Augustus

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Extract

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I am afraid my father's account of his Gallic Wars is among the dullest books ever written. I remember, Gaius, how your tutor once expressed indignation when you complained of its tedium. But you were quite right though it seemed to me then inexpedient to admit as much, and I only suggested to your tutor that he make due allowance for the ardour of youth. One reason why it is unsatisfactory is Caesar's pompous tone, and this owes much to his unfortunate decision to write of himself in the third person: 'Caesar did this, Caesar did that, Caesar acted to save the situation . . .'; it grows more wearisome and seems even more self-admiring than the perpetual 'I' of autobiographers.

Then that much-praised first sentence: 'All Gaul is divided into three parts', has really only the single virtue of lucidity. It is far from accurate, for the divisions of Gaul are more numerous and much deeper than he suggests.

In fact the book is fundamentally untruthful. Not surprising; it was written for an immediate political purpose – when did a manifesto ever speak the truth? The Triumvirate formed by Caesar, Pompey and Crassus had broken up. Caesar's enemies in Rome were baying for his blood and demanding his recall. He appealed to public opinion with this vainglorious account of his Gallic conquests: he would show them what he had done for Rome. It worked. Even the dullness of which you complained was deliberate; many had thought Caesar flashy; now they should be soothed by the impressive sobriety of his prose.

So, my dear Gaius, and Lucius, too, (for I cannot imagine your tender imagination responded to Caesar's prose, though you would be too mild and mannerly to complain) your early criticism was

justified. 'On the spot', as you would say yourself. It has always seemed to me an example of how not to write your memoirs. There is no personal voice. What you hear is an actor. Of course it's also true that Julius Caesar was always acting: the real Caesar, if he existed by the time I knew him, was buried deep beneath layers of artifice. Still, most of the parts he chose to play were livelier and wittier than the role he wrote for himself in his 'Gallic War'.

All the same, now that I bring myself to write this account of my own life, for you – for your instruction and, I hope, pleasure – I confess that the pompous tone is hard to avoid. Autobiography sets out to recapture experience, but the business of writing it requires the author to abstract himself from the self that lived these experiences, and to construct a figure that can hardly fail to be, as it were, theatrical. To put it another way: the self you write is never quite the self that lived. (I hope you don't find that concept too difficult. It's a modern idea of course which you certainly won't find in the authors you have studied and I am only too sadly aware of the inadequacy of my attempts at philosophical exposition.) I was anyway struck with this when I wrote a first sketch of my life about twenty years ago when I was stuck in a small town in the Pyrenees recovering from an illness. I found it heavy going, I assure you. It began, if I recall, with a genealogical chapter. Everyone is interested in his ancestry of course, but I could not bring mine to life. It was profoundly unsatisfactory.

So, engaging on this book for you, my boys, I propose to imitate Homer or follow his advice at least. He recommends you start in the middle of action.

Therefore: here we are: Greece, late March, blustery and cold, snow on the mountains, in my nineteenth year.

As we lay in the rest-room after our baths Maecenas ran his hand over my thigh.

'You see, my dear, I was quite right. Red-hot walnut shells are absolutely it. You have such pretty legs, ducky, it's a shame to spoil them with fuzz.'

And then, with his hand still stroking me just above the knee, and Agrippa snorting something about bloody effeminate dirt from the next couch – then – it is a scene I hold clear as a vase-painting – the curtain was thrown aside, and a slave burst in, with no ceremony at all.

'Which of you is Gaius Octavius Thurinus?' he cried.

'This one is,' Maecenas said, not moving his hand. But I sat up, shaking him off. When slaves forget their manners, all the more reason to behave decently. The man thrust a letter into my outstretched hand, and disappeared without waiting for a reward. (I know why he did that; he was aware he was the bearer of bad news – slaves always know what their missives contain, I suppose they check with the secretaries and it is passed down the line – but in this case of course he could hardly have failed to know what the whole world would ring of – and he had all the Greek superstitious fear of the fate that waits the bringer of evil tidings.)

I turned it over. 'It's from my mother,' I said.

'Oh God,' Maecenas said, 'mothers.'

'That's no way to talk,' Agrippa said.

'Well, who's little Miss Good Citizen now?'

Their bickering is memory's sour accompaniment to the solo of my mother's letter. It was short enough for something that shook the world:

My son, your uncle Julius was this day murdered in the Senate House by his enemies. I write that bluntly because there is no way to prepare such news. And I say merely 'his enemies' because all here is uncertainty. No one knows what may happen, whether this is the beginning of new wars or not. Therefore, my child, be careful. Nevertheless the time has come when you must play the man, decide and act, for no one knows or can tell what things may now come forth.

