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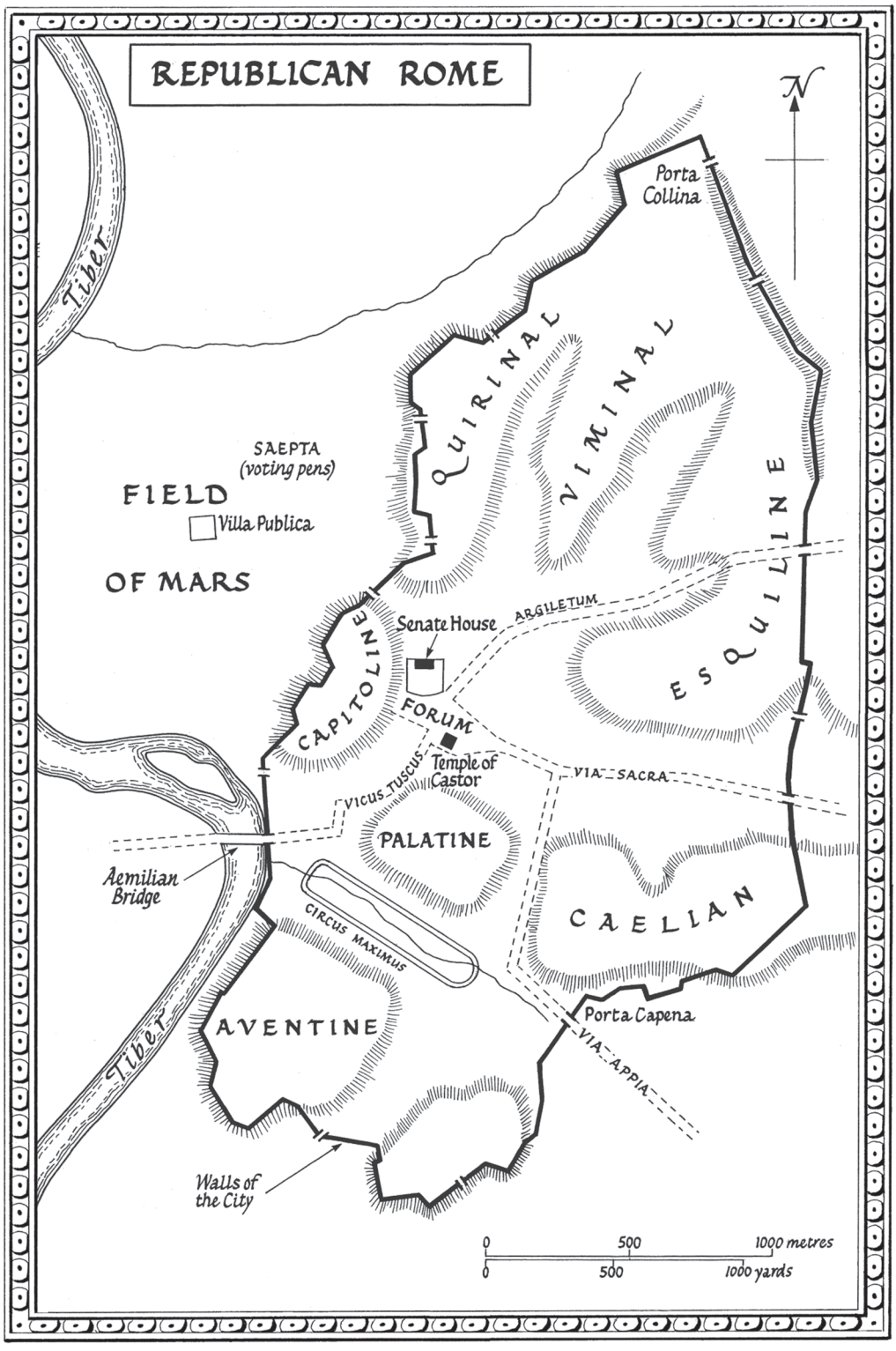
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INTRODUCTION

The Cicero Trilogy consists of three novels which appeared at irregular intervals over the course of almost a decade: *Imperium* in 2006, *Lustrum* in 2009 and *Dictator* in 2015. Although each book was designed to be self-contained, focusing on a separate phase in Cicero's career – his rise to power, his time in power, and his struggle to survive after he lost power – in my mind I always saw them as a single-volume epic that could be read straight through. In a curious way, it now feels as though the work is actually appearing properly for the first time.

I can date the moment of its inception to 17 April 2003, when I received an advance copy of Tom Holland's now-classic account of the end of the Roman republic, *Rubicon*. I had just finished my first Roman novel, *Pompeii*, and was turning my mind to what I might tackle next. I had always wanted to write a political novel. But having spent several years happily immersed in the ancient world, I was reluctant to leave it behind. Sitting in the garden, it suddenly struck me that I could combine the two ambitions in 'a big, saga-type novel', as I noted in my diary that evening, 'tracing the interlinked lives of Cicero, Caesar, Pompey, Crassus, etc., with Cicero as the linking figure'.

Cicero appealed to me from the outset: a man from the provinces, always an outsider, constantly dodging and weaving between more powerful forces, who succeeded purely by the quickness of his wit and his ability as a speaker. He was the world's first professional politician, with a credo he expounds in the novel:

> *Politics? Boring? Politics is history on the wing! What other sphere of human activity calls forth all that is most noble in men's souls, and all that is most base? Or has such excitement? Or more vividly exposes our strengths and weaknesses? Boring? You might as well say that life itself is boring!*

Cicero also had the advantage of having been largely overlooked in popular culture. I cannot think of a film, a play or a novel in which he is the central, rather than merely a supporting, character, and often a sinister one at that. He is given just nine lines in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. (When Cassius suggests involving Cicero in the plot to assassinate the dictator, Brutus briskly dismisses the idea: 'He will never follow any thing / That other men begin.') Even scholars have tended to be quite sniffy. The great nineteenth-century German scholar Theodor Mommsen – who gushed like a super-fan about Julius Caesar as 'the entire and perfect man' – sneered at Cicero as 'a weakling', and 'a journalist in the worst sense of the word'.

But that was what I liked about him. It is a quirk of my own nature always to be suspicious of the 'man of destiny' figure in history – the Caesars and Napoleons – and to prefer instead those less heroic, less sung, nimbler, crafty politicians, who at least try to avoid getting other people killed.

Cicero is perhaps the greatest example of this type. He detested soldiering. Even the deaths of the animals in the arena could upset him. There is no record of his ever being gratuitously cruel – a rare quality in that era. He was a defender in the law courts, never a prosecutor – apart from the one great case which made his name, and which takes up the first part of the *Trilogy*. He approached his political career assiduously and methodically, climbing each rung of the ladder in a way that seems strikingly modern. He would have risen in any nation, at any time, in any system. As Anthony Trollope wrote in 1881:

> *What a man he would have been for London life! How he would have enjoyed his club, picking up the news of the day from all lips, while he seemed to give it to all ears! How popular he would have been at the Carlton, and how men would have listened to him while every great or little crisis was discussed! How supreme he would have sat on the Treasury bench – or how unanswerable, how fatal, how joyous when attacking the Government from the opposite seats! How crowded would have been his rack with invitations to dinner! How delighted would have been the middle-aged countesses of the time to hold with him mild intellectual flirtations – and the girls of the period, how proud to get his autograph, how much prouder to have touched the lips of the great orator with theirs! How the pages of the magazines would have run over with little essays from his pen!*

Cicero had many faults. He was boastful, duplicitous, grasping, hypocritical and sometimes cowardly. ('Unchanging consistency of standpoint', he once blithely observed, 'has never been considered a virtue in great statesmen.') But he generally proved himself brave in the end, sometimes recklessly so. His was the most attractive kind of courage: to face danger, instinctively flinch, collect oneself, and then stand firm.

Having decided that Cicero would be the central character, the question then arose of how to tell his story. One obvious solution would have been to copy the example of Robert Graves in *I, Claudius*, and have him write a first-person autobiography. But Cicero, unlike Claudius, was a genius, and I shied away from the challenge of trying to imitate a genius's thought processes. Geniuses are best described from the outside. This led me naturally to his secretary, Tiro.

That there was such a man as Tiro, and that he published a biography of Cicero after his master's death, is well attested. 'Your services to me are beyond count,' Cicero once wrote to him, 'in my home and out of it, in Rome and abroad, in my studies and literary work …' (Letter, 7 November 50 BC). He was three years younger than Cicero, born a slave, but long outlived him, surviving – according to Saint Jerome – until his hundredth year. Tiro was the first person to record a speech in the senate verbatim: 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.*, *N.B.*, *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 in his commentary on Cicero's speeches; Plutarch cites it twice. But, like the rest of Tiro's literary output, the book disappeared amid the collapse of the Roman Empire.

What kind of work might it have been? In 1985, Elizabeth Rawson, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, speculated that it would probably have been in the Hellenistic tradition of biography – a literary form 'written in an unpretentious, unrhetorical style; it might quote documents, but it liked apophthegms by its subject, and it could be gossipy and irresponsible … It delighted in a subject's idiosyncrasies … Such biography was written not for statesmen and generals, but for what the Romans called *curiosi*.'

For me as a novelist, Tiro was a gift almost too good to be true – intimate yet set apart by his status as a slave, constantly at Cicero's side,

plausibly taking down his letters, his speeches and his conversations verbatim – loyal, doting, awestruck and frequently appalled.

Most Roman novels tend to be about the emperors or soldiers. My aim was to bring to life in as much detail as possible the actual political machinery of the Roman republic – a kind of *West Wing on the Tiber*. How did a man, without benefit of amplification, command an audience of six hundred in the senate, and several thousand in the forum? How did he stand for election? How did he canvass for votes? And who exactly voted?

My happiest moments writing the novels were occasionally to look up and think, *Yes, it must have been something like that*. Of course, fiction is no substitute for scholarship. Inevitably it leaves the reader wondering how much of what they are reading is true. My rule in the *Trilogy* was never to write something that I knew for certain couldn't have happened. Mostly I didn't need to. The story was so remarkable it required little embellishment. By and large in the pages which follow, whenever something is described which seems absurd or fantastical, it is true; whenever it seems dull or prosaic, I made it up.

Finally, I should say that I have not revised the text, even though there are occasional nods towards New Labour or George W. Bush that nowadays probably mean little. When I started writing the novels it was not quite the cliché it has since become to compare the collapse of the Roman republic to the possible fate of modern America, or of democracy generally. As it turned out, the underlying theme of the *Trilogy* – how a greedy ruling elite came under attack by populist forces whipped up by rich and unscrupulous demagogues; how institutions that had lasted for centuries suddenly started to collapse – seems sharper in hindsight than it did at the time.

But enough self-justification. I am starting to sound as pompous as Cicero. The preliminaries are over. It is time to let the Games begin.

Robert Harris
February 2021

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 contexitur?

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

THE CICERO TRILOGY

PART ONE

SENATOR

79–70 BC

'Urbem, urbem, mi Rufe, cole et in ista luce vive!'

'Rome! Stick to Rome, my dear Rufus, and
live in the limelight!'
Cicero, letter to Rufus, 26 June 50 BC

I

My name is Tiro. For thirty-six years I was the confidential secretary of the Roman statesman Cicero. At first this was exciting, then astonishing, then arduous, and finally extremely dangerous. During those years I believe he spent more hours with me than with any other person, including his own family. I witnessed his private meetings and carried his secret messages. I took down his speeches, his letters and his literary works, even his poetry – such an outpouring of words that I had to invent what is commonly called shorthand to cope with the flow, a system still used to record the deliberations of the senate, and for which I was recently awarded a modest pension. This, along with a few legacies and the kindness of friends, is sufficient to keep me in my retirement. I do not require much. The elderly live on air, and I am very old – almost a hundred, or so they tell me.

In the decades after his death, I was often asked, usually in whispers, what Cicero was really like, but always I held my silence. How was I to know who was a government spy and who was not? At any moment I expected to be purged. But since my life is almost over, and since I have no fear of anything any more – not even torture, for I would not last an instant at the hands of the carnifex or his assistants – I have decided to offer this work as my answer. I shall base it on my memory, and on the documents entrusted to my care. Because the time left to me inevitably must be short, I propose to write it quickly, using my shorthand system, on a few dozen small rolls of the finest paper – Hieratica, no less – which I have long hoarded for the purpose. I pray forgiveness in advance for all my errors and infelicities of style. I also pray to the gods that I may reach the end before my own end overtakes me. Cicero's final words to me were a request to tell the truth about him, and this I shall endeavour to do. If he does not always emerge as a paragon of virtue, well, so be

it. Power brings a man many luxuries, but a clean pair of hands is seldom among them.

And it is of power and the man that I shall sing. By power I mean official, political power – what we know in Latin as *imperium* – the power of life and death, as vested by the state in an individual. Many hundreds of men have sought this power, but Cicero was unique in the history of the republic in that he pursued it with no resources to help him apart from his own talent. He was not, unlike Metellus or Hortensius, from one of the great aristocratic families, with generations of political favours to draw on at election time. He had no mighty army to back up his candidacy, as did Pompey or Caesar. He did not have Crassus's vast fortune to grease his path. All he had was his voice – and by sheer effort of will he turned it into the most famous voice in the world.

I was twenty-four years old when I entered his service. He was twenty-seven. I was a household slave, born on the family estate in the hills near Arpinum, who had never even seen Rome. He was a young advocate, suffering from nervous exhaustion, and struggling to overcome considerable natural disabilities. Few would have wagered much on either of our chances.

Cicero's voice at this time was not the fearsome instrument it later became, but harsh and occasionally prone to stutter. I believe the problem was that he had so many words teeming in his head that at moments of stress they jammed in his throat, as when a pair of sheep, pressed by the flock behind them, try at the same time to squeeze through a gate. In any case, these words were often too highfalutin for his audience to grasp. 'The Scholar', his restless listeners used to call him, or 'the Greek' – and the terms were not meant as compliments. Although no one doubted his talent for oratory, his frame was too weak to carry his ambition, and the strain on his vocal cords of several hours' advocacy, often in the open air and in all seasons, could leave him rasping and voiceless for days. Chronic insomnia and poor digestion added to his woes. To put it bluntly, if he was to rise in politics, as he desperately wished to do, he needed professional help. He therefore decided to spend some time away from Rome, travelling both to refresh his mind and to consult the leading teachers of rhetoric, most of whom lived in Greece and Asia Minor.

Because I was responsible for the upkeep of his father's small library, and possessed a decent knowledge of Greek, Cicero asked if he might borrow me, as one might remove a book on loan, and take me with him to the East. My job would be to supervise arrangements, hire transport, pay teachers and so forth, and after a year go back to my old master. In the end, like many a useful volume, I was never returned.

We met in the harbour of Brundisium on the day we were due to set sail. This was during the consulship of Servilius Vatia and Claudius Pulcher, the six hundred and seventy-fifth year after the foundation of Rome. Cicero then was nothing like the imposing figure he later became, whose features were so famous he could not walk down the quietest street unrecognised. (What has happened, I wonder, to all those thousands of busts and portraits, which once adorned so many private houses and public buildings? Can they really *all* have been smashed and burned?) The young man who stood on the quayside that spring morning was thin and round-shouldered, with an unnaturally long neck, in which a large Adam's apple, as big as a baby's fist, plunged up and down whenever he swallowed. His eyes were protuberant, his skin sallow, his cheeks sunken; in short, he was the picture of ill health. *Well, Tiro*, I remember thinking, *you had better make the most of this trip, because it is not going to last long.*

We went first to Athens, where Cicero had promised himself the treat of studying philosophy at the Academy. I carried his bag to the lecture hall and was in the act of turning away when he called me back and demanded to know where I was going.

'To sit in the shade with the other slaves,' I replied, 'unless there is some further service you require.'

'Most certainly there is,' he said. 'I wish you to perform a very strenuous labour. I want you to come in here with me and learn a little philosophy, in order that I may have someone to talk to on our long travels.'

So I followed him in, and was privileged to hear Antiochus of Ascalon himself assert the three basic principles of stoicism – that virtue is sufficient for happiness, that nothing except virtue is good, and that the emotions are not to be trusted – three simple rules which, if only men could follow them, would solve all the problems of the world. Thereafter, Cicero and I would often debate such questions, and in this realm of the intellect the difference in our stations was always forgotten. We stayed six months with Antiochus and then moved on to the real purpose of our journey.

The dominant school of rhetoric at that time was the so-called Asiatic method. Elaborate and flowery, full of pompous phrases and tinkling rhythms, its delivery was accompanied by a lot of swaying about and striding up and down. In Rome its leading exponent was Quintus Hortensius Hortalus, universally considered the foremost orator of the day, whose fancy footwork had earned him the nickname of 'the Dancing Master'. Cicero, with an eye to discovering his tricks, made a point of seeking out all Hortensius's mentors: Menippus of Stratonicea, Dionysius of Magnesia, Aeschylus of Cnidus, Xenocles of Adramyttium – the names alone give a flavour of their style. Cicero spent weeks with each, patiently studying their methods, until at last he felt he had their measure.

'Tiro,' he said to me one evening, picking at his customary plate of boiled vegetables, 'I have had quite enough of these perfumed prancers. You will arrange a boat from Loryma to Rhodes. We shall try a different tack, and enrol in the school of Apollonius Molon.'

And so it came about that, one spring morning just after dawn, when the straits of the Carpathian Sea were as smooth and milky as a pearl (you must forgive these occasional flourishes: I have read too much Greek poetry to maintain an austere Latin style), we were rowed across from the mainland to that ancient, rugged island, where the stocky figure of Molon himself awaited us on the quayside.

This Molon was a lawyer, originally from Alabanda, who had pleaded in the Rome courts brilliantly, and had even been invited to address the senate in Greek – an unheard-of honour – after which he had retired to Rhodes and opened his rhetorical school. His theory of oratory, the exact opposite of the Asiatics', was simple: don't move about too much, hold your head straight, stick to the point, make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, and when you've won their sympathy, sit down quickly – 'For nothing,' said Molon, 'dries more quickly than a tear.' This was far more to Cicero's taste, and he placed himself in Molon's hands entirely.

Molon's first action was to feed him that evening a bowl of hard-boiled eggs with anchovy sauce, and, when Cicero had finished that – not without some complaining, I can tell you – to follow it with a lump of red meat, seared over charcoal, accompanied by a cup of goat's milk. 'You need bulk, young man,' he told him, patting his own barrel chest. 'No mighty note was ever sounded by a feeble reed.' Cicero glared at him, but dutifully

chewed until his plate was empty, and that night, for the first time in months, slept soundly. (I know this because I used to sleep on the floor outside his door.)

At dawn, the physical exercises began. 'Speaking in the forum,' said Molon, 'is comparable to running in a race. It requires stamina and strength.' He threw a fake punch at Cicero, who let out a loud '*Oof!*' and staggered backwards, almost falling over. Molon had him stand with his legs apart, his knees rigid, then bend from the waist twenty times to touch the ground on either side of his feet. After that, he made him lie on his back with his hands clasped behind his head and repeatedly sit up without shifting his legs. He made him lie on his front and raise himself solely by the strength of his arms, again twenty times, again without bending his knees. That was the regime on the first day, and each day afterwards more exercises were added and their duration increased. Cicero again slept soundly, and now had no trouble eating, either.

