NICANOR OF ATHENS

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The Autobiography of an Unknown Citizen

BY

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PREFACE

THE fact that my generation gave of its best in one war and has shared in the ravaging of Western culture in a second may have some bearing on, if it is not an excuse for, writing about another war, fought some 2,400 years ago between the citizens of Athens and the armies of Sparta.

While it may seem presumptuous to write, in any detail or at any length, about campaigns waged some four centuries before Christ, without either the equipment of a scholar or even the ability to translate Greek, yet to spend in writing such leisure as may be wrenched from less poetic pursuits in the machination of Iron surely needs no apology.

The word 'hobby', horrible in itself and never quite escaping from association with Mr Smiles, has now been euphemised into any form of 'escapism': but some form of self-expression, even if it is as primitive as poker-work or as gracious as gardening, is very necessary for salvation in the Machine Age. If our hands —the servants of our eyes and brains—have not the gift for cold iron, or the traditionally sacred craft of woodwork, they must either draw or write or else find some more serious mischief.

It was by accident that the first books that made an impression on me were all about Greece—*The Heroes*, *Stories from Homer* and, a little later, *Athens at Bay*—and, what is perhaps important, all illustrated; at that age, and for that reason, the more valued. Irretrievable damage might have been done if those so-called tender years had been at the mercy of woodcuts of Apollyon, Christian, or the fantasies of Mr Foxe.

Only a psychologist can rightly assess the effect of pictures in the first books which we read. With the possible exception of Samuel Pickwick, I believe that the vast crowd of imaginary creatures—the glory of our literature and language—are limited, instead of being expanded, by the pencil of the illustrator; for their full compass they should be left to the imagination of the reader—'Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or

loose the bands of Orion?' It is not for the mature that draughtsmen should seek to confine the immeasurable chumpishness of Mr Woodhouse; Mrs Hauksbee would defy the brush of Sargent; the puppets of Henty alone might be stereotyped.

Facility of illustration nowadays has been most prolific in fertilising school books in general and histories in particular; but photographs of the Parthenon and statues of beautiful people in classical attitudes, harmless enough in themselves, tend to create a mental picture of Ancient Athens which, I think, errs on the aesthetic side. Reproductions of exquisite Greek coins may give a false conception of Athenian commerce; at any rate one that does not coincide with our own experience of the more sordid reactions of the Economic Man.

Somehow I suspected that such pictures ignored if they did not deceive. Greek civilisation must have been moulded and shaped by citizens who, like ourselves, had a normal ration of beauty, but no more. Apart from a natural bent for inquisitive speculation, philosophic reveries, and a delight in the more extreme forms of political experiment, the Athenians were as human as ourselves, though possibly nicer. I felt I wanted to know more of these people.

I do not think it is unfair either to the English, whether Elizabethan or Victorian, or to the Athenians, to claim that we have much in common. We have both, for example, exploited our neighbours and the sea. We English have the advantage in that our slaves are machines, though we have yet to organise our lives so that these slaves do not become our masters. On the other hand, the Greeks enjoyed a climate which encouraged life out of doors, they were stimulated by sunshine which we can never hope to enjoy in these islands; their appreciation of beauty was not tainted, as ours is, with a sense of sin—perhaps inevitable where a foggy climate is associated with a distrust of logic, a preference for vinegar in our sauces, and the vagaries of Luther in our religions.

There is plenty of material for a picture of life in Athens, when the art of living reached its highest perfection during the

age of Pericles. That glory was consummated and all but extinguished in a struggle for mastery between democracy of a sort and oligarchy perfect at least in outward form. The struggle lasted twenty-seven years. Democracy was maimed in the process.

I tried to find books which would bring these fascinating people out of the frames in which they had been portrayed, out of the classical atmosphere, and into line with the present day. I asked a bookseller for what I needed—and his reply was: 'I don't know of any such book. You will have to write it yourself.' This flippant reply reminded me of a *mot* of Disraeli's, and I have tried, but without presumption, to fill the gap.

The raw materials of my book are the cold lucid pages of Thucydides, who owned gold mines and wrote history; the pamphlets of Plato, who was a humanist, which is commonplace enough, but who has a charm which is unique; the plays of Aristophanes the poet, which are inspired with that prophetic instinct which is the great gift of the comic Muse; and last the turgid pages of the egregious Xenophon.