* * *

I let the letter drop. (One of the others picked it up and what they read silenced them.) I let my fingers play over my smooth legs and bare chin, and wondered if I was going to cry. I have always cried easily, but I had no tears for Julius either then or later.

Very soon there was a clamour without. We dressed hurriedly in some apprehension. One does in such circumstances. No one likes to be caught naked when there is danger of sword-play. My mind was full of all that I had heard and read of the proscriptions in the struggle between Sulla and Marius; how Julius himself had nearly lost his life then, for, said Sulla, 'in that young man there are many Mariuses.' I could not be certain that the slave who had brought the message was not the precursor of those who had constituted themselves my enemies as well as Julius's. I was his next-of-kin; it would make sense to dispose of me. I was indeed prudent to have such fears, for my death would have been an act of prudence on their part.

They should have killed me. I wonder when they realized that themselves. It is known that they regretted not putting Antony to death at the same time as my uncle. Cassius, wise man, wished to do so. The ostentatiously virtuous Marcus Brutus over-ruled him. The truth is, there was never so thoughtless a conspiracy. They imagined, these self-styled Liberators, these besotted idealists, these disgruntled fools, that if they killed Julius, the Republic would resume its old stability of its own accord. They were futile men, without foresight.

That night in Illyria Agrippa organized a guard for me, alert to our peril. I had gone out before the crowd and stilled their tumult. To express grief for Julius, I tore my clothes (Maecenas having first thoughtfully run a knife along the seam). I begged the crowd, whose grief I knew to be as great as mine – they liked that assurance – to go home and leave me to mourn. To my surprise it worked. They were a poor lot and even more confused than I was myself.

'Well,' I said to Maecenas when we were alone.

He stopped plucking his eyebrows, a task he would normally have left to a slave.

'Well,' I said, 'I am head of the family. Julius had no other heir. I am almost his adopted son.'

'You are only eighteen,' he said. 'There are other leaders of the Popular Party. Mark Antony and his brother Lucius.'

'They may have killed Antony too,' I said. 'Why shouldn't they? It's five days since Julius was murdered. Anything could have happened. My mother tells me to act the man. But how?'

'We must go to Italy,' he said. 'You are in no more danger there than here. And whatever you do, nobody will believe you plan to do nothing. So you might as well act with decision. The Gods,' his tongue flickered on his lips, 'have thrown the dice for you. You must pick them up, and roll again. Tell Agrippa to see to a ship, employ his vast administrative talent. As for me, well, Nikos tells me he has a new consignment from Asia. He has promised me a Phrygian boy with a bottom like a peach. It would be a shame not to pluck it before we sail. Nothing, my dear, is sadder than the remembrance of lost fucks.'

You will wonder, I am sure, why I tolerated Maecenas; he is hardly the type you would find around me now, is he? Of course I have grown staid and respectable with years, but even then your natural father Agrippa could not understand it. He often rebuked me for this friendship and inveighed against Maecenas, of whom he was intensely jealous, and whom he would call 'a pansy whoremaster'. You will wonder too why I record the light nonsense of Maecenas' lascivious conversation, that quip about my legs for instance. To tell the truth, I am surprised to find myself doing so. I can only say that nothing brings back those last moments of boyish irresponsibility so keenly to me as the echo in my memory of that affected drawl.

And to answer the first question: no one in my life ever gave me more consistently good advice.

Agrippa couldn't stand that knowledge either.

* * *

Certainly not my mother's husband Philippus.

We had arrived in Brindisi in an April dawn. The sun was just touching the mountains of Basilicata. Even this early though, the port was in a ferment. It swarmed with disbanded or disorganized legionaries – we were told that a ship bringing back some of the last remnants of Pompey's men had docked the day before, and the streets round the fishmarket were thronged with these veterans who had no idea what to do with themselves. Ours seemed an unpropitious arrival.

Then, so quickly does news get about, a century of legionaries in good marching order wheeled round the corner of the harbour offices, the crowd falling back. Their centurion halted them on the quayside, as if they constituted a guard of honour; or possibly, as I remarked to Maecenas, a prisoner's escort.

The centurion boarded the ship, followed by a couple of his men. He called out in a loud voice:

'I have information that Gaius Octavius Thurinus is on board.'

I saw the captain of the vessel hesitate. I drew back the cloak with which I was covering my face, and stepped forward.

'I am he.'

The centurion saluted with a great flourish.

'Publius Clodius Maco, centurion of the fifth cohort of the twelfth legion, served in Gaul, fought at Pharsalus and Munda, wounded and decorated in the latter battle, at your service, sir. I have brought my century as your escort, sir.'

I advanced towards him.

