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THE ROMAN EMPIRE 44BC

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| 1. <i>Rome</i> | 7. <i>Patrae</i> |
| 2. <i>Munda</i> | 8. <i>Athens</i> |
| 3. <i>Thapsus</i> | 9. <i>Thessalonica</i> |
| 4. <i>Dyrrachium</i> | 10. <i>Rhodes</i> |
| 5. <i>Corcyra</i> | 11. <i>Laodicea</i> |
| 6. <i>Pharsalus</i> | 12. <i>Carrhae</i> |



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CICERO'S ITALY



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N.G.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

*D*ictator tells the story of the final fifteen years in the life of the Roman statesman Cicero, imagined in the form of a biography written by his secretary, Tiro.

That there was such a man as Tiro and that he wrote such a book are well-attested historical facts. Born a slave on the family estate, he was three years younger than his master but long outlived him, surviving, according to Saint Jerome, until he reached his hundredth year.

'Your services to me are beyond count,' Cicero wrote to him in 50 BC, 'in my home and out of it, in Rome and abroad, in private affairs and public, in my studies and literary work . . .' Tiro was the first man to record a speech in the senate verbatim, and his shorthand system, known as *Notae Tironianae*, was still in use in the Church in the sixth century; indeed some traces of it (the symbol '&', the abbreviations etc, NB, i.e., e.g.) survive to this day. He also wrote several treatises on the development of Latin. His multi-volume life of Cicero is referred to as a source by the first-century historian Asconius Pedianus; Plutarch cites it twice. But, like the rest of Tiro's literary output, the book disappeared amid the collapse of the Roman Empire.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

What must it have been like, one wonders? Cicero's life was extraordinary, even by the hectic standards of the age. From relatively lowly origins compared to his aristocratic rivals, and despite his lack of interest in military matters, deploying his skill as an orator and the brilliance of his intellect he rose at meteoric speed through the Roman political system, until, against all the odds, he finally was elected consul at the youngest-permitted age of forty-two.

There followed a crisis-stricken year in office – 63 BC – during which he was obliged to deal with a conspiracy to overthrow the republic led by Sergius Catilina. To suppress the revolt, the Senate, under Cicero's presidency, ordered the execution of five prominent citizens – an episode that haunted his career ever afterwards.

When subsequently the three most powerful men in Rome – Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great and Marcus Crassus – joined forces in a so-called triumvirate to dominate the state, Cicero decided to oppose them. Caesar in retaliation, using his powers as chief priest, unleashed the ambitious aristocratic demagogue, Clodius – an old enemy of Cicero's – to destroy him. By allowing Clodius to renounce his patrician status and become a plebeian, Caesar opened the way for his election as tribune. Tribunes had the power to haul citizens before the people, to harass and persecute them. Cicero swiftly decided he had no choice but to flee Rome. It is at this desperate point in his fortunes that *Dictator* begins.

My aim has been to describe, as accurately as I can within the conventions of fiction, the end of the Roman Republic as it might have been experienced by Cicero

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Dictator

and Tiro. Wherever possible, the letters and speeches and descriptions of events have been drawn from the original sources.

As *Dictator* encompasses what was arguably – at least until the convulsions of 1933–45 – the most tumultuous era in human history, a glossary and a cast of characters have been provided at the back of the book to assist the reader in navigating Cicero’s sprawling and collapsing world.

Robert Harris
Kintbury, 8 June 2015

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‘The melancholy of the antique world seems to me more profound than that of the moderns, all of whom more or less imply that beyond the dark void lies immortality. But for the ancients that “black hole” was infinity itself; their dreams loom and vanish against a background of immutable ebony. No crying out, no convulsions – nothing but the fixity of a pensive gaze. Just when the gods had ceased to be and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone. Nowhere else do I find that particular grandeur.’

Gustave Flaubert, letter to Mme
Roger des Genettes, 1861

‘Alive, Cicero enhanced life. So can his letters do, if only for a student here and there, taking time away from belittling despairs to live among Virgil’s Togaed People, desperate masters of a larger world.’

D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero*, 1971

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PART ONE

EXILE

58 BC—47 BC

Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contextitur?

To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?

Cicero, *Orator*, 46 BC

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I

I remember the cries of Caesar's war-horns chasing us over the darkened fields of Latium – their yearning, keening howls, like animals on heat – and how when they stopped there was only the slither of our shoes on the icy road and the urgent panting of our breath.

It was not enough for the immortal gods that Cicero should be spat at and reviled by his fellow citizens; not enough that in the middle of the night he be driven from the hearths and altars of his family and ancestors; not enough even that as we fled from Rome on foot he should look back and see his house in flames. To all these torments they deemed it necessary to add one further refinement: that he should be forced to hear his enemy's army striking camp on the Field of Mars.

Even though he was the oldest of our party Cicero kept up the same fast pace as the rest of us. Not long ago he had held Caesar's life in the palm of his hand. He could have crushed it as easily as an egg. Now their fortunes led them in entirely opposite directions. While Cicero hurried south to escape his enemies, the architect of his destruction marched north to take command of both provinces of Gaul.

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He walked with his head down, not uttering a word and I imagined it was because he was too full of despair to speak. Only at dawn, when we rendezvoused with our horses at Bovillae and were about to embark on the second stage of our escape, did he pause with his foot in the doorway of his carriage and say suddenly, 'Do you think we should turn back?'

The question caught me by surprise. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I hadn't considered it.'