For the actual declamatory training, Molon took his eager pupil out of the shaded courtyard and into the heat of midday, and had him recite his exercise pieces – usually a trial scene or a soliloquy from Menander – while walking up a steep hill without pausing. In this fashion, with the lizards scattering underfoot and only the scratching of the cicadas in the olive trees for an audience, Cicero strengthened his lungs and learned how to gain the maximum output of words from a single breath. 'Pitch your delivery in the middle range,' instructed Molon. 'That is where the power is. Nothing too high or low.' In the afternoons, for speech projection, Molon took him down to the shingle beach, paced out eighty yards (the maximum range of the human voice) and made him declaim against the boom and hiss of the sea – the nearest thing, he said, to the murmur of three thousand people in the open air, or the background mutter of several hundred men in conversation in the senate. These were distractions Cicero would have to get used to.

'But what about the content of what I say?' Cicero asked. 'Surely I will compel attention chiefly by the force of my arguments?'

Molon shrugged. 'Content does not concern me. Remember Demosthenes: "Only three things count in oratory. Delivery, delivery, and again: delivery."'

'And my stutter?'

'The st-st-stutter does not b-b-bother me either,' replied Molon with a grin and a wink. 'Seriously, it adds interest and a useful impression of honesty. Demosthenes himself had a slight lisp. The audience identifies with these flaws. It is only perfection which is dull. Now, move further down the beach and still try to make me hear.'

Thus was I privileged, from the very start, to see the tricks of oratory passed from one master to another. 'There should be no effeminate bending of the neck, no twiddling of the fingers. Do not move your shoulders. If you must use your fingers for a gesture, try bending the middle finger against the thumb and extending the other three – that is it, that is good. The eyes of course are *always* turned in the direction of the gesture, except when we have to reject: "O gods, avert such plague!" or "I do not think that I deserve such honour."'

Nothing was allowed to be written down, for no orator worthy of the name would dream of reading out a text or consulting a sheaf of notes. Molon favoured the standard method of memorising a speech: that of an imaginary journey around the speaker's house. 'Place the first point you want to make in the entrance hall, and picture it lying there, then the second in the atrium, and so on, walking round the house in the way you would naturally tour it, assigning a section of your speech not just to each room, but to every alcove and statue. Make sure each site is well lit, clearly defined, and distinctive. Otherwise you will go groping around like a drunk trying to find his bed after a party.'

Cicero was not the only pupil at Molon's academy that spring and summer. In time we were joined by Cicero's younger brother Quintus, and his cousin Lucius, and also by two friends of his: Servius, a fussy lawyer who wished to become a judge, and Atticus – the dapper, charming Atticus – who had no interest in oratory, for he lived in Athens, and certainly had no intention of making a career in politics, but who loved spending time with Cicero. All marvelled at the change which had been wrought in his health and appearance, and on their final evening together – for now it was autumn, and the time had come to return to Rome – they gathered to hear the effects which Molon had produced on his oratory.

I wish I could recall what it was that Cicero spoke about that night after dinner, but I fear I am the living proof of Demosthenes' cynical assertion that content counts for nothing beside delivery. I stood discreetly

out of sight, among the shadows, and all I can picture now are the moths whirling like flakes of ash around the torches, the wash of stars above the courtyard, and the enraptured faces of the young men, flushed in the firelight, turned towards Cicero. But I do remember Molon's words afterwards, when his protégé, with a final bow of his head towards the imaginary jury, sat down. After a long silence he got to his feet and said, in a hoarse voice: 'Cicero, I congratulate you and I am amazed at you. It is Greece and her fate that I am sorry for. The only glory that was left to us was the supremacy of our eloquence, and now you have taken that as well. Go back,' he said, and gestured with those three outstretched fingers, across the lamp-lit terrace to the dark and distant sea, 'go back, my boy, *and conquer Rome*.'

Very well, then. Easy enough to say. But how do you do this? How do you 'conquer Rome' with no weapon other than your voice?

The first step is obvious: you must become a senator.

To gain entry to the senate at that time it was necessary to be at least thirty-one years old and a millionaire. To be exact, assets of one million sesterces had to be shown to the authorities simply to qualify to be a candidate at the annual elections in July, when twenty new senators were elected to replace those who had died in the previous year or had become too poor to keep their seats. But where was Cicero to get a million? His father certainly did not have that kind of money: the family estate was small and heavily mortgaged. He faced, therefore, the three traditional options. But making it would take too long, and stealing it would be too risky. Accordingly, soon after our return from Rhodes, he married it. Terentia was seventeen, boyishly flat-chested, with a head of short, tight black curls. Her half-sister was a vestal virgin, proof of her family's social status. More importantly, she was the owner of two slum apartment blocks in Rome, some woodland in the suburbs, and a farm; total value: one and a quarter million. (Ah, Terentia: plain, grand and rich – what a piece of work you were! I saw her only a few months ago, being carried on an open litter along the coastal road to Naples, screeching at her bearers to make better speed: white-haired and walnut-skinned but otherwise quite unchanged.)

So Cicero, in due course, became a senator – in fact, he topped the poll, being generally now regarded as the second-best advocate in Rome,

after Hortensius – and then was sent off for the obligatory year of government service, in his case to the province of Sicily, before being allowed to take his seat. His official title was quaestor, the most junior of the magistracies. Wives were not permitted to accompany their husbands on these tours of duty, so Terentia – I am sure to his deep relief – stayed at home. But I went with him, for by this time I had become a kind of extension of himself, to be used unthinkingly, like an extra hand or foot. Part of the reason for my indispensability was that I had devised a method of taking down his words as fast as he could utter them. From small beginnings – I can modestly claim to be the man who invented the ampersand – my system eventually swelled to a handbook of some four thousand symbols. I found, for example, that Cicero was fond of repeating certain phrases, and these I learned to reduce to a line, or even a few dots – thus proving what most people already know, that politicians essentially say the same thing over and over again. He dictated to me from his bath and his couch, from inside swaying carriages and on country walks. He never ran short of words and I never ran short of symbols to catch and hold them for ever as they flew through the air. We were made for one another.

But to return to Sicily. Do not be alarmed: I shall not describe our work in any detail. Like so much of politics, it was dreary even while it was happening, without revisiting it sixty-odd years later. What was memorable, and significant, was the journey home. Cicero purposely delayed this by a month, from March to April, to ensure he passed through Puteoli during the senate recess, at exactly the moment when all the smart political set would be on the Bay of Naples, enjoying the mineral baths. I was ordered to hire the finest twelve-oared rowing boat I could find, so that he could enter the harbour in style, wearing for the first time the purple-edged toga of a senator of the Roman republic.

For Cicero had convinced himself that he had been such a great success in Sicily, he must be the centre of all attention back in Rome. In a hundred stifling market squares, in the shade of a thousand dusty, wasp-infested Sicilian plane trees, he had dispensed Rome's justice, impartially and with dignity. He had purchased a record amount of grain to feed the electors back in the capital, and had dispatched it at a record cheap price. His speeches at government ceremonies had been masterpieces of tact. He had even feigned interest in the conversation of the locals. He knew he

had done well, and in a stream of official reports to the senate he boasted of his achievements. I must confess that occasionally I toned these down before I gave them to the official messenger, and tried to hint to him that perhaps Sicily was not entirely the centre of the world. He took no notice.

I can see him now, standing in the prow, straining his eyes at Puteoli's quayside, as we returned to Italy. What was he expecting? I wonder. A band to pipe him ashore? A consular deputation to present him with a laurel wreath? There was a crowd, all right, but it was not for him. Hortensius, who already had his eye on the consulship, was holding a banquet on several brightly coloured pleasure-craft moored nearby, and guests were waiting to be ferried out to the party. Cicero stepped ashore – ignored. He looked about him, puzzled, and at that moment a few of the revellers, noticing his freshly gleaming senatorial rig, came hurrying towards him. He squared his shoulders in pleasurable anticipation.

'Senator,' called one, 'what's the news from Rome?'

Cicero somehow managed to maintain his smile. 'I have not come from Rome, my good fellow. I am returning from my province.'

A red-haired man, no doubt already drunk, said, 'Ooooh! My *good fellow*! He's returning from his *province* …'

There was a snort of laughter, barely suppressed.

'What is so funny about that?' interrupted a third, eager to smooth things over. 'Don't you know? He has been in Africa.'

Cicero's smile was now heroic. 'Sicily, actually.'

There may have been more in this vein. I cannot remember. People began drifting away once they realised there was no city gossip to be had, and very soon Hortensius came along and ushered his remaining guests towards their boats. Cicero he nodded to, civilly enough, but pointedly did not invite to join him. We were left alone.

A trivial incident, you might think, and yet Cicero himself used to say that this was the instant at which his ambition hardened within him to rock. He had been humiliated – humiliated by his own vanity – and given brutal evidence of his smallness in the world. He stood there for a long time, watching Hortensius and his friends partying across the water, listening to the merry flutes, and when he turned away, he had changed. I do not exaggerate. I saw it in his eyes. *Very well*, his expression seemed to say, *you fools can frolic; I shall work*.

'This experience, gentlemen, I am inclined to think was more valuable to me than if I had been hailed with salvoes of applause. I ceased thenceforth from considering what the world was likely to hear about me: from that day I took care that I should be seen personally every day. I lived in the public eye. I frequented the forum. Neither my doorkeeper nor sleep prevented anyone from getting in to see me. Not even when I had nothing to do did I do nothing, and consequently absolute leisure was a thing I never knew.'

I came across that passage in one of his speeches not long ago and I can vouch for the truth of it. He walked away from the harbour like a man in a dream, up through Puteoli and out on to the main highway without once looking back. I struggled along behind him carrying as much luggage as I could manage. To begin with, his steps were slow and thoughtful, but gradually they picked up speed, until at last he was striding so rapidly in the direction of Rome I had difficulty keeping up.

And with this both ends my first roll of paper, and begins the real story of Marcus Tullius Cicero.

II

The day which was to prove the turning point began like any other, an hour before dawn, with Cicero, as always, the first in the household to rise. I lay for a little while in the darkness and listened to the thump of the floorboards above my head as he went through the exercises he had learned on Rhodes – a visit now six years in the past – then I rolled off my straw mattress and rinsed my face. It was the first day of November; cold.

Cicero had a modest two-storey dwelling on the ridge of the Esquiline Hill, hemmed in by a temple on one side and a block of flats on the other, although if you could be bothered to scramble up on to the roof you would be rewarded with a decent view across the smoky valley to the great temples on Capitol Hill about half a mile to the west. It was actually his father's place, but the old gentleman was in poor health nowadays and seldom left the country, so Cicero had it to himself, along with Terentia and their five-year-old daughter, Tullia, and a dozen slaves: me, the two secretaries working under me, Sositheus and Laurea, the steward, Eros, Terentia's business manager, Philotimus, two maids, a nurse, a cook, a valet and a doorkeeper. There was also an old blind philosopher somewhere, Diodotus the Stoic, who occasionally groped his way out of his room to join Cicero for dinner when his master needed an intellectual workout. So: fifteen of us in the household in all. Terentia complained endlessly about the cramped conditions, but Cicero would not move, for at this time he was still very much in his man-of-the-people phase, and the house sat well with the image.

The first thing I did that morning, as I did every morning, was to slip over my left wrist a loop of cord, to which was attached a small notebook of my own design. This consisted of not the usual one or two but four double-sided sheets of wax, each in a beechwood frame, very thin and so

hinged that I could fold them all up and snap them shut. In this way I could take many more notes in a single session of dictation than the average secretary; but even so, such was Cicero's daily torrent of words, I always made sure to put spares in my pockets. Then I pulled back the curtain of my tiny room and walked across the courtyard into the tablinum, lighting the lamps and checking all was ready. The only piece of furniture was a sideboard, on which stood a bowl of chickpeas. (Cicero's name derived from *cicer*, meaning chickpea, and believing that an unusual name was an advantage in politics, he always took pains to draw attention to it.) Once I was satisfied, I passed through the atrium into the entrance hall, where the doorman was already waiting with his hand on the big metal lock. I checked the light through the narrow window, and when I judged it pale enough, gave a nod to the doorman, who slid back the bolts.

Outside in the chilly street, the usual crowd of the miserable and the desperate was already waiting, and I made a note of each man as he crossed the threshold. Most I recognised; those I did not, I asked for their names; the familiar no-hopers, I turned away. But the standing instruction was: 'If he has a vote, let him in', so the tablinum was soon well filled with anxious clients, each seeking a piece of the senator's time. I lingered by the entrance until I reckoned the queue had all filed in and was just stepping back when a figure with the dusty clothes, straggling hair and uncut beard of a man in mourning loomed in the doorway. He gave me a fright, I do not mind admitting.

'Tiro!' he said. 'Thank the gods!' And he sank against the door jamb, exhausted, peering out at me with pale, dead eyes. I guess he must have been about fifty. At first I could not place him, but it is one of the jobs of a political secretary to put names to faces, and gradually, despite his condition, a picture began to assemble in my mind: a large house overlooking the sea, an ornamental garden, a collection of bronze statues, a town somewhere in Sicily, in the north – Thermae, that was it.

'Sthenius of Thermae,' I said, and held out my hand. 'Welcome.'

It was not my place to comment on his appearance, nor to ask what he was doing hundreds of miles from home and in such obvious distress. I left him in the tablinum and went through to Cicero's study. The senator, who was due in court that morning to defend a youth charged with parricide, and who would also be expected to attend the afternoon session of the senate, was squeezing a small leather ball to strengthen his fingers, while

being robed in his toga by his valet. He was listening to one letter being read out by young Sositheus, and at the same time dictating a message to Laurea, to whom I had taught the rudiments of my shorthand system. As I entered, he threw the ball at me – I caught it without thinking – and gestured for the list of callers. He read it greedily, as he always did. What had he caught overnight? Some prominent citizen from a useful tribe? A Sabatini, perhaps? A Pomptini? Or a businessman rich enough to vote among the first centuries in the consular elections? But today it was only the usual small fry and his face gradually fell until he reached the final name.

'Sthenius?' He interrupted his dictation. 'He's that Sicilian, is he not? The rich one with the bronzes? We had better find out what he wants.'

'Sicilians don't have a vote,' I pointed out.

'Pro bono,' he said, with a straight face. 'Besides, he does have bronzes. I shall see him first.'

So I fetched in Sthenius, who was given the usual treatment – the trademark smile, the manly double-grip handshake, the long and sincere stare into the eyes – then shown to a seat and asked what had brought him to Rome. I had started remembering more about Sthenius. We had stayed with him twice in Thermae, when Cicero heard cases in the town. Back then he had been one of the leading citizens of the province, but now all his vigour and confidence had gone. He needed help, he announced. He was facing ruin. His life was in terrible danger. He had been robbed.

'Really?' said Cicero. He was half glancing at a document on his desk, not paying too much attention, for a busy advocate hears many hard-luck stories. 'You have my sympathy. Robbed by whom?'

'By the governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres.' The senator looked up sharply.

There was no stopping Sthenius after that. As his story poured out, Cicero caught my eye and performed a little mime of note-taking – he wanted a record of this – and when Sthenius eventually paused to draw breath, he gently interrupted and asked him to go back a little, to the day, almost three months earlier, when he had first received the letter from Verres. 'What was your reaction?'

'I worried a little. He already had a … *reputation*. People call him – his name meaning boar – people call him the Boar with Blood on his Snout. But I could hardly refuse.'

'You still have this letter?'

'Yes.'

'And in it did Verres specifically mention your art collection?'

'Oh yes. He said he had often heard about it and wanted to see it.'

'And how soon after that did he come to stay?'

'Very soon. A week at most.'

'Was he alone?'

'No, he had his lictors with him. I had to find room for them as well. Bodyguards are always rough types, but these were the worst set of thugs I ever saw. The chief of them, Sextius, is the official executioner for the whole of Sicily. He demands bribes from his victims by threatening to botch the job – you know, mangle them – if they do not pay up beforehand.' Sthenius swallowed and started breathing hard. We waited.

'Take your time,' said Cicero.

'I thought Verres might like to bathe after his journey, and then we could dine – but no, he said he wanted to see my collection straightaway.'

'You had some very fine pieces, I remember.'

'It was my life, Senator, I cannot put it plainer. Thirty years of travelling and haggling. Corinthian and Delian bronzes, pictures, silver – nothing I did not handle and choose myself. I had Myron's *The Discus Thrower* and *The Spear Bearer* by Polycleitus. Some silver cups by Mentor. Verres was complimentary. He said it deserved a wider audience. He said it was good enough for public display. I paid no attention till we were having dinner on the terrace and I heard a noise from the inner courtyard. My steward told me a wagon drawn by oxen had arrived and Verres's lictors were loading it with everything.'

Sthenius was silent again, and I could readily imagine the shame of it for such a proud man: his wife wailing, the household traumatised, the dusty outlines where the statues had once stood. The only sound in the study was the tap of my stylus on wax.

Cicero said: 'You did not complain?'

'Who to? The governor?' Sthenius laughed. 'No, Senator. I was alive, wasn't I? If he had just left it at that, I would have swallowed my losses, and you would never have heard a squeak from me. But collecting can be a sickness, and I tell you what: your Governor Verres has it badly. You remember those statues in the town square?'

'Indeed I do. Three very fine bronzes. But you are surely not telling me he stole those as well?'

'He tried. This was on his third day under my roof. He asked me whose they were. I told him they were the property of the town, and had been

for centuries. You know they are four hundred years old? He said he would like permission to remove them to his residence in Syracuse, also as a loan, and asked me to approach the council. By then I knew what kind of a man he was, so I said I could not, in all honour, oblige him. He left that night. A few days after that, I received a summons for trial on the fifth day of October, on a charge of forgery.'

'Who brought the charge?'

'An enemy of mine named Agathinus. He is a client of Verres. My first thought was to face him down. I have nothing to fear as far as my honesty goes. I have never forged a document in my life. But then I heard the judge was to be Verres himself, and that he had already fixed on the punishment. I was to be whipped in front of the whole town for my insolence.'

'And so you fled?'

'That same night, I took a boat along the coast to Messana.'

Cicero rested his chin in his hand and contemplated Sthenius. I recognised that gesture. He was weighing the witness up. 'You say the hearing was on the fifth of last month. Have you heard what happened?'

'That is why I am here. I was convicted in my absence, sentenced to be flogged – and fined five thousand. But there is worse than that. At the hearing, Verres claimed fresh evidence had been produced against me, this time of spying for the rebels in Spain. There is to be a new trial in Syracuse on the first day of December.'

'But spying is a capital offence.'

'Senator – believe me – he plans to have me crucified. He boasts of it openly. I would not be the first, either. I need help. Please. Will you help me?'

I thought he might be about to sink to his knees and start kissing the senator's feet, and so, I suspect, did Cicero, for he quickly got up from his chair and started pacing about the room. 'It seems to me there are two aspects to this case, Sthenius. One, the theft of your property – and there, frankly, I cannot see what is to be done. Why do you think men such as Verres desire to be governors in the first place? Because they know they can take what they want, within reason. The second aspect, the manipulation of the legal process – that is more promising.

'I know several men with great legal expertise who live in Sicily – one, indeed, in Syracuse. I shall write to him today and urge him, as a particular

favour to me, to accept your case. I shall even give him my opinion as to what he should do. He should apply to the court to have the forthcoming prosecution declared invalid, on the grounds that you are not present to answer. If that fails, and Verres goes ahead, your advocate should come to Rome and argue that the conviction is unsound.'

But the Sicilian was shaking his head. 'If it was just a lawyer in Syracuse I needed, Senator, I would not have come all the way to Rome.'

I could see Cicero did not like where this was leading. Such a case could tie up his practice for days, and Sicilians, as I had reminded him, did not have votes. Pro bono indeed!

'Listen,' he said reassuringly, 'your case is strong. Verres is obviously corrupt. He abuses hospitality. He steals. He brings false charges. He plots judicial murder. His position is indefensible. It can easily be handled by an advocate in Syracuse – really, I promise you. Now, if you will excuse me, I have many clients to see, and I am due in court in less than an hour.'