'Welcome, friend. I am happy to see you.' Then I raised my voice so that I could be heard by the troops drawn up on the quay. 'You are all Caesar's soldiers and colleagues. I am Caesar's adopted son. You wish to avenge your general, I seek to avenge my father. You offer me your protection on the road to Rome. I offer you my name and my father's name as a talisman, and I grant you my protection in all you do. Caesar living brought us first together. Caesar's blood, shed in most foul murder, has united us to death or victory . . .'

They gave a great cheer, without breaking ranks, a good sign. The two soldiers who had boarded the ship behind Maco hoisted me to their shoulders and bore me to the quay. I bade them set me down, and, taking a risk, announced that I would inspect the guard, my first command. It was a risk worth taking. If they had shrunk from that assertion of my authority, they would have been useless for my purpose. But they didn't. They drew themselves up, set their shoulders back. I was relieved and impressed. They were serious men, and their leather was polished, their brass and weapons shining. Maco was a good centurion to have seen to it that his men were in such fine condition in a world that was crumbling into uncertainty.

'Where now?' asked Agrippa.

'To the magistrates,' I said. 'It is important that they realize why we are here.'

'What's all this about being Caesar's adopted son?' – Agrippa was full of naïve questions when we were young – 'First I've heard of it.'

'It must be in the will. If I'm not that, we're sunk.'

'My dear boy, nobody admires your spirit more than I do.' My stepfather leant back in his arbour overlooking the Campagna and toyed with a mug of his own yellow wine; the fingers of his left hand played little drumming tunes on his swollen paunch; the mug almost vanished in the fat of his face. 'Nobody, not even your dear mother, who dotes on you and who has been in tears, floods, I assure you, since it happened. But, dear boy, consider the facts. Look at yourself. You're scarcely more than a child. I don't want to be rude, but there simply are times when a chap must tell the truth. How old are you? Sixteen?'

'Eighteen,' I said.

'Well, eighteen, eighteen, and you want to set yourself up against chaps like Gaius Cassius. To say nothing of Mark Antony. Oh I know he's meant to be a Caesarean, but Caesar's

dead, my dear. And I know you think I'm an old fogey, but still even you must admit that old fogeys have seen a thing or two. And I know Antony, know him well. He has beardless boys for breakfast. And, take my word for it, what Antony is now is an Antonian, nothing less . . . no,' he sighed deeply before resuming his wearying unwearied flow of counsel, 'take the money old Jules left you. Take that like a shot naturally, but waive the political inheritance. Just say you're too young and inexperienced. Let them look elsewhere. They'll be relieved as like as not. I don't expect either Cassius or Antony really wants to cut your throat.'

'There's that danger,' I said, 'I'm not too inexperienced to recognize that. There was a cohort sent south to arrest me, you know. I turned them round and they're on my side now, but it shows . . .'

'Only,' he sighed, 'because you will insist on drawing attention to yourself. Once announce that all you want is a quiet life, and no one will trouble you. Chaps don't come trying to clap irons on me, you know . . . Besides, you must admit, the whole Julian connection is fortuitous. A bit thin, what? I mean, if your mother's father hadn't married his sister Julia, what would you be? Nothing. Nothing significant. Decent folk of course, but small town worthies. That's all. Your own dad was the first of your family to enter the Senate, you know, and only because of the connection. What do you think all the really top families make of that? You know they sneer at Cicero as a parvenu, and he's a man of genius. You're only a boy, and your grandfather was a moneylender.'

'Let's say banker.' I kept a smile in my voice. 'Do you think my banking blood should be potent enough to persuade me to take the money and do nothing else? Do you think anyone would believe I was satisfied with that? What do you think my own soldiers would say?'

'Your own soldiers?' He sighed and poured himself wine. 'It's a fantasy, child, a boy's game, but it will end in blood, your

blood, I fear. Well, your mother can't say I didn't try to dissuade you.'

It is hard to make you, my beloved boys, who have been brought up in peace and order, understand the mood of a crumbling state, of an incipient revolution. If I talk of fear and uncertainty, what can these be but words to you children of sunshine? In the same way, you know me as a man on the verge of old age; you can hardly remember your natural father Agrippa. You, Gaius, were only eight when he died; you, my dear Lucius, an infant of five. I myself could never imagine Julius young, and yet I saw him in dangerous action. And you have been brought up in the Republic which I restored; how can you imagine a world that was falling apart, where no man knew his friend?

I trusted Agrippa and Maecenas of course. Apart from affection, they had nowhere else to go. But I trusted no other man above the rank of centurion, and not always them either. Even Maco said to me, 'You know, sir, my brother's with Antony. I could get him to let us know the feeling in his camp . . .' I assented of course, but how could I be sure of the honesty of any answer? And it wasn't really true either that Agrippa and Maecenas were bound to me; traitors are always welcome, for a time at least. Yet I had to act as if their affection, of which I was sure, could continue to determine their interest; which was more doubtful.