'Well, consider it now. Tell me: why are we fleeing Rome?'

'Because of Clodius and his mob.'

'And why is Clodius so powerful?'

'Because he's a tribune and can pass laws against you.'

'And who made it possible for him to become a tribune?'

I hesitated. 'Caesar.'

'Exactly. Caesar. Do you imagine that man's departure for Gaul at that precise hour was a coincidence? Of course not! He waited till his spies had reported I'd left the city before ordering his army to move. Why? I'd always assumed his advancement of Clodius was to punish me for speaking out against him. But what if his real aim all along was to drive me out of Rome? What scheme requires him to be certain I've gone before he can leave too?'

I should have grasped the logic of what he was saying. I should have urged him to turn back. But I was too exhausted to reason clearly. And if I am honest there was more to it than that. I was too afraid of what Clodius's thugs might do to us if they caught us re-entering the city.

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So instead I said, ‘It’s a good question, and I can’t pretend I have the answer. But wouldn’t it look indecisive, after bidding goodbye to everyone, suddenly to reappear? In any case, Clodius has burned your house down now – where would we return to? Who would take us in? I think you’d be wiser to stick to your original plan and get as far away from Rome as you can.’

He rested his head against the side of the carriage and closed his eyes. In the pale grey light I was shocked by how haggard he appeared after his night on the road. His hair and beard had not been cut for weeks. He was wearing a toga dyed black. Although he was only in his forty-ninth year, these public signs of mourning made him look much older – like some ancient, mendicant holy man. After a while he sighed. ‘I don’t know, Tiro. Perhaps you’re right. It’s so long since I slept I’m too tired to think any more.’

And so the fatal error was made – more through indecision than decision – and we continued to press on southwards for the remainder of that day and for the twelve days that followed, putting what we thought was a safe distance between ourselves and danger.

We travelled with a minimal entourage to avoid attracting attention – just the carriage driver and three armed slaves on horseback, one in front and two behind. A small chest of gold and silver coins that Atticus, Cicero’s oldest and closest friend, had provided to pay for our journey was hidden under our seat. We stayed only in the houses of men we trusted, no more than a night in each, and steered clear of those places where Cicero might have

been expected to stop – for example at his seaside villa at Formiae, the first place any pursuers would look for him, and along the Bay of Naples, already filling with the annual exodus from Rome in search of winter sun and warm springs. Instead we headed as fast as we could towards the toe of Italy.

Cicero's plan, conceived on the move, was to make for Sicily and stay there until the political agitation against him in Rome subsided. 'The mob will turn on Clodius eventually,' he predicted. 'Such is the unalterable nature of the mob. He will always be my mortal enemy but he won't always be tribune – we must never forget that. In nine months his term of office will expire and then we can go back.'

He was confident of a friendly reception from the Sicilians, if only because of his successful prosecution of the island's tyrannical governor, Verres – even though that brilliant victory, which launched his political career, was now twelve years in the past and Clodius had more recently been a magistrate in the province. I sent letters ahead giving notice of his intention to seek sanctuary, and when we reached the harbour at Regium we hired a little six-oared boat to row us across the straits to Messina.

We left the harbour on a clear cold winter morning of searing blues – the sea and the sky; one light, one dark; the line dividing them as sharp as a blade; the distance to Messina a mere three miles. It took us less than an hour. We drew so close we could see Cicero's supporters lined up on the rocks to welcome him. But stationed between us and the entrance to the port was a warship flying the

red and green colours of the governor of Sicily, Gaius Vergilius, and as we approached the lighthouse it slipped its anchor and moved slowly forwards to intercept us. Vergilius stood at the rail surrounded by his lictors and, after visibly recoiling at Cicero's dishevelled appearance, shouted down a greeting, to which Cicero replied in friendly terms. They had known one another in the Senate for many years.

Vergilius asked him his intentions.

Cicero called back that naturally he intended to come ashore.

'That's what I'd heard,' replied Vergilius. 'Unhappily I can't allow it.'

'Why not?'

'Because of Clodius's new law.'

'And what new law would that be? There are so many, one loses count.'

Vergilius beckoned to a member of his staff who produced a document and leaned down to pass it to me and I then gave it to Cicero. To this day I can remember how it fluttered in his hands in the slight breeze as if it were a living thing; it was the only sound in the silence. He took his time and when he had finished reading it he handed it to me without comment.

Lex Clodia in Ciceronem

Whereas M. T. Cicero has put Roman citizens to death unheard and uncondemned; and to that end forged the authority and decree of the Senate; it is hereby

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ordained that he be interdicted from fire and water to a distance of four hundred miles from Rome; that nobody should presume to harbour or receive him, on pain of death; that all his property and possessions be forfeit; that his house in Rome be demolished and a shrine to Liberty consecrated in its place; and that whoever shall move, speak, vote or take any step towards recalling him shall be treated as a public enemy, unless those whom Cicero unlawfully put to death should first spring back to life.

It must have been the most terrible blow. But he found the composure to dismiss it with a flick of his hand. ‘When,’ he enquired, ‘was this nonsense published?’

‘I’m told it was posted in Rome eight days ago. It came into my hands yesterday.’

‘Then it’s not law yet, and can’t be law until it’s been read a third time. My secretary will confirm it. Tiro,’ he said, turning to me, ‘tell the governor the earliest date it can be passed.’

