

1. I wish to give future generations an account of the events in heaven on the thirteenth of October of this new year of grace that inaugurated our present period of prosperity. No offence and no flattery have any part in it. What follows is the honest truth. If the reader asks for my sources, in the first place I will refuse to answer if I am not so inclined. Who is going to make me? I know that I'm a free agent ever since the death of the fellow who proved the old saying – *be born a king or a fool!* Should I wish to answer, I'll say the first thing that comes to my lips. Whoever demanded sworn certification from an historian? But if it is necessary to reveal my source, you should ask the man who saw Drusilla's ascent into heaven.¹ This person will claim he saw Claudius making the same journey, though 'with unequal steps'.² Willy-nilly, he has to watch everything that goes on in heaven – he's in charge of the Appian Way,³ the way by which, as you know, both the Divine Augustus and Tiberius Caesar joined the company of the gods. If you ask him, he'll tell you in private. He'll never say a word to more than one. Ever since he swore in the senate that he'd seen Drusilla going up to heaven and, for all that marvellous news, no one believed him, he has solemnly sworn that he personally will never reveal what he's seen, even if it's a murder in the middle of the Forum. I am here setting down clearly and precisely what I got from him at the time, so help him God!

2. Now Phoebus⁴ had made short the arc of day,
Shortening his road, and Sleep extends its sway;
Now vaster realms hear Cynthia's conquering call;
Foul Winter plucks the crown from wealthy Fall;
Bacchus is told, Grow old; no vine escapes,
As the tardy vintner⁵ plucks the few last grapes.

I think it'll be better understood if I put it this way: it was the month of October, the thirteenth day of October. The hour I can't say for

certain – it's easier to get philosophers to agree than clocks.⁶ Anyway, it was between twelve and one o'clock. 'That's too crude!' you say. 'No poet is content to describe just dawn and sunset. They all like those descriptions so much that they make midday miserable too. Will you pass up such a good hour like this?'

Now the chariot of Phoebus had passed mid-orbit;
Closer to Night, he shook his tiring reins,
Sending the curving light down paths oblique.

Claudius began to gasp his last breath, but he could not find the proper exit.

3. At that point Mercury,⁷ as he had always enjoyed his wit, took one of the three Fates aside⁸ and said: 'Why are you allowing that poor man to be tortured, you cruel woman? After all his long agony, isn't he ever going to get peace? It's sixty-four years since he began fighting against his breath. Why the malice against him and the state? Let the astrologers⁹ be right for once: ever since he became emperor they've been burying him off every month of every year. Of course, it's not surprising they make mistakes and that none of them can predict his last hour – they all thought he'd never been born. Do what has to be done:

Let him be slain,
That he who best deserves alone may reign.'¹⁰

Clotho however said: 'Well, for Hercules' sake! I was going to give him a bit of time until he could grant citizenship to the handful left without it: he'd made up his mind to see every Greek, Gaul, Spaniard and Briton in a toga.'¹¹ But since you like the idea of leaving a few aliens to start the next crop and you insist on it that way, so be it.' She opens a little box and brings out three spindles. One was for Augurinus,¹² the second for Baba and the third for Claudius. 'I'll make these three die in one year at very short intervals – I won't send him off without company. For a man who used to see so many thousands following him, so many thousands in front of him, and so many thousands around him, it's not right to be left suddenly on his own. He'll be happy in the meantime with these close old friends.'