There were at least five parties or factions in the State, including my own.

Antony had inherited part of Caesar's following. He was consul which assured him direct command of at least five legions, and, even more important, gave him legitimate authority.

The chief of the self-styled Liberators, Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius, still posing as true friends of the Republic, had withdrawn in panic from the city which had vociferously rejected their gift of blood. Though they had only been assigned in the previous

elections the unimportant provinces of Crete and Cyrene respectively, within a few weeks it was known that Brutus had gone to Macedonia, Cassius to Syria, where they were raising rebellious armies in the name of Liberty and Republican virtue.

Lurking in Sicily was Sextus Pompey, unworthy son of an overrated father. Pompey the Great had cleared the sea of pirates; Sextus was little better than a pirate himself. Yet he had attracted to him the most irreconcilable remnants of the old Optimate party, those who, unlike the Liberators, had never made their peace with Caesar.

In Rome itself you could find the constitutionalists; their chief was Cicero. He was at least a voice, a marvellous and fecund organ.

And then, myself. I had got the nucleus of an army. It burned to revenge Caesar, and would continue to burn as long as I could pay it.

'Money,' Maecenas said, 'money is how it is done.'

Agrippa snorted, but I knew Maecenas was right. To this extent anyway; without money it couldn't be done.

Mark Antony had grown. That was the first surprise. I have since seen other men contract in office, as if the possession of authority revealed their deficiencies to them. His manner too had changed. He had treated me before like a younger brother. I had disliked his assumption of intimacy; he had had a habit of putting his arm round my shoulders and hugging me towards him which I found particularly offensive. Now he lay back on a couch, with two greyhounds resting beside him, and, having dismissed the slaves, looked me straight in the face.

'You're making trouble,' he said. He spoke as if I was a defaulter, and didn't ask me to sit down. Nevertheless I took the other couch. (Perhaps he regretted not having had it removed.) In the silence the babble of the morning forum rose up to us.

'I grant you,' he said – and I felt I had won the first round by compelling him to make the running in the conversation – 'that

you have secured the south. I even grant it was well done. But the stories you permit to be circulated can only serve our enemies.'

'Our enemies?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I want those soldiers you have. How many is it? A legion? Half a legion? You realize of course that as consul I have the right to command them, and that you as a private citizen are acting illegally. You have no official position, and at your age you can't have one. You can't command an army anyway, you've no experience, and I need the troops. Decimus Brutus is loose in Cisalpine Gaul, the other buggers are raising armies the other side of the Adriatic. I need those troops.'

'And what will you offer me?' I asked.

'A place on my staff. A consulship years before you're qualified. Safety. After all, boy, if I fail, you're done for.'

He may even have been frank. Certainly, for Antony was the sort of optimist who believes that the expression of a desire is miraculously translated into its achievement, he seemed to think that my silence betokened consent. At any rate, he now called on a slave to bring us wine, drank off a cup himself, and began to give me a survey of the strategical situation; Julius had once told me not to underestimate Antony: for all his flamboyance he was a good staff officer, with a grasp of detail you don't often find in drunkards.

'There's another thing,' I said. 'My inheritance. Caesar's will . . .'

He closed up, walked over to the window; and I knew at that moment I would have to fight him to be anything. Antony was a chronic debtor. Having a treasure like Caesar's at his disposal was a new and exhilarating experience. Even if he had not needed the money, which Caesar had left me, to pay his troops and buy popularity, he couldn't have brought himself to relinquish something so novel and delightful.

'You are right,' I said to Maecenas that evening. 'Money is how it's going to be done. I'll have to pay my soldiers from my own resources. See what you can do about it. And meanwhile make

me an appointment to see Balbus. He financed my father; let him finance me too.'

Agrippa said: 'I don't know that you were wise to turn down his offer. After all we're all Caesareans. We've got common enemies. We can sort things out between us when we've dealt with them. And Antony is consul. He has got a right to command.'

I said: 'You don't understand. There are no Caesareans. It's a meaningless term since the Ides of March.'

I couldn't blame Agrippa. He wasn't alone in his failure to understand. Yet in that general failure, in the confused incomprehension of how things actually were, lay the strength of my position; it was that which gave me freedom to manoeuvre. I despatched Agrippa into Campania to raise more troops – he had a genius for recruiting, and I knew they would come in an orderly fashion. Meanwhile, I had Maecenas, with all the considerable ostentation of which he was capable, pay Caesar's legacies from my own fortune and credit (people laugh at a banking background, but it's invaluable when you have to raise money in a hurry). And I resolved to woo Cicero.