I tried to calculate. Before a bill could be put to a vote it had to be read aloud in the Forum on three successive market days. But my reasoning was so shaken by what I had just read I couldn’t remember what day of the week it was now, let alone when the market days fell. ‘Twenty days from today,’ I hazarded, ‘perhaps twenty-five?’

‘You see?’ cried Cicero. ‘I have three weeks’ grace even if it passes, which I’m sure it won’t.’ He stood up in the prow of the boat, bracing his legs against the rocking of the hull, and spread his arms wide in appeal. ‘Please, my

dear Vergilius, for the sake of our past friendship, now that I have come so far, at least allow me to land and spend a night or two with my supporters.’

‘No, as I say, I’m sorry, but I cannot take the risk. I’ve consulted my experts. They say even if you travelled to the very western tip of the island, to Lilybaeum, you’d still be within three hundred and fifty miles of Rome, and then Clodius would come after *me*.’

At that, Cicero ceased to be so friendly. He said coldly, ‘You have no right under the law to impede the journey of a Roman citizen.’

‘I have every right to safeguard the tranquillity of my province. And here, as you know, my word *is* the law . . .’

He was apologetic. I dare say he was even embarrassed. But he was immovable, and after a few more angry exchanges there was nothing for it but to turn round and row back to Regium. Our departure provoked a great cry of dismay from the shoreline and I could see that Cicero for the first time was seriously worried. Vergilius was a friend of his. If this was how a friend reacted then soon the whole of Italy would be closed against him. Returning to Rome to oppose the law was much too risky. He had left it too late. Apart from the physical danger such a journey would entail, the bill would almost certainly pass, and then we would be stranded four hundred miles from the legal limit it prescribed. To comply safely with the terms of his exile he would have to flee abroad immediately. Obviously Gaul was out of the question because of Caesar. So it would have to be somewhere in the East – Greece perhaps, or Asia. But unfortunately we

were on the wrong side of the peninsula to make our escape in the treacherous winter seas. We needed to get over to the opposite coast, to Brundisium on the Adriatic, and find a big ship capable of making a lengthy voyage. Our predicament was exquisitely vile – as no doubt Caesar, the original sponsor and creator of Clodius, had intended.

It took us two weeks of arduous travel to cross the mountains, often in heavy rain and mostly along bad roads. Every mile seemed fraught with the hazard of ambush, although the primitive little towns we passed through were welcoming enough. At night we slept in smoky, freezing inns and dined on hard bread and fatty meat made scarcely more palatable by sour wine. Cicero's mood veered between fury and despair. He saw clearly now that he had made a terrible mistake by leaving Rome. It had been madness for him to quit the city and leave Clodius free to spread the calumny that he had put citizens to death 'unheard and uncondemned' when in fact each of the five Catiline conspirators had been allowed to speak in his own defence and their execution had been sanctioned by the entire Senate. But his flight was tantamount to an admission of guilt. He should have obeyed his instinct and turned back when he heard Caesar's departing trumpets and first began to realise his error. He wept at the disaster his folly and timidity had brought upon his wife and children.

And when he had finished lashing himself, he turned

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his scourge on Hortensius ‘and the rest of the aristocratic gang’, who had never forgiven him for rising from his humble origins to the consulship and saving the republic: they had deliberately urged him to flee in order to ruin him. He should have heeded the example of Socrates, who said that death was preferable to exile. Yes, he should have killed himself! He snatched up a knife from the dining table. He *would* kill himself! I said nothing. I didn’t take the threat seriously. He couldn’t stand the sight of others’ blood, let alone his own. All his life he had tried to avoid military expeditions, the games, public executions, funerals – anything that might remind him of mortality. If pain frightened him, death terrified him – which, although I would never have been impertinent enough to point it out, was the principal reason we had fled Rome in the first place.

When finally we came within sight of the fortified walls of Brundisium, he decided not to venture inside. The port was so large and busy, so full of strangers, and so likely to be his destination, he was convinced it was the obvious spot for his assassination. Instead we sought sanctuary a little way up the coast, in the residence of his old friend Marcus Laenius Flaccus. That night we slept in decent beds for the first time in three weeks, and the next morning we went down to the beach. The waves were much rougher than on the Sicilian side. A strong wind was hurling the Adriatic relentlessly against the rocks and shingle. Cicero loathed sea voyages at the best of times; this one promised to be especially treacherous. Yet it was our only means of escape. One hundred and

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twenty miles beyond the horizon lay the shore of Illyricum.

Flaccus, noticing his expression, said, ‘Fortify your spirits, Cicero – perhaps the bill won’t pass, or one of the other tribunes will veto it. There must be *someone* left in Rome willing to stand up for you – Pompey, surely?’

But Cicero, his gaze still fixed out to sea, made no reply, and a few days later we heard that the bill had indeed become law and that Flaccus was therefore guilty of a capital offence simply by having a convicted exile on his premises. Even so he tried to persuade us to stay. He insisted that Clodius didn’t frighten *him*. But Cicero wouldn’t hear of it: ‘Your loyalty moves me, old friend, but that monster will have dispatched a team of his hired fighters to hunt me down the moment his law passed. There is no time to lose.’

