
Opening Extract from...

I, Claudius

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Chapter 1

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', A.D. 41 or 'Clau-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 Augusta'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 or 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 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 Cumae, 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 Cumae, 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 Deiphobe, whom Augustus often consulted, and Amalthea, who is still alive and most famous, there had been a run of very poor Sibyls for nearly 300 years. The cavern lies behind a pretty little Greek temple sacred to Apollo and Artemis – Cumae was an Aeolian Greek colony. There is an ancient gilt frieze above the portico ascribed to Daedalus, though this is patently absurd, for it is no older than 500 years, if as old as that, and Daedalus lived at least 1,100 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 Cumae.

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 learnt that this was the mummied body of Deiphobe, the previous Sibyl, who had died recently at the age of 110; her eyelids 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 Deiphobe, 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 Deiphobe 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 Deiphobe. 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, and 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 1,900 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