

CHAPTER I

I TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS DRUSUS NERO GERMANICUS This-that-and-the-other (for I shall not trouble you yet with all my titles) who was once, and not so long ago either, known to my friends and relatives and associates as "Claudius the Idiot", or "That Claudius", or "Claudius the Stammerer", or "Clau-^{A.D. 41} Clau-Claudius" or at best as "Poor Uncle Claudius", am now about to write this strange history of my life; starting from my earliest childhood and continuing year by year until I reach the fateful point of change where, some eight years ago, at the age of fifty-one, I suddenly found myself caught in what I may call the "golden predicament" from which I have never since become disentangled.

This is not by any means my first book: in fact literature, and especially the writing of history—which as a young man I studied here at Rome under the best contemporary masters—was, until the change came, my sole profession and interest for more than thirty-five years. My readers must not therefore be surprised at my practised style: it is indeed Claudius himself who is writing this book, and no mere secretary of his, and not one of those official annalists, either, to whom public men are in the habit of communicating their recollections, in the hope that elegant writing will eke out meagreness of subject-matter and flattery soften vices. In the present work, I swear by all the Gods, I am my own mere secretary, and my own official annalist: I am writing with my own hand, and what favour can I hope to

win from myself by flattery? I may add that this is not the first history of my own life that I have written. I once wrote another, in eight volumes, as a contribution to the City archives. It was a dull affair, by which I set little store, and only written in response to public request. To be frank, I was extremely busy with other matters during its composition, which was two years ago. I dictated most of the first four volumes to a Greek secretary of mine and told him to alter nothing as he wrote (except, where necessary, for the balance of the sentences, or to remove contradictions or repetitions). But I admit that nearly all the second half of the work, and some chapters at least of the first, were composed by this same fellow, Polybius (whom I had named myself, when a slave-boy, after the famous historian) from material that I gave him. And he modelled his style so accurately on mine that, really, when he had done, nobody could have guessed what was mine and what was his.

It was a dull book, I repeat. I was in no position to criticize the Emperor Augustus, who was my maternal grand-uncle, or his third and last wife, Livia Augusta, who was my grandmother, because they had both been officially deified and I was connected in a priestly capacity with their cults; and though I could have pretty sharply criticized Augustus's two unworthy Imperial successors, I refrained for decency's sake. It would have been unjust to exculpate Livia, and Augustus himself in so far as he deferred to that remarkable and—let me say at once—abominable woman, while telling the truth about the other two, whose memories were not similarly protected by religious awe.

I let it be a dull book, recording merely such uncontroversial facts as, for example, that So-and-so married So-and-so, the daughter of Such-and-such who had this or that number of public honours to his credit, but not mentioning the political reasons for the marriage nor the behind-scene bargaining between the families. Or I would write that So-and-so died suddenly, after eating a dish of African figs, but say nothing of poison, or to whose advantage the death

proved to be, unless the facts were supported by a verdict of the Criminal Courts. I told no lies, but neither did I tell the truth in the sense that I mean to tell it here. When I consulted this book to-day in the Apollo Library on the Palatine Hill, to refresh my memory for certain particulars of date, I was interested to come across passages in the public chapters which I could have sworn I had written or dictated, the style was so peculiarly my own, and yet which I had no recollection of writing or dictating. If they were by Polybius they were a wonderfully clever piece of mimicry (he had my other histories to study, I admit), but if they were really by myself then my memory is even worse than my enemies declare it to be. Reading over what I have just put down I see that I must be rather exciting than disarming suspicion, first as to my sole authorship of what follows, next as to my integrity as an historian, and finally as to my memory for facts. But I shall let it stand; it is myself writing as I feel, and as the history proceeds the reader will be the more ready to believe that I am hiding nothing—so much being to my discredit.

This is a confidential history. But who, it may be asked, are my confidants? My answer is: it is addressed to posterity. I do not mean my great-grandchildren, or my great-great-grandchildren: I mean an extremely remote posterity. Yet my hope is that you, my eventual readers of a hundred generations ahead, or more, will feel yourselves directly spoken to, as if by a contemporary: as often Herodotus and Thucydides, long dead, seem to speak to me. And why do I specify so extremely remote a posterity as that? I shall explain.