I had found a merchant ship in the harbour at Brundisium whose hard-pressed master was willing to risk a winter voyage across the Adriatic in return for a huge fee, and the next morning at first light, when no one was around, we went on board. She was a sturdy, broad-beamed vessel, with a crew of about twenty, used to ply the trade route between Italy and Dyrrachium. I was no judge of these things, but she looked safe enough to me. The master estimated the crossing would require a day and a half – but we needed to leave quickly, he said, and take advantage of the favourable wind. So while the sailors made her ready and Flaccus waited on the quayside, Cicero quickly dictated a final message to his wife and children: *It has been a fine life, a great career – the good in*

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me, nothing bad, has brought me down. My dear Terentia, loyalest and best of wives, my darling daughter Tullia, and little Marcus, our one remaining hope – goodbye! I copied it out and passed it up to Flaccus. He raised his hand in farewell. Then the sail was unfurled, the cables cast off, the oarsmen pushed us away from the harbour wall, and we set off into the pale grey light.

At first we made good speed. Cicero stood high above the deck on the steersmen's platform, leaning on the stern rail, watching the great lighthouse of Brundisium recede behind us. Apart from his visits to Sicily, it was the first time he had left Italy since his youth, when he went to Rhodes to learn oratory from Molon. Of all the men I ever knew, Cicero was the least equipped by temperament for exile. To thrive he needed the appurtenances of civilised society – friends, news, gossip, conversation, politics, dinners, plays, baths, books, fine buildings; to watch all these dwindle away must have been an agony for him.

Nevertheless, in little more than an hour they had gone, swallowed up in the void. The wind drove us forwards strongly, and as we cut through the whitecaps I thought of Homer's 'dark blue wave/foaming at the bow'. But then around the middle of the morning the ship seemed gradually to lose propulsion. The great brown sail became slack-bellied and the two steersmen standing at their levers on either side of us began exchanging anxious looks. Soon dense black clouds started to mass on the horizon, and

within an hour they had closed over our heads like a trap-door. The light became shadowy; the temperature dropped. The wind got up again, but this time the gusts were in our faces, driving the cold spray off the surface of the waves. Hailstones raked the heaving deck.

Cicero shuddered, leaned forwards and vomited. His face was as grey as a corpse. I put my arm around his shoulders and indicated that we should descend to the lower deck and seek shelter in the cabin. We were halfway down the ladder when a flash of lightning split the gloom, followed instantly by a deafening, sickening crack, like a bone snapping or a tree splintering, and I was sure we must have lost the mast, for suddenly we seemed to be tumbling over and over while all around us great glistening black mountains of jet towered and toppled in the lightning flashes. The shriek of the wind made it impossible to speak or hear. In the end I simply pushed Cicero into the cabin, fell in after him and closed the door.

We tried to stand, but the ship was listing. The deck was ankle-deep in water. Our feet slid from under us. The floor tilted first one way and then the other. We clutched at the walls as we were pitched back and forth in the darkness amid loose tools and jars of wine and sacks of barley, like dumb beasts in a crate on our way to slaughter. Eventually we wedged ourselves in a corner and lay there soaked and shivering as the boat shook and plunged. I was sure we were doomed and closed my eyes and prayed to Neptune and all the gods for deliverance.

A long time passed. How long I cannot say – certainly it was the remainder of that day, and the whole of the night,

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and part of the day that followed. Cicero seemed quite unconscious; on several occasions I had to touch his cold cheek to reassure myself he was still alive. Each time his eyes opened briefly and then closed again. Afterwards he said he had fully resigned himself to drowning but such was the misery of his seasickness he felt no fear: rather he saw how Nature in her mercy spares those *in extremis* from the terrors of oblivion and makes death seem a welcome release. Almost the greatest surprise of his life, he said, was when he awoke on the second day and realised the storm was over and his existence would continue after all: 'Unfortunately my situation is so wretched, I almost regret it.'

Once we were sure the storm had blown itself out, we went back on deck. The sailors were just at that moment tipping over the side the corpse of some poor wretch whose head had been smashed by a swinging boom. The Adriatic was oily-smooth and still, of the same grey shade as the sky, and the body slid into it with scarcely a splash. There was a smell on the cold wind I didn't recognise, of something rotten and decaying. About a mile away I noticed a wall of sheer black rock rising above the surf. I assumed we had been blown back home again and that it must be the coast of Italy. But the captain laughed at my ignorance and said it was Illyricum, and that those were the famous cliffs that guard the approaches to the ancient city of Dyrrachium.

Cicero had at first intended to make for Epirus, the mountainous country to the south, where Atticus owned a great estate that included a fortified village. It

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was a most desolate region, having never recovered from the terrible fate decreed it by the Senate a century earlier, when, as a punishment for siding against Rome, all seventy of its towns had been razed to the ground simultaneously and its entire population of one hundred and fifty thousand sold into slavery. Nevertheless, Cicero claimed he wouldn't have minded the solitude of such a haunted spot. But just before we left Italy Atticus had warned him – 'with regret' – that he could only stay for a month lest word of his presence become known: if it did, under clause two of Clodius's bill, Atticus himself would be liable to the death penalty for harbouring the exile.

Even as we stepped ashore at Dyrrachium Cicero remained in two minds about which direction to take – south to Epirus, temporary refuge though it would be, or east to Macedonia, where the governor, Apuleius Saturninus, was an old friend of his, and from Macedonia on to Greece and Athens. In the event, the decision was made for him. A messenger was waiting on the quayside – a young man, very anxious. Glancing around to make sure he was not observed, he drew us quickly into a deserted warehouse and produced a letter. It was from Saturninus, the governor. I do not have it in my archives because Cicero seized it and tore it to pieces the moment I had read it out loud to him. But I can still remember the gist of what it said: that 'with regret' (that phrase again!), despite their years of friendship, Saturninus would not be able to receive Cicero in his household as it would be 'incompatible with the dignity of a Roman governor to offer succour to a convicted exile'.