He nodded to me and I stepped forward, putting a hand on Sthenius's arm to guide him out. The Sicilian shook it off. 'But I need you,' he persisted.

'Why?'

'Because my only hope of justice lies here, not in Sicily, where Verres controls the courts. And everyone here tells me Marcus Cicero is the second-best lawyer in Rome.'

'Do they indeed?' Cicero's tone took on an edge of sarcasm: he hated that epithet. 'Well then, why settle for second best? Why not go straight to Hortensius?'

'I thought of that,' said his visitor artlessly, 'but he turned me down. He is representing Verres.'

I showed the Sicilian out and returned to find Cicero alone in his study, tilted back in his chair, staring at the wall, tossing the leather ball from one hand to the other. Legal textbooks cluttered his desk. *Precedents in Pleading* by Hostilius was one which he had open; Manilius's *Conditions of Sale* was another.

'Do you remember that red-haired drunk on the quayside at Puteoli, the day we came back from Sicily? "Ooooh! My *good fellow*! He's returning from his *province* …"'

I nodded.

'That was Verres.' The ball went back and forth, back and forth. 'The fellow gives corruption a bad name.'

'I am surprised at Hortensius for getting involved with him.'

'Are you? I'm not.' He stopped tossing the ball and contemplated it on his outstretched palm. 'The Dancing Master and the Boar …' He brooded for a while. 'A man in my position would have to be mad to tangle with Hortensius and Verres combined, and all for the sake of some Sicilian who is not even a Roman citizen.'

'True.'

'True,' he repeated, although there was an odd hesitancy in the way he said it which sometimes makes me wonder if he had not just then glimpsed the whole thing – the whole extraordinary set of possibilities and consequences, laid out like a mosaic in his mind. But if he had, I never knew, for at that moment his daughter Tullia ran in, still wearing her nightdress, with some childish drawing to show him, and suddenly his attention switched entirely on to her and he scooped her up and settled her on his knee. 'Did you do this? Did you *really* do this all by yourself …?'

I left him to it and slipped away, back into the tablinum, to announce that we were running late and that the senator was about to leave for court. Sthenius was still moping around, and asked me when he could expect an answer, to which I could only reply that he would have to fall in with the rest. Soon after that Cicero himself appeared, hand in hand with Tullia, nodding good morning to everyone, greeting each by name ('The first rule in politics, Tiro: never forget a face'). He was beautifully turned out, as always, his hair pomaded and slicked back, his skin scented, his toga freshly laundered; his red leather shoes spotless and shiny; his face bronzed by years of pleading in the open air; groomed, lean, fit: he *glowed*. They followed him into the vestibule, where he hoisted the beaming little girl into the air, showed her off to the assembled company, then turned her face to his and gave her a resounding kiss on the lips. There was a drawn-out 'Ahh!' and some isolated applause. It was not wholly put on for show – he would have done it even if no one had been present, for he loved his darling Tulliola more than he ever loved anyone in his entire life – but he knew the Roman electorate were a sentimental lot, and that if word of his paternal devotion got around, it would do him no harm.

And so we stepped out into the bright promise of that November morning, into the gathering noise of the city – Cicero striding ahead, with me beside him, notebook at the ready; Sositheus and Laurea tucked in behind, carrying the document cases with the evidence he needed for his appearance in court; and, on either side of us, trying to catch the senator's attention, yet proud merely to be in his aura, two dozen assorted petitioners and hangers-on, including Sthenius – down the hill from the leafy, respectable heights of the Esquiline and into the stink and smoke and racket of Subura. Here the height of the tenements shut out the sunlight and the packed crowds squeezed our phalanx of supporters into a broken thread that still somehow determinedly trailed along after us. Cicero was a well-known figure here, a hero to the shopkeepers and merchants whose interests he had represented, and who had watched him walking past for years. Without once breaking his rapid step, his sharp blue eyes registered every bowed head, every wave of greeting, and it was rare for me to need to whisper a name in his ear, for he knew his voters far better than I.

I do not know how it is these days, but at that time there were six or seven law courts in almost permanent session, each set up in a different part of the forum, so that at the hour when they all opened one could barely move for advocates and legal officers hurrying about. To make it worse, the praetor of each court would always arrive from his house preceded by half a dozen lictors to clear his path, and as luck would have it, our little entourage debouched into the forum at exactly the moment that Hortensius – at this time a praetor himself – went parading by towards the senate house. We were all held back by his guards to let the great man pass, and to this day I do not think it was his intention to cut Cicero dead, for he was a man of refined, almost effeminate manners: he simply did not see him. But the consequence was that the so-called second-best advocate in Rome, his cordial greeting dead on his lips, was left staring at the retreating back of the so-called best with such an intensity of loathing I was surprised Hortensius did not start rubbing at the skin between his shoulder blades.

Our business that morning was in the central criminal court, convened outside the Basilica Aemilia, where the fifteen-year-old Caius Popillius Laenas was on trial accused of stabbing his father to death through the eye with a metal stylus. I could already see a big crowd waiting around the tribunal. Cicero was due to make the closing speech for the defence.

That was attraction enough. But if he failed to convince the jury, Popillius, as a convicted parricide, would be stripped naked, flayed till he bled, then sewn up in a sack together with a dog, a cock and a viper and thrown into the River Tiber. There was a whiff of bloodlust in the air, and as the onlookers parted to let us through, I caught a glimpse of Popillius himself, a notoriously violent youth, whose eyebrows merged to form a continuous thick black line. He was seated next to his uncle on the bench reserved for the defence, scowling defiantly, spitting at anyone who came too close. 'We really must secure an acquittal,' observed Cicero, 'if only to spare the dog, the cock and the viper the ordeal of being sewn up in a sack with Popillius.' He always maintained that it was no business of the advocate to worry whether his client was guilty or not: that was for the court. He undertook only to do his best, and in return the Popillii Laeni, who could boast four consuls in their family tree, would be obliged to support him whenever he ran for office.

Sositheus and Laurea set down the boxes of evidence, and I was just bending to unfasten the nearest when Cicero told me to leave it. 'Save yourself the trouble,' he said, tapping the side of his head. 'I have the speech up here well enough.' He bowed politely to his client – 'Good day, Popillius: we shall soon have this settled, I trust' – then continued to me, in a quieter voice: 'I have a more important task for you. Give me your notebook. I want you to go to the senate house, find the chief clerk, and see if there is a chance of having this put on the order paper this afternoon.' He was writing rapidly. 'Say nothing to our Sicilian friend just yet. There is great danger. We must take this carefully, one step at a time.'

It was not until I had left the tribunal and was halfway across the forum to the senate house that I risked taking a look at what he had written: *That in the opinion of this house the prosecution of persons in their absence on capital charges should be prohibited in the provinces.* I felt a tightening in my chest, for I saw at once what it meant. Cleverly, tentatively, obliquely, Cicero was preparing at last to challenge his great rival. I was carrying a declaration of war.

Gellius Publicola was the presiding consul for November. He was a blunt, delightfully stupid military commander of the old school. It was said, or at any rate it was said by Cicero, that when Gellius had passed

through Athens with his army twenty years before, he had offered to mediate between the warring schools of philosophy: he would convene a conference at which they could thrash out the meaning of life once and for all, thus sparing themselves further pointless argument. I knew Gellius's secretary fairly well, and as the afternoon's agenda was unusually light, with nothing scheduled apart from a report on the military situation, he agreed to add Cicero's motion to the order paper. 'But you might warn your master,' he said, 'that the consul has heard his little joke about the philosophers, *and he does not much like it*.'

By the time I returned to the criminal court, Cicero was already well launched on his closing speech for the defence. It was not one of those which he afterwards chose to preserve, so unfortunately I do not have the text. All I can remember is that he won the case by the clever expedient of promising that young Popillius, if acquitted, would devote the rest of his life to military service – a pledge which took the prosecution, the jury, and indeed his client entirely by surprise. But it did the trick, and the moment the verdict was in, without pausing to waste another moment on the ghastly Popillius, or even to snatch a mouthful of food, he set off immediately westwards towards the senate house, still trailed by his original honour-guard of admirers, their number swelled by the spreading rumour that the great advocate had another speech planned.

Cicero used to say that it was not in the senate chamber that the real business of the republic was done, but outside, in the open-air lobby known as the senaculum, where the senators were obliged to wait until they constituted a quorum. This daily massing of white-robed figures, which might last for an hour or more, was one of the great sights of the city, and while Cicero plunged in among them, Sthenius and I joined the crowd of gawpers on the other side of the forum. (The Sicilian, poor fellow, still had no idea what was happening.)

It is in the nature of things that not all politicians can achieve greatness. Of the six hundred men who then constituted the senate, only eight could be elected praetor – to preside over the courts – in any one year, and only two of these could go on to achieve the supreme *imperium* of the consulship. In other words, more than half of those milling around the senaculum were doomed never to hold elected office at all. They were what the aristocrats sneeringly called the *pedarii*, the men who voted with their feet, shuffling dutifully to one side of the chamber or the other whenever a

division was called. And yet, in their way, these citizens were the backbone of the republic: bankers, businessmen and landowners from all over Italy; wealthy, cautious and patriotic; suspicious of the arrogance and show of the aristocrats. Like Cicero, they were often 'new men', the first in their families to win election to the senate. These were his people, and observing him threading his way among them that afternoon was like watching a master-craftsman in his studio, a sculptor with his stone – here a hand resting lightly on an elbow, there a heavy arm clapped across a pair of meaty shoulders; with this man a coarse joke, with that a solemn word of condolence, his own hands crossed and pressed to his breast in sympathy; detained by a bore, he would seem to have all the hours of the day to listen to his dreary story, but then you would see his hand flicker out and catch some passer-by, and he would spin as gracefully as a dancer, with the tenderest backward glance of apology and regret, to work on someone else. Occasionally he would gesture in our direction, and a senator would stare at us, and perhaps shake his head in disbelief, or nod slowly to promise his support.

'What is he saying about me?' asked Sthenius. 'What is he going to do?'

I made no answer, for I did not know myself.

By now it was clear that Hortensius had realised something was going on, but was unsure exactly what. The order of business had been posted in its usual place beside the door of the senate house. I saw Hortensius stop to read it – *the prosecution of persons in their absence on capital charges should be prohibited in the provinces* – and turn away, mystified. Gellius Publicola was sitting in the doorway on his carved ivory chair, surrounded by his attendants, waiting until the entrails had been inspected and the auguries declared favourable before summoning the senators inside. Hortensius approached him, palms spread wide in enquiry. Gellius shrugged and pointed irritably at Cicero. Hortensius swung round to discover his ambitious rival surrounded by a conspiratorial circle of senators. He frowned, and went over to join his own aristocratic friends: the three Metellus brothers – Quintus, Lucius and Marcus – and the two elderly ex-consuls who really ran the empire, Quintus Catulus (whose sister was married to Hortensius), and the double-triumphator Publius Servilius Vatia Isauricus. Merely writing their names after all these years raises the hairs on my neck, for these were such men, stern and unyielding and steeped in the old republican values, as no longer exist. Hortensius must have told

them about the motion, because slowly all five turned to look at Cicero. Immediately thereafter a trumpet sounded to signal the start of the session and the senators began to file in.

The old senate house was a cool, gloomy, cavernous temple of government, split by a wide central aisle of black and white tile. Facing across it on either side were long rows of wooden benches, six deep, on which the senators sat, with a dais at the far end for the chairs of the consuls. The light on that November afternoon was pale and bluish, dropping in shafts from the unglazed windows just beneath the raftered roof. Pigeons cooed on the sills and flapped across the chamber, sending small feathers and even occasionally hot squirts of excrement down on to the senators below. Some held that it was lucky to be shat on while speaking, others that it was an ill omen, a few that it depended on the colour of the deposit. The superstitions were as numerous as their interpretations. Cicero took no notice of them, just as he took no notice of the arrangement of sheep's guts, or whether a peal of thunder was on the left or the right, or the particular flight-path of a flock of birds – idiocy all of it, as far as he was concerned, even though he later campaigned enthusiastically for election to the College of Augurs.

By ancient tradition, then still observed, the doors of the senate house remained open so that the people could hear the debates. The crowd, Sthenius and I among them, surged across the forum to the threshold of the chamber, where we were held back by a simple rope. Gellius was already speaking, relating the dispatches of the army commanders in the field. On all three fronts, the news was good. In southern Italy, the vastly rich Marcus Crassus – he who once boasted that no man could call himself wealthy until he could keep a legion of five thousand solely out of his income – was putting down Spartacus's slave revolt with great severity. In Spain, Pompey the Great, after six years' fighting, was mopping up the last of the rebel armies. In Asia Minor, Lucius Lucullus was enjoying a glorious run of victories over King Mithradates. Once their reports had been read, supporters of each man rose in turn to praise his patron's achievements and subtly denigrate those of his rivals. I knew the politics of this from Cicero and passed them on to Sthenius in a superior whisper: 'Crassus hates Pompey and is determined to defeat Spartacus before Pompey can return with his legions from Spain to take all the credit. Pompey hates Crassus and wants the glory of finishing off Spartacus so

that he can rob him of a triumph. Crassus and Pompey both hate Lucullus because he has the most glamorous command.'

'And whom does Lucullus hate?'

'Pompey and Crassus, of course, for intriguing against him.'

I felt as pleased as a child who has just successfully recited his lesson, for it was all just a game then, and I had no idea that we would ever get drawn in. The debate came to a desultory halt, without the need for a vote, and the senators began talking among themselves. Gellius, who must have been well into his sixties, held the order paper up close to his face and squinted at it, then peered around the chamber, trying to locate Cicero, who, as a junior senator, was confined to a distant back bench near the door. Eventually Cicero stood to show himself, Gellius sat, the buzz of voices died away, and I picked up my stylus. There was a silence, which Cicero allowed to grow, an old trick to increase tension. And then, when he had waited so long it seemed that something must be wrong, he began to speak – very quietly and hesitantly at first, forcing his listeners to strain their ears, the rhythm of his words hooking them without their even knowing it.

'Honourable members, compared to the stirring accounts of our men in arms to which we have lately listened, I fear what I say will sound small indeed.' And now his voice rose. 'But if the moment has come when this noble house no longer has ears for the pleas of an innocent man, then all those courageous deeds are worthless, and our soldiers bleed in vain.' There was a murmur of agreement from the benches beside him. 'This morning there came into my home just such an innocent man, whose treatment by one of our number has been so shameful, so monstrous and so cruel that the gods themselves must weep to hear of it. I refer to the honourable Sthenius of Thermae, recently resident in the miserable, misgoverned, misappropriated province of Sicily.'

At the word 'Sicily', Hortensius, who had been sprawling on the front bench nearest the consul, twitched slightly. Without taking his eyes from Cicero he turned and began whispering to Quintus, the eldest of the Metellus brothers, who promptly leaned behind him and beckoned to Marcus, the junior of the fraternal trio. Marcus squatted on his haunches to receive his instructions, then, after a brief bow to the presiding consul, came hurrying down the aisle towards me. For a moment I thought I was about to be struck – they were tough, swaggering fellows, those Metelli

– but he did not even look at me. He lifted the rope, ducked under it, pushed through the crowd and disappeared.

Cicero, meanwhile, was hitting his stride. After our return from Molon, with the precept 'Delivery, delivery, delivery' carved into his mind, he had spent many hours at the theatre, studying the methods of the actors, and had developed a considerable talent for mime and mimicry. Using only the smallest touch of voice or gesture, he could, as it were, populate his speeches with the characters to whom he referred. He treated the senate that afternoon to a command performance: the swaggering arrogance of Verres was contrasted with the quiet dignity of Sthenius, the long-suffering Sicilians shrank before the vileness of the public executioner, Sextius. Sthenius himself could hardly believe what he was witnessing. He had been in the city but a day, and here he was, the subject of a debate in the Roman senate itself. Hortensius, meanwhile, kept glancing towards the door, and as Cicero began to work towards his peroration – 'Sthenius seeks our protection, not merely from a thief, but from the very man who is supposed to punish thieves!' – he finally sprang to his feet. Under the rules of the senate, a serving praetor always took precedence over a humble member of the *pedarii*, and Cicero had no choice but to give way.

'Senators,' boomed Hortensius, 'we have sat through this long enough! This is surely one of the most flagrant pieces of opportunism ever seen in this noble house! A vague motion is placed before us, which now turns out to relate to one man only. No notice is given to us about what is to be discussed. We have no means of verifying whether what we are hearing is true. Gaius Verres, a senior member of this order, is being defamed with no opportunity to defend himself. I move that this sitting be suspended immediately!'

Hortensius sat to a patter of applause from the aristocrats. Cicero stood. His face was perfectly straight.

'The senator seems not to have read the motion,' he said, in mock puzzlement. 'Where is there any mention here of Gaius Verres? Gentlemen, I am not asking this house to vote on Gaius Verres. It would not be fair to judge Gaius Verres in his absence. Gaius Verres is not here to defend himself. And now that we have established that principle, will Hortensius please extend it to my client, and agree that he should not be tried in his absence either? Or is there to be one law for the aristocrats and another for the rest of us?'

That raised the temperature well enough and set the *pedarii* around Cicero and the crowd at the door roaring with delight. I felt someone pushing roughly behind me and Marcus Metellus shouldered his way back into the chamber and walked quickly up the aisle towards Hortensius. Cicero watched his progress, at first with an expression of puzzlement, and then with one of realisation. He quickly held up his hand for silence. 'Very well. Since Hortensius objects to the vagueness of the original motion, let us reframe it so that there can be no doubt. I propose an amendment: *That whereas Sthenius has been prosecuted in his absence, it is agreed that no trial of him in his absence shall take place, and that if any such trial has already taken place, it shall be invalid*. And I say: let us vote on it now, and in the highest traditions of the Roman senate save an innocent man from the dreadful punishment of crucifixion!'

To mingled cheers and cat-calls, Cicero sat and Gellius rose. 'The motion has been put,' declared the consul. 'Does any other member wish to speak?'

Hortensius, the Metellus brothers and a few others of their party, such as Scribonius Curio, Sergius Catilina and Aemilius Alba, were in a huddle around the front bench, and it briefly seemed that the house would move straight to a division, which would have suited Cicero perfectly. But when the aristocrats finally settled back in their places, the bony figure of Catulus was revealed to be still on his feet. 'I believe I shall speak,' he said. 'Yes, I believe I shall have something to say.' Catulus was as hard and heartless as flint – the great-great-great-great-great-grandson (I believe that is the correct number of greats) of that Catulus who had triumphed over Hamilcar in the First Punic War – and a full two centuries of history were distilled into his vinegary old voice. 'I shall speak,' he repeated, 'and what I shall say first is that that young man' – pointing at Cicero – 'knows nothing whatsoever about "the highest traditions of the Roman senate", for if he did he would realise that no senator ever attacks another, except to his face. It shows a lack of breeding. I look at him there, all clever and eager in his place, and do you know what I think, gentlemen? I think of the wisdom of the old saying: "An ounce of heredity is worth a pound of merit"!'

Now it was the aristocrats who were rocking with laughter. Catilina, of whom I shall have much more to say later, pointed at Cicero, and then drew his finger across his throat. Cicero flushed pink but kept his self-control. He even managed a thin smile. Catulus turned with delight to

the benches behind him, and I caught a glimpse of his grinning profile, sharp and beak-nosed, like a head on a coin. He swivelled back to face the chamber. 'When I first entered this house, in the consulship of Claudius Pulcher and Marcus Perperna …' His voice settled into a confident drone.