I went to Cumæ, in Campania, a little less than eighteen years ago, and visited the Sibyl in her cliff cavern on Mount Gaurus. There is always a Sibyl at Cumæ, for when one dies her novice-attendant succeeds; but they are not all equally famous. Some of them are never granted a prophecy by Apollo in all the long years of their service. Others prophesy, indeed, but seem more inspired by Bacchus than by Apollo, the drunken nonsense they deliver; which

has brought the oracle into discredit. Before the succession of Deiphobē, whom Augustus often consulted, and Amalthea, who is still alive and most famous, there had been a run of very poor Sibyls for nearly three hundred years. The cavern lies behind a pretty little Greek temple sacred to Apollo and Artemis—Cumæ was an Æolian Greek colony. There is an ancient gilt frieze above the portico ascribed to Dædalus, though this is patently absurd, for it is no older than five hundred years, if as old as that, and Dædalus lived at least eleven hundred years ago; it represents the story of Theseus and the Minotaur whom he killed in the Labyrinth of Crete. Before being permitted to visit the Sibyl I had to sacrifice a bullock and a ewe there, to Apollo and Artemis respectively. It was cold December weather. The cavern was a terrifying place, hollowed out from the solid rock; the approach steep, tortuous, pitch-dark and full of bats. I went disguised, but the Sibyl knew me. It must have been my stammer that betrayed me. I stammered badly as a child and though, by following the advice of specialists in elocution, I gradually learned to control my speech on set public occasions, yet on private and unpremeditated ones, I am still, though less so than formerly, liable every now and then to trip nervously over my own tongue: which is what happened to me at Cumæ.

I came into the inner cavern, after groping painfully on all-fours up the stairs, and saw the Sibyl, more like an ape than a woman, sitting on a chair in a cage that hung from the ceiling, her robes red and her unblinking eyes shining red in the single red shaft of light that struck down from somewhere above. Her toothless mouth was grinning. There was a smell of death about me. But I managed to force out the salutation that I had prepared. She gave me no answer. It was only some time afterwards that I learned that this was the mummied body of Deiphobē, the previous Sibyl, who had died recently at the age of one hundred and ten; her eye-lids were propped up with glass marbles silvered behind to make them shine. The reigning Sibyl always

lived with her predecessor. Well, I must have stood for some minutes in front of Deiphobë, shivering and making propitiatory grimaces—it seemed a lifetime. At last the living Sibyl, whose name was Amalthea, quite a young woman too, revealed herself. The red shaft of light failed, so that Deiphobë disappeared—somebody, probably the novice, had covered up the tiny red-glass window—and a new shaft, white, struck down and lit up Amalthea seated on an ivory throne in the shadows behind. She had a beautiful, mad-looking face with a high forehead and sat as motionless as Deiphobë. But her eyes were closed. My knees shook and I fell into a stammer from which I could not extricate myself.

“O Sib . . . Sib . . . Sib . . . Sib . . . Sib . . .” I began. She opened her eyes, frowned and mimicked me: “O Clau . . . Clau . . . Clau . . .” That shamed me and I managed to remember what I had come to ask. I said with a great effort: “O Sibyl: I have come to question you about Rome’s fate and mine.”

Gradually her face changed, the prophetic power overcame her, she struggled and gasped, there was a rushing noise through all the galleries, doors banged, wings swished my face, the light vanished, and she uttered a Greek verse in the voice of the God:

Who groans beneath the Punic Curse
And strangles in the strings of purse,
Before she mends must sicken worse.

Her living mouth shall breed blue flies,
And maggots creep about her eyes.
No man shall mark the day she dies.

Then she tossed her arms over her head and began again:

Ten years, fifty days and three,
Clau—Clau—Clau—shall given be
A gift that all desire but he.

To a fawning fellowship
He shall stammer, cluck and trip,
Dribbling always with his lip.

But when he's dumb and no more here,
Nineteen hundred years or near,
Clau—Clau—Claudius shall speak clear.

The God laughed through her mouth then, a lovely yet terrible sound—ho! ho! ho! I made obeisance, turned hurriedly and went stumbling away, sprawling headlong down the first flight of broken stairs, cutting my forehead and knees, and so painfully out, the tremendous laughter pursuing me.

