, those ties which between friends of the same sex are so easily broken. And through one crisis after another a relationship gradually developed which vacillated constantly between mind and heart. Yet an ambitious man rarely concedes such as ascendancy to another man.

On arrival and departure Pericles always kissed *Aspasia* on the forehead, Plutarch informs us, and this is a symbol of their relationship. The fact that she induced him to enter the war against Samos, and even the Peloponnesian War, which destroyed Athens' power, is not necessarily against her. It merely demonstrates her influence in politics, for a Pericles does not permit himself to be in-

fluenced in such decisions by an ordinary woman.

And now let us follow the two friends to the *Symposium*. Here *Aspasia* plays the zither. And then a general conversation begins truly platonic in nature. *Aspasia* reposes on the divan beside the reclining men, talks with *Hippocrates* about medicine, with *Phidias* about art, with *Anaxagoras* about philosophy. Yes, even *Socrates* himself, who both domestically and socially was not an admirer of women, had called himself her pupil only half ironically. *Pericles'* great funeral oration in the second year of the war was supposed to be her work.

But jealousy spread, and since it could not attack her powerful friend, it was direct-

ed against *Aspasia*. The scandal became courageous; an accusation against her was inevitable; she remained instead of fleeing. *Pericles* himself came before the judges in her defense. His tears evidently saved her, perhaps also his prestige.

But not long afterwards, he himself was on trial. He was deprived of his office, his career was threatened, and, moreover, his two sons were taken away from him. And always the fearless woman stood close by to support him. But the reversal of Athenian favor, just an erratic and whimsical then as now, called him back. Finally the plague carried *Pericles* off, and *Aspasia* remained alone. — *Emil Ludwig, condensed from The American Magazine.*