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978-1-107-64284-3 - Nicanor of Athens: The Autobiography of  
an Unknown Citizen

O. F. Grazebrook

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD IN ATHENS

I WAS BORN on the farm which was my mother's dowry, two years before the first invasion of Attica by Spartan troops.

My nurse I can faintly remember—if she had been a Spartan I might have been different, but Spartan nurses were not so usual then as they are now. Since she died when I was six, that dates it, as the saying goes. She had brown skin, wrinkled and dry like an old apple, and I associated her with the smell of dried beans—why this should be so I don't remember.

She never liked me as much as my two brothers, who were both finer and bigger children. Yet my experience tells me that mothers and nurses generally prefer the youngest, or the weakest of the brood. Slaves, on the other hand, have an uncanny instinct for success, which makes it all the stranger that our nurse liked me the least of her charges; all the other slaves pretended that I was the nicest of my father's children.

My mother I don't remember at all; but since she died when I was only three it is not unnatural. There was something a little irregular about her rights as a citizen, for it was common talk among the slaves that it cost my father a great deal of both time and money to get her on the rolls. Her name was Algeia, and her father was a farmer from the Hill country.

My memories of my father are blurred, like the design on second-rate urns; though the outline is still visible, the edges have lost their sharpness and have run into the background. Until I was seventeen (and I only realise it now that I am older) I was frightened of him.

I wonder if any others, who, maybe, are writing their records, besides putting down the apparently important events like battles, and deaths, and marriages—the pegs of history—will write of these personal details.

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I was quite unconscious how big a step forward it was in my own development the day that I ceased to look on my father as a world oracle and the fountain of wisdom. I was about sixteen years old, but until then I had taken the world as it came and was content to believe what I was told. It was almost a shock to realise that my father was human because he suddenly lost his temper.

It was the Day of Dupes, when all the world went to vote to ostracise Nicias, to find when the votes were counted that Hyperbolus had been outwitted by Alcibiades and the party managers, and was the one to leave the City.

My younger brother, Lysis, had told me in the morning that Olympian number Two—for so he would sometimes call our father behind his back—would have a surprise that night. Lysis, even at that age, had a taste for secret societies and sources of information of his own.

As I ran back with the news of that surprise—for I stayed behind for the count, most of the citizens had gone home, and the streets were empty—I remembered Lysis' words.

I told my father. 'Nonsense', he said. Then Lysis came in: 'What did I tell you, Nicanor!', he said, 'Alcibiades is too clever for apes like Hyperbolus.'

My father picked up a piece of pottery and threw it at Lysis. 'Out of the house, you whelp', he said, and he cursed Lysis, Alcibiades and everyone he could think of.

This behaviour was so unlike my father that it made him human. In general, his children were no more to him than furniture about the house, bar the intervals when his spasms of affection made us feel awkward. It was only natural; children—after the first fascination of possession has been worn away—cannot fail to be a source of disappointment, if not annoyance, to those responsible. We parents—I speak from bitter experience—see our children making the same silly mistakes that we made, refusing to take advice. We half hope that our own offspring will be more intelligent than their parents; in consequence we are all the more disappointed when we find them

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doing the same pointless things in which we delighted, and behaving in general with less intelligence than chickens.

Taking one thing with another, my father, by the time that I was ten, was more interested in his ships and their cargoes than in any of his three sons. If his eldest son, Clenorides, had not quite worn away the buds of affection, Lysis succeeded in scraping the bark off the tree. I cannot blame him.

I learnt early enough what all children must learn if they are to survive, that in certain moods the head of the house is best left alone. That a certain expression, or method of speaking, or what we called a 'face', threatened storms.

The dearest memories of my father now are of him at his least gracious moments, such as being actively annoyed at the stupidity of a slave, and saying so; being cross with a dog; or with an oil lamp that wouldn't light; and being amusing, without at all meaning it, with visitors, more especially politicians and generals. When you knew him well you could recognise from the almost divine serenity of his expression, rather than anything else, how much he was enjoying himself internally—and not so much with pleasure as with spite—a kind of quiet, but hard, resignation made him look like a slab of stone; in the family we called it 'marble face'. I feel sure that I am unconsciously imitating him when I am bored with my visitors. I find myself grinning rather than smiling, and I sometimes wonder even if I grin.