4. This said, she twirled the thread on an ugly spool,
Cut from the imperial line one doddering life.
But Lachesis, locks looped, with tresses dressed,

Pierian crown of laurel on forehead and hair,
Takes from the snowy fleece the bright white yarn,
Shaping with happy touch; new colours now dawn.
The sisters look at their work in awed surmise,
To see cheap wool turn into a mass of gold.
The Ages of Gold¹³ spin out in a lovely line.
No limits are set. They tease the favoured fleece,
Filling their hands in joy, so sweet their task.
As if by itself, the work went on, with ease;
Softly the threads turn on to the twirling spool –
Tithonus? his eons – Nestor? his years surpassed.
Phoebus is by to assist and the decades to come
Gladden his heart, so he helps with a song,
Now plucking the strings, now happily passing the wool.
He keeps them to work with his song, beguiling their labour,
No praise too much for his lyre, his brotherly songs.¹⁴
Their hands spin more than they used; and the work he salutes
Surpasses the lot of a man. 'Stint not, o ye Fates!'
Says Apollo, 'Let him surpass by far a mortal span,
Image of me in looks and beauty as well,
In song and voice no less. To a weary folk
He brings glad times, to muted law a tongue.
Like the Morning Star, setting the stars to flight,
Like the Evening Star, rising with the stars' return,
As the shining Sun, whenso the ruddy Dawn,
The shades of night dispersed, brings back the day,
Looks on the world and starts his chariot off:
So Caesar comes, so Nero appears to Rome,
His bright face fired with gentle radiance,
His neck all beauty under his flowing hair.'

This was Apollo. For her part, Lachesis, being herself on the side of such a handsome mortal, did her job with generous hands and gave Nero a lot of years from her own stock. As for Claudius, however, they commanded that all

in joy and holy awe bear him from the house.¹⁵

And he did indeed gurgle out his last breath and from that moment stopped even appearing to be alive. However, when he expired he was listening to some comic actors, so you can understand that my fear of them is not unfounded. His last words heard on earth came after he'd let off a louder noise from his easiest channel of communication: 'Oh

my! I think I've shit myself.' For all I know, he did. He certainly shat on everything else.

5. An account of what happened after that on earth is superfluous. My readers are perfectly familiar with the events, and there is no danger of people forgetting what national celebrations impress on the memory. No one forgets his own good luck. Here is what happened in heaven: my informant will be responsible for the reliability of the account.

An announcement was made to Jupiter that there was a visitor of a respectable size and with very white hair. He was making some sort of threat, as he kept shaking his head; he was also dragging his right foot. When asked his nationality, he had made some answer with a confused noise and in indistinct tones. It was impossible to understand his language: he was neither Greek nor Roman, nor of any known race.

Jupiter then instructed Hercules,¹⁶ who had travelled the whole world over and seemed familiar with every nationality, to go and find out his nationality. Hercules was badly shaken by the first sight of him – he hadn't been scared by all possible monsters yet. Seeing the strange sort of appearance and the weird walk and hearing the hoarse and incomprehensible voice that belonged to no land creature but seemed more appropriate to a sea-monster, he thought his thirteenth labour had arrived. On a closer inspection, it appeared to be something like a man. So he came nearer and asked in the language these little Grecks find easiest:

Who art thou? Whence? Thy city and thy kin?¹⁷

Claudius was glad there were scholars there. He had hoped that there would be a place for his Histories.¹⁸ And so, using himself another line from Homer to indicate he was Caesar, he said:

The winds from Ilion to the Cicons' shore,
Beneath cold Ismarus, our vessels bore.¹⁹

The line after that, however, would have been more correct and equally Homeric:

We sack'd the city and destroy'd the race.

6. He would have put it over on Hercules, who is not at all sharp, if the goddess Fever²⁰ had not been there. She was the only goddess to leave her temple and come with him: she had left all the other gods in Rome. 'This man is telling you absolute lies,' she said. 'I'll give you the

truth, since I've lived with him all these years. He was born at Lyons.²¹ You see in front of you one of Munatius' fellow townsmen.²² I tell you, he was born at the sixteenth milestone from Vienne, a *Bruder* Gaul. And so, as a Gaul should, he captured Rome.²³ I assure you, this man was born at Lyons, where Licinus²⁴ ruled for years. Now you've tramped over more places than any long-haul mule driver and you ought to know that there are many miles between the Xanthus²⁵ and the Rhone.'