Nicanor's life story is an attempt to picture life in the great days of a great war. By a little squeezing here and there to keep the age of this man within the compass of recorded events, it has been possible for him to avoid destruction with the first Armada to Sicily, to have been a witness of many of the historic occasions which marked the maritime ascendancy, the defeat, and the partial recrudescence of the City of the Violet Crown.

In those years of high endeavour, however memorable the scene, trivial and sordid details were as much in the foreground of Athenian lives as they are to-day, nor is it possible to forget that fears and financial anxiety were also the portion of the men who beautified the Acropolis.

Nicanor is a witness, naturally truthful (at any rate where his own advantage is not imperilled), without much imagination or personal ambition, content to do as little as—but no more than —was necessary for salvation, nonchalant, but quick to notice even if he could not understand.

PREFACE

Since no one, not even St Paul, can be all things to all men, Nicanor (though at his best as a conversationalist, which, though the greatest of social arts, defies reproduction in cold print) was not able to seize all the pleasures of life with equal zest, and was blind to some things which others would have grasped with both hands. Acute, rather than intelligent, he lived his short years during a period which in intensity, if not in stature, can bear comparison with the years 1910–1945.

O. F. G.

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PROLOGUE

I DID not begin to write this life history until after the Battle of Cyzicus when I was about twenty-four years old. The first suggestion that I should do so came from Pasion, Pompous Pasion as his enemies called him, then the slave but now the heir of Antisthenes the Banker. I had asked him to come to my house in Piraeus for I wanted his advice, in spite of his short coat. My brother Lysis had been killed the year before in a brawl during the troubles of the Four Hundred and had left me warden of his three illegitimate children, so that I became responsible for the rent of a farm which he had under long lease from the priests of Eleusis. I wanted to know if it would be wise to sell, for I had received what seemed to me a good offer for the remainder of the lease. I was not anxious to farm it myself—collecting rents is one thing but being tied to land is quite another; also I wanted money to provide for this household hanging round my neck.

I needed not so much advice as a Nestor to assure me that what I was doing was the wise thing—that is the great advantage of an outside opinion—and I had chosen Pasion rather than Antisthenes his master; partly because he was not deaf—and I find it trying to explain things and shout at the same time—and also because Antisthenes, who is as old as my father, treats me, as my father does, very much as a child, and a rather stupid one at that.

Since I was asking a favour from Pasion I had bought for dinner some dried fish from Lake Copais, and almonds from Sinope; luxuries like the latter were easier to buy in the Harbour than the City. He ate most of the almonds, I remember, which surprised me, but Pasion retained nothing of the slave either in his habits or manners—except perhaps a tendency to

make personal remarks—but it is only to be expected that so fine an intelligence would acquire the behaviour and demeanour of his clients, and possibly improve on them.

There could be no doubt as to Pasion's ability or his shrewdness, and since I had already made up my mind to sell, I was relieved to hear him telling me to let another take over the lease and the farm.

Although I did what proved to be the wise thing, the reasoning on which my action had been based proved quite erroneous; that is where luck comes in.

Our meeting took place in the summer, some months after the news of our victory at Cyzicus had reached the City. I am the more certain of the date for, besides other things, Pasion and I discussed the new temple to Athena Polias, for which Cleophon had found funds to finish a building which had been begun soon after the Peace of Nicias. I did not like it, and I was not sorry when two years later it was burnt down.

To get back to our business, the farm lands of Eleusis had not then been the scenes of fighting in a civil war, nor could any man have conceived it possible that such things could be, and Pasion believed, as most of us did, that the war was over, and that the war had been won.

As a banker Pasion had at his disposal special and accurate information, and he told me that Spartan envoys were actually on their way to arrange a peace, and it seemed then so obvious that the problems of our corn supplies had been solved once and for all, and that we should be able to reap our own fields in Attica. A pleasant change. The march of events proved us both wrong.

While we watched a squall of rain coming up over the sea, which we could see from the steps of my house in Piraeus, and waited for it to pass away, we began to talk of Lysis and the troubles which had caused his death.