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Hungry, damp and exhausted from our crossing, having hurled the fragments of the letter to the ground, Cicero sank on to a bale of cloth with his head in his hands. That was when the messenger said nervously, ‘Your Excellency, there is another letter . . .’

It was from one of the governor’s junior magistrates, the quaestor Gnaeus Plancius. His family were old neighbours of the Ciceros from their ancestral lands around Arpinum. Plancius said that he was writing secretly and sending his letter via the same courier, who was to be trusted; that he disagreed with his superior’s decision; that it would be an honour for him to take the Father of the Nation under his protection; that secrecy was vital; that he had already set out on the road to meet him at the Macedonian border; and that in the meantime he had arranged for a carriage to transport Cicero out of Dyrrachium ‘immediately, in the interests of your personal safety; I plead with you not to delay by so much as an hour; I shall explain more when I see you’.

‘Do you trust him?’ I asked.

Cicero stared at the floor and in a low voice replied, ‘No. But what choice do I have?’

With the messenger’s help I arranged for our luggage to be transferred from the boat to the quaestor’s carriage – a gloomy contraption, little better than a cell on wheels, without suspension and with metal grilles nailed over the windows so that its fugitive occupant could look out but no one could see him. We clattered up from the harbour into the city and joined the traffic on the Via Egnatia, the great highway that runs all the way to Byzantium. It

started to sleet. There had been an earthquake a few days earlier and the place was wretched in the downpour, with corpses of the native tribespeople unburied by the roadside and here and there little groups of survivors sheltering in makeshift tents among the ruins, huddled over smoking fires. It was this odour of destruction and despair that I had smelt out at sea.

We travelled across the plain towards the snow-covered mountains and spent the night in a small village hemmed in by the encroaching peaks. The inn was squalid, with goats and chickens in the downstairs rooms. Cicero ate little and said nothing. In this strange and barren land, with its savage-looking people, he had at last fallen into the full depths of despair, and it was only with difficulty that I roused him from his bed the next morning and persuaded him to continue our journey.

For two days the road climbed into the mountains, until we came to the edge of a wide lake, fringed with ice. On the far side was a town, Lychnidos, that marked the border with Macedonia, and it was here, in its forum, that Plancius awaited us. He was in his early thirties, strongly built, wearing military uniform, with half a dozen legionaries at his back, and there was a moment when they all began to stride towards us that I experienced a rush of panic and feared we had blundered into a trap. But the warmth with which Plancius embraced Cicero, and the tears in his eyes, convinced me immediately that he was genuine.

He could not disguise his shock at Cicero's appearance. 'You need to recover your strength,' he said, 'but

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unfortunately, we must leave here straight away.’ And then he told us what he had not dared put into his letter: that he had received reliable intelligence that three of the traitors Cicero had sent into exile for their parts in Catilina’s conspiracy – Autronius Paetas, Cassius Longinus and Marcus Laeca – were all out looking for him, and had sworn to kill him.

Cicero said, ‘Then there is nowhere in the world where I am safe. How are we to live?’

‘Under my protection, as I said. In fact come back with me to Thessalonica, and stay under my very roof. I was military tribune until last year and I’m still on active service, so there’ll be soldiers to guard you as long as you stay within the frontiers of Macedonia. My house is no palace, but it’s secure and it’s yours for as long as you need it.’

Cicero stared at him. Apart from the hospitality of Flaccus, it was the first real offer of help he had received for weeks – for months, in fact – and that it should have come from a young man he barely knew, when old allies such as Pompey had turned their backs on him, moved him deeply. He tried to speak, but the words choked in his throat and he had to look away.

The Via Egnatia runs for one hundred and fifty miles across the mountains of Macedonia before descending to the plain of Amphaxis, where it enters the port of Thessalonica, and this was where our journey ended, two months after leaving Rome, in a secluded villa off a busy thoroughfare in the northern part of the town.

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Five years earlier, Cicero had been the undisputed ruler of Rome, second only to Pompey the Great in the affections of the people. Now he had lost everything – reputation, position, family, possessions, country; even at times the balance of his mind. For reasons of security he was confined to the villa during the hours of daylight. His presence was kept secret. A guard was posted at the entrance. Plancius told his staff that his anonymous guest was an old friend suffering from acute grief and melancholia. Like all the best lies it had the merit of being partly true. Cicero barely ate, or spoke, or left his room; sometimes his fits of weeping could be heard from one end of the house to the other. He would not receive visitors, not even his brother Quintus, who was passing nearby on his way back to Rome after completing his term as governor of Asia: *You would not have seen your brother the man you knew*, he pleaded in mitigation, *not a trace or semblance of him but only the likeness of a breathing corpse*. I tried my best to console him, without success, for how could I, a slave, understand his sense of loss, having never possessed anything worth losing in the first place? Looking back, I can see that my attempts to offer solace through philosophy must only have added to his aggravation. Indeed on one occasion, when I tried to advance the Stoic argument that possessions and rank are unnecessary, given that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness, he threw a stool at my head.

We had arrived in Thessalonica at the beginning of spring, and I took it upon myself to send letters to Cicero's friends and family letting them know, in confidence,

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where he was hiding, and asking them to write in response using Plancius as a *poste restante*. It took three weeks for these messages to reach Rome, and a further three weeks before we started to receive replies, and the news they brought was anything but encouraging. Terentia described how the charred walls of the family house on the Palatine hill had been demolished so that Clodius's shrine to Liberty – the irony! – could be erected on the site. The villa at Formiae had been pillaged, the country estate in Tusculum also invaded, and even some of the trees in the garden carted off by the neighbours. Homeless, at first she had taken refuge with her sister in the House of the Vestal Virgins.