As to our background, the family farm near Oropus had been our own for three generations at least. In his most patrician days Lysis would have the world believe that we had been land-owners since Homer—this enraged my father, who would say: 'My boy, family is only important if it produces worthy sons.' The sort of remark which drives children frantic with rage; and, if we pestered him still further, he would smile and say: 'I don't know.' He would go on, 'But I am quite sure some of our name were ferrying troops for Agamemnon, and at some small profit.'

Our tribe was Daedalus, and we have done our duty to them

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and to the City. We had two of our own ships at Salamis, and one year our horses were third at Olympia. In the earliest days I expect we were successful pirates, and when piracy, as Aristophanes used to say, degenerated into merchanting, we degenerated too into traders, chiefly in wheat, but in everything else as well. For three generations our ships have sailed from Piraeus under our own flag.

You must remember that the attitude to trade and the social position of the merchant were quite different when I was a boy from what they are at the time I write. It was only in the years of Pericles that trading became permissible, if not respectable, for citizens of Athens.

My grandfather started our fortunes from this same farm near the Boeotian border. His olive orchard was then in bearing and he would bring the oil in clumsy local pots to Athens in his own boat. He would superintend its sale, standing by the stalls above the steward, to the world at large as a detached spectator apparently unconcerned with the sale of that oil. Tradition in those days, for what it was worth, would not allow him to take any part in such commerce. Athenian citizens in those days had to suffer such limitations. Things have changed to-day; men become generals who in my boyhood would not have been allowed to be inspectors in the markets.

My father, having inherited several boats which would sail to the Euxine, besides the family farm, so far demeaned himself in the eyes of his contemporaries as to buy, through his agents in the north, those cargoes of wheat with which his bottoms were filled, while his friends merely lent money to others to buy such cargoes. He was not content with the profits of his carriage of corn and other goods, for finding that the returns of his voyages were meagre compared with the gains of those for whom the goods were carried, he decided to buy and sell those same goods with which he filled his holds. He burnt his Athenian pride on the pyre of a large fortune. Since, too, his fleet sailed over many seas and his trade touched not merely the islands but the mainland as well, he was well served with

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information as to political affairs in all parts of the world. This knowledge made him valuable to the chief men of the City, and his connection with the governors of Attica enabled him to pick and choose markets least likely to be unsettled by war, or raided by pirates.

He was careful to be on good terms too with the Temple Treasurers, clumsy and stiffnecked though they might be.

In my father's lifetime, while it was permissible, if not respectable, to own slave-run factories and to lend money, to trade in commodities was considered unworthy, and I know now that for that reason my father's house was not frequented by the oldest and most patrician families. I do not think he lost much thereby. I have found that these old traditional families are generally, if not invariably, the dullest of mortals. They survive too long. Living in and on the past seems to cover humans with moss, like old trees.

At any rate, my father grew from a merchant trader in corn to a trader in most of the common goods of everyday life. Leather and hides from Sicily, timber from the north, and oil to the islands, were his creatures. Wisely he had never traded, at least so I think, with Crete for, as he used to say, crocks break very easily. He was careful to be free of all traffic which depended on caprice, custom or fashion. Again, to use his own words, 'The earth gives us what we need the most', and to the staple things of life he confined himself. He never made chairs, nor armour, nor cloth; he preferred to bring timber, tin, copper, iron and wool to the market halls of Piraeus.

Even in my time, I think my friends thought me a little vulgar. I make peace with my soul by giving them such good things to eat and drink that they continue to come to my house. While I find much of interest in the affairs of my friend Antisthenes, and I admire Pasion—both bankers—they seem to me a little soulless.

Any loss of contact with the things of the earth makes men artificial. Mere lists of figures, admirable and productive though they may be, have never the fascination, to me at least, of

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actual bales of wool or jars of olive oil. Money may not smell, though oil and wool both do, but I could not bring myself to be a banker.