Claudius flared up at this point and fumed as loudly as he could. No one understood what he was saying. He was, in fact, giving orders for the goddess Fever to be taken away. With his shaky hand, which was steady enough only on these occasions, making the familiar gesture with which he had people's heads cut off, he had ordered her to be decapitated. You'd have thought they were all his freedmen the way no one took any notice of him.

7. 'Listen to me,' says Hercules then, 'and stop playing the fool. You've come where mice chew iron. Out with the truth, quick, before I knock this nonsense out of you.' To make himself more terrifying, he speaks in tones of high tragedy:

Say, sirrah, quick, what country hail'st thou from,
Or, smitten by this bough, thou sink'st to earth,
A club that oft hath butchered savage kings.
Why mumble now thy words in tones unclear?
What land, what nation, raised that shaking head?
Speak out. I once did seek the far-flung realms
Of triform Geryon,²⁶ whose most noble herd
I drove from Western seas to Argos town.
While homeward bound, I saw a mountain crest,
O'erlooking two great rivers, which the sun
Faces direct when first he rises up.
There mighty Rhone with rapid current flows;
Hard by the Saône, in doubt where it should run,
With hushed and quiet shallows laps its banks.
Is this the soil that nursed thee into life?

This is delivered with some vigour and courage. None the less he is out of his mind and is nervous of some *coup de fou*.²⁷ Claudius, seeing his physique, cut out the nonsense, realizing that though he had no one equal to him in Rome, up there he did not have the same prestige: whatever your gall, you're cock-of-the-walk only on your own

dungheap. And so, as far as he could be understood, he apparently said: 'Hercules, strongest of all the gods, I hoped you would stand up for me among the others, and if anyone asked me for a person to vouch for me, I was going to name you, as you know me best. If you recall, I was the one who used to preside in court in front of *your* temple for whole days at a time in the months of July and August.²⁸ You know what misery I went through there, listening to lawyers day and night. If you'd been dropped into that, mighty tough as you think you are, you'd have preferred to clean out the Augean sewers: I threw out a lot more bullshit. But since I'd like ...²⁹

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8. '... it's no surprise that you've come charging into the Senate: nothing is barred to you. Just tell us what sort of god you want him to be. He can't be an Epicurean god: he'd be "untroubled and troubling none".³⁰ A Stoic god? How can he be "globular", as Varro says "with no head, no foreskin"?³¹ There is something about him of the Stoic god, I now see. He's got neither a heart nor a head.

'For Hercules' sake, if he'd asked this favour from Saturn, he wouldn't have got it, even though he celebrated his month all year round, a proper Saturnalian emperor.³² Still less would he get that favour from Jupiter, after he condemned him for incest, as far as he could: he killed his son-in-law Silanus.³³ Why, I ask you? Because his sister, who was the most delightful girl in the world, he preferred to call Juno, when everyone called her Venus. You say "Why his own sister, I wonder?" Get back to school, you idiot! In Athens you can go halfway, in Alexandria the whole way.³⁴ Just because in Rome, you say, "the mice lick the millstones", is he the one to set crooked things straight with us? He won't know what he does in his own bedroom: already "he keeps his eye on regions in the sky".³⁵ He wants to become a god, does he? Isn't it enough for him to have a temple in Britain, have savages worship him,³⁶ and pray they'll find in him a Merciful Clod.'

9. Jupiter finally recollected that with members of the public in the Senate-house it was out of order for senators to offer a motion or debate. 'Gentlemen of the senate,' he said, 'I permitted you to put some questions, but you're making the whole thing an absolute shambles. I request you to observe the rules of order of the House. What will this man think of us, whatever he is?'