But that impious wretch Clodius, in defiance of all the sacred laws, broke into the temple, and dragged me to the Basilica Porcia, where in front of the mob he had the impertinence to question me about my own property! Of course I refused to answer. He then demanded that I hand over our little son as a hostage to my good behaviour. In answer I pointed to the painting that shows Valerius defeating the Carthaginians and reminded him that my ancestors fought in that very battle and that as my family had never feared Hannibal, we most certainly would not be intimidated by him.

It was the plight of his son that most upset Cicero: 'The first duty of any man is to protect his children, and I am helpless to fulfil it.' Marcus and Terentia were now

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sheltering in the home of Cicero's brother, while his adored daughter, Tullia, was sharing a roof with her in-laws. But although Tullia, like her mother, tried to make light of her troubles, it was easy enough to read between the lines and recognise the truth: that she was nursing her sick husband, the gentle Frugi – whose health, never robust, seemed to have collapsed under the strain. *Ah, my beloved, my heart's longing!* Cicero wrote to his wife. *To think that you, dearest Terentia, once everybody's refuge in trouble, should now be so tormented! You are before my eyes night and day. Goodbye, my absent loves, goodbye.*

The political outlook was equally bleak. Clodius and his supporters were continuing their occupation of the Temple of Castor in the southern corner of the Forum. Using this fortress as their headquarters, they could intimidate the voting assemblies and pass or block whatever bills they chose. One new law we heard about, for example, demanded the annexation of Cyprus and the taxation of its wealth, 'for the good of the Roman people' – that is, to pay for the free dole of corn Clodius had instituted for every citizen – and charged Marcus Porcius Cato with accomplishing this piece of theft. Needless to say, it passed, for what group of voters ever refused to levy a tax on someone else, especially if it benefited themselves? At first Cato refused to go. But Clodius threatened him with prosecution if he disobeyed the law. As Cato held the constitution to be sacred above all things, he felt he had no choice but to comply. He sailed off for Cyprus, along with his young nephew, Marcus Junius Brutus, and with his departure Cicero lost his most vocal supporter in Rome.

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Against Clodius's intimidation, the Senate was powerless. Even Pompey the Great ('the Pharaoh', as Cicero and Atticus privately called him) was now becoming frightened of the over-mighty tribune he had helped Caesar create. He was rumoured to spend most of his time making love to his young wife Julia, the daughter of Caesar, while all the time his public standing declined. Atticus wrote gossipy letters about him to cheer Cicero up, one of which survives:

You remember that when the Pharaoh restored the King of Armenia to his throne a few years back, he brought his son to Rome as a hostage to ensure the old man behaved himself? Well, just after your departure, bored of having the young fellow under his own roof, Pompey decided to lodge him with Lucius Flavius, the new praetor. Naturally, our Little Miss Beauty [Cicero's nickname for Clodius] soon got to hear of it, whereupon he invited himself round to Flavius's for dinner, asked to see the prince, and then took him away with him at the end of the meal, as if he were a napkin! Why? I hear you ask. Because Clodius has decided to put the prince on the throne of Armenia in place of his father, and take all the revenues of Armenia away from Pompey and have them for himself! Unbelievable – but it gets better: the prince is duly sent back to Armenia on a ship. There is a storm. The ship returns to harbour. Pompey tells Flavius to get himself down to Antium straight away and recapture his prize hostage. But Clodius's men are waiting. There is a

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fight on the Via Appia. Many are killed – among them Pompey's dear friend Marcus Papirius.

Since then, things have gone from bad to worse for the Pharaoh. The other day, when he was in the Forum attending the trial of one of his supporters (Clodius is prosecuting them left, right and centre), Clodius called together a gang of his criminals and started a chant. 'What's the name of the lecherous emperor? What's the name of the man who is trying to find a man? Who is it who scratches his head with one finger?' After each question he made a sign by shaking the folds of his toga – in that way the Pharaoh does – and the mob, like a circus chorus, all roared out the answer: 'Pompey!'

No one in the Senate lifts a finger to help him, as they all think his harassment is eminently deserved for the way he abandoned you . . .

But if Atticus thought such news would bring comfort to Cicero, he was wrong. On the contrary, it served only to make him feel more isolated and helpless. With Cato gone, Pompey cowed, the Senate impotent, the voters bribed and Clodius's mob in control of all law-making, Cicero despaired of ever having his exile rescinded. He chafed against the conditions in which we were obliged to exist. Thessalonica may be nice enough for a short stay in the springtime. But as the months passed, summer came – and Thessalonica in the summer becomes a hell of humidity and mosquitoes. No breath of a breeze stirs the brittle vegetation. The air is suffocating. And because

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the walls of the town retain the heat, the nights can be even more sweltering than the days. I slept in the room next to Cicero's – or rather, I tried to sleep. Lying in my tiny cubicle, I felt as if I were a roasting pig in a brick oven, and that the sweat pooling beneath my back was my melted flesh. Often after midnight I would hear Cicero stumbling around in the dark, his door opening, his bare feet slapping across the mosaic tiles. Then I would slip out after him and watch from a distance to make sure he was all right. He would sit in the courtyard on the edge of the dried-up pool with its dust-clogged fountain, and stare up at the brilliant stars, as if he could read in their alignment some clue as to why his good fortune had so spectacularly deserted him.

