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ANNA KOMNENE

The Alexiad

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PROLOGUE

1. Time, which flies irresistibly and perpetually, sweeps up and carries away with it everything that has seen the light of day and plunges it into utter darkness, whether deeds of no significance or those that are mighty and worthy of commemoration; as the playwright says,¹ it brings to light that which had been obscure and shrouds from us what had been visible. Nevertheless, the science of History is a great bulwark against this stream of Time; in a way it checks this irresistible flood, it holds in a tight grasp whatever it can seize floating on the surface and will not allow it to slip away into the depths of oblivion.

I, Anna, daughter of the Emperor Alexios and the Empress Eirene, born and bred in the purple,² not without some acquaintance with literature – having devoted the most earnest study to the Greek language, in fact, and being not unpractised in rhetoric and having read thoroughly the works of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato, and having fortified my mind with the *tetrakus* of sciences (these things must be divulged, and it is not boasting to recall what Nature and my own zeal for knowledge have given me, nor what God has apportioned to me from above and what has been contributed by circumstance); I desire now by means of my writings to give an account of my father's deeds, which do not deserve to be consigned to silence nor to be swept away on the flood of Time into an ocean of obscurity; I wish to recall everything, the achievements before his elevation to the throne and his actions in the service of others before his coronation.

2. I approach the task with no intention of flaunting my skill as a writer; my concern is rather that a subject so significant

should not go unrecorded in the future, since even the greatest exploits, unless by some chance their memory is preserved and guarded in history, vanish in silent darkness. As events clearly demonstrate, my father proved able to rule as well as to obey rules, at least in so far as was reasonable.

Now that I have decided to write the story of his life, I am fearful of wagging and suspicious tongues: someone might conclude that in composing the history of my father I am glorifying myself; the history, wherever I express admiration for any act of his, may seem wholly false and mere panegyric. On the other hand, if my father should ever lead me, under the compulsion of events, to criticize some action taken by him, not because of what he decided but because of the circumstances, here again I fear the jokers: in their all-embracing jealousy and refusal to accept what is right, because they are malicious and full of envy, they may cast me in the story of Noah's son Ham and, as Homer says, blame the blameless.³

Whenever one assumes the role of historian, friendship and enmities have to be forgotten; often one has to bestow on adversaries the highest commendation, where their deeds merit it; often, too, one's nearest relatives have to be censured, as and when their behaviour deserves it. The historian, therefore, must shirk neither from remonstrating with their friends, nor from praising their enemies. For my part, I hope to satisfy both parties, both those who are offended by us and those who accept us, by appealing to the evidence of the actual events and of eyewitnesses. The fathers and grandfathers of some men alive today saw these things.

3. The main reason why I have to write the account of my father's deeds is this: I was the lawful wife of the *Kaisar* Nikephoros,⁴ a scion of the Bryennioi, an extremely handsome man, very intelligent, and in the precise use of words far superior to his contemporaries. To see and hear him was indeed an extraordinary experience. For the moment, however, let us concentrate on what happened afterwards, lest the story should digress.

My husband, the most outstanding man of the time, went on campaign with my brother, the Emperor John,⁵ when the latter

led an army against other barbarians and also when he set out against the Syrians and once more restored imperial authority to the city of Antioch. Even in the midst of these wearing exertions the *kaisar* could not neglect his writing, and, among other compositions worthy of honourable mention, he chose in particular to write the history of Alexios, the Emperor of the Romans and my father, on the orders of the empress,⁶ and to record the events of his reign in several books, when a brief lull in the warfare gave him the chance to turn his attention to historical and literary research. He did indeed begin the history – and in this, too, he yielded to the wishes of our empress – with references to the period before Alexios, starting with Diogenes, the Emperor of the Romans, and carrying it down to the times of his original subject. At the time of Diogenes' reign my father was only a youth; he had done nothing worthy of note, unless childhood exploits are also to be made the object of record.