Once Claudius was dismissed, Father Janus³⁷ was given the floor first. He had been appointed consul for the afternoon of the first of July;

he was—at least in his own street—always forward-looking and watching his rear at the same time. As he lived in the Forum, he made a long and eloquent speech, which the recorder could not keep up with and which I therefore will not report in case I substitute other words for what he actually said. He spoke at length about the high status of gods. This honour should not be granted to ordinary people. 'Once,' he said, 'it was a great thing to become a god. Now you've made it a farce — not worth a bean.'³⁸ Therefore, to avoid any appearance of speaking against the person involved and not for the principle of the thing, I move that from this day forth no one who "eats the harvest of the tilth" or lives off "the grain-bearing tilth"³⁹ shall become a god. Any person who is declared a god or so spoken of or so depicted in contravention of this decree of the senate shall be handed over to gladiatorial managers and at the next show in the arena shall be beaten with rods along with the new recruits.'

Diespiter⁴⁰ was next recognized. The son of the goddess Vica Pota, he was also consul elect and a moneylender in a small way. He made his living at this and used to sell bits and pieces of citizenships. Hercules daintily approached him and touched his ear-lobe.⁴¹ Diespiter accordingly phrased his motion as follows:

'Whereas the Divine Claudius is related by blood to both the Divine Augustus and equally to the Divine Augusta, his grandmother, whom he personally had declared a goddess, and whereas he is far superior intellectually to all other mortals, and whereas it is in the interest of the state that there should be someone who can "swallow boiling turnips" with Romulus,⁴² I hereby propose that the Divine Claudius be a god from this day forth with the privileges accorded to those of his predecessors with the most unquestionable qualifications and that an account of the matter be appended to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁴³

Motions were made of various kinds and Claudius seemed to be winning. For Hercules, who saw his own irons were in the fire, rushed here and there on the floor, and kept saying: 'Don't turn me down, my own interests are involved. Next time you want a favour, I'll do the same for you. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.'

10. Then the Divine Augustus rose to his feet when his turn to speak came and delivered a highly eloquent oration. 'Gentlemen of the senate,' he said, 'you are witness that, since I became a god, I have not uttered a word. I always mind my own business. Yet I cannot hide my feelings any longer or conceal the pain, which my sense of honour aggravates.

Was it for this that I brought peace to land and sea? Was this why I put an end to civil war? Was this why I laid a foundation of laws for Rome, beautified the city with public works – in order to . . . I can't think of what to say, gentlemen. No words can be equal to my indignation. I must fall back on the remarks of that great orator, Messala Corvinus, and say, "I am disgusted with power."⁴⁴ This man, gentlemen, who seems to you incapable of shooing a fly, killed men as easily as you get a low roll of the dice. But why am I talking about all those important victims? When a man looks at the troubles in his own house, he has no time to shed tears over national calamities. So I'll pass over them and talk about my domestic problems. Even if my ankle doesn't know it, the knee is nearer than the shin.⁴⁵ That man you see in front of you, after all those years of hiding under my name,⁴⁶ thanked me by killing my two great-granddaughters, one Julia with cold steel, the other Julia by starving her to death, and by killing one of my great-great-grandsons, Lucius Silanus.⁴⁷ You will decide, Jupiter, whether it was for an unjustified cause. Certainly it was one which reflects on you, if you are to be fair. Tell me, Divine Claudius, for what reason did you condemn any one of the men and women you killed, before specifying the charges, and before ascertaining the facts? Where is this usual? It doesn't happen in heaven.

11. "Take Jupiter, who has held supreme power all these years. In Vulcan's case alone did he break his leg, whom

Taking by the foot he flung from heaven's threshold."⁴⁸

He was also angry with his wife and hung her up. Did he ever kill? You killed Messalina, whose great-great-uncle I was as well as yours. "I don't know about it," you say. God damn you! Not to know about it is worse than killing her."⁴⁹

"He didn't stop dogging Gaius Caesar's footsteps even after he was dead. Gaius had killed his father-in-law: Claudius killed a son-in-law too.⁵⁰ Gaius wouldn't allow Crassus' son to be called Magnus: Claudius returned his title and removed his head. In one household he killed Crassus, Magnus, and Scribonia. Three lightweights, but they *were* aristocracy – Crassus in fact was so stupid he could even have been an emperor.⁵¹ Do you now want to make this man a god? Look at his body – the gods were angry when it came into the world. In short, let him say three words one after the other and he can drag me off as his slave. Who's going to worship him as a god? Who'll believe in him?