Cicero is at most a name to you, my sons, because I have never permitted you to study his writings. You may, in the course of this narrative, come to understand why. Yet, if you are to make sense of my account of the next few months, I must tell you something about this man of the greatest genius – for another time and another city.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was the cleverest man I have ever known; yet I outwitted him at every turn. He was born in the municipality of Aroinum in the year 106 BC, so that he was by now an old man. The events of this terrible year show however that, if he was failing, it was in judgement, not energy of mind or body. I had sympathy and respect for Cicero, even affection. We were

both after all from the same sort of background, and he too had risen by his own genius. He was consul in 63, the year that saw the conspiracy of Catiline, which he suppressed with vigour and, it must be said, a fine disregard for the legality he spent the rest of his life claiming to uphold. For this exploit he was granted the title 'Father of his Country', which, as you know, the Conscript Fathers have thought fit to bestow on me also. Yet he never learned the lesson of his own consulship: that power makes its own rules. Nobody was more aware than Cicero of the decrepitude of the Republic, nobody analysed it more acutely. He saw that the extraordinary commands entrusted to the Republic's generals enabled them to create armies loyal to themselves but not to the Republic; yet he never saw how this had come about. His proposed cure was preposterous: he believed that if all the 'good men' would come together and co-operate, they could restore the old virtues of the Republic as in the day of Scipio – if not that stout old peasant Cincinnatus. He did not see that the structure itself was rotten. Yet he had proved it in his own life: to combat Caesar he had been forced to propose that Pompey receive one of those extraordinary commands that were destroying what Cicero loved; crazy.

I envied him his love for the idea of the Republic; he was infatuated with virtue. (But, my sons, you know the root of that verb 'to infatuate', don't you? You realize I have chosen it with the utmost precision to describe its effect on this man of genius.) He had beautiful manners too. Having discussed the matter with Maecenas, I went to visit Cicero taking with me humble and homely presents – a pot of honey from the Alban hills, a caciocavallo cheese, the first (very early, for it was a marvellous benign spring) wood strawberries from Nemi. He received me with a dignity that did honour to us both.

He began by speaking of Caesar. 'You must not think I did not respect him,' he said, 'even love him. Who could fail to admire his abilities? What a power of reasoning, what a memory, what lucidity, what literary skill, what accuracy, profundity of

thought and energy! His conquest of Gaul! Even though, as you will understand, I cannot think of it in its consequences as other than disastrous for the Republic, nevertheless, what an achievement! His genius was great, well-nigh unparalleled of its type; yet, my boy, and I say this with tears in my eyes, consider the consequence of his illustrious career: he brought this free city, which we both love – do we not? – to a habit of slavery. That is why I opposed him. That is why I welcomed his death. It is painful for me to say this; it is painful for you to hear it. Yet I must be honest if we are to work together, as I hope we may.'

'It is my hope too, sir,' I said.

'These gifts you have brought me, so aptly and significantly chosen, they give me assurance that that hope may not be vain. There is measure and restraint in your choice; a just severity of judgement.'

I said: 'They are nothing. I merely hoped they might be pleasing to the Father of our Country, who saved Rome from the mad wolf Catiline.'

His manner, which had been public, ornate, rhetorical and insincere, changed.

'Ah,' he said, 'you know about that. I can never believe they teach any history now. My own sons and my nephew would have known nothing if I had not instructed them myself. And indeed you see truly what Catiline was . . . But what else is Antony?'

I was amazed at his audacity, for I had been accustomed to hear men mock his timidity. I had not known before how some men become bolder as their future shortens.

'Do you know what Rome is?' he said. 'Ah, how could you, child? But come.'

He took me by the sleeve and led me over to where we could look down on the city. The sky was of the most intense blue; the temples on the Capitol glittered. Below the hill rose the hum of the city, a constant movement, a coming and going, a jostling animation; law courts were babbling, baths teeming, libraries

attended, cook-shops and taverns sizzling. We withdrew into the cool of the atrium.

'It is a city of free men,' Cicero said, 'with liberty of discussion and debate, where none legally wears arms or armour; a city of noble equals; and that mad dog, whom I shall not dignify with Catiline's name of wolf, that drunken pirate, threatens to stop our mouths with the swords of his legionaries.'

'I have legions too, sir.'

The first smile lit up his face; he chuckled.

'Of course you have, dear boy. That's why you are here, child. The question is, what will you do with them?'

'My legions are at the service of the Republic,' I said.

He let a long silence of sceptical memories fill the air.

'But,' I continued, 'what are the intentions of the Republic towards me?'

'I am not sure,' he said, 'that just at the moment the Republic can be said to have any intentions. It is as bereft of will as it is of legions. That, dear boy, is the crux of the matter.'