The *kaisar's* plan was such as I have described; his writings make that clear. However, he did not manage to complete what he had set out to do, and the history was not completed. After carrying on the account to the times of the Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates, he stopped writing because circumstances prevented any further progress, to the detriment of the history itself and the sorrow of its readers. That is why I have chosen to record the full story of my father's deeds myself, so that future generations may not be deprived of knowledge about them. Everyone who has encountered his literary work knows with what symmetry and grace the *kaisar* wrote . . .

Having reached the point I have mentioned, he brought back his work to us from foreign parts half-finished and hastily put together, and also, I am sorry to say, carrying an illness which was to prove fatal, caused by too much soldiering, excessive fatigue and inordinate concern for ourselves. He was by nature a worrier and a worker; he could not relax. The unpleasant changes of climate, too, contributed to his death. He was a very sick man, then, when he set out on campaign to Syria and Kilikia; his health continued to fail in Syria; after Syria came Kilikia, Pamphylia, Lydia and Bithynia before he returned to

us in the Queen of Cities.⁷ He was ill in all these regions, already suffering from a tumour, the result of so much fatigue. In this weak condition, although he wanted to give a graphic account of his adventures, he could not because of his illness; besides, we would not let him do it – the strain of talking might aggravate things further.

4. At this point my spirit becomes overwhelmed; floods of tears fill my eyes when I think of Rome's great loss. His wisdom, his vast practical experience, gained over so wide a field, his knowledge of literature, the diverse learning acquired at home and abroad. Grace suffused all his body as did a majesty befitting not, as some say, a human throne, but something higher and more divine. My own lot has been far from fortunate in other ways, ever since I was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the purple chamber, and I have not enjoyed good luck – although one would not deny that fortune did smile on me when I had as parents an emperor and an empress, and when I was born in the purple. The rest was full of troubles, full of revolution. Orpheus moved rocks and forests, even inanimate nature, with his singing; Timotheos the flute-player by his Orthian strains once stirred Alexander to take up the sword and for the Macedonian to arm himself without delay for battle;⁸ the story of my afflictions would move no one physically to arms or battle, though it would stir the reader to weep with me and wring sympathy from nature, animate and inanimate alike.

The *kaisar's* untimely death and the suffering it brought about touched my heart deeply and the pain of it affected the innermost part of my being. The calamities of the past, in the face of this infinite disaster, I regard as a mere drop of rain compared with the whole Atlantic Ocean or the swell of the Adriatic Sea. They were, it seems, the prelude of these later woes, the warning smoke of this furnace flame; the fierce heat was a herald of this unspeakable conflagration, the daily signal-fires of this awful funeral pyre – a fire that lights up with torches the secret places and burns, but does not consume with burning; parching my heart imperceptibly, although its flames pierce to the bones and marrow and heart's centre.

But I see that I have been led astray by these thoughts from

my subject; the *kaisar* stood over me and his sorrow provoked heavy sorrow in me too. I will wipe away the tears from my eyes, recover from my grief and continue my story, earning thereby a double share of tears, as the playwright says, for one disaster recalls another.⁹ To put before the public the life history of such an emperor reminds me of his supreme virtue, his marvellous qualities – and the hot tears fall again as I weep with all the world. When I remember him and make known the events of his reign, it is for me a theme of lamentation; others will be reminded of their loss. However, this is where I must begin the history of my father, at the point where it is better to begin, where the narrative will become at once clearer and more accurate.

care that his needs should be generously provided for at the expense of the imperial treasury.

Then there was the case of the famous dialectician Eleutherios,²⁹ another Egyptian, who attained great proficiency in the art, which he practised with a wonderful skill. He was undoubtedly the supreme exponent. In later times, too, there was an Athenian, one Katanankes,³⁰ who came from his native city to Constantinople with the ambition to surpass all his predecessors. He was asked by some people about the emperor, inquiring as to when he would die. He forecast the date according to his calculations, but proved to be wrong. However, it happened at that moment that the lion living in the palace breathed its last after suffering from a fever for four days, and most people thought that Katanankes' prediction was thereby fulfilled. Some time afterwards he again foretold the emperor's death wrongly, but on the very day he had mentioned the Empress Anna, his mother, died. Although the man had been wrong as often as he had been right, the emperor was unwilling to remove him from the city, even if he was erratic; moreover, he wished to avoid any appearance of resentment.