Pasion, like many others, disliked my younger brother. Lysis had been to him as he had been to everyone else, very, if not insufferably, rude. He began by saying how strange it was

that Lysis of all men should have been accepted as a tenant on the Eleusis Temple Estates after having been mixed up with the great scandals. Then he turned to me and said, 'What will you do, Nicanor, when peace breaks out? You will have nothing to do; you had better write down what happened to you during the war.'

I remember laughing at the time and saying, 'I am no Herodotus'. He answered me quite seriously, admitting that my travels had not been so far afield. 'But', he said, 'you are observant, Nicanor, and that is quite as important in life as travelling.'

As the squall of rain had passed away, nothing further was said, but he left me fermenting, so to speak, like wine in the vat.

The next day I walked into the market to buy a copy of Herodotus, but the size of the rolls almost frightened me. As I looked through them I was struck with the foreign idiom and dialect—one phrase amused me, for it explained one of my father's favourite ejaculations on hearing something too outrageous—I found this strange word of his was a conjunction of Herodotus' 'Such is the story they tell'.

I refused to pay the price which the stallholder was asking. Soon after this I talked over with my father the selling of the lease on the priesthood estates. He thought (as the rents were low) it would be wiser to keep it and run the farm. I used Pasion's arguments about the war being practically over and the more settled state of affairs in the City; and he agreed that better times were ahead. He asked me what the new man offered for the lease, and when I told him he changed his mind and was all for a sale.

I then made a vow if I could get my price for the lease I would write a history. It seems quite irrational, as Hermes, to whom I vowed, could not gain anything by the bargain, but all my life I have kept myself to a purpose by these secret bargains with the gods.

I asked my father if he had heard Herodotus reading his history—partly because Pasion's talk and my vow had made a

definite impression on me, but also because my father had got to that time of life when the past is of more interest than the present.

He could always be roused from ill humour or melancholy by references to the past. Yes, he remembered Herodotus, and the exact sum which the author had received from the City for his books. He said Herodotus was insignificant in appearance—with a funny little eager face, and when he read his history, it seemed to those who heard him more like a man telling a story than relating history. He said that the man's accent was aggravating.

My father was never interested in books or poetry as such, but all the same he had enjoyed the stories of Herodotus.

'Did you ever meet him', I asked, 'apart from hearing him read?' 'Once,' said my father, 'and he spent the morning asking questions; nothing was too big or too small for him. He was the kind of man of whom one very soon tired.' This was only to be expected with my father, for his interest in things and people was soon exhausted. I think in that respect he and I were alike.

'Did you like him?' was my next question.

'I neither liked nor disliked him', was the reply. 'He was amiable, talkative, a little pious perhaps, but all the time you were talking you wondered if it was going into another book.'

'But isn't that rather pleasant, to feel that you are thereby becoming immortal in some fashion?'

'Nothing of the sort', said my father, 'people only get into books by being famous or foolish. I was never foolish, and do not expect to be famous.'

After snorting with indignation at the idea of finding himself in a book, he went on: 'Herodotus went away from the City as one of Pericles' colonials to Thurii. Everyone was glad to see him go. Even a good thing may become wearisome.'

Somehow this was not very encouraging, but I was determined all the same to try to write a history. I put down dates and strings of facts, and what I remembered; and since the

priests of Eleusis made such favourable terms for the new tenant and I got a much higher price than I expected, my vow was valid and my duty plain.

Should any reader of this have tried to write a book, it will be no surprise to hear that there are base mechanic details which hinder the process. For myself, full of zeal, pens and parchment were matters of purchase. Ink, difficult enough I found, but I learnt that my writing (without a master to point the lines with the stylus) was so bad that the charm of actually writing things down soon lost its magic. I could not read the next day what had sounded so well the day before, so I bought a slave who could write at my dictation, who was also cheap and, what appealed to me, could work in the garden. He was cheap because he limped badly, but he wrote neatly and dug deep.

When these notes had come into some sort of shape, I alternatively despaired of my work or was convinced nothing like it had been done so brilliantly before. These moods varied with the sunshine and my prosperity.

Then another casual remark had a profound effect on my efforts, though I had begun so much to enjoy dictation, that the vow to Hermes was no longer necessary to bind me to my task. The words of Bion the Metic—at least the one-time Metic, for he had been granted citizenship after the Battle of Arginusae, where he had lost his right hand—settled the collar still more firmly round my neck.