Cicero caught my eye. He mouthed something, glanced up at the windows, then gestured with his head towards the door. I understood at once what he meant, and as I pushed my way back through the spectators and into the forum, I realised that Marcus Metellus must have been dispatched on exactly the same errand. In those days, when time-keeping was cruder than it is now, the last hour of the day's business was deemed to begin when the sun dropped west of the Maenian Column. I guessed that must be about to happen, and sure enough, the clerk responsible for making the observation was already on his way to tell the consul. It was against the law for the senate to sit after sunset. Clearly, Hortensius and his friends were planning to talk out the remainder of the session, preventing Cicero's motion from being put to the vote. By the time I had quickly confirmed the sun's position for myself, run back across the forum and wriggled my way through the crowd to the threshold of the chamber, Gellius was making the announcement: 'The last hour!'

Cicero was instantly on his feet, wanting to make a point of order, but Gellius would not take it, and the floor was still with Catulus. On and on Catulus went, giving an interminable history of provincial government, virtually from the time since the she-wolf suckled Romulus. (Catulus's father, also a consul, had famously died by shutting himself up in a sealed room, kindling a charcoal fire, and suffocating himself with the fumes: Cicero used to say he must have done it to avoid listening to another speech by his son.) When he did eventually reach some sort of conclusion, he promptly yielded the floor to Quintus Metellus. Again Cicero rose, but again he was defeated by the seniority rule. Metellus had praetorian rank, and unless he chose to give way, which naturally he did not, Cicero had no right of speech. For a time Cicero stood his ground, against a swelling roar of protest, but the men on either side of him – one of whom was Servius, his lawyer friend, who had his interests at heart and could see he was in danger of making a fool of himself – pulled at his toga, and finally he surrendered and sat down.

It was forbidden to light a lamp or a brazier inside the chamber. As the gloom deepened, the cold sharpened and the white shapes of the senators,

motionless in the November dusk, became like a parliament of ghosts. After Metellus had droned on for an eternity, and sat down in favour of Hortensius – a man who could talk on anything for hours – everyone knew the debate was over, and very soon afterwards Gellius dissolved the house. He limped down the aisle, an old man in search of his dinner, preceded by four lictors carrying his curule chair. Once he had passed through the doors, the senators streamed out after him and Sthenius and I retreated a short distance into the forum to wait for Cicero. Gradually the crowd around us dwindled. The Sicilian kept asking me what was happening, but I felt it wiser to say nothing, and we stood in silence. I pictured Cicero sitting alone on the back benches, waiting for the chamber to empty so that he could leave without having to speak to anyone, for I feared he had badly lost face. But to my surprise he strolled out chatting with Hortensius and another, older senator, whom I did not recognise. They talked for a while on the steps of the senate house, shook hands and parted.

'Do you know who that was?' asked Cicero, coming over to us. Far from being cast down, he appeared highly amused. 'That was Verres's father. He has promised to write to his son, urging him to drop the prosecution, if we agree not to bring the matter back to the senate.'

Poor Sthenius was so relieved, I thought he might die from gratitude. He dropped to his knees and began kissing the senator's hands. Cicero made a sour face and gently raised him to his feet. 'Really, my dear Sthenius, save your thanks until I have actually achieved something. He has only promised to write, that is all. It is not a guarantee.'

Sthenius said, 'But you will accept the offer?'

Cicero shrugged. 'What choice do we have? Even if I re-table the motion, they will only talk it out again.'

I could not resist asking why, in that case, Hortensius was bothering to offer a deal at all.

Cicero nodded slowly. 'Now that is a good question.' There was a mist rising from the Tiber, and the lamps in the shops along the Argiletum shone yellow and gauzy. He sniffed the damp air. 'I suppose it can only be because he is embarrassed. Which in his case, of course, takes quite a lot. Yet it seems that even *he* would prefer not to be associated too publicly with such a flagrant criminal as Verres. So he is trying to settle the matter quietly. I wonder how much his retainer is from Verres: it must be an enormous sum.'

'Hortensius was not the only one who came to Verres's defence,' I reminded him.

'No.' Cicero glanced back at the senate house, and I could see that something had just occurred to him. 'They are all in it together, aren't they? The Metellus brothers are true aristocrats – they would never lift a finger to help anyone apart from themselves, unless it was for money. As for Catulus, the man is frantic for gold. He has undertaken so much building on the Capitol over the past ten years, it is almost more of a shrine to him than it is to Jupiter. I estimate we must have been looking at half a million in bribes this afternoon, Tiro. A few Delian bronzes – however fine, Sthenius, forgive me – would not be sufficient to buy that kind of protection. What *is* Verres up to down there in Sicily?' He suddenly began working his signet ring over his knuckle. 'Take this to the National Archive, Tiro, and show it to one of the clerks. Demand in my name to see all the official accounts submitted to the senate by Gaius Verres.'

My face must have registered my dismay. 'But the National Archive is run by Catulus's people. He is sure to hear word of what you are doing.'

'That cannot be helped.'

'But what am I looking for?'

'Anything interesting. You will know it when you see it. Go quickly, while there is still some light.' He put his arm round the shoulders of the Sicilian. 'As for you, Sthenius – you will come to dinner with me tonight, I hope? It is only family, but I am sure my wife will be delighted to meet you.'

I rather doubted that, but naturally it was not my place to say so.

The National Archive, which was then barely six years old, loomed over the forum even more massively than it does today, for back then it had less competition. I climbed that great flight of steps up to the first gallery, and by the time I found an attendant my heart was racing. I showed him the seal, and demanded, on behalf of Senator Cicero, to see Verres's accounts. At first he claimed never to have heard of Cicero, and besides, the building was closing. But then I pointed in the direction of the Carcer and told him firmly that if he did not desire to spend a month in chains in the state prison for impeding official business, he had better fetch those

records now. (One lesson I had learned from Cicero was how to hide my nerves.) He scowled a bit and thought about it, then told me to follow him.

The Archive was Catulus's domain, a temple to him and his clan. Above the vaults was his inscription – *Q. Lutatius Catulus, son of Quintus, grandson of Quintus, consul, by a decree of the Senate, commissioned the erection of this National Archive, and approved it satisfactory* – and beside the entrance stood his life-size statue, looking somewhat more youthful and heroic than he had appeared in the senate that afternoon. Most of the attendants were either his slaves or his freedmen, and wore his emblem, a little dog, sewn on to their tunics. I shall tell you the kind of man Catulus was. He blamed the suicide of his father on the populist praetor Gratidianus – a distant relative of Cicero – and after the victory of the aristocrats in the civil war between Marius and Sulla he took the opportunity for revenge. His young protégé, Sergius Catilina, at his behest, seized Gratidianus, and whipped him through the streets to the Catulus family tomb. There, his arms and legs were broken, his ears and nose cut off, his tongue pulled out of his mouth and severed, and his eyes gouged out. In this ghastly condition his head was then lopped off, and Catilina bore it in triumph to Catulus, who was waiting in the forum. Do you wonder now why I was nervous as I waited for the vaults to be opened?

The senatorial records were kept in fireproof strong-rooms, built to withstand a lightning strike, tunnelled into the rock of the Capitol, and when the slaves swung back the big bronze door I had a glimpse of thousands upon thousands of rolled papyri, receding into the shadows of the sacred hill. Five hundred years of history were encompassed in that one small space: half a millennium of magistracies and governorships, proconsular decrees and judicial rulings, from Lusitania to Macedonia, from Africa to Gaul, and most of them made in the names of the same few families: the Aemilii, the Claudii, the Cornelii, the Lutatii, the Metelli, the Servilii. This was what gave Catulus and his kind the confidence to look down upon such provincial equestrians as Cicero.

They kept me waiting in an antechamber while they searched for Verres's records, and eventually brought out to me a single document case containing perhaps a dozen rolls. From the labels on the ends I saw that these were all, with one exception, accounts from his time as urban praetor. The exception was a flimsy piece of papyrus, barely worth the trouble of unrolling, covering his work as a junior magistrate twelve years previously, at the time of the war between Sulla and Marius, and on which was written

just three sentences: *I received 2,235,417 sesterces. I expended on wages, grain, payments to legates, the proquaestor, the praetorian cohort 1,635,417 sesterces. I left 600,000 at Ariminum*. Remembering the scores of rolls of meticulous accounts which Cicero's term as a junior magistrate on Sicily had generated, all of which I had written out for him, I could barely refrain from laughing.

'Is this all there is?'

The attendant assured me it was.

'But where are the accounts from his time in Sicily?'

'They have not yet been submitted to the treasury.'

'Not yet submitted? He has been governor for almost two years!'

The fellow looked at me blankly, and I could see that there was no point in wasting any more time with him. I copied out the three lines relating to Verres's junior magistracy and went out into the evening.

While I had been in the National Archive, darkness had fallen over Rome. In Cicero's house the family had already gone into dinner. But the master had left instructions with the steward, Eros, that I was to be shown straight into the dining room the moment I returned. I found Cicero lying on a couch beside Terentia. His brother, Quintus, was also there, with his wife, Pomponia. The third couch was occupied by Cicero's cousin Lucius and the hapless Sthenius, still clad in his dirty mourning clothes and squirming with unease. I could sense the strained atmosphere as soon as I entered, although Cicero was in good spirits. He always liked a dinner party. It was not the quality of the food and drink which mattered to him, but the company and the conversation. Quintus and Lucius, along with Atticus, were the three men he loved most.

'Well?' he said to me. I told him what had happened and showed him my copy of Verres's quaestorian accounts. He scanned it, grunted, and tossed the wax tablet across the table. 'Look at that, Quintus. The villain is too lazy even to lie adequately. Six hundred thousand – what a nice round sum, not a penny either side of it – and where does he leave it? Why, in a town which is then conveniently occupied by the opposition's army, so the loss can be blamed on them! And no accounts submitted from Sicily for *two years*? I am obliged to you, Sthenius, for bringing this rogue to my attention.'

'Oh yes, *so* obliged,' said Terentia, with savage sweetness. '*So* obliged – for setting us at war with half the decent families in Rome. But presumably we can socialise with Sicilians from now on, so that will be all right. Where did you say you came from again?'

'Thermae, your ladyship.'

'Thermae. I have never heard of it, but I am sure it is delightful. You can make speeches to the town council, Cicero. Perhaps you will even get elected there, now that Rome is forever closed to you. You can be the consul of Thermae and I can be the first lady.'

'A role I am sure you will perform with your customary charm, my darling,' said Cicero, patting her arm.

They could needle away at one another like this for hours. Sometimes I believe they rather enjoyed it.

'I still fail to see what you can do about it,' said Quintus. He was fresh from military service: four years younger than his brother, and possessed of about half the brains. 'If you raise Verres's conduct in the senate, they will talk it out. If you try to take him to court, they will make sure he is acquitted. Just keep your nose out of it is my advice.'

'And what do you say, cousin?'

'I say no man of honour in the Roman senate can stand by and see this sort of corruption going on unchecked,' replied Lucius. 'Now that you know the facts, you have a duty to make them public.'

'Bravo!' said Terentia. 'Spoken like a true philosopher who has never stood for office in his life.'

Pomponia yawned noisily. 'Can we talk about something else? Politics is so dull.'

She was a tiresome woman whose only obvious attraction, apart from her prominent bust, was that she was Atticus's sister. I saw the eyes of the two Cicero brothers meet and my master give a barely perceptible shake of his head: ignore her, his expression said, it is not worth arguing over. 'All right,' he conceded, 'enough of politics. But I propose a toast.' He raised his cup and the others did the same. 'To our old friend Sthenius. If nothing else, may this day have seen the beginning of the restoration of his fortunes. Sthenius!'

The Sicilian's eyes were wet with tears of gratitude.

'Sthenius!'

'And Thermae, Cicero,' added Terentia, her small dark eyes, her shrew's eyes, bright with malice over the rim of her drink. 'Do not let us forget Thermae.'

⋆

I took my meal alone in the kitchen and went exhausted to bed with my lamp and a book of philosophy which I was too tired to read. (I was free to borrow whatever I liked from the household's small library.) Later, I heard the guests all leave and the bolts slam shut on the front door. I heard Cicero and Terentia mount the stairs in silence and go their separate ways, for she had long since taken to sleeping in another part of the house to avoid being woken by him before dawn. I heard Cicero's footsteps on the boards above my head, and then I blew out my lamp, and that was the last sound I heard as I surrendered myself to sleep – his footsteps pacing, up and down, up and down.

It was six weeks later that we heard the news from Sicily. Verres had ignored the entreaties of his father. On the first day of December, in Syracuse, exactly as he had threatened, he had judged Sthenius in his absence, found him guilty of espionage, sentenced him to be crucified, and dispatched his officials to Rome to arrest him and return him for execution.

III

The governor of Sicily's contemptuous defiance caught Cicero off his guard. He had been convinced he had struck a gentlemen's agreement which would safeguard his client's life. 'But then of course,' he complained bitterly, 'none of them is a gentleman.' He stormed around the house in an uncharacteristic rage. He had been tricked! They had played him for a fool! He would march down to the senate house right there and then and expose their villainous lies! I knew he would calm down before long, for he was only too aware that he lacked the rank simply to demand a hearing in the senate: he would risk humiliation.

But there was no escaping the fact that he was under a heavy obligation to protect his client, and on the morning after Sthenius had learned his fate, Cicero convened a meeting in his study to determine how best to respond. For the first time that I can remember, all his usual callers were turned away, and six of us crammed into that small space: Cicero, brother Quintus, cousin Lucius, Sthenius, myself (to take notes), and Servius Sulpicius, already widely regarded as the ablest jurist of his generation. Cicero began by inviting Servius to give his legal opinion.

'In theory,' said Servius, 'our friend has a right of appeal in Syracuse, but only to the governor, that is to Verres himself; so that avenue is closed to us. To bring a prosecution against Verres is not an option: as a serving governor he has executive immunity; besides, Hortensius is the praetor of the extortion court until January; and besides both of these, the jury will be composed of senators who will never convict one of their own. You could table another motion in the senate, but you have already tried that, and presumably if you tried again you would merely meet with the same result. Continuing to live openly in Rome is not an option for Sthenius – anyone convicted of a capital crime is automatically subject to banishment from the city, so it is impossible for him to remain here. Indeed,

Cicero, you are liable to prosecution yourself if you harbour him under your roof.'

'So what is your advice?'

'Suicide,' said Servius. Sthenius let out a terrible groan. 'No, really, I am afraid you should consider it. Before they catch hold of you. You do not want to suffer the scourge, the hot irons, or the torments of the cross.'

'Thank you, Servius,' said Cicero, cutting him off swiftly before he had an opportunity to describe those torments in further detail. 'Tiro, we need to find Sthenius a place where he can hide. He cannot stay here any longer. It is the first place they will look. As for the legal situation, Servius, your analysis strikes me as faultless. Verres is a brute, but a cunning brute, which is why he felt strong enough to press ahead with the conviction. In short, having thought about the matter overnight, it seems to me that there is only one slim possibility.'

'Which is?'

'To go to the tribunes.'

This suggestion produced an immediate stir of unease, for the tribunes were at that time an utterly discredited group. Traditionally, they had checked and balanced the power of the senate by voicing the will of the common people. But ten years earlier, after Sulla had defeated the forces of Marius, the aristocrats had stripped them of their powers. They could no longer summon meetings of the people, or propose legislation, or impeach the likes of Verres for high crimes and misdemeanours. As a final humiliation, any senator who became a tribune was automatically disqualified from standing for senior office, that is the praetorship or the consulship. In other words, the tribuneship was designed to be a political dead end – a place to confine the ranting and the rancorous, the incompetent and the unpromotable: the effluent of the body politic. No senator of any nobility or ambition would go anywhere near it.

'I know your objections,' said Cicero, waving the room to be silent. 'But the tribunes still have one small power left to them, do they not, Servius?'

'That is true,' agreed Servius. 'They do have a residual *potestas auxilii ferendi*.' Our blank looks gave him obvious satisfaction. 'It means,' he explained with a smile, 'that they have the right to offer their protection to private persons against the unjust decisions of magistrates. But I must warn you, Cicero, that your friends, among whom I have long counted it an honour to number myself, will think much the less of you if you start

dabbling in the politics of the mob. Suicide,' he repeated. 'Where is the objection? We are all mortal. For all of us it is only a matter of time. And this way you go with honour.'

'I agree with Servius about the danger we run if we approach the tribunes,' said Quintus. (It was usually 'we' when Quintus spoke about his elder brother.) 'Whether we like it or not, power in Rome nowadays lies with the senate and with the nobles. That's why our strategy has always been to build your reputation carefully, through your advocacy in the courts. We shall do ourselves irreparable damage with the men who really matter if the feeling gets around that you are merely another rabble-rouser. Also … I hesitate to raise this, Marcus, but have you considered Terentia's reaction if you were to follow this course?'

Servius guffawed at that. 'You will never conquer Rome, Cicero, if you cannot rule your wife.'

'Conquering Rome would be child's play, Servius, believe me, compared with ruling my wife.'

And so the debate went on. Lucius favoured an immediate approach to the tribunes, no matter what the consequences. Sthenius was too numb with misery and fear to have a coherent opinion on anything. At the very end, Cicero asked me what I thought. In other company this might have caused surprise, a slave's view not counting for much in most Romans' eyes, but these men were used to the way that Cicero sometimes turned to me for advice. I replied cautiously that it seemed to me that Hortensius would not be happy to learn of Verres's action, and that the prospect of the case becoming a public scandal might yet force him to put more pressure on his client to see sense: going to the tribunes was a risk, but on balance it was one worth taking. The answer pleased Cicero.

'Sometimes,' he said, summing up the discussion with an aphorism I have never forgotten, 'if you find yourself stuck in politics, the thing to do is start a fight – start a fight, even if you do not know how you are going to win it, because it is only when a fight is on, and everything is in motion, that you can hope to see your way through. Thank you, gentlemen.' And with that the meeting was adjourned.

There was no time to waste, for if the news from Syracuse had already reached Rome, it was a fair assumption that Verres's men were not

far behind. Even while Cicero was talking, I had conceived an idea for a possible hiding place for Sthenius, and the moment the conference was over I went in search of Terentia's business manager, Philotimus. He was a plump and lascivious young man, generally to be found in the kitchen, pestering the maids to satisfy one or other, or preferably both, of his vices. I asked him if there was a spare apartment available in one of his mistress's tenement blocks, and when he replied that there was, I bullied him into giving me the key. I checked the street outside the house for suspicious loiterers, and when I was sure that it was safe I persuaded Sthenius to follow me.

He was in a state of complete dejection, his dreams of returning to his homeland dashed, in hourly terror of being arrested. And I fear that when he first saw the squalid building in Subura in which I said he would now have to live, he must have felt that even we had abandoned him. The stairs were rickety and gloomy. There was evidence of a recent fire on the walls. His room, on the fifth floor, was barely more than a cell, with a straw mattress in the corner and a tiny window which offered no view, except across the street to another, similar apartment, close enough for Sthenius to reach out and shake hands with his neighbour. For a latrine he had a bucket. But if it did not offer him comfort, it at least offered him security – dropped, unknown, into this warren of slums, it would be almost impossible for him to be found. He asked me, in a plaintive tone, to sit with him a while, but I had to get back and gather all the documents relating to his case, so that Cicero could present them to the tribunes. We were fighting time, I told him, and left at once.

The headquarters of the tribunes were next door to the senate house, in the old Basilica Porcia. Although the tribunate was only a shell, from which all the succulent flesh of power had been sucked, people still hung around its building. The angry, the dispossessed, the hungry, the militant – these were the denizens of the tribunes' basilica. As Cicero and I walked across the forum, we could see a sizeable crowd jostling on its steps to get a view of what was happening inside. I was carrying a document case, but still I cleared a way for the senator as best I could, receiving some kicks and curses for my pains, as these were not citizens with any great love for a purple-bordered toga.