When Antony promised me safety if I delivered my legions to him, there was mockery in his voice. There was an even harsher note: contempt. He believed I would indeed be ready to buy safety. 'You, boy,' he would say, 'with your banker's blood, who owe everything to a name . . .' Such an assumption on his part hardly caused me to respect his intelligence: did he truly fail to realize that I too had let the dice fly high when I chose to accept Julius' legacy and acknowledged Maco's salute at Brindisi?

Cicero praised me in the Senate. His words would have overwhelmed me if my vanity had approached his own. Agrippa was hugely impressed. He repeated over and over again that we had really arrived: 'I don't see that they can now deny you legitimate authority. Not after such advocacy.' Maecenas I saw smirking. 'You don't agree, do you?' I said. 'Oh,' he said, 'who am I to speak? Remember I am not a true Roman. I don't understand your Senates

and Assemblies. My ancestors were Kings in Etruria. So it is hard for me to estimate the effect of oratory on a body like the Senate. But we have a saying in my family: beware the man who speaks well of you. Besides, haven't you heard the story that's going about? Someone said to Cicero, "Why on earth do you praise that young man?" The old boy looked over his shoulder to see who might overhear, and replied, "The young man must be praised." "Must be?" asks his chum. "Must be," says Cicero, "he must be praised, decorated and . . . disposed of . . ." What we mustn't forget, my dears, is that Cicero was cheating serpents before our daddies were weaned.' I looked at Maecenas. 'We must never let Cicero suspect that we guess what he has in mind. He is our dearest friend and essential ally.'

It was a spring of the utmost delicacy. The wild weather of the March of Julius' murder was scattered by a sun that promised more than we could find time to enjoy. I had got myself an army, but hesitated whether to use it or disband it for the moment. Antony returned to Rome about 20 May, bringing with him a bodyguard of thugs ready to control any vote in the popular assembly. With money that was rightfully mine he bought the alliance of Cicero's son-in-law Dolabella. At the beginning of June he staged a plebiscite to prolong his own provincial command for three years.

We met again in a house that had once belonged to Pompey; whether he or Antony was responsible for its vulgarity, I could not tell. But I had time enough to study it, for Antony had the insolence to keep me waiting. No doubt he thought to disturb me. When he at last granted me an interview his insolence continued. He again absolutely refused to disgorge Julius' money.

I accepted his insolence in silence. Do not, my children, ever underestimate the value of silence. It disconcerts bluster and distorts judgement.

When I left his presence I let it be known that I would pay all

Julius' legacies; 'If it costs me my last penny,' I asserted. I wrote to my friends in the legions in Macedonia complaining that Antony was refusing to avenge Caesar.

This was not strictly true, for by midsummer Antony was actually besieging Decimus Brutus in Mutina. This disturbed Agrippa. 'It seems to me wrong that we're not working with Antony,' he kept saying. 'I tell you our centurions don't understand what you're up to. They don't like it. They joined us to avenge Caesar and here you are fucking about with the Senate and that old woman Cicero.'

'Run away and practise your sword-play, ducky,' Maecenas said. 'We do have heads on our shoulders. We're not just blundering about.'

'Well,' Agrippa glowered at me, 'that's what it fucking well looks like. If you've got a plan, perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell me what it is?'

I thought about that.

'There you go again,' he said. 'You just sit there like a little owl, and let him make fun of me. You don't tell me anything, but it's me as has to go out and find you soldiers, and then try to keep 'em happy. But they're not happy, they're bleeding not. So what's your flaming plan?'

'I don't have one,' I said, 'not the sort of plan you could write down.'

And this was true. I have talked to you about this, Gaius and Lucius, but I have never put it in writing for you. The value of planning diminishes in accordance with the complexity of the state of affairs. Believe me: this is true. It may seem paradoxical. You may think that the more complicated a situation is, the more necessary a plan to deal with it. I shall grant you the theory. But practice is different. No plan can be equal to the complexities and casualties of political life. Hence, adherence to a plan deprives you of the flexibility which you need if you are to ride the course of events; for a moment's reflection should enable you to see that it is impossible (even with the help of the wisest soothsayers and

mathematicians) to predict what will happen; and it is folly to pretend that you can control the actions of other men with any certainty. Therefore a plan is only suitable for the simple operations of life; you can plan a journey to your country house, but you cannot plan a battle or a political campaign in any detail. You must have a goal, my sons, but to achieve it, nothing is more important than that you retain fluidity of thought. Improvisation is the secret of success in politics, for most political action is in fact and of necessity reaction.