This event took place before that battle, and Bion was still a Metic, and had the use of both his hands. My enthusiasm for history had been swamped if not drowned by the troubles of the war, and I had half determined to make another vow to Cythera, and drown my book in wine, or the sea—possibly both.

Bion had dined with me and was sitting up to throw wine drops from his cup with his left hand, and then with his right. He had been amusing himself also at my expense—I could not grudge him his guerdon for I had been his guest and had gibed at him often enough.

'You ought to write the story of your life, Nicanor', he said.

'Not that your experiences can be very valuable of themselves, but by some stroke of fortune or another, you seem always to have had your hand in the dish. I think you are as lucky as Jason.' I dissented to this, partly because it implied that I had pried into things not rightly my concern, and partly because I did not mean to let him know that I had been trying to write a history. Bion then went on to say—and this at least is true—that my life had been spent not merely at a crisis in Athenian affairs, but at the climax of a great war, and among interesting people.

He had a slow drawling way of speaking, had Bion, which added something to the most casual of his remarks, and completely deceived those who for the first time purchased gold leaf from him.

'You see, Nicanor, it is not because you have any special virtue that makes you outstanding. All of us who are alive today, even if we are somewhat splintered, as the potters say, have seen war and death. You have escaped unharmed; that in itself shows you are lucky. Your two brothers were in their day very much in the front of the stage—all three of you saw something of Sicily, but while your brothers are dead, you have kept alive, and like a cheeky sparrow'—here he gave a fat chuckle—'hopping from one god's head to another.' Then before I could say anything, he gave a grunt. 'Also, you've managed to keep rich. That's important too.'

I did not think it wise to tell Bion that I was writing a history, though the temptation was great, but his reasons for my being a suitable person for the purpose stuck in my mind, not so much as an excuse for my labours but because they are true.

Even if I cannot write in flowing sentences, I have lived through great and tragic events; as much as any man alive—from my brothers in their day, from my father while he lived—I was in touch with the leaders of the Army and the Assembly. What I knew, I knew, so to speak, from the inside. I have lived through the war; I have seen the Long Walls pulled down and rebuilt. My father was one of the Commissars of the Committee of Public Safety.

PROLOGUE

Alcibiadies and Nicias, both unlucky and both rich; Cleon and Demosthenes; Thrasybulus and Theramenes; Cleophon and Critias; these and many others of the chief actors have been my acquaintances—some of them became my friends, and those whom I disliked I have understood the best.

I have known tyrants in Sicily and would-be tyrants in Athens. There can be but few of the great men of Athens during my lifetime whom I have not known. That I liked or admired but few of them is, in all probability, my own misfortune. I knew, too, most of our leading generals and admirals in their short day, and with but one exception have found them second-rate persons.

I think highly of Cleon—whose memory is now blown upon—Cleon being safely dead. As for the man Xenophon, who is reputed to be writing a history, I dislike him so much that I hope that my record will be acceptable to those gods in whom neither Xenophon nor I believe—for everything that Xenophon likes is wrong for me. I disliked him when young, and I dislike him more than ever now.

My experience tells me that few men are fairly judged in their lifetime—when they are dead, if they are not forgotten, they are painted far better or far worse than they were in reality. Few celebrities are entitled to their renown, and heroes, like temples, will not bear too close an inspection. They are both dusty inside. The same is true of those who are accounted vile because they have been failures; often I have found them more likeable than heroes.

Lastly, Bion said that 'being rich was important'; he is quite right: I was born into a rich family, and by various devices I have managed to remain rich. It has made my life more interesting.

Not that I am childish or barbarian enough to attach any virtue to riches as such, but I remember my father saying that the best education consisted in listening to men of affairs talking of the world.

Again, he used to say, 'No man worth talking to despises

good food or wine; if he affects to despise such things such a man lacks something human, such a one is unbalanced. Only a savour of the good things enables a man to encompass the surfeit of bad things.' In my father's house I have listened to the great men of their day at their ease, and at my own I have been able to collect anyone whose information might be useful or whose acquaintance would be of value.

I have been careful to leave out any particulars of our ships and voyages. It is so easy to pick up details here and there from merchants and thereby learn more than they would like of their affairs, and I do not wish to encourage my competitors by telling them of my private ventures.