There were ten tribunes, elected annually by the people, and they always sat on the same long wooden bench, beneath a mural depicting the defeat

of the Carthaginians. It was not a large building, but packed, noisy and warm, despite the December cold outside. A young man, bizarrely barefoot, was haranguing the mob as we entered. He was an ugly, raw-faced youth with a brutal, grating voice. There were always plenty of cranks in the Basilica Porcia, and I took him at first to be just another, as his entire speech seemed to be devoted to arguing why one particular pillar should not, on any account, be demolished, or even moved one inch, to give the tribunes more room. And yet for some curious reason he compelled attention. Cicero began listening to him very carefully, and after a while he realised – from the constant references to 'my ancestor' – that this peculiar creature was none other than the great-grandson of the famous Marcus Porcius Cato who had originally built the basilica and given it his name.

I mention this here because young Cato – he was then twenty-three – was to become such an important figure, in both the life of Cicero and the death of the republic. Not that one would have guessed it at the time. He looked destined for nowhere more significant than the asylum. He finished his speech, and as he went by, wild-eyed and unseeing, he knocked into me. What remains in my mind is the animal stink of him, his hair matted with damp and the patches of sweat the size of dinner plates spreading under the armpits of his tunic. But he had won his point, and that pillar stayed absolutely in its place for as long as the building stood – which was not, alas, to be many years longer.

However, returning to my story, the tribunes were a poor lot on the whole, but there was one among them who stood out for his talent and his energy, and that was Lollius Palicanus. He was a proud man, but of low birth, from Picenum in the Italian north-east, the power base of Pompey the Great. It had been assumed that when Pompey returned from Spain he would use his influence to try to gain his fellow countryman a praetorship, and Cicero had been as surprised as everybody else earlier in the summer when Palicanus had suddenly announced his candidacy for the tribunate. But on this particular morning he looked happy enough with his lot. The fresh crop of tribunes always began their term of office on the tenth day of December, so he must have been very new in the job. 'Cicero!' he bellowed, the moment he saw us. 'I had been wondering when you would show up!'

He told us that he had already heard the news from Syracuse, and he wanted to talk about Verres. But he wanted to talk in private, for there

was more at stake, he said mysteriously, than the fate of one man. He proposed meeting us at his house on the Aventine Hill in an hour, to which Cicero agreed, whereupon he immediately ordered one of his attendants to guide us, saying he would follow separately.

It turned out to be a rough and unpretentious place, in keeping with the man, close to the Lavernan Gate, just outside the city wall. The thing I remember most clearly is the larger-than-lifesize bust of Pompey, posed in the headgear and armour of Alexander the Great, which dominated the atrium. 'Well,' said Cicero, after he had contemplated it for a while, 'I suppose it makes a change from the Three Graces.' This was exactly the sort of droll but inappropriate comment which used to get repeated around the town, and which invariably found its way back to its victim. Luckily, only I was present on this occasion, but I took the opportunity to pass on what the consul's clerk had said regarding his joke about Gellius mediating between the philosophers. Cicero pretended to be sheepish and promised to be more circumspect in future – he knew, he said, that people liked their statesmen to be dull – but naturally he soon forgot his resolution.

'That was a good speech you made the other week,' said Palicanus, the moment he arrived. 'You have the stuff in you, Cicero, you really have, if I may say so. But those blue-blooded bastards screwed you over, and now you are in the shit. So what exactly are you planning to do about it?' (This was more or less how he spoke – rough words in a rough accent – and the aristocrats used to have some sport with him over his elocution.)

I opened my case and handed the documents to Cicero, and he quickly laid out the situation regarding Sthenius. When he had finished he asked what chance there was of receiving any help from the tribunes.

'That depends,' said Palicanus, with a quick lick of his lips and a grin. 'Come and sit down and let us see what is to be done.'

He took us through into another room, small and completely overwhelmed by a huge wall painting of a laurelled Pompey, this time dressed as Jupiter, complete with lightning bolts shooting from his fingers.

'Do you like it?' asked Palicanus.

'It is remarkable,' said Cicero.

'Yes, it is,' he said, with some satisfaction. '*That* is art.'

I took a seat in the corner, beneath the Picenean deity, while Cicero, whose eye I dared not meet, settled himself at the opposite end of the couch to our host.

'What I am about to tell you, Cicero, is not to be repeated outside this house. Pompey the Great' – Palicanus nodded to the painting, in case we were in any doubt as to whom he meant – 'will soon be returning to Rome for the first time in six years. He will come with his army, so there can be no fancy double-dealing from our noble friends. He will seek the consulship. And he will get the consulship. And he will get it unopposed.'

He leaned forward eagerly, expecting shock or surprise, but Cicero received this sensational intelligence as coolly as if he were being told the weather.

'So in return for your helping me over Sthenius, I am to support you over Pompey?'

'You are a canny one, Cicero, you have the stuff in you. What do you think?'

Cicero rested his chin in his hand and gazed at Palicanus. 'Quintus Metellus will not be happy, for a start. You know the old poem – "In Rome Metelli are, 'tis fate,/Elected to the consulate." He has been scheduled since birth to have his turn next summer.'

'Has he indeed? Well he can kiss my backside. How many legions did Quintus Metellus have behind him, the last time you looked?'

'Crassus has legions,' Cicero pointed out. 'So has Lucullus.'

'Lucullus is too far away, and besides, he has his hands full. As for Crassus – well, it is true that Crassus hates Pompey's guts. But the thing about Crassus is that he is not a proper soldier. He is a businessman, and that type always cuts a deal.'

'And then there is the little matter of its being completely unconstitutional. You have to be forty-two at the time of the consular election, and Pompey is how old?'

'Just thirty-four.'

'Indeed. Almost a year younger than me. And a consul is also required to have been elected to the senate and to have served as praetor, neither of which Pompey has achieved. He has never made a political speech in his life. To put the matter simply, Palicanus, seldom has a man been less qualified for the post.'

Palicanus made a dismissive gesture. 'All that may be true, but let us face facts – Pompey has run whole countries for years, and done it with proconsular authority to boot. He *is* a consul, in all but name. Be realistic, Cicero. You cannot expect a man such as Pompey to come back to Rome

and start at the bottom, running for quaestor like some political hack. What would that do to his dignity?'

'I appreciate his feelings, but you asked my opinion, and I am giving it to you, and I tell you the aristocrats will not stand for it. All right, perhaps if he has ten thousand men outside the city they will have no choice but to let him become consul, but sooner or later his army will go home and then how will he— Ha!' Cicero suddenly threw back his head and started laughing. 'That is very clever.'

'You have seen it?' said Palicanus, with a grin.

'I have seen it.' Cicero nodded appreciatively. 'Very good.'

'Well, I am offering you the chance to be a part of it. And Pompey the Great does not forget his friends.'

At the time I had not the least idea of what they were talking about. Only when we were walking home afterwards did Cicero explain everything to me. Pompey was planning to seek the consulship on the platform of a full restoration of tribunician power. Hence Palicanus's surprising move in becoming a tribune. The strategy was not born of some altruistic desire on Pompey's part to give the Roman people greater liberty – although I suppose it is just possible he was occasionally pleased to lie in his bath in Spain and fancy himself a champion of citizens' rights – no: it was purely a matter of self-interest. Pompey, as a good general, saw that by advocating such a programme, he would trap the aristocrats in a pincer movement, between his soldiers encamped beyond the walls of Rome and the common people on the city's streets. Hortensius, Catulus, Metellus and the rest would have no choice but to concede both Pompey's consulship and the tribunes' restoration, or risk annihilation. And once they did, Pompey could send his army home, and if necessary rule by circumventing the senate and appealing directly to the people. He would be unassailable. It was, as Cicero described it to me, a brilliant stroke, and he had seen it in that flash of insight as he sat on Palicanus's couch.

'What exactly would be in it for me?' asked Cicero.

'A reprieve for your client.'

'And nothing else?'

'That would depend on how good you were. I cannot make specific promises. That will have to wait until Pompey himself gets back.'

'It is rather a weak offer, if I may say so, my dear Palicanus.'

'Well, you are in rather a weak position, if I may say so, my dear Cicero.'

Cicero stood. I could see he was put out. 'I can always walk away,' he said.

'And leave your client to die in agony on one of Verres's crosses?' Palicanus also stood. 'I doubt it, Cicero. I doubt you are that hard.' He took us out then, past Pompey as Jupiter, past Pompey as Alexander. 'I shall see you and your client at the basilica tomorrow morning,' he said, shaking hands with Cicero on the doorstep. 'After that you will be in our debt, and we shall be watching.' The door closed with a confident slam.

Cicero turned on his heel and stepped into the street. 'If that is the kind of art he puts on public display,' he said, 'what do you suppose he keeps in the latrine? And do not warn me to guard my tongue, Tiro, because I do not care who hears it.'

He walked on ahead of me through the city gate, his hands clasped behind his back, his head hunched forward, brooding. Of course, Palicanus was right. Cicero had no choice. He could not abandon his client. But I am sure he must have been weighing the political risks of moving beyond a simple appeal to the tribunes to a full-blooded campaign for their restoration. It would cost him the support of the moderates, such as Servius.

'Well,' he said with a wry smile, when we reached his house, 'I wanted to get into a fight, and it seems I have succeeded.'

He asked Eros, the steward, where Terentia was, and looked relieved when he learned she was still in her room. At least that saved him from having to tell her the news for a few more hours. We went into his study, and he had just started dictating to me his speech to the tribunes – 'Gentlemen, it is an honour to stand before you for the first time' – when we heard shouts and a thump from the entrance. Cicero, who always liked to think on his feet and was prowling around, ran out to find out what was happening. I hurried after him. Six rough-looking fellows were crowded in the vestibule, all wielding sticks. Eros was rolling on the ground, clutching his stomach, with blood pouring from a split lip. Another stranger, armed not with a stick but with an official-looking document, stepped up to Cicero and announced that he had the authority to search the house.

'The authority of whom?' Cicero was calm – calmer than I would have been in his shoes.

'Gaius Verres, pro-praetor of Sicily, issued this warrant in Syracuse on the first day of December.' He held it up before Cicero's face for an insultingly short time. 'I am searching for the traitor Sthenius.'

'You will not find him here.'

'I shall be the judge of that.'

'And who are you?'

'Timarchides, freedman of Verres, and I shall not be kept talking while he escapes. You,' he said, turning to the nearest of his men, 'secure the front. You two take the back. The rest of you come with me. We shall start with your study, Senator, if you have no objection.'

Very soon the house was filled with the sounds of the search – boots on marble tile and wooden board, the screams of the female slaves, harsh male voices, the occasional crash as something was knocked and broken. Timarchides worked his way through the study upending document cases, watched by Cicero from the door.

'He is hardly likely to be in one of those,' said Cicero. 'He is not a dwarf.'

Finding nothing in the study, they moved on up the stairs to the senator's spartan bedroom and dressing room. 'Be assured, Timarchides,' said Cicero, still keeping his cool, but obviously with greater difficulty as he watched his bed being overturned, 'that you and your master will be repaid for this, one hundredfold.'

'Your wife,' said Timarchides. 'Where does she sleep?'

'Ah,' said Cicero quietly. 'Now I really would not do that, if I were you.'

But Timarchides had his blood up. He had come a long way, was finding nothing, and Cicero's manner was chafing on his nerves. He ran along the passage, followed by three of his men, shouted, 'Sthenius! We know you're in there!' and threw open the door of Terentia's bedroom. The screech that followed and the sharp crack of her hand across the invader's face rang through the house. Then came such a volley of colourful abuse, delivered in such an imperious voice, and at such a volume, that Terentia's distant ancestor who had commanded the Roman line against Hannibal at Cannae a century and a half before must surely have sat bolt upright in his tomb. 'She fell on that wretched freedman,' Cicero used to say afterwards, 'like a tigress out of a tree. I almost felt sorry for the fellow.'

Timarchides must have realised his mission had failed and decided to cut his losses, for in short order he and his ruffians were retreating down the stairs, followed by Terentia, with little Tullia hiding behind her skirts and occasionally brandishing her tiny fists in imitation of her mother. We heard Timarchides calling to his men, heard a running of feet and the slam of the door, and after that the old house was silent except for the distant wailing of one of the maids.

'And this,' said Terentia, taking a deep breath and rounding on Cicero, her cheeks flushed, her narrow bosom rising and falling rapidly, '*this* is all because you spoke in the senate on behalf of that dreary Sicilian?'

'I am afraid it is, my darling,' he said sadly. 'They are determined to scare me off.'

'Well, you must not let them, Cicero.' She put her hands on either side of his head, gripped it tight – a gesture not at all of tenderness but of passion – and glared furiously into his eyes. 'You must *crush* them.'

The upshot was that the following morning, when we set out for the Basilica Porcia, Quintus was on one side of Cicero, Lucius was on the other, and behind him, magnificently turned out in the formal dress of a Roman matron and carried in a litter hired specially for the occasion, came Terentia. It was the first time she had ever troubled to see him speak, and I swear he was more nervous of appearing before her than he was of appearing before the tribunes. He had a big retinue of clients to back him up as he left the house, and we picked up more along the way, especially after we stopped off halfway down the Argiletum to retrieve Sthenius from his bolt-hole. A hundred or more of us must have surged across the forum and into the tribunes' hall. Timarchides followed at a distance with his gang, but there were far too many of us for him to risk an attack, and he knew that if he tried anything in the basilica itself he would be torn to bits.

The ten tribunes were on the bench. The hall was full. Palicanus rose and read the motion – *That in the opinion of this body the proclamation of banishment from Rome does not apply to Sthenius* – and Cicero stepped up to the tribunal, his face clenched white with nerves. Quite often he was sick before a major speech, as he had been on this occasion, pausing at the door to vomit into the gutter. The first part of his oration was more or less the same as the one he had given in the senate, except that now he could call his client to the front and gesture to him as need arose to stir the pity of the judges. And certainly a more perfect illustration of a dejected victim was never paraded before a Roman court than Sthenius on that day. But Cicero's peroration was entirely new, not at all like his normal forensic oratory, and marked a decisive shift in his political position. By the time he reached it, his nerves were gone and his delivery was on fire.

'There is an old saying, gentlemen, among the merchants in the Macellum, that a fish rots from the head down, and if there is something

rotten in Rome today – and who can doubt that there is? – I tell you plainly that it has started in the head. It has started at the top. It has started in the senate.' Loud cheers and stamping of feet. 'And there is only one thing to do with a stinking, rotten fish-head, those merchants will tell you, and that is to cut it off – cut it off and throw it out!' Renewed cheers. 'But it will need quite a knife to sever this head, for it is an aristocratic head, and we all know what they are like!' Laughter. 'It is a head swollen with the poison of corruption and bloated with pride and arrogance. And it will need a strong hand to wield that knife, and it will need a steady nerve besides, because they have necks of brass, these aristocrats, I tell you: brass necks, all of them!' Laughter. 'But that man will come. He is not far away. Your powers will be restored, I promise you, however hard the struggle.' A few brighter sparks started shouting out Pompey's name. Cicero held up his hand, three fingers outstretched. 'To you now falls the great test of being worthy of this fight. Show courage, gentlemen. Make a start today. Strike a blow against tyranny. Free my client. And then free Rome!'

Later, Cicero was so embarrassed by the rabble-rousing nature of this speech that he asked me to destroy the only copy, so I must confess I am writing here from memory. But I recollect it very clearly – the force of his words, the passion of his delivery, the excitement of the crowd as he whipped them up, the wink he exchanged with Palicanus as he left the tribunal, and Terentia not moving a muscle, simply staring straight ahead as the common people around her erupted in applause. Timarchides, who had been standing at the back, slipped out before the ovation ended, no doubt to ride at full gallop to Sicily and report to his master what had happened – for the motion, I need hardly add, was passed by ten votes to nil, and Sthenius, as long as he stayed in Rome, was safe.

IV

Another of Cicero's maxims was that if you must do something unpopular, you might as well do it wholeheartedly, for in politics there is no credit to be won by timidity. Thus, although he had never previously expressed an opinion about Pompey or the tribunes, neither cause now had a more devoted adherent. And the Pompeians were naturally delighted to welcome such a brilliant recruit to their ranks.

That winter was long and cold in the city, and for no one, I suspect, more than Terentia. Her personal code of honour required her to support her husband against the enemies who had invaded her home. But having sat among the smelly poor, and listened to Cicero haranguing her own class, she now found her drawing room and dining room invaded at all hours by his new political cronies: men from the uncouth north who spoke with ugly accents and who liked to put their feet up on her furniture and plot late into the night. Palicanus was the chief of these, and on his second visit to the house in January he brought with him one of the new praetors, Lucius Afranius, a fellow senator from Pompey's homeland of Picenum. Cicero went out of his way to be charming, and in earlier years, Terentia, too, would have felt it an honour to have a praetor in her house. But Afranius had no decent family or breeding of any sort. He actually had the nerve to ask her if she liked dancing, and, when she drew back in horror, declared that personally he loved nothing more. He pulled up his toga, showed her his legs and demanded to know if she had ever seen a finer pair of calves.

These men were Pompey's representatives in Rome and they brought with them something of the whiff and manners of the army camp. They were blunt to the point of brutality; but then, perhaps, they had to be, given what they were planning. Palicanus's daughter, Lollia – a blowsy young piece, very much not to Terentia's taste – occasionally joined the

menfolk, for she was married to Aulus Gabinius, another of Pompey's Picenean lieutenants, currently serving with the general in Spain. This Gabinius was a link with the legionary commanders, who in turn provided intelligence on the loyalty of the centuries – an important consideration, for, as Afranius put it, there was no point in bringing the army all the way to Rome to restore the powers of the tribunes, only to find that the legions would happily go over to the aristocrats if they were offered a big enough bribe.

At the end of January, Gabinius sent word that the final rebel strongholds of Uxama and Calagurris had been taken, and that Pompey was ready to march his legions home. Cicero had been active among the *pedarii* for weeks, drawing senators aside as they waited for debates, convincing them that the rebel slaves in the Italian north posed a gathering threat to their businesses and trade. He lobbied well. When the issue came up for discussion in the senate, despite the intense opposition of the aristocrats and the supporters of Crassus, the house voted narrowly to let Pompey keep his Spanish army intact and bring it back to the mother country to crush Spartacus's northern recruits. From that point on, the consulship was as good as his, and on the day the motion passed, Cicero came home smiling. True, he had been snubbed by the aristocrats, who now loathed him more than any other man in Rome, and the presiding consul, the super-snobbish Publius Cornelius Lentulus Sura, had even refused to recognise him when he tried to speak. But what did that matter? He was in the inner circle of Pompey the Great, and, as every fool knows, the quickest way to get ahead in politics is to get yourself close to the man at the top.

Throughout these busy months, I am ashamed to say, we neglected Sthenius of Thermae. He would often turn up in the mornings, and hang around the senator for the entire day in the hope of securing an interview. He was still living in Terentia's squalid tenement block. He had little money. He was unable to venture beyond the walls of the city, as his immunity ended at the boundaries of Rome. He had not shaved his beard nor cut his hair, nor, by the smell of him, changed his clothes since October. He reeked – not of madness exactly, but of obsession, forever producing small pieces of paper, which he would fumble and drop in the street.

Cicero kept making excuses not to see him. Doubtless he felt he had discharged his obligations already. But that was not the sole explanation. The truth is that politics is a country idiot, capable of concentrating only

on one thing at a time, and poor Sthenius had become yesterday's topic. All anyone could talk about now was the coming confrontation between Crassus and Pompey; the plight of the Sicilian was a bore.