I do not think my father was as strong or as creative a man as my grandfather, but as he would say: 'In these days it's as hard to keep money as it is to make it.' But the fact that his father's estate was handed on to us and increased many times over, shows that he cannot have been as unworthy of the family tradition as he would sometimes pretend.

Looking back on him, with my own experience to guide me, I think he was blessed not only with sound judgment, but with the greatest gift that the gods bestow—good luck. Good luck does not stumble, even in the dark. Strangely enough, however, he was never fortunate in obtaining a play to produce at the Autumn Festival. I say 'fortunate' because in his lifetime plays did not cost one-tenth of what they do now, and so far as he had ambitions I know from what he told me himself he would dearly have liked to stage one of the classics, but his lot was never thrown. He was a true Athenian. In spite of his affectation to despise the past, he had a yearning for the old things which I have not only shared, but have been able to compass and enjoy. But there is a balance in life, and if he could not stage some old-time masterpiece, on the other hand, his voyages and ships seemed to have escaped the worst storms; and although he lost ships from pirates, and shipwreck, for who does not, he grew steadily more rich.

Being so closely connected with the sea, he was a great democrat, not merely in theory but in practice. There is a great difference between the two. Constant intercourse with the sea, the wind, storms, harbours, oars, sails and seamen, makes a man realise that since all men are equal on the high seas, they cannot be so dissimilar on land.

I had two brothers. Clenorides was ten years old when I was born; and Lysis was five years older than me. All the details of my education and surroundings had to be, as it were, improvised again, and since I was born so soon before the Great War began,

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I never knew the countryside as a child. I met the soil when I was ten years old, too late then to acquire that great and abiding love for the things of the earth which I wondered at but could not share with my father and brothers. For instance, horses. Both Clenorides and Lysis not only loved their beasts when the fortunes of the campaign made it necessary for them to have one, but they actually liked riding horses, and had a profound knowledge of the husbandry of horses—if such a thing is possible. I put this down entirely to their country training and upbringing, for they spent their childhood on our farm, on the coast overlooking Euboea.

I cannot remember, of course, the first Spartan invasion that drove all the farmers and their households to herd within the City walls, but my brothers remembered it well enough. They told me how at first they hated City life, and how they sickened for the sights and smells of the countryside. How far true it is that what is bred in the bone comes out in the flesh, I do not know; but the fact remains that in spite of two generations of landowning, I cannot love the land. I am now inclined to put the thing down to environment, and blame my having spent the early years of my life cooped up in a city for being blind to the virtues of horses, manure and farming generally. To this day I hate and yawn at the talk of all such things.

Being inquisitive and naturally curious as to the whys and wherefores of other people's fancies, I often ask people of their early days how they lived and why they liked doing the things which seemed to me so strangely uninviting. Such answers as I get seem to be very unconvincing and unreasonable. Because I like wine, I see no reason to love the vine, or to pretend any interest in bees because honey is sweet. I can thank Olympus for this one thing, that I need no more harass myself with that outrageous and unexpected animal, the horse. Xenophon always reminded me of a horse; perhaps that's why I disliked him so much. He was always talking of horse-sense. To me horses are essentially stupid.

Clenorides had not inherited my father's ability, although he

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made a good soldier. Perhaps that's why. There was, all the same, much more in common between us two than with Lysis. I sometimes wonder if Lysis was my father's son: he was so different from his brothers. To begin with, he was very nice-looking; no one could call Clenorides handsome, and I have never been able to boast more than that I should not be noticed in a crowd: but Lysis was beautiful, and had many lovers, who were a constant annoyance to the house. He was clever at lessons, and could dance well; but mentally he was not well-balanced. He was the most typical Athenian of our family. Having been taken up by men much older than himself his mind developed too fast, I think. If you remember that play by Cratinus, when he for once forgets his wine tubs and deals with education and parodies a rich young man with more money than brains, you will have a very good notion of how Lysis appeared at his worst. At his best, he was as quick as Hermes, and very sharp with his tongue. In him was something of the poet. I know he wrote two plays, but unlike most authors he refused to read them aloud or even to allow his family to see them. He was an excellent and venomous mimic, which is always dangerous. He estranged my father with his impatient criticism of the household; and what made more trouble, he cost my father much with his extravagances. His horses were not so much a source of expense as his betting and his clothes. I could not help being proud of so decorative a brother, but he was, in spite of the difference in age, much less companionable than my elder brother. Though I had to wear the clothes which Lysis had outgrown, I could not keep pace with his theories.