While you create such gods, no one will believe that you yourselves are gods. To get to the point, gentlemen of the senate, I ask you, if I have been an honest man while with you, if I have been too blunt to no one, make him pay for the wrongs he has done me. I put this motion to the House.'

And then he read as follows from a notebook: 'Whereas the Divine Claudius has murdered his father-in-law, Appius Silanus,⁵² his two sons-in-law, Magnus Pompeius and Lucius Silanus, his daughter's father-in-law, Crassus Frugi, a man as like him as two peas, his daughter's mother-in-law, Scribonia, his wife Messalina and others too numerous to go into, I move that he be severely punished, that he be denied any immunity from trial, and that he be deported as soon as possible, leaving heaven within thirty days and Olympus within three.'

On the division there was general support for this motion. Without delay, Mercury seized him, twisting his neck, and hauled him off from heaven to hell,

that bourne from which, they say, no man returns.⁵³

12. While they were going down by way of the Via Sacra, Mercury inquired the meaning of the great crowd: was it Claudius' funeral? And it was the most handsome cortège ever, with no expense spared to let you know that a god was being buried. There was such a mob, such an orchestration of trumpeters, horn players, and every kind of brass instrumentalist that even Claudius could hear it. Everyone was happy and gay. The Roman people walked about like free men. Agatho⁵⁴ and a few barristers were in tears, but they were clearly sincere. Legal authorities were emerging from the shadows, pale, thin, and scarcely breathing, like men who had just come back to life. One of them, seeing the barristers with their heads together, crying over their bad luck, went up and said: 'I told you it won't always be carnival time.'

When Claudius saw his funeral, he realized he was dead. For a dirge⁵⁵ was being sung with a huge choir *en masse*:

Mourn, mourn
Ye Roman lads and lasses!
Sound, sound
The sad and gloomy brasses!
In the Forum,
Sound them for him.
Brave heart ever,

Now he passes,
 Braver never,
 Who surpasses
 Him for racing
 Or for warring
 Parthians chasing?
 His light spears
 Hit the Persians,
 His sure bow
 Made swift incursions,
 Lightly pricking
 All attacks,
 Routing Medes
 With painted backs.
 Beyond the seaways
 That we knew
 He made Britons,
 Brigantes too,
 Drop blue targes,
 Be our charges
 In the chains of
 Romulus.
 He brought the Ocean
 Roman *Pax*,
 Spread devotion
 With our axe.

Weep, weep
 For the man's good judgements.
 Who could master
 Lawsuits faster,
 Hearing either
 One or neither.
 Who will warm
 The bench and dock
 Through the year
 And round the clock?
 Minos, retire for him,
 Let Claudius instead,
 O Cretan lawgiver,
 Be judge of the Dead.

Pound, pound
 Your breasts
 In solemn mourning,
 Lawyers for retainers
 And all the other gainers!
 Weep, weep,
 Ye new poetic prattlers
 And ye tribes of
 Lucky dice box rattlers!

13. Claudius was delighted to hear his praises sung and wanted to watch longer. The heavenly herald got a grip on him and hauled him along through the Campus Martius, his head wrapped up so that no one could recognize him. And between the Tiber and the Via Tecta he descended into the infernal regions. Claudius' freedman Narcissus had already gone on ahead by a short cut to make his master welcome.⁵⁶ As Claudius arrived, he met him, gleaming because he'd come straight from a bath.

'What are gods doing with men?' he asked. 'Get a move on!' said Mercury, 'and announce our arrival.' Quicker than the words, Narcissus flew off. Everything slopes downward and the descent is easy.⁵⁷ And so, despite his gout, he arrived in an instant at the gate of Dis, where lay Cerberus, or, as Horace calls him, 'the hundred-headed monster'.⁵⁸ He was a bit frightened – he'd been used only to a little off-white bitch as a pet – when he saw that black, shaggy dog, which was certainly not the sort of thing you'd like to meet in the dark, and in a loud voice he cried out: 'Claudius is on his way!'