In the late spring, Crassus – having finally defeated the main force of Spartacus's rebels in the heel of Italy, killing Spartacus and taking six thousand prisoners – had started marching towards Rome. Very soon afterwards, Pompey crossed the Alps and wiped out the slave rebellion in the north. He sent a letter to the consuls which was read out in the senate, giving only the faintest credit to Crassus for his achievement and instead proclaiming that it was really he who had finished off the slave war 'utterly and entirely'. The signal to his supporters could not have been clearer: only one general would be triumphing that year, and it would not be Marcus Crassus. Finally, lest there be any remaining doubt, at the end of his dispatch Pompey announced that he too was moving on Rome. Little wonder that amid these stirring historical events, Sthenius was forgotten.

Sometime in May, it must have been, or possibly early June – I cannot find the exact date – a messenger arrived at Cicero's house bearing a letter. With some reluctance the man let me take it, but refused to leave the premises until he had received a reply: those, he said, were his orders. Although he was wearing civilian clothes, I could tell he was in the army. I carried the message into the study and watched Cicero's expression darken as he read it. He handed it to me, and when I saw the opening – *From Marcus Licinius Crassus, Imperator, to Marcus Tullius Cicero: Greetings* – I understood the reason for his frown. Not that there was anything threatening in the letter. It was simply an invitation to meet the victorious general the next morning on the road to Rome, close to the town of Lanuvium, at the eighteenth milestone.

'Can I refuse?' asked Cicero, but then he answered his own question. 'No, I can't. That would be interpreted as a mortal insult.'

'Presumably he is going to ask for your support.'

'Really?' said Cicero sarcastically. 'What makes you think that?'

'Could you not offer him some limited encouragement, as long as it does not clash with your undertakings to Pompey?'

'No. That is the trouble. Pompey has made that very clear. He expects absolute loyalty. So Crassus will pose the question: "Are you for me or against me?" and then I shall face the politician's worst nightmare: the

requirement to give a straight answer.' He sighed. 'But we shall have to go, of course.'

We left soon after dawn the following morning, in a two-wheeled open carriage, with Cicero's valet doubling up as coachman for the occasion. It was the most perfect time of day at the most perfect time of year, already hot enough for people to be bathing in the public pool beside the Capena Gate, but cool enough for the air to be refreshing. There was none of the usual dust thrown up from the road. The leaves of the olive trees were a glossy fresh green. Even the tombs that line the Appian Way so thickly along that particular stretch just beyond the wall gleamed bright and cheerful in the first hour of the sun. Normally, Cicero liked to draw my attention to some particular monument and give me a lecture on it – the statue of Scipio Africanus, perhaps, or the tomb of Horatia, murdered by her brother for displaying excessive grief at the death of her lover. But on this morning his usual good spirits had deserted him. He was too preoccupied with Crassus.

'Half of Rome belongs to him – these tombs as well, I should not wonder. You could house an entire family in one of these! Why not? Crassus would! Have you ever seen him in operation? Let us say he hears there is a fire raging and spreading through a particular neighbourhood: he sends a team of slaves round all the apartments, offering to buy out the owners for next to nothing. When the poor fellows have agreed, he sends another team equipped with water-carts to put the fires out! That is just one of his tricks. Do you know what Sicinnius calls him – always bearing in mind, by the way, that Sicinnius is afraid of no one? He calls Crassus "the most dangerous bull in the herd".'

His chin sank on to his chest and that was all he said until we had passed the eighth milestone and were deep into open country, not far from Bovillae. That was when he drew my attention to something odd: military pickets guarding what looked like small timber yards. We had already passed four or five, spaced out at regular half-mile intervals, and the further down the road we went, the greater the activity seemed – hammering, sawing, digging. It was Cicero who eventually supplied the answer. The legionaries were making crosses. Soon afterwards, we encountered a column of Crassus's infantry tramping towards us, heading for Rome, and we had to pull over to the far side of the road to let them pass. Behind the legionaries came a long, stumbling procession of prisoners, hundreds of them, vanquished rebel slaves, their arms pinioned behind their backs

– a terrible, emaciated, grey army of ghosts, heading for a fate which we had seen being prepared for them, but of which they were presumably ignorant. Our driver muttered a spell to ward off evil, flicked his whip over the flanks of the horses and we jolted forwards. A mile or so later, the killing started, in little huddles off on either side of the road, where the prisoners were being nailed to the crosses. I try not to remember it, but it comes back to me occasionally in my dreams, especially, for some reason, the crosses with their impaled and shrieking victims being pulled upright by soldiers heaving on ropes, each wooden upright dropping with a thud into the deep hole that had been dug for it. That I remember, and also the moment when we passed over the crest of a hill and saw a long avenue of crosses running straight ahead for mile after mile, shimmering in the mid-morning heat, the air seeming to tremble with the moans of the dying, the buzz of the flies and the screams of the circling crows.

'So this is why he dragged me out of Rome,' muttered Cicero furiously, 'to intimidate me by showing me these poor wretches.' He had gone very white, for he was squeamish about pain and death, even when inflicted on animals, and for that reason tried to avoid attending the games. I suppose this also explains his aversion to all matters military. He had done the bare minimum of army service in his youth, and was quite incapable of wielding a sword or hurling a javelin; throughout his career he had to put up with the taunt that he was a draft-dodger.

At the eighteenth milestone, surrounded by a ditch and ramparts, we found the bulk of Crassus's legions encamped beside the road, giving off that dusty smell of sweat and leather which always lingers over an army in the field. Standards fluttered over the gate, beside which Crassus's own son, Publius, then a brisk young junior officer, was waiting to conduct Cicero to the general's tent. A couple of other senators were being shown out as we arrived, and suddenly there was Crassus himself at the entrance, instantly recognisable – 'Old Baldhead', as his soldiers called him – wearing the scarlet cloak of a commander, despite the heat. He was all affability, waving goodbye to his previous visitors, wishing them a safe journey, and greeting us equally heartily – even me, whose hand he shook as warmly as if I were a senator myself, rather than a slave who might in other circumstances have been howling from one of his crosses. And looking back on it, and trying to fix precisely what it was about him which made him so disconcerting, I think it was this: his indiscriminate and detached

friendliness, which you knew would never waver or diminish even if he had just decided to have you killed. Cicero had told me he was worth at least two hundred million, but Crassus talked as easily to any man as a farmer leaning on a gate, and his army tent – like his house in Rome – was modest and unadorned.

He led us inside – me as well: he insisted – apologising for the gruesome spectacle along the Appian Way, but he felt it was necessary. He seemed particularly proud of the logistics which had enabled him to crucify six thousand men along three hundred and fifty miles of road, from the victorious battlefield to the gates of Rome, without, as he put it, 'any scenes of violence'. That was seventeen crucifixions to the mile, which meant one hundred and seventeen paces between each cross – he had a wonderful head for figures – and the trick was not to cause a panic among the prisoners, or else one would have had another battle on one's hands. So, after every mile – or sometimes two or three, varying it to avoid arousing suspicion – the requisite number of recaptured slaves would be halted by the roadside as the rest of the column marched on, and not until their comrades were out of sight did the executions begin. In this way the job had been done with the minimum amount of disruption for the maximum deterrent effect – the Appian Way being the busiest road in Italy.

'I doubt whether many slaves, once they hear of this, will rise against Rome in the future,' smiled Crassus. 'Would you, for example?' he said to me, and when I replied very fervently that I most certainly would not, he pinched my cheek and ruffled my hair. The touch of his hand made my flesh shrivel. 'Is he for sale?' he asked Cicero. 'I like him. I'd give you a good price for him. Let us see …' He named an amount that was at least ten times what I was worth, and for a terrible moment I thought the offer might be accepted and I would lose my place in Cicero's life – a banishment I could not have borne.

'He is not for sale, at any price,' said Cicero. The journey had upset him; there was a hoarseness to his voice. 'And to avoid any misunderstanding, Imperator, I believe I should tell you right away that I have pledged my support to Pompey the Great.'

'Pompey the who?' mocked Crassus. 'Pompey the *Great*? As great as what?'

'I would rather not say,' replied Cicero. 'Comparisons can be odious.' At which remark even Crassus, for all his ironclad bonhomie, drew back his head a little.

There are certain politicians who cannot stand to be in the same room as one another, even if mutual self-interest dictates that they should try to get along, and it quickly became apparent to me that Cicero and Crassus were two such men. This is what the Stoics fail to grasp when they assert that reason rather than emotion should play the dominant part in human affairs. I am afraid the reverse is true, and always will be, even – perhaps especially – in the supposedly calculating world of politics. And if reason cannot rule in politics, what hope is there for it in any other sphere? Crassus had summoned Cicero in order to seek his friendship. Cicero had come determined to keep Crassus's goodwill. Yet neither man could quite conceal his distaste for the other, and the meeting was a disaster.

'Let us get to the point, shall we?' said Crassus, after he had invited Cicero to sit down. He took off his cloak and handed it to his son, then settled on the couch. 'There are two things I would like to ask of you, Cicero. One is your support for my candidacy for the consulship. I am forty-four, so I am more than old enough, and I believe this ought to be my year. The other is a triumph. For both I am willing to pay whatever is your current market rate. Normally, as you know, I insist on an exclusive contract, but, given your prior commitments, I suppose I shall have to settle for half of you. Half of Cicero,' he added with a slight bow of his head, 'being worth twice as much as the entirety of most men.'

'That is flattering, Imperator,' responded Cicero, bridling at the implication. 'Thank you. My slave cannot be bought, but I can, is that it? Perhaps you will allow me to think about it.'

'What is there to think about? Every citizen has two votes for the consulship. Give one to me and one to whomever else you please. Just make sure your friends all follow your example. Tell them Crassus never forgets those who oblige him. Or those who disoblige him, for that matter.'

'I would still have to think about it, I am afraid.'

Some shadow moved across Crassus's friendly face, like a pike in clear water. 'And my triumph?'

'Personally, I absolutely believe you have earned the honour. But, as you know, to qualify for a triumph it is necessary for the military action concerned to have extended the dominion of the state. The senate has consulted the precedents. Apparently, it is not enough merely to regain territory that has been lost previously. For example, when Fulvius won

back Capua after its defection to Hannibal, he was not allowed a triumph.' Cicero explained all this with what seemed genuine regret.

'But this is a technicality, surely? If Pompey can be a consul without meeting any of the necessary requirements, why cannot I at least have a triumph? I know you are unfamiliar with the difficulties of military command, or even,' he added sinuously, 'with military service, but surely you would agree that I have met all the other requirements – killed five thousand in battle, fought under the auspices, been saluted imperator by the legions, brought peace to the province, withdrawn my troops? If someone of influence such as yourself were to put down a motion in the senate, he would find me very generous.'

There was a long pause, and I wondered how Cicero would escape from his dilemma.

'*There* is your triumph, Imperator!' he said suddenly, pointing in the direction of the Appian Way. '*That* is the monument to the kind of man you are! For as long as Romans have tongues to speak, they will remember the name of Crassus as the man who crucified six thousand slaves over three hundred and fifty miles, with one hundred and seventeen paces between the crosses. None of our other great generals would ever have done such a thing. Scipio Africanus, Pompey, Lucullus …' He flicked them away with contempt. 'None of them would even have *thought* of it.'

Cicero sat back and smiled at Crassus; Crassus smiled in return. Time went on. I felt myself begin to sweat. It became a contest to see whose smile would crack first. Eventually, Crassus stood and held out his hand to Cicero. 'Thank you so much for coming, my young friend,' he said.

When the senate met a few days later to determine honours, Cicero voted with the majority to deny Crassus a triumph. The vanquisher of Spartacus had to settle for an ovation, an altogether second-class award. Rather than entering the city riding on a chariot drawn by four horses, he would have to walk in; the customary fanfare of trumpets would be replaced by the trilling of flutes; and instead of the usual wreath of laurel he would only be permitted to wear myrtle. 'If the man has any sense of honour,' said Cicero, 'he will turn it down.' I need hardly add that Crassus quickly sent word of his acceptance.

Once the discussion moved on to honours for Pompey, Afranius pulled a clever trick. He used his praetorian rank to rise early in the debate and declare that Pompey would accept with humble gratitude whatever the house chose to grant him: he would be arriving outside the city with ten thousand men the following day, and hoped to thank as many of the senators in person as possible. *Ten thousand men?* After that, even the aristocrats were unwilling publicly to snub the conqueror of Spain, and the consuls were instructed by a unanimous vote to attend on Pompey at his earliest convenience and offer him a full triumph.

The next morning Cicero dressed with even more care than usual and consulted with Quintus and Lucius as to what line he should take in his discussions with Pompey. He decided on a bold approach. The following year he would be thirty-six, just eligible to stand for an aedileship of Rome, four of which were elected annually. The functions of the office – the maintenance of public buildings and public order, the celebration of various festivals, the issuing of trading licences, distribution of grain and so on – were a useful means of consolidating political support. That was what he would ask for, it was agreed: Pompey's backing for an aedileship. 'I believe I have earned it,' said Cicero.

After that was settled, we joined the throngs of citizens heading west towards the Field of Mars, where it was rumoured that Pompey intended to halt his legions. (It was, at least in those days, illegal to possess military *imperium* within the sacred boundaries of Rome; thus both Crassus and Pompey were obliged, if they wanted to keep command of their armies, to do their scheming from beyond the city's walls.) There was intense interest in seeing what the great man looked like, for the Roman Alexander, as Pompey's followers called him, had been away fighting for nearly seven years. Some wondered how much he might have changed; others – of whom I was one – had never set eyes on him at all. Cicero had already heard from Palicanus that Pompey intended to set up his headquarters in the Villa Publica, the government guest house next to the voting enclosures, and that was where we made for – Cicero, Quintus, Lucius and I.

The place was encircled with a double cordon of soldiers, and by the time we had fought our way through the crowds to the perimeter wall, no one was being allowed into the grounds unless they had authorisation. Cicero was most offended that none of the guards had even heard of him, and we were lucky that Palicanus was at that moment passing close to

the gate: he was able to fetch his son-in-law, the legionary commander Gabinius, to vouch for us. Once we were inside we found that half of official Rome was already there, strolling around the shaded colonnades, humming with curiosity at being this close to power.

'Pompey the Great arrived in the middle of the night,' Palicanus informed us, adding grandly: 'The consuls are with him now.' He promised to return with more information as soon as he had any, then disappeared, self-importantly, between the sentries into the house.

Several hours passed, during which there was no further sign of Palicanus. Instead we noted the messengers rushing in and out, hungrily witnessed food being delivered, saw the consuls leave, and then watched Catulus and Isauricus, the elder statesmen, arrive. Waiting senators, knowing Cicero to be a fervent partisan of Pompey and believing him to be in his inner counsels, kept coming up to him and asking what was really happening. 'All in good time,' he would reply, 'all in good time.' Eventually I guess he must have found this formula embarrassing, for he sent me off to find him a stool, and when I returned, he set it against a pillar, leaned back and closed his eyes. Towards the middle of the afternoon, Hortensius arrived, squeezing his way through the curious onlookers held back by the soldiers, and was admitted immediately into the villa. When he was followed soon afterwards by the three Metellus brothers, it was impossible even for Cicero to pretend this was anything other than a humiliation. Brother Quintus was dispatched to see if he could pick up any gossip outside the senate house, while Cicero paced up and down the colonnades and ordered me for the twentieth time to try to find Palicanus or Afranius or Gabinius – anyone who could get him in to that meeting.

I hung around the crowded entrance, rising on tiptoe, trying to see over all the jostling heads. A messenger came out and briefly left the door half open, and for a moment I glimpsed white-robed figures, laughing and talking, standing around a heavy marble table with documents spread across it. But then I was distracted by a commotion from the street. With shouts of 'Hail Imperator!' and much cheering and yelling, the gate was swung open and, flanked by bodyguards, in stepped Crassus. He took off his plumed helmet and handed it to one of his lictors, wiped his forehead and looked around him. His gaze fell upon Cicero. He gave him a slight nod of the head accompanied by another of his plain man's smiles, and that was one of the few occasions, I should say, when Cicero was entirely

lost for words. Then Crassus swept his scarlet cloak around him – rather magnificently, it must be admitted – and marched into the Villa Publica, while Cicero plonked down heavily on his stool.

I have frequently observed this curious aspect of power: that it is often when one is physically closest to its source that one is least well informed as to what is actually going on. For example, I have seen senators obliged to step out of the senate chamber and dispatch their slaves to the vegetable market to find out what was happening in the city they were supposedly running. Or I have known of generals, surrounded by legates and ambassadors, who have been reduced to intercepting passing shepherds to discover the latest events on the battlefield. So it was that afternoon with Cicero, who sat within twenty feet of the room in which Rome was being carved up like a cooked chicken, but who had to hear the news of what had been decided from Quintus, who had picked it up from a magistrate in the forum, who had heard it from a senate clerk.

'It's bad,' said Quintus, although one could already tell that from his face. 'Pompey for consul and the rights of the tribunes restored, and with no opposition to be offered by the aristocrats. But in return – listen to this – *in return*, Hortensius and Quintus Metellus are to be consuls in the following year, with the full support of Pompey, while Lucius Metellus is to replace Verres as governor of Sicily. Finally, Crassus – *Crassus!* – is to rule with Pompey as joint consul, with both their armies to be dissolved on the day they take office.'

'But I should have been in there,' said Cicero, staring with dismay at the villa. *'I should have been in there!'*

'Marcus,' said his brother sadly, putting his hand on his shoulder, 'none of them would have you.'

Cicero looked stunned at the scale of this reversal – himself excluded, his enemies rewarded, Crassus elevated to the consulship – but then he shook his shoulder free and made angrily towards the doors. And perhaps his career might have been ended there by the sword of one of Pompey's sentries, for I believe, in his desperation, Cicero had resolved to force his way through to the negotiating table and demand his share. But it was too late. The big men, their deal struck, were already coming out, their aides scampering ahead of them, their guards stamping to attention as they passed. Crassus emerged first, and then, from the shadows, Pompey, his identity obvious at once not only from the aura of power around him

– the way the proximate air seemed almost to crackle as he moved – but from the cast of his features. He had a broad face, wide cheekbones, and thick wavy hair that rose in a quiff, like the prow of a ship. It was a face full of weight and command, and he possessed the body to go with it, wide shoulders and a strong chest – the torso of a wrestler. I could see why, when he was younger, and famed for his ruthlessness, he had been called the Butcher Boy.

And so off they went, Baldhead and the Butcher Boy, noticeably neither talking nor even looking at one another, heading towards the gate, which swung open as they approached. A stampede of senators, seeing what was happening, set off in pursuit, and we were swept along in the rush, borne out of the Villa Publica and into what felt like a solid wall of noise and heat. Twenty thousand people must have gathered on the Field of Mars that afternoon, all bellowing their approval. A narrow avenue had been cleared by the soldiers, straining arms chain-linked at the elbows, feet scrabbling in the dust to hold back the crowd. It was just wide enough for Pompey and Crassus to walk abreast, although what their expressions were and whether they had started talking I could not see, as we were far back in the procession. They made slow progress towards the tribunal, where the officials traditionally stand at election time. Pompey heaved himself up first, to a renewed surge of applause, which he basked in for a while, turning his wide and beaming face this way and that, like a cat in sunshine. Then he reached down and hauled Crassus up after him. At this demonstration of unity between the two notorious rivals, the crowd let out another roar, and it came again and even louder when Pompey seized hold of Crassus's hand and raised it above his head.