Speaking now as a practised diviner, a professional historian and a priest who has had opportunities of studying the Sibylline books as regularized by Augustus, I can interpret the verses with some confidence. By the Punic Curse the Sibyl was referring plainly enough to the destruction of Carthage by us Romans. We have long been under a divine curse because of that. We swore friendship and protection to Carthage in the name of our principal Gods, Apollo included, and then, jealous of her quick recovery from the disasters of the Second Punic war, we tricked her into fighting the Third Punic war and utterly destroyed her, massacring her inhabitants and sowing her fields with salt. "The strings of purse" are the chief instruments of this curse—a money-madness that has choked Rome ever since she destroyed her chief trade rival and made herself mistress of all the riches of the Mediterranean. With riches came sloth, greed, cruelty, dishonesty, cowardice, effeminacy and every other un-Roman vice. What the gift was that all desired but myself—and it came exactly ten years and fifty-three days later—you shall read in due course. The lines about Claudius speaking clear puzzled me for years but at last I think that I understand them. They are, I believe, an injunction to write the present work. When it is written,

I shall treat it with a preservative fluid, seal it in a lead casket and bury it deep in the ground somewhere for posterity to dig up and read. If my interpretation be correct it will be found again some nineteen hundred years hence. And then, when all other authors of to-day whose works survive will seem to shuffle and stammer, since they have written only for to-day, and guardedly, my story will speak out clearly and boldly. Perhaps on second thoughts, I shall not take the trouble to seal it up in a casket: I shall merely leave it lying about. For my experience as a historian is that more documents survive by chance than by intention. Apollo has made the prophecy, so I shall let Apollo take care of the manuscript. As you see, I have chosen to write in Greek, because Greek, I believe, will always remain the chief literary language of the world, and if Rome rots away as the Sibyl has indicated, will not her language rot away with her? Besides, Greek is Apollo's own language.

I shall be careful with dates (which you see I am putting in the margin) and proper names. In compiling my histories of Etruria and Carthage I have spent more angry hours than I care to recall, puzzling out in what year this or that event happened and whether a man named So-and-so was really So-and-so or whether he was a son or grandson or great-grandson or no relation at all. I intend to spare my successors this sort of irritation. Thus, for example, of the several characters in the present history who have the name of Drusus—my father; myself; a son of mine; my first cousin; my nephew—each will be plainly distinguished wherever mentioned. And, for example again, in speaking of my tutor, Marcus Porcius Cato, I must make it clear that he was neither Marcus Porcius Cato, the Censor, instigator of the Third Punic war; nor his son of the same name, the well-known jurist; nor his grandson, the Consul of the same name, nor his great-grandson of the same name, Julius Cæsar's enemy; nor his great-great-grandson, of the same name, who fell at the Battle of Philippi; but an absolutely undistinguished great-great-great-grandson, still of the same

name, who never bore any public dignity and who deserved none. Augustus made him my tutor and afterwards schoolmaster to other young Roman noblemen and sons of foreign kings, for though his name entitled him to a position of the highest dignity, his severe, stupid, pedantic nature qualified him for nothing better than that of elementary schoolmaster.

To fix the date to which these events belong I can do no better, I think, than to say that my birth occurred in the 744th year after the foundation of Rome by Romulus, a. c. 10 and in the 767th year after the First Olympiad, and that the Emperor Augustus, whose name is unlikely to perish even in nineteen hundred years of history, had by then been ruling for twenty years.

Before I close this introductory chapter I have something more to add about the Sibyl and her prophecies. I have already said that, at Cumæ, when one Sibyl dies another succeeds, but that some are more famous than others. There was one very famous one, Demophilë, whom Æneas consulted before his descent into Hell. And there was a later one, Herophilë, who came to King Tarquin and offered him a collection of prophecies at a higher price than he wished to pay; when he refused, so the story runs, she burned a part and offered what was left at the same price, which he again refused. Then she burned another part and offered what was left, still at the same price—which, for curiosity, this time he paid. Herophilë's oracles were of two kinds, warning or hopeful prophecies of the future, and directions for the suitable propitiatory sacrifices to be made when such and such portents occurred. To these were added, in the course of time, whatever remarkable and well-attested oracles were uttered to private persons. Whenever, then, Rome has seemed threatened by strange portents or disasters the Senate orders a consultation of the books by the priests who have charge of them and a remedy is always found. Twice the books were partially destroyed by fire and the lost prophecies restored by the combined memories