People came out clapping and chanting in Greek, 'We have found Him, let us rejoice!'⁵⁹ Here was Gaius Silius, a consul designate, Juncus, a former praetor, Sextus Traulus, Marcus Helvius, Trogius, Cotta, Vettius Valens, Fabius – all Roman knights whom Narcissus had ordered executed.⁶⁰ In the centre of this singing crowd was the ballet-dancer, Mnester,⁶¹ whom Claudius had cut down to size for the sake of appearances, as regards Messalina. The rumour spread quickly that Claudius had arrived. Up rushed first of all the freedmen Polybius,⁶² Myron, Arpocras, Ampheus and Pheronactus – all of whom Claudius had dispatched ahead to avoid being anywhere without attendants. Then came the two Praetorian Prefects, Justus Catonius⁶³ and Rufrius Pollio. Then Claudius' Cabinet members, Saturninus Lusius, Peto Pompeius, Lupus, and Celer Asinius, all men of consular rank. Finally,

the daughter of his brother, the daughter of his sister, his sons-in-law, his fathers-in-law, his mothers-in-law, all obviously close kin.⁶⁴ And forming into a line they came to meet Claudius.

When he saw them, Claudius cried out: '*Tout le monde mes amis!*'⁶⁵ How did *you* get here?' Peto Pompeius then spoke: 'What do you mean, you cruel bastard? You ask *how*? Who else sent us here but *you*, you butcher of every friend you had? Let's go into court. I'll show *you* the bench down here.'

14. He leads him before Aeacus' tribunal;⁶⁶ he sat on cases that fell under the Cornelian legislation on murder.⁶⁷ Peto requests that Claudius be charged and he lays out the indictment: 'Executed 30 Senators, 221 Roman knights, and others "to the number of the grains of sand and the specks of dust".'⁶⁸ Claudius finds no counsel. Finally, an old crony of his, Publius Petronius,⁶⁹ comes forward, a master of Claudian-style eloquence, and he requests an adjournment. It is not granted. Peto Pompeius opens for the prosecution amid acclamation. The defence starts wanting to reply. The superbly impartial Aeacus denies the request, and with only one side of the case heard, finds Claudius guilty and quotes in Greek:

'What thou hast wrought shouldst thou suffer,
Straight would justice be done.'⁷⁰

There was a profound silence. Everyone was stupefied, thunderstruck by the strange procedure: this had never happened before. Claudius found it more unjust than unprecedented. As for the type of punishment, there was a long argument about what penalty should be imposed upon him. There were those who said that Sisyphus had been carrying his burden for a long time, that Tantalus would die of thirst unless relieved, and that sometime or other the brake had to be put on poor Ixion's wheel.⁷¹ It was decided that none of these old lags should be pardoned, in case even Claudius had his hopes raised for something similar.

It was decided that a new punishment should be instituted, some useless labour should be thought up, an illusory hope of gratifying some desire. Aeacus then orders him to throw dice from a dicebox with a hole in it. And he was off hunting already for the continually falling dice, and getting nowhere.

When from the rattling cup he seeks to throw
The dice, they trickle through the hole below,
And when he tries the recovered bones to roll –

A gambler fooled by the eternal goal –
Again they fool him: through his finger-tips
Each time each cunning die as cruelly slips,
As Sisyphus' rocks, before they reach the crest,
Slip from his neck and roll back to their rest.

15. Suddenly Gaius Caesar⁷² turned up and starts claiming him as his slave. He produces witnesses who had seen him being beaten by Gaius with whips, rods and his fists. The judgement is in his favour. It is to Gaius Caesar that Aeacus awards him. He in turn hands him over to his freedman Menander to put him to work as legal secretary.⁷³