'What a sickening spectacle,' said Cicero. He had to shout into my ear to make himself heard. 'The consulship demanded and conceded at the point of the sword. We are witnessing the beginning of the end of the republic, Tiro, remember my words!' I could not help reflecting, however, that if *he* had been in that conference, and had helped engineer this joint ticket, he would now be hailing it as a masterpiece of statecraft.

Pompey waved at the crowd for quiet, then began speaking in his parade-ground voice. 'People of Rome! The leaders of the senate have graciously conveyed to me the offer of a triumph, and I am pleased to accept it. They have also told me that I will be allowed to stand as a candidate for the consulship, and I am pleased to accept that as well. The

only thing that pleases me more is that my old friend Marcus Licinius Crassus will be my colleague.' He concluded by promising that the following year he would hold a great festival of games, dedicated to Hercules, in honour of his victories in Spain.

Well, these were fine words, no doubt, but he spoke them all too quickly, forgetting to leave the necessary pause after every sentence, which meant that those few who had managed to hear what he said had no opportunity to repeat it to those behind who had not. I doubt if more than a few hundred out of that vast assembly knew what he was saying, but they cheered in any case, and they cheered even more when Crassus immediately, and cunningly, upstaged him.

'I hereby dedicate,' he said, in the booming voice of a trained orator, 'at the same time as Pompey's games – on the same day as Pompey's games – one tenth of my fortune – one tenth of my *entire* fortune – to providing free food to the people of Rome – free food for every one of you, for *three months* – and a great banquet in the streets – a banquet for every citizen – a banquet in honour of Hercules!'

The crowd went into fresh ecstasies. 'The villain,' said Cicero admiringly. 'A tenth of his fortune is a bribe of twenty million! But cheap at the price. See how he turns a weak position into a strong one? I bet you were not expecting *that*,' he called out to Palicanus, who was struggling towards us from the tribunal. 'He has made himself look Pompey's equal. You should never have allowed him a platform.'

'Come and meet the imperator,' urged Palicanus. 'He wants to thank you in person.' I could see Cicero was in two minds, but Palicanus was insistent, tugging at his sleeve, and I suppose he thought he ought to try to salvage something from the day.

'Is he going to make a speech?' shouted Cicero, as we followed Palicanus towards the tribunal.

'He doesn't really make speeches,' replied Palicanus over his shoulder. 'Not yet, anyway.'

'That is a mistake. They will expect him to say something.'

'Well, they will just have to be disappointed, won't they?'

'What a waste,' Cicero muttered to me in disgust. 'What I would not give to have an audience such as this! How often do you see so many voters in one place?' But Pompey had little experience of public oratory, and besides, he was accustomed to commanding men, not pandering to

them. With a final wave to the crowd, he clambered down from the platform. Crassus followed suit and the applause slowly died away. There was a palpable sense of anticlimax, as people stood around wondering what they should do next. 'What a waste,' repeated Cicero. '*I* would have given them a show.'

Behind the tribunal was a small enclosed area, where it was the custom for the magistrates to wait before going up to officiate on election-day. Palicanus conducted us into it, past the guards, and here, a moment or two later, Pompey himself appeared. A young black slave handed him a cloth and he began dabbing at his sweating face and wiping the back of his neck. A dozen senators waited to greet him and Palicanus thrust Cicero into the middle of the line, then drew back with Quintus, Lucius and myself to watch. Pompey was moving down the queue, shaking hands with each of the senators in turn, Afranius at his back to tell him who was who. 'Good to meet you,' said Pompey. 'Good to meet you. Good to meet you.' As he came closer I had a better opportunity to study him. He had a noble face, no question of it, but there was also a disagreeable vanity in those fleshy features, and his grand, distracted manner only emphasised his obvious boredom at meeting all these tedious civilians. He reached Cicero very quickly.

'This is Marcus Cicero, Imperator,' said Afranius.

'Good to meet you.'

He was about to move on, but Afranius took his elbow and whispered, 'Cicero is considered one of the city's foremost advocates, and was very useful to us in the senate.'

'Was he? Well, then – keep up the good work.'

'I shall,' said Cicero quickly, 'for I hope next year to be aedile.'

'Aedile?' Pompey scoffed at the very idea. 'No, no, I do not think so. I have other plans in that direction. But I'm sure we can always find a use for a clever lawyer.'

And with that he really did move on – 'Good to meet you … Good to meet you …' – leaving Cicero staring straight ahead and swallowing hard.

V

That night, for the first and last time in all my years in his service, Cicero drank too much. I could hear him arguing over dinner with Terentia – not one of their normal, witty, icily courteous disputes, but a row which echoed throughout the small house, as she berated him for his stupidity in ever trusting such an obviously dishonourable gang: Piceneans, all of them, not even proper Romans! 'But then of course, you are not a proper Roman either' – a dig at Cicero's lowly provincial origins which invariably got under his skin. Ominously, I did not hear what he said back to her – it was delivered in such a quiet, malevolent tone – but whatever it was, it must have been devastating, for Terentia, who was not a woman easily shaken, ran from the dining room in tears and disappeared upstairs.

I thought it best to leave him well alone. But an hour later I heard a crash, and when I went in Cicero was on his feet and swaying slightly, staring at a broken plate. The front of his tunic was stained with wine. 'I really do not feel well,' he said.

I got him up to his room by hooking his arm over my shoulder – not an easy procedure, as he was heavier than I – laid him on his bed, and unlaced his shoes. 'Divorce,' he muttered into his pillow, 'that is the answer, Tiro – divorce, and if I have to leave the senate because I can't afford it – well, so what? Nobody would miss me. Just another "new man" who came to nothing. Oh dear, Tiro!' I managed to get his chamber pot in front of him just before he was sick. Head down, he addressed his own vomit. 'We shall go to Athens, my dear fellow, and live with Atticus and study philosophy and no one here will miss us …' these last few words all running together into a long, self-pitying burble of slurred syllables and sibilant consonants which no shorthand symbol of mine could ever have reconstructed. I set the pot beside him, blew out the lamp and he was

snoring even before I reached the door. I confess I went to bed that night with a troubled heart.

And yet, the next morning, I was woken at exactly the usual pre-dawn hour by the sound of him going through his exercises – a little more slowly than usual, perhaps, but then it was awfully early, for this was the height of summer, and he can hardly have had more than a few hours' sleep. Such was the nature of the man. Failure was the fuel of his ambition. Each time he suffered a humiliation – be it as an advocate in his early days when his constitution failed him, or on his return from Sicily, or now, with Pompey's offhand treatment – the fire in him was temporarily banked, but only that it might flare up again even more fiercely. 'It is perseverance,' he used to say, 'and not genius that takes a man to the top. Rome is full of unrecognised geniuses. Only perseverance enables you to move forward in the world.' And so I heard him preparing for another day of struggle in the Roman forum and felt the old, familiar rhythm of the house reassert itself.

I dressed. I lit the lamps. I told the porter to open the front door. I checked the callers. Then I went into Cicero's study and gave him his list of clients. No mention was ever made, either then or in the future, of what had happened the previous night, and I suspect this helped draw us even closer. To be sure, he looked a little green, and he had to screw up his eyes to focus on the names, but otherwise he was entirely normal. 'Sthenius!' he groaned, when he saw who was waiting, as usual, in the tablinum. 'May the gods have mercy upon us!'

'He is not alone,' I warned him. 'He has brought two more Sicilians with him.'

'You mean to say he is multiplying?' He coughed to clear his throat. 'Right. Let us have him in first and get rid of him once and for all.'

As in some curious recurring dream from which one cannot wake, I found myself yet again conducting Sthenius of Thermae into Cicero's presence. His companions he introduced as Heraclius of Syracuse and Epicrates of Bidis. Both were old men, dressed like him in the dark garb of mourning, with uncut hair and beards.

'Now listen, Sthenius,' said Cicero sternly, after he had shaken hands with the grim-looking trio, 'this has got to stop.'

But Sthenius was in that strange and remote private kingdom into which outside sounds seldom penetrate: the land of the obsessive litigant. 'I am most grateful to you, Senator. Firstly, now that I have obtained the

court records from Syracuse,' he said, pulling a piece of paper from his leather bag and thrusting it into Cicero's hands, 'you can see what the monster has done. This is what was written before the verdict of the tribunes. And this,' he said, giving him another, 'is what was written afterwards.'

With a sigh, Cicero held the two documents side by side and squinted at them. 'So what is this? This is the official record of your trial for treason, in which I see it is written that you were present during the hearing. Well, we know that is nonsense. And here …' his words began to slow as he realised the implications, 'here it says that you were *not* present.' He looked up, his bleary eyes starting to clear. 'So Verres is falsifying the proceedings of his own court, and then he is falsifying his own falsification?'

'Exactly!' cried Sthenius. 'When he realised you had produced me before the tribunes, and that all of Rome knew I could hardly have been in Syracuse on the first day of December, he had to obliterate the record of his lie. But the first document was already on its way to me.'

'Well, well,' said Cicero, continuing to scrutinise the paper, 'perhaps he is more worried than we thought. And I see it also says here that you had a defence attorney representing you that day: "Gaius Claudius, son of Gaius Claudius, of the Palatine tribe." You are a fortunate man, to have your very own Roman lawyer. Who is he?'

'He is Verres's business manager.'

Cicero studied Sthenius for a moment or two. 'What else do you have in that bag of yours?' he said.

Out it all came then, tipped over the study floor on that hot summer's morning: letters, names, scraps of official records, scribbled notes of gossip and rumours – seven months' angry labour by three desperate men, for it transpired that Heraclius and Epicrates had also been swindled out of their estates by Verres, one worth sixty thousand, the other thirty. In both cases, Verres had abused his office to bring false accusations and secure illegal verdicts. Both had been robbed at around the same time as Sthenius. Both had been, until then, the leading men in their communities. Both had been obliged to flee the island penniless and seek refuge in Rome. Hearing of Sthenius's appearance before the tribunes, they had sought him out and proposed cooperation.

'As single victims, they were weak,' said Cicero, years later, reminiscing about the case, 'but when they joined in common cause, they found they

had a network of contacts which spread across the entire island: Thermae in the north, Bidis in the south, Syracuse in the east. These were men sagacious by nature, shrewd by experience, accomplished by education, and their fellow countrymen had opened up the secrets of their suffering to them, as they would never have done to a Roman senator.'

Outwardly, Cicero still seemed the calm advocate. But as the sun grew stronger and I blew out the lamps, and as he picked up one document after another, I could sense his gathering excitement. Here was the sworn affidavit of Dio of Halaesa, from whom Verres had first demanded a bribe of ten thousand to bring in a not guilty verdict, and then stolen all his horses, tapestries and gold and silver plate. Here were the written testimonies of priests whose temples had been robbed – a bronze Apollo, signed in silver by the sculptor Myron, and presented by Scipio a century and a half earlier, stolen from the shrine of Aesculapius at Agrigentum; a statue of Ceres carried away from Catina, and of Victory from Henna; the sacking of the ancient shrine of Juno in Melita. Here was the evidence of farmers in Herbita and Agyrium, threatened with being flogged to death unless they paid protection money to Verres's agents. Here was the story of the wretched Sopater of Tyndaris, seized in midwinter by Verres's lictors and bound naked to an equestrian statue in full view of the entire community, until he and his fellow citizens agreed to hand over a valuable municipal bronze of Mercury that stood in the local gymnasium. 'It is not a province Verres is running down there,' murmured Cicero, in wonder, 'it is a fully fledged criminal state.' There were a dozen more of these grim stories.

With the agreement of the three Sicilians, I bundled the papers together and locked them in the senator's strongbox. 'It is vital, gentlemen, that not a word of this leaks out,' Cicero told them. 'By all means continue to collect statements and witnesses, but please do it discreetly. Verres has used violence and intimidation many times before, and you can be sure he will use them again to protect himself. We need to take the rascal unawares.'

'Does that mean,' asked Sthenius, hardly daring to hope, 'that you will help us?'

Cicero looked at him but did not answer.

*

Later that day, when he returned from the law courts, the senator made up his quarrel with his wife. He dispatched young Sositheus down to the old flower market in the Forum Boarium, in front of the Temple of Portunus, to buy a bouquet of fragrant summer blooms. These he then gave to little Tullia, telling her solemnly that he had a vital task for her. She was to take them in to her mother and announce they had come for her from a rough provincial admirer. ('Have you got that, Tulliola? A rough provincial admirer.') She disappeared very self-importantly into Terentia's chamber, and I guess they must have done the trick, for that evening, when – at Cicero's insistence – the couches were carried up to the roof and the family dined beneath the summer stars, the flowers had a place of honour at the centre of the table.

I know this because, as the meal was ending, I was unexpectedly sent for by Cicero. It was a still night, without a flicker of wind to disturb the candles, and the night-time sounds of Rome down in the valley mingled with the scent of the flowers in the warm June air – snatches of music, voices, the call of the watchmen along the Argiletum, the distant barking of the guard dogs set loose in the precincts of the Capitoline Triad. Lucius and Quintus were still laughing at some joke of Cicero's, and even Terentia could not quite hide her amusement as she flicked her napkin at her husband and scolded him that that was quite enough. (Pomponia, thankfully, was away visiting her brother in Athens.)

'Ah,' said Cicero, looking round, 'now here is Tiro, the master politician of us all, which means I can proceed to make my little declaration. I thought it appropriate that he should be present to hear this as well. I have decided to stand for election as aedile.'

'Oh, very good!' said Quintus, who thought it was all still part of Cicero's joke. Then he stopped laughing and said in a puzzled way, 'But that is not funny.'

'It will be if I win.'

'But you can't win. You heard what Pompey said. He doesn't want you to be a candidate.'

'It is not for Pompey to decide who is to be a candidate. We are free citizens, free to make our own choices. I choose to run for aedile.'

'There is no sense in running and losing, Marcus. That is the sort of pointlessly heroic gesture Lucius here believes in.'

'Let us drink to pointless heroism,' said Lucius, raising his glass.

'But we cannot win against Pompey's opposition,' persisted Quintus. 'And what is the point of incurring Pompey's enmity?'

To which Terentia retorted: 'After yesterday, one might better ask, "What is the point of incurring Pompey's friendship?"'

'Terentia is right,' said Cicero. 'Yesterday has taught me a lesson. Let us say I wait a year or two, hanging on Pompey's every word in the hope of favour, running errands for him. We have all seen men like that in the senate – growing older, waiting for half-promises to be fulfilled. They are hollowed out by it. And before they even know it, their moment has passed and they have nothing left with which to bargain. I would sooner clear out of politics right now than let that happen to me. If you want power, there is a time when you have to seize it. This is my time.'

'But how is this to be accomplished?'

'By prosecuting Gaius Verres for extortion.'

So there it was. I had known he would do it since early morning, and so, I am sure, had he, but he had wanted to take his time about it – to try on the decision, as it were, and see how it fitted him. And it fitted him very well. I had never seen him more determined. He looked like a man who believed he had the force of history running through him. Nobody spoke.

'Come on!' he said with a smile. 'Why the long faces? I have not lost yet! And I do not believe I shall lose, either. I had a visit from the Sicilians this morning. They have gathered the most damning testimony against Verres, have they not, Tiro? We have it under lock and key downstairs. And when we do win – think of it! I defeat Hortensius in open court, and all this "second-best advocate" nonsense is finished for ever. I assume the rank of the man I convict, according to the traditional rights of the victorious prosecutor, which means I become a praetorian overnight – so no more jumping up and down on the back benches in the senate, hoping to be called. And I place myself so firmly before the gaze of the Roman people that my election as aedile is assured. But the best thing of all is that *I* do it – I, Cicero – and I do it without owing favours to anyone, least of all Pompey the Great.'

'But what if we lose?' said Quintus, finding his voice at last. 'We are defence attorneys. We never prosecute. You have said it yourself a hundred times: defenders win friends; prosecutors just make enemies. If you don't bring Verres down, there is a good chance he will eventually be elected consul. Then he will never rest until you are destroyed.'

'That is true,' conceded Cicero. 'If you are going to kill a dangerous animal, you had better make sure you do it with the first thrust. But then – don't you see? This way I can win everything. Rank, fame, office, dignity, authority, independence, a base of clients in Rome and Sicily. It opens my way clear through to becoming consul.'

This was the first time I had heard him mention his great ambition, and it was a measure of his renewed confidence that he felt able to utter the word at last. *Consul*. For every man in public life, this was the apotheosis. The very years themselves were distinguished from one another on all official documents and foundation stones by the names of the presiding consuls. It was the nearest thing below heaven to immortality. How many nights and days must he have thought of it, dreamed of it, nursed it, since his gawky adolescence? Sometimes it is foolish to articulate an ambition too early – exposing it prematurely to the laughter and scepticism of the world can destroy it before it is even properly born. But sometimes the opposite occurs, and the very act of mentioning a thing makes it suddenly seem possible, even plausible. That was how it was that night. When Cicero pronounced the word 'consul' he planted it in the ground like a standard for us all to admire. And for a moment we glimpsed the brilliant, starry future through his eyes, and saw that he was right: that if he took down Verres, he had a chance; that he might just – with luck – go all the way to the summit.

There was much to be done over the following months, and as usual a great deal of the work fell upon me. First, I drew up a large chart of the electorate for the aedileship. At that time, this consisted of the entire Roman citizenry, divided into their thirty-five tribes. Cicero himself belonged to the Cornelia, Servius to the Lemonia, Pompey to the Clustumina, Verres to the Romilia, and so forth. A citizen cast his ballot on the Field of Mars as a member of his tribe, and the results of each tribe's vote were then read out by the magistrates. The four candidates who secured the votes of the greatest number of tribes were duly declared the winners.

There were several advantages for Cicero in this particular electoral college. For one thing – unlike the system for choosing praetors and consuls – each man's vote, whatever his wealth, counted equally, and as Cicero's strongest support was among the men of business and the teeming poor,

the aristocrats would find it harder to block him. For another, it was a relatively easy electorate to canvass. Each tribe had its own headquarters somewhere in Rome, a building large enough to lay on a show or a dinner. I went back through our files and compiled a list of every man Cicero had ever defended or helped over the past six years, arranged according to his tribe. These men were then contacted and asked to make sure that the senator was invited to speak at any forthcoming tribal event. It is surely amazing how many favours there are to be called in after six years of relentless advocacy and advice. Cicero's campaign schedule was soon filled with engagements, and his working day became even longer. After the courts or the senate had adjourned, he would hurry home, quickly bathe and change, and then rush out again to give one of his rousing addresses. His slogan was 'Justice and Reform'.

Quintus, as usual, acted as Cicero's campaign manager, while cousin Lucius was entrusted with organising the case against Verres. The governor was due to return from Sicily at the end of the year, whereupon – at the very instant he entered the city – he would lose his *imperium*, and with it his immunity from prosecution. Cicero was determined to strike at the first opportunity, and, if possible, give Verres no time to dispose of evidence or intimidate witnesses. For this reason, to avoid arousing suspicion, the Sicilians stopped coming to the house, and Lucius became the conduit between Cicero and his clients, meeting them in secret at various locations across the city. I thus came to know Lucius much better, and the more I saw of him the more I liked him. He was in many respects very similar to Cicero. He was almost the same age, clever and amusing, a gifted philosopher. The two had grown up together in Arpinum, been schooled together in Rome, and travelled together in the East. But there was one huge difference: Lucius entirely lacked worldly ambition. He lived alone, in a small house full of books, and did nothing all day except read and think – a most dangerous occupation for a man which in my experience leads invariably to dyspepsia and melancholy. But oddly enough, despite his solitary disposition, he soon came to relish leaving his study every day and was so enraged by Verres's wickedness that his zeal to bring him to justice eventually exceeded even Cicero's. 'We shall make a lawyer of you yet, cousin,' Cicero remarked admiringly, after Lucius had produced yet another set of damning affidavits.