The next morning he would often summon me to his room. 'Tiro,' he would whisper, his fingers gripping my arm tightly, 'I've got to get out of this shithole. I'm losing all sense of myself.' But where could we go? He dreamed of Athens, or possibly Rhodes. But Plancius would not hear of it: the danger of assassination, he insisted, was, if anything, even greater than before, as rumours of Cicero's presence in the region spread. After a while I began to suspect that he quite enjoyed having such a famous figure in his power and was reluctant to let us leave. I voiced my suspicions to Cicero, who said: 'He's young and ambitious. Perhaps he's calculating that the situation in Rome will change and he might eventually get some political credit for shielding me. If so, he deludes himself.'

And then late one afternoon, when the ferocity of the

day's heat had subsided a little, I happened to go into town with a packet of letters for dispatch to Rome. It was hard to persuade Cicero even to raise the energy to reply to his correspondence, and when he did so, it was mostly a list of complaints. *I am still stuck here with no one to talk to and nothing to think about. There could be no less suitable spot in which to bear calamity in such a state of grief as I am in.* But write he did, and to supplement the occasional trusted traveller who would carry our letters, I had arranged to hire couriers provided by a local Macedonian merchant named Epiphanes, who ran an import/export business with Rome.

He was an inveterate lazy crook, of course, as are most people in that part of the world. But I reckoned the bribes I paid him ought to have been enough to buy his discretion. He had a warehouse up the slope from the harbour, on the higher ground close to the Egnatian Gate, where a haze of red-grey dust hung permanently over the clustered roofs, thrown up by the traffic from Rome to Byzantium. To reach his office one had to cross a yard where his wagons were loaded and unloaded. And there, that afternoon – with its shafts resting on blocks and its horses unhitched and drinking noisily from a water trough – was a chariot. It was so unlike the usual ox carts that the sight of it brought me up short and I went over to give it a closer look. Obviously it had been ridden hard: it was so filthy from the road it was impossible to tell its original colour. But it was fast and strong and built for fighting – a war chariot – and when I found Epiphanes upstairs I asked him whose it was.

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He gave me a crafty look. ‘The driver did not say his name. He just asked me to look after it.’

‘A Roman?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘Alone?’

‘No, he had a companion – a gladiator, perhaps: both young men, strong.’

‘When did they arrive?’

‘An hour ago.’

‘And where are they now?’

‘Who can say?’ He shrugged and bared his yellow teeth.

A terrible realisation gripped me. ‘Have you been opening my letters? Have you had me followed?’

‘Sir, I am shocked. Really . . .’ He spread his hands to show his innocence and glanced around as if in silent appeal to some invisible jury. ‘How could such a thing even be suggested?’

Epiphanes! For a man who made his living by lying, he was remarkably bad at it. I turned and ran out of that room and down those steps and didn’t stop running until I was within sight of our villa, where a pair of rough-looking villains were loitering in the street. My footsteps slowed as the two strangers turned to look at me and I knew in my bones they had been sent to kill Cicero. One had a puckered scar that split the side of his face from his eyebrow to his jaw (Epiphanes was right: he was a fighter straight from the gladiator barracks), while the other could have been a blacksmith – given his swagger, he could have been Vulcan himself – with bulging

sunburnt calves and forearms and a face as black as a Negro's. He called out to me, 'We're looking for the house where Cicero is living!' And when I started to plead ignorance, he cut me off and added, 'Tell him Titus Annius Milo has come to pay his compliments, all the way from Rome.'

Cicero's room was dark, his candle expiring for want of air. He lay on his side, facing the wall.

'Milo?' he repeated in a monotone. 'What sort of a name is that? Is he Greek, or what?' But then he rolled over on to his back and raised himself up on his elbows. 'Wait – hasn't a candidate of that name just been elected tribune?'

'It's the same man. He's here.'

'But if he's a tribune-elect, why isn't he in Rome? His term of office begins in three months.'

'He says he wants to talk to you.'

'It's a long way to come just for a chat. What do we know of him?'

'Nothing.'

'Maybe he's come to kill me?'

'Maybe – he has a gladiator with him.'

'That doesn't inspire confidence.' Cicero lay back and thought it over. 'Well, what does it matter? I might as well be dead in any case.'

He had skulked in his room so long that when I opened the door, the daylight blinded him and he had to put up his hand to protect his eyes. Stiff-limbed and

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waxen, half starved, with straggling grey hair and beard, he looked like a corpse freshly risen from its tomb. It was scarcely surprising that when he first came into the room, supported on my arm, Milo failed to recognise him. It was only when he heard that familiar voice bidding him good day that our visitor gasped, pressed his hand to his heart, bowed his head and declared this to be the greatest moment and the greatest honour of his life, that he had heard Cicero speak countless times in the law courts and from the rostra but had never thought to meet him, the Father of the Nation, in person, let alone be in a position (he dared to hope) to render him some service . . .

There was a lot more in this vein, and eventually it elicited from Cicero something I had not seen from him in months: laughter. 'Yes, very well, young man, that's enough. I understand: you're pleased to see me! Come.' And with that he stepped forward, arms open, and the two men embraced.