So I said now to Agrippa, 'I have no plan but I have purposes. I intend to avenge Caesar and to restore the Republic. And first I intend to safeguard our position. All my manoeuvring is directed towards these aims. You ask about Antony? You call for a reunion of the Caesareans. Well, so do I. But does Antony? As far as he is concerned, Caesar is dead and Antony is his successor. He must be persuaded that it is not so, and that he, Antony, is less than half our party.'

Meanwhile, as Maecenas was quick to tell me, Antony was doing all he could to destroy my reputation. He spread many rumours about me. I shall set them down, because I am not ashamed to have been slandered.

He let it be known that I had played the role of catamite to Caesar to encourage him to adopt me. He added that, subsequently, I had submitted to the lusts of Aulus Hirtius, Procurator of Spain, in return for 3000 gold pieces: 'The boy lends out his body at interest,' he said, 'it's his banker's blood, no doubt.' He accused me of effeminacy and sent agents among my troops to ask why they let themselves be commanded by a boy-whore.

The accusations were false of course; it was ridiculous to suppose that Caesar would so reward a boy who behaved in such a disgusting way. As for Aulus Hirtius, he was so repulsive that one of his slave-boys hanged himself rather than endure his embraces. (The boy was a Gaul too, and everyone knows that

Gallic boys think it no shame to sleep with mature men; the Druid religion encourages youths to prostitute themselves to the priests, and Gallic warriors are accustomed to choose the boys who look after their war-horses for their good looks.) Besides, it was absurd to suppose that 3000 gold pieces would attract a young man of my fortune.

Curiously these allegations did me no harm with the troops. They didn't believe them. Even if they had, Antony should have known that soldiers take pleasure in the vices of their commanders. Caesar's legionaries had delighted in the story of their general's seduction by King Nicomedes. They had even sung a dirty song about it, which I shall not repeat to you.

Agrippa of course was furious. He told me I was bound to have such stories made up about me as long as I associated with a pansy like Maecenas. He said that even if my men chose not to believe them, the senators whose support I was seeking would hardly like it to be thought that they were associating with a tart.

'Don't be so silly,' I said, 'there's nothing to worry about. Everyone knows Antony is a liar.'

All the same I was displeased myself, though my displeasure was mixed with the satisfaction that the circulation of such absurd and malicious rumours showed that Antony was taking my rivalry seriously. Nevertheless, I thought it as well to do what I could to disprove the lies. I stopped shaving my legs for one thing, and grew a beard too; and I took care to let pretty slave-girls be seen round my quarters. Maecenas introduced me to one Toranius, a dealer who was able to supply me with the most delectable fruits of the market.

I tell you these things, my sons, not for any pleasure I feel in the memory – to speak the truth I look back on them with a mixture of amusement and distaste – but for two reasons: first, that you may learn from my own lips what manner of man I have been, and so be able to discount the malicious and disreputable rumours with which I am sure you will be fed; and, second, because you may learn in this way how much prudence,

self-control and decision are necessary to manipulate public opinion. I was careful to arrange that Maco should see a Circassian girl slip shiftless from my tent as he awaited an interview. I knew he would go back and say, 'He's a right boy, our general, you should have seen the bit of fluff he had last night . . .'

Antony was fighting only for himself; but I had a vision of Rome. No one knows how ideas are formed, what influences operate on the mind, to what extent a man creates a world-view for himself. These are deep matters which I have discussed with philosophers, and, as the poet says, 'evermore came out, by that same door wherein I went'; and with Virgil, who was something more profound than a philosopher, a true poet. Here let me say a word on the subject of poets. Most of them are no more than versifiers. Any gentleman should of course be able to turn a verse; you, Lucius, have written elegiacs that please me. Beyond that, when it becomes a profession, there is too often something despicable in the craft. It encourages conceit and extravagant behaviour, monkey-tricks. True poetry has a moral value, most verse none; some is frankly immoral. Occasionally however you find a poet who offers more even than that. He is a man possessed of insight, a man through whom the Gods have chosen to speak. (By the way, I am glad that I have never heard you mock the Gods; only those with no rudder, men who trust complacently to their own natural buoyancy, do that. I fear the man who does not fear the Gods, for he lacks proportion.) I am fortunate to have known one such poet, Virgil. The spirit of Rome inhabited him; he saw what was hidden from other men. There is no man I have more deeply revered. I am sometimes tempted to believe that the core of my political thought derives from Virgil. And yet this is false. I was moving in that direction before I ever talked with him. Is it possible that ideas can exist, as it were, in the air?