of the priests in charge. These memories seem in many instances to have been extremely faulty: this is why Augustus set to work on an authoritative canon of the prophecies, rejecting obviously uninspired interpolations or restorations. He also called in and destroyed all unauthorised private collections of Sibylline oracles as well as all other books of public prediction that he could lay his hands upon, to the number of over two thousand. The revised Sibylline books he put in a locked cupboard under the pedestal of Apollo's statue in the temple which he built for the God close to his palace on the Palatine Hill. A unique book from Augustus's private historical library came into my possession some time after his death. It was called "Sibylline Curiosities: being such prophecies found incorporated in the original canon as have been rejected as spurious by the priests of Apollo". The verses were copied out in Augustus's own beautiful script, with the characteristic mis-spellings which, originally made from ignorance, he ever afterwards adhered to as a point of pride. Most of these verses were obviously never spoken by the Sibyl either in ecstasy or out of it, but composed by irresponsible persons who wished to glorify themselves or their houses or to curse the houses of rivals by claiming divine authorship for their own fanciful predictions against them. The Claudian family had been particularly active, I noticed, in these forgeries. Yet I found one or two pieces whose language proved them respectably archaic and whose inspiration seemed divine, and whose plain and alarming sense had evidently decided Augustus—his word was law among the priests of Apollo—against admitting them into his canon. This little book I no longer have. But I can recall almost every word of the most memorable of these seemingly genuine prophecies, which was recorded both in the original Greek, and (like most of the early pieces in the canon) in rough Latin verse translation. It ran thus:

A hundred years of the Punic Curse
And Rome will be slave to a hairy man,

A hairy man that is scant of hair,
Every man's woman and each woman's man.
The steed that he rides shall have toes for hooves.
He shall die at the hand of his son, no son,
And not on the field of war.

The hairy one next to enslave the State
Shall be son, no son, of this hairy last.
He shall have hair in a generous mop.
He shall give Rome marble in place of clay
And fetter her fast with unseen chains,
And shall die at the hand of his wife, no wife,
To the gain of his son, no son.

The hairy third to enslave the State
Shall be son, no son, of his hairy last.
He shall be mud well mixed with blood,
A hairy man that is scant of hair.
He shall give Rome victories and defeat
And die to the gain of his son, no son—
A pillow shall be his sword.

The hairy fourth to enslave the State
Shall be son, no son, of this hairy last.
A hairy man that is scant of hair,
He shall give Rome poisons and blasphemies
And die from a kick of his aged horse
That carried him as a child.

The hairy fifth to enslave the State,
To enslave the State, though against his will,
Shall be that idiot whom all despised.
He shall have hair in a generous mop.
He shall give Rome water and winter bread
And die at the hand of his wife, no wife,
To the gain of his son, no son.

The hairy sixth to enslave the State
Shall be son, no son, of this hairy last.
He shall give Rome fiddlers and fear and fire.
His hand shall be red with a parent's blood.
No hairy seventh to him succeeds
And blood shall gush from his tomb.

Now, it must have been plain to Augustus that the first of the hairy ones, that is, the Cæsars (for Cæsar means a head of hair), was his grand-uncle Julius, who adopted him. Julius was bald and he was renowned for his debaucheries with either sex; and his war-charger, as is a matter of public record, was a monster which had toes instead of hooves. Julius escaped alive from many hard-fought battles only to be murdered at last, in the Senate House, by Brutus. And Brutus, though fathered on another, was believed to be Julius's natural son: "Thou too, child!" said Julius, as Brutus came at him with a dagger. Of the Punic Curse I have already written. Augustus must have recognized in himself the second of the Cæsars. Indeed he himself at the end of his life made a boast, looking at the temples and public buildings that he had splendidly re-edified, and thinking too of his life's work in strengthening and glorifying the Empire, that he had found Rome in clay and left her in marble. But as for the manner of his death, he must have found the prophecy either unintelligible or incredible: yet some scruple kept him from destroying it. Who the hairy third and the hairy fourth and the hairy fifth were this history will plainly show; and I am indeed an idiot if, granting the oracle's unswerving accuracy in every particular up to the present, I do not recognize the hairy sixth; rejoicing on Rome's behalf that there will be no hairy seventh to succeed him.