In later years, Cicero was to be much criticised for his friendship with Milo. And it is true that the young tribune-elect was headstrong, violent and reckless, but there are times when these traits are more to be prized than prudence, calmness and caution – and these were such times. Besides, Cicero was touched that Milo should have come so far to see him; it made him feel he was not entirely finished. He invited him to stay for dinner and to save whatever he had to say until then. He even tidied himself up a little for the occasion, combing his hair and changing into less funereal garb.

Plancius was away upcountry in Tauriana, judging the

local assizes, so therefore only the three of us gathered to eat. (Milo's gladiator, a murmillo named Birria, took his meal in the kitchen; even a man as easy-going as Cicero, who had been known occasionally to tolerate the presence of an actor at his dinner table, drew the line at a gladiator.) We lay in the garden in a kind of fine-mesh tent designed to keep out the mosquitoes, and over the next few hours we learned something of Milo, and why he had made such an arduous journey of seven hundred miles. He came, he said, of a noble but hard-up family. He had been adopted by his maternal grandfather. Even so, there was little money and he had been obliged to earn a living as the owner of a gladiator school in Campania, supplying fighters for funeral games in Rome. ('No wonder we've never heard of him,' Cicero remarked to me afterwards.) His work brought him often to the city. He had been appalled, he claimed, by the violence and intimidation unleashed by Clodius. He had wept to see Cicero harried and pilloried and eventually driven from Rome. Given his occupation, he fancied himself to be in a unique position to help restore order, and through intermediaries he had approached Pompey with an offer.

'What I am about to disclose is in the strictest confidence,' he said, with a sideways glance at me. 'No word of it must go beyond us three.'

'Who am I to tell?' retorted Cicero. 'The slave who empties my chamber pot? The cook who brings my meals? I assure you I see no one else.'

'Very well,' said Milo, and then he told us what he had offered Pompey: to place at his disposal one hundred

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pairs of highly trained fighting men to recapture the centre of Rome and end Clodius's control of the legislative assembly. In return he had asked for a certain sum to cover expenses, and also Pompey's support in the elections for tribune: 'I couldn't just do this as a private citizen, you understand – I'd be prosecuted. I told him I needed the inviolability of the office.'

Cicero was studying him closely. He had barely touched his food. 'And what did Pompey say to that?'

'At first he brushed me off. He said he'd think about it. But then came the business with the Prince of Armenia, when Papirius was killed by Clodius's men. Did you hear about that?'

'We heard something of it.'

'Well, the killing of his friend seemed to make Pompey do that bit of extra thinking, because the day after Papirius was put on the pyre, he called me to his house. "That idea of your becoming tribune – you've got yourself a deal."

'And how has Clodius reacted to your election? He must know what you have in mind.'

'Well that's why I'm here. And this you won't have heard about, because I left Rome straight after it happened, and no messenger could have got here quicker than I.' He stopped and held out his cup for more wine. He had come a long way to tell his story; he was obviously a raconteur; he meant to do it in his own time. 'It was about two weeks ago, not long after the elections. Pompey was doing a little business in the Forum when he ran into a gang of Clodius's men. There was some

pushing and shoving, and one of them dropped a dagger. A lot of people saw it, and a great shout went up that they were going to murder Pompey. His attendants hustled him out of there fast, and back to his house, and barricaded him in – and that's where he is still, as far as I know, with only the Lady Julia for company.'

Cicero said in astonishment, 'Pompey the Great is barricaded in his own house?'

'I don't blame you if you find it funny. Who wouldn't? There's rough justice in it, and Pompey knows it. In fact he said to me that the greatest mistake of his life was letting Clodius drive you out of the city.'

'Pompey said that?'

'That's why I've raced across three countries, barely stopping to eat or sleep – to give you the news that he's going to do everything he can to get your exile overturned. His blood is up. He wants you back in Rome, you and me and him, fighting side by side, to save the republic from Clodius and his gang! What do you say to that?'

He was like a dog that has just laid a kill at its master's feet; if he'd had a tail, it would have been thumping against the fabric of the couch. But if Milo had expected either delight or gratitude, he was to be disappointed. Depressed in spirit and ragged in appearance though he might be, Cicero had nevertheless seen straight through to the heart of the matter. He swilled his wine around in his cup, frowning before he spoke.

'And does Caesar agree to this?'

'Ah now,' said Milo, shifting slightly on his couch, 'that's for you to settle with him. Pompey will play his

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part, but you must play yours. It would be hard for him to campaign to bring you back if Caesar were to object very strongly.'

'So he wants me to reconcile with him?'

'His word was to *reassure* him.'

It had grown dark while we were talking. The household slaves had lit lamps around the perimeter of the garden; their gleams were clouded with moths. But no light was on the table, so I couldn't properly make out Cicero's expression. He was silent for a long while. It was terrifically hot as usual, and I was conscious of the night sounds of Macedonia – the cicadas and the mosquitoes, the occasional dog bark, the voices of local people in the street, speaking in their strange, harsh foreign tongue. I wondered if Cicero was thinking the same as I was – that another year in such a place as this would kill him. Perhaps he was, because eventually he let out a sigh of resignation and said, 'And in what terms am I supposed to "reassure" him?'

'That's up to you. If any man can find the right words, it's you. But Caesar has made it clear to Pompey that he needs something in writing before he'll even think of reconsidering his position.'

'Am I supposed to give you a document to take back to Rome?'

'No, this part of the arrangement has to be between you and Caesar. Pompey thinks it would be best if you sent your own private emissary to Gaul – someone you trust, who could deliver some form of written undertaking into Caesar's hands personally.'

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