Caesar was naturally an inspiration. Yet, speaking under my breath to you, my sons, let me confess I never cared for Julius. There was something meretricious in him, something rotten. He revealed the full decadence of the Republic; when he led his legions

across the Rubicon in that winter dawn, it was as if he tore a veil away from a shrine and discovered to all that the God had abandoned it. He was a great general; his conquest of Gaul and defeat of Pompey were imperishable feats. But what did he do then? He was tempted by monarchy – I have it on good authority that when Antony three times presented him with a kingly crown on the occasion of the Feast of the Lupercal, both Caesar and Antony expected that the crowd would hail him as king, and thus allow him to accept the crown. Inept politicians! Not to have arranged that the wind would blow that way! There was a vanity to him; he wore the high red boots of the old kings of Alba Longa; can you imagine me behaving so absurdly? But there was room for such vanity – it filled a vacancy at the heart of his imagination. Having achieved supreme power, he did not see that he was only at the beginning of his labours.

I often talked of Julius with Cicero that long summer ago. When he sensed – oh he had the sharp intuition of the great cross-examiner he was – that I too had my doubts about my father, Cicero let slip the cloak of discretion which he always wore as if it chafed him. He ran his hand through his grey hair, leaned forward and thrust his scraggy neck towards me:

'The truth is,' he said, 'he was an adventurer, a gambler. He had no purpose beyond the immediate. He had no sense of history, no sense of the relationship that must exist between the past, the present and the future. He had never analysed the causes of his own elevation because he believed it had been achieved by fortune and his own merit; his genius in short. Such nonsense!'

'Do you think,' I said – I made a habit of seeking Cicero's opinion even when I had no need of it – 'do you think that there was any deep purpose behind his admission of Gauls to the Senate?'

Cicero flushed: 'There was certainly a purpose, but it was simply to insult the senators by making us associate with barbarians. Can you imagine anything more contemptuous?'

'No, sir,' I said, shaking my head and keeping my face straight,

'but tell me how in your view, garnered from your life's distinguished harvest, the Free State can be restored.'

Cicero sighed: 'I had almost come to believe it impossible. Perhaps, my dear boy, you have been sent by the gods to make it possible. What is needed is resolution, and the agreement of all good men throughout society to work together, and obey the laws. There is no fault in our laws. The fault, Octavius, lies in our own natures. Let me give you two examples. Have you ever heard of Verres?'

'Who, thanks to your sublime oratory, has not heard of Verres?'

'Well, yes, my prosecution made some stir in its time. I am glad it is still read. You remember what I said? Let me at any rate refresh your memory. I dislike quoting myself, but I know no other way to make my present point . . .'

And he did; it lasted half an hour (all from memory of course) and he was (as I guessed) hardly half-way through when he was suddenly taken by old man's weakness and had to leave me to empty his bladder. I shan't weary you with his speech: suffice to say that Verres was a dishonest and extortionate Governor of Sicily, whom Cicero had very properly prosecuted (nowadays of course a modern Verres would not be able to commit even a quarter of the offences of the original, and we have more efficient ways of dealing with such malpractice than by public trial).

I had thought the interruption might spare me the rest of the speech. Not a bit of it; he was in full flow before he was properly back in the room, doubtless lest I should change the subject.

Eventually he paused a moment. 'My peroration,' he said, 'has been called sublime.' And he gave it to me elaborate and fortissimo. (I would never advise anyone to copy his magniloquent and excessively mannered style of oratory. It was, I suppose, superb or sublime, if you like; but prolix and too carefully prepared to convince. All right in its time I daresay, but terribly dated and disgustingly florid in my view. However, I applauded as was only polite.)

Then he said: 'Now look on the other side. I myself have been a Governor too. In Cilicia, a province lamentably looted by my

predecessors. I refused to follow their example. No expense was imposed on the wretched provincials during my government, and when I say no expense, I do not speak hyperbolically. I mean, none, not a farthing. Imagine that. I refused to billet my troops on them. I made the soldiers sleep under canvas. I refused all bribes. My dear boy, the natives regarded my conduct with speechless admiration and astonishment. I tell you it was all I could do to prevent them from erecting temples in my honour. Innumerable babies were named Marcus, I could hardly object to that. When I took slaves in my campaigns I deposited in the Treasury the 12 million sesterces I received for their sale. That's how to govern; that's the way it should be done. Not like Verres, not like Marcus Brutus.' He broke off to giggle. 'Do you know, dear boy, what interest he charged the wretched Cypriots under his care? No? You won't believe it. Forty-eight per cent. That's right, it's true. Forty-eight per cent. Imagine. But, dear boy, you see what I mean? There is nothing wrong with the Republic that a change of heart and a return to the stern morality of our ancestors will not put right. Meanwhile though, we have this wild beast Antony to account for. The stories he has spread about you! It's shameful. An old man like myself can stand slander; it must always hurt the young.'

Such optimism, such naïvety, in one who had seen so much!