Towards the end of December an incident occurred which finally brought together, and in dramatic fashion, all these separate strands of Cicero's life. I opened the door one dark morning to find, standing at the head of the usual queue, the man we had recently seen in the tribunes' basilica, acting as defence attorney for his great-grandfather's pillar – Marcus Porcius Cato. He was alone, without a slave to attend him, and looked as though he had slept out in the street all night. (I suppose he might have done, come to think of it, although Cato's appearance was usually dishevelled – like that of a holy man or mystic – so that it was hard to tell.) Naturally, Cicero was intrigued to discover why a man of such eminent birth should have turned up on his doorstep, for Cato, bizarre as he was, dwelt at the very heart of the old republican aristocracy, connected by blood and marriage to a webwork of Servilii, Lepidi and Aemilii. Indeed, such was Cicero's pleasure at having so high-born a visitor, he went out to the tablinum himself to welcome him, and conducted him into the study personally. This was the sort of client he had long dreamed of finding in his net one morning.

I settled myself in the corner to take notes, and young Cato, never a man for small talk, came straight to the point. He was in need of a good advocate, he said, and he had liked the way Cicero had handled himself before the tribunes, for it was a monstrous thing when any man such as Verres considered himself above the ancient laws. To put it briefly: he was engaged to be married to his cousin, Aemilia Lepida, a charming girl of eighteen, whose young life had already been blighted by tragedy. At the age of thirteen, she had been humiliatingly jilted by her fiancé, the haughty young aristocrat Scipio Nasica. At fourteen, her mother had died. At fifteen, her father had died. At sixteen, her brother had died, leaving her completely alone.

'The poor girl,' said Cicero. 'So I take it, if she is your cousin, that she must be the daughter of the consul of six years ago, Aemilius Lepidus Livianus? He was, I believe, the brother of your late mother, Livia?' (Like many supposed radicals, Cicero had a surprisingly thorough knowledge of the aristocracy.)

'That is correct.'

'Why, then, I congratulate you, Cato, on a most brilliant match. With the blood of those three families in her veins, and with her nearest relatives all dead, she must be the richest heiress in Rome.'

'She is,' said Cato bitterly. 'And that is the trouble. Scipio Nasica, her former suitor, who has just come back from Spain after fighting in the army of Pompey the so-called Great, has found out how rich she has become, now that her father and brother are gone, and he has reclaimed her as his own.'

'But surely it is for the young lady herself to decide?'

'She has,' said Cato. 'She has decided on him.'

'Ah,' replied Cicero, sitting back in his chair, 'in that case, you may be in some difficulties. Presumably, if she was orphaned at fifteen, she must have had a guardian appointed. You could always talk to him. He is probably in a position to forbid the marriage. Who is he?'

'That would be me.'

'You? You are the guardian of the woman you want to marry?'

'I am. I am her closest male relative.'

Cicero rested his chin in his hand and scrutinised his prospective new client – the ragged hair, the filthy bare feet, the tunic unchanged for weeks. 'So what do you wish me to do?'

'I want you to bring legal proceedings against Scipio, and against Lepida if necessary, and put a stop to this whole thing.'

'These proceedings – would they be brought by you in your role as rejected suitor, or as the girl's guardian?'

'Either.' Cato shrugged. 'Both.'

Cicero scratched his ear. 'My experience of young women,' he said carefully, 'is as limited as my faith in the rule of law is boundless. But even I, Cato, *even I* have to say that I doubt whether the best way to a girl's heart is through litigation.'

'A girl's heart?' repeated Cato. 'What has a girl's heart got to do with anything? This is a matter of principle.'

And money, one would have added, if he had been any other man. But Cato had that most luxurious prerogative of the very rich: little interest in money. He had inherited plenty, and gave it away without even noticing. No: it was principle that always motivated Cato – the relentless desire never to compromise on principle.

'We would have to go to the embezzlement court,' said Cicero, 'and lay charges of breach of promise. We would have to prove the existence of a prior contract between you and the Lady Lepida, and that she was therefore a cheat and a liar. We would have to prove that Scipio was a

double-dealing, money-grubbing knave. I would have to put them both on the witness stand and tear them to pieces.'

'Do it,' said Cato, with a gleam in his eye.

'And at the end of all that, we would probably still lose, for juries love nothing more than star-crossed lovers, save perhaps for orphans – and she is both – and you would have been made the laughing-stock of Rome.'

'What do I care what people think of me?' said Cato scornfully.

'And even if we win – well, imagine it. You might end up having to drag Lepida kicking and screaming from the court through the streets of Rome, back to her new marital home. It would be the scandal of the year.'

'So this is what we have descended to, is it?' demanded Cato bitterly. 'The honest man is to step aside so that the rascal triumphs? And this is Roman justice?' He leapt to his feet. 'I need a lawyer with steel in his bones, and if I cannot find anyone to help me, then I swear I shall lay the prosecution myself.'

'Sit down, Cato,' said Cicero gently, and when Cato did not move, he repeated it: 'Sit, Cato, and I shall tell you something about the law.' Cato hesitated, frowned, and sat, but only on the edge of his chair, so that he could leap up again at the first hint that he should moderate his convictions. 'A word of advice, if I may, from a man ten years your senior. You must not take everything head-on. Very often the best and most important cases never even come to court. This looks to me like one of them. Let me see what I can do.'

'And if you fail?'

'Then you can proceed however you like.'

After he had gone, Cicero said to me: 'That young man seeks opportunities to test his principles as readily as a drunk picks fights in a bar.' Nevertheless, Cato had agreed to let Cicero approach Scipio on his behalf, and I could tell that Cicero relished the opportunity this would give him to scrutinise the aristocracy at first hand. There was literally no man in Rome with grander lineage than Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius Cornelius Scipio Nasica – Nasica meaning 'pointed nose', which he carried very firmly in the air – for he was not only the natural son of a Scipio, but the adopted son of Metellus Pius, pontifex maximus and the titular head of the Metelli clan. Father and adopted son had only recently returned from Spain, and were presently on Pius's immense country estate at Tibur. They were expected to enter the city on the twenty-ninth day of December,

riding behind Pompey in his triumph. Cicero decided to arrange a meeting for the thirtieth.

The twenty-ninth duly arrived, and what a day that was – Rome had not seen such a spectacle since the days of Sulla. As I waited by the Triumphal Gate it seemed that everyone in the city had turned out to line the route. First to pass through the gate from the Field of Mars was the entire body of the senate, including Cicero, on foot, led by the consuls and the other magistrates. Then the trumpeters, sounding the fanfares. Then the carriages and litters laden with the spoils of the Spanish war – gold and silver, coin and bullion, weapons, statues, pictures, vases, furniture, precious stones and tapestries – and wooden models of the cities Pompey had conquered and sacked, and placards with their names, and the names of all the famous men he had killed in battle. Then the massive, plodding white bulls, destined for sacrifice, with gilded horns hung with ribbons and floral garlands, driven by the slaughtering-priests. Then trudging elephants – the heraldic symbol of the Metellii – and lumbering ox-carts bearing cages containing the wild beasts of the Spanish mountains, roaring and tearing at their bars in rage. Then the arms and insignia of the beaten rebels, and then the prisoners themselves, the defeated followers of Sertorius and Perperna, shuffling in chains. Then the crowns and tributes of the allies, borne by the ambassadors of a score of nations. Then the twelve lictors of the imperator, their rods and axes wreathed in laurel. And now at last, to a tumult of applause from the vast crowd, the four white horses of the imperator's chariot came trotting through the gate, and there was Pompey himself, in the barrel-shaped, gem-encrusted chariot of the triumphator. He wore a gold-embroidered robe with a flowered tunic. In his right hand he held a laurel bough and in his left a sceptre. There was a wreath of Delphic laurel on his head, and his handsome face and muscled body had been painted with red lead, for on this day he truly was the embodiment of Jupiter. Standing beside him was his eight-year-old son, the golden-curled Gnaeus, and behind him a public slave to whisper in his ear that he was only human and all this would pass. Behind the chariot, riding on a black war-horse, came old Metellus Pius, his leg tightly bandaged, evidence of a wound incurred in battle. Next to him was Scipio, his adopted son – a handsome young fellow of twenty-four: no wonder, I thought, that Lepida preferred him to Cato – and then the legionary commanders, including Aulus Gabinius, followed by all the knights and

cavalry, armour glinting in the pale December sun. And finally the legions of Pompey's infantry, in full marching order, thousand upon thousand of sunburnt veterans, the crash of their tramping boots seeming to shake the very earth, roaring at the top of their voices, *'Io Triumphe!'* and chanting hymns to the gods and singing filthy songs about their commander-in-chief, as they were traditionally permitted to do in this, the hour of his glory.

It took half the morning for them all to pass, the procession winding through the streets towards the forum, where, according to tradition, as Pompey ascended the steps of the Capitol to sacrifice before the Temple of the Jupiter, his most eminent prisoners were lowered into the depths of the Carcer and garrotted – for what could be more fitting than that the day which ended the military authority of the conqueror should also end the lives of the conquered? I could hear the distant cheering inside the city but spared myself that sight, and hung around the Triumphal Gate with the dwindling crowd to see the entry of Crassus for his ovation. He made the best of it, marching with his sons beside him, but despite the efforts of his agents to whip up some enthusiasm, it was a poor show after the magnificence of Pompey's dazzling pageant. I am sure he must have resented it mightily, picking his way between the horse shit and elephant dung left behind by his consular colleague. He did not even have many prisoners to parade, the poor fellow, having slaughtered almost all of them along the Appian Way.

The following day, Cicero set out for the house of Scipio, with myself in attendance, carrying a document case – a favourite trick of his to try to intimidate the opposition. We had no evidence; I had simply filled it with old receipts. Scipio's residence was on the Via Sacra, fronted by shops, although naturally these were not your average shops, but exclusive jewellers, who kept their wares behind metal grilles. Our arrival was expected, Cicero having sent notice of his intention to visit, and we were shown immediately by a liveried footman into Scipio's atrium. This has been described as 'one of the wonders of Rome', and indeed it was, even at that time. Scipio could trace his line back for at least eleven generations, nine of which had produced consuls. The walls around us were lined with the wax masks of the Scipiones, some of them centuries old, yellowed with smoke and grime (later, Scipio's adoption by Pius was to bring a further six consular masks crowding into the atrium), and they exuded that thin, dry compound of dust and incense which is to me the smell

of antiquity. Cicero went round studying the labels. The oldest mask was three hundred and twenty-five years old. But naturally, it was that of Scipio Africanus, conqueror of Hannibal, which fascinated him the most, and he spent a long time bent down studying it. It was a noble, sensitive face – smooth, unlined, ethereal, more like the representation of a soul than of flesh and blood. 'Prosecuted, of course, by the great-grandfather of our present client,' sighed Cicero, as he straightened. 'Contrariness runs thick in the blood of the Catos.'

The footman returned and we followed him through into the tablinum. There, young Scipio lounged on a couch surrounded by a jumble of precious objects – statues, busts, antiques, rolls of carpet and the like. It looked like the burial chamber of some Eastern potentate. He did not stand when Cicero entered (an insult to a senator), nor did he invite him to sit, but merely asked him in a drawling voice to state his business. This Cicero proceeded to do, firmly but courteously, informing him that Cato's case was legally watertight, given that Cato was both formally betrothed to the young lady, and also her guardian. He gestured to the document case, which I held before me like a serving boy with a tray, and ran through the precedents, concluding by saying that Cato was resolved to bring an action in the embezzlement court, and would also seek a motion *obsignandi gratia*, preventing the young lady from having further contact with any person or persons material to the case. There was only one sure way of avoiding this humiliation, and that was for Scipio to give up his suit immedately.

'He really is a crackpot, isn't he?' said Scipio languidly, and lay back on his couch with his hands behind his head, smiling at the painted ceiling.

'Is that your only answer?' said Cicero.

'No,' said Scipio, 'this is my only answer. Lepida!' And at that, a demure young woman appeared from behind a screen, where she had obviously been listening, and moved gracefully across the floor to stand beside the couch. She slipped her hand into Scipio's. 'This is my wife. We were married yesterday evening. What you see around you are the wedding gifts of our friends. Pompey the Great came directly from sacrificing on the Capitol to be a witness.'

'Jupiter himself could have been a witness,' retorted Cicero, 'but that would not suffice to make the ceremony legal.' Still, I could see by the way his shoulders slumped slightly that the fight had gone out of him. Possession, as the jurists say, is nine tenths of the law, and Scipio had not merely the

possession, but obviously the eager acquiescence, of his new bride. 'Well,' Cicero said, looking around at the wedding presents, 'on my behalf, I suppose, if not that of my client, I offer you both congratulations. Perhaps my wedding gift to you should be to persuade Cato to recognise reality.'

'That,' said Scipio, 'would be the rarest gift ever bestowed.'

'My cousin is a good man at heart,' said Lepida. 'Will you convey my best wishes, and my hopes that one day we shall be reconciled?'

'Of course,' said Cicero, with a gentlemanly bow, and he was just turning to go when he stopped abruptly. 'Now that is a pretty piece. That is a very pretty piece.'

It was a bronze statue of a naked Apollo, perhaps half the size of a man, playing on a lyre – a sublime depiction of graceful masculinity, arrested in mid-dance, with every hair of his head and string of his instrument perfectly delineated. Worked into his thigh in tiny silver letters was the name of the sculptor: Myron.

'Oh, that,' said Scipio, very offhand, 'that was apparently given to some temple by my illustrious ancestor, Scipio Africanus. Why? Do you know it?'

'If I am not mistaken, it is from the shrine of Aesculapius at Agrigentum.'

'That is the place,' said Scipio. 'In Sicily. Verres got it off the priests there and gave it to me last night.'

In this way Cicero learned that Gaius Verres had returned to Rome and was already spreading the tentacles of his corruption across the city. 'Villain!' exclaimed Cicero as he walked away down the hill. He clenched and unclenched his fists in impotent fury. 'Villain, villain, *villain*!' He had good cause to be alarmed, for it was fair to assume that if Verres had given a Myron to young Scipio, then Hortensius, the Metellus brothers and all his other prominent allies in the senate would have received even heftier bribes – and it was precisely from among such men that the jury at any future trial would be drawn. A secondary blow was the discovery that Pompey had been present at the same wedding feast as Verres and the leading aristocrats. Pompey had always had strong links with Sicily – as a young general he had restored order on the island, and had even stayed overnight in the house of Sthenius. Cicero had looked to him if not exactly for support – he had learned his lesson there – then at least for benign neutrality. The awful possibility now occurred to him that if he went ahead

with the prosecution he might have every powerful faction in Rome united against him.

But there was no time to ponder the implications of that now. Cato had insisted on hearing the results of Cicero's interview immediately, and was waiting for him at the house of his half-sister, Servilia, which was also on the Via Sacra, only a few doors down from Scipio's residence. As we entered, three young girls – none I would guess more than five years old – came running out into the atrium, followed by their mother. This was the first occasion, I believe, on which Cicero met Servilia, who was later to become the most formidable woman among the many formidable women who lived in Rome. She was nearly thirty, handsome but not at all pretty, about five years older than Cato. By her late first husband, Marcus Brutus, she had given birth to a son when she was still only fifteen; by her second, the feeble Junius Silanus, she had produced these three daughters in quick succession. Cicero greeted them as if he had not a care in the world, squatting on his haunches to talk to them while Servilia looked on. She insisted that they meet every caller, and so become familiar with adult ways, for they were her great hope for the future, and she wished them to be sophisticated.

Eventually a nurse came and took the girls away and Servilia showed us through to the tablinum. Here, Cato was waiting with Antipater the Tyrian, a Stoic philosopher who seldom left his side. Cato took the news of Lepida's marriage quite as badly as one would have predicted, striding around and swearing, which reminds me of another of Cicero's witticisms – that Cato was always the perfect Stoic, as long as nothing went wrong.

'Do calm yourself, Cato,' said Servilia after a while. 'It is perfectly obvious the matter is finished, and you might as well get used to it. You did not love her – you do not know what love is. You do not even need her money – you have plenty of your own. She is a drippy little thing. You can find a hundred better.'

'She asked me to bring you her best wishes,' said Cicero, which provoked another outpouring of abuse from Cato.

'I shall not put up with it!' he shouted.

'Yes you will,' said Servilia. She pointed at Antipater, who quailed. 'You tell him, philosopher. My brother thinks his fine principles are all the product of his intellect, whereas they are simply girlish emotions tricked out by false philosophers as manly points of honour.' And then, to Cicero

again: 'If he had had more experience of the female sex, Senator, he would see how foolish he is being. But you have never even lain with a woman, have you, Cato?'

Cicero looked embarrassed, for he always had the equestrian class's slight prudishness about sexual matters, and was unused to the free ways of the aristocrats.

'I believe it weakens the male essence, and dulls the power of thought,' said Cato sulkily, producing such a shriek of laughter from his sister that his face turned as red as Pompey's had been painted the previous day, and he stamped out of the room, trailing his Stoic after him.

'I apologise,' said Servilia, turning to Cicero. 'Sometimes I almost think he is slow-witted. But then, when he does get hold of a thing, he will never let go of it, which is a quality of sorts, I suppose. He praised your speech to the tribunes about Verres. He made you sound a very dangerous fellow. I rather like dangerous fellows. We should meet again.' She held out her hand to bid Cicero goodbye. He took it, and it seemed to me that she held it rather longer than politeness dictated. 'Would you be willing to take advice from a woman?'

'From you,' said Cicero, eventually retrieving his hand, 'of course.'

'My other brother, Caepio – my full brother, that is – is betrothed to the daughter of Hortensius. He told me that Hortensius was speaking of you the other day – that he suspects you plan to prosecute Verres, and has some scheme in mind to frustrate you. I know no more than that.'

'And in the unlikely event that I was planning such a prosecution,' said Cicero, with a smile, 'what would be your advice?'

'That is simple,' replied Servilia, with the utmost seriousness. 'Drop it.'

VI

Far from deterring him, this conversation with Servilia and his visit to Scipio convinced Cicero that he would have to move even more quickly than he had planned. On the first day of January, in the six hundred and eighty-fourth year since the foundation of Rome, Pompey and Crassus took office as consuls. I escorted Cicero to the inaugural ceremonies on Capitol Hill, and then stood with the crowd at the back of the portico. The rebuilt Temple of Jupiter was at that time nearing completion under the guiding hand of Catulus, and the new marble pillars shipped from Mount Olympus and the roof of gilded bronze gleamed in the cold sunshine. According to tradition, saffron was burnt on the sacrificial fires, and those crackling yellow flames, the smell of spice, the shiny clarity of the winter air, the golden altars, the shuffling creamy bullocks awaiting sacrifice, the white and purple robes of the watching senators – all of it made an unforgettable impression on me. I did not recognise him, but Verres was also there, Cicero told me afterwards, standing with Hortensius: he was aware of the two of them looking at him, and laughing at some shared joke.

For several days thereafter nothing could be done. The senate met and heard a stumbling speech from Pompey, who had never before set foot in the chamber, and who was only able to follow what was happening by constant reference to a bluffer's guide to procedure which had been written out for him by the famous scholar Varro, who had served under him in Spain. Catulus, as usual, was given the first voice, and he made a notably statesmanlike speech, conceding that, although he opposed it personally, the demand for the restoration of the tribunes' rights could not be resisted, and that the aristocrats had only themselves to blame for their unpopularity. ('You should have seen the looks on the faces of Hortensius and Verres when he said *that*,' Cicero told me later.) Afterwards, following the ancient