When Clenorides was killed in Sicily in the tenth year of the war, my father, so his slaves told me, became very quiet and lost interest in life; but he never understood his second son. I believe, when Lysis was killed in the fighting in Piraeus the year before Euclides was Archon, it was in some measure a relief to him that I should inherit his fortune.

I do not think my brothers ever understood me, nor did they

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know how much I loved and adored them. Certain it is that when I was a boy they treated me kindly enough and answered my questions, but they were obviously at pains to make out for my benefit how natural it all was that such and such things were desirable, and that by repeating this often enough, they thought that I should be brought round to the right way of thinking. As theirs were such very different right ways, they naturally thought me stupid.

Apart from all this, they must have associated with the death of our mother that mad rush into the City to avoid the Spartan invaders, because she died of the plague, and the plague was nothing but the result of crowding into our Athens all the inhabitants of Attica who could be induced to come within the Long Walls. I was to them something external to the family, and they could not be bothered with me.

My brothers were educated on the old traditional lines, for the old democrats, much as they welcome new ideas in theory, are the most persistent in keeping the education of their children within old ruts. They had the usual slave attached to them as tutor, whom they called (also in the traditional manner) Old Gnous. I had the same tutor, but whereas they had been kept in the background and had not been allowed to be seen or heard downstairs except when we were alone, from a very early age I ran in and out of the rooms whether visitors were present or not.

Otherwise my education ran the usual course. I was put in charge of this tutor and sent off to a Grammar School, which still exists and is owned by the same family. My fees were paid, but I strongly suspect that some of them had to be collected in kind. My tutor, having seen three of a family, was thoroughly tired of his work. He came from Rhodes, and when we did not call him Gnous, we called him Pluto, although his real name was Leonidas. Anything more unlike a Spartan king could not be imagined; he looked like a dried monkey, chiefly because his nose had been kicked into his face, as he said, by a horse, but as we believed, by a drunkard in a brawl. He had a few teeth,

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and, I imagine, scarcely any mind at all. He sat at the back of the classes mumbling and mouthing to himself. He was in no way amiable, and his only interest in life was food and drink. His only boast was that he was a great teacher of manners. Why he was kept by my father and not sold for what he would fetch in the market I do not know. One of the first things I did on my father's death was to sell him. Perhaps I should be grateful to him for teaching me manners: my friends find me courteous, and I can carry on a conversation, and that without awkwardness, with anyone I have yet met. I think I learnt my manners from imitating men I admired rather than anything I could learn from Leonidas of Rhodes.

My memory was naturally good, so that I had no difficulty in reciting pages of the Classics. I won a prize for recitation, of which I was secretly, and my father openly, very proud. My brothers, who never won such prizes, were offensive about it, as brothers are, and used to mimic me whenever I began to talk about recitation. I am not wholly free from the habit now.

At figures I was quick, but at music I was stupid. Lysis was the only one of our family who had any ear, and very soon after the music classes began, I was taken away from the teacher. He was a very honourable man, for he came to the house to explain that it was a waste of money to try to teach me. To this day I can pick out a tune on the lyre with a quill, but I do not think I could have done that if I had not found out how angry it made Lysis. The flute I could never even blow, and I profoundly agree with Alcibiades that the flute is no instrument for a gentleman.

As you shall hear later on, my education was interrupted soon after I was ten, and for nearly two years I was free from classes and a tutor. I do not think that I suffered any handicap thereby.

If we had lived in the country, where it seemed to be so much easier for people to do one thing at a time, I fancy that I, too, should have had regular hours for this and that, and the tutor-in-charge would have seen to it that I was in his room at the