It is time now for us to return to the narrative so that I do not seem like someone whose head is in the clouds, and so that I do not obscure the main theme of my history with the names of astrologers.³¹ It was generally agreed and some actually said that Robert was an exceptional leader, quick-witted, of fine appearance, courteous, a clever conversationalist with a loud voice, accessible, of solid build, with hair invariably of the right length and a thick beard; he was always careful to observe the customs of his own race; he preserved to the end the youthful bloom which distinguished his face and indeed his whole body, and was proud of it – he had the physique of a true leader; he treated with respect all his subjects, especially those who had served him with unswerving loyalty.³² On the other hand, he was niggardly and grasping in the extreme, a very good businessman, most covetous and full of ambition. Dominated as he was by these traits, he attracted much censure from everyone.

Some people blame the emperor for losing his head and starting the war with Robert prematurely.³³ According to them,

if he had not provoked Robert too soon, he would have beaten him easily in any case, for Robert was being shot at from all directions, by the Albanians and by Bodin's men from Dalmatia. But of course fault-finders stand out of weapon range and the acid darts they fire at the contestants come from their tongues. The truth is that Robert's manliness, his marvellous skill in war and his steadfast spirit are universally recognized. He was an adversary not readily vanquished, a very tough enemy who was more courageous than ever in the hour of defeat.

8. The emperor, accompanied by the Latins of Count Bryennius who had deserted to him, returned to the capital with the laurels of victory. The date was the first of December in the seventh indiction.³⁴ He found the empress in the throes of childbirth, in the room set apart long ago for an empress's confinement. Our ancestors called it the *porphyra* – hence the world-famous name of the *porphyrogenetoi*. At dawn (it was a Saturday) a baby girl was born to them, who resembled her father, so they said, in all respects. I was that baby.

On several occasions I have heard my mother tell how, two days before the emperor's return to the palace (he was coming back then after his battle with Robert and his other numerous wars and labours), she was seized with the pains of childbirth and making the sign of the cross over her womb, said, 'Wait a while, little one, till your father's arrival.' Her mother, the *protovestiaría*, so she said, reproached her soundly: 'What if he comes in a month's time? Do you know when he'll arrive?' she said angrily. 'And how will you bear such pain?' So spoke her mother; but her own command was obeyed – which very clearly signified even in her womb the love that I was destined to have for my parents in the future. For thereafter, when I grew to womanhood and reached years of reason, I had beyond all doubt a great affection for both of them alike. Many folk, certainly all those who know my history, are witnesses of this deep feeling of mine and their evidence is supported by the numerous struggles and labours I have endured on their behalf, as well as those dangers to which I have exposed myself because of that love, unconcerned by honour, money, or life itself.

My love for them burned so fiercely that many a time I was ready to sacrifice my very soul for them. But it is not time to speak of that yet. I must tell the reader of the events that followed my birth.

When all the ceremonies which are usually performed at the birth of imperial children had taken place, by which I mean the acclamations, the gifts and honours presented to the leaders of the Senate and army, there was, I am told, an unprecedented outburst of joy; everyone was dancing and singing hymns, especially the close relatives of the empress, who could not contain themselves for delight. After a certain period of time my parents honoured me too with a crown and imperial diadem. Constantine, the son of the former emperor Michael Doukas, who has on many occasions been mentioned in this history, was still sharing the throne with my father; he signed notices of donations with him in purple ink, followed him with a tiara in processions and was acclaimed after him.³⁵ So it came about that I too was acclaimed and the officers who led the acclamations linked the names of Constantine and Anna. Often in later times I have heard my relatives and parents say that this practice continued in fact over a long period. Maybe it foreshadowed what was about to befall me afterwards, for good or ill.

When a second daughter was born, very like her parents and at the same time showing clear signs of the virtue and wisdom which were to distinguish her in later years, they longed for a son and he became the object of their prayers. Thus in the eleventh indiction a boy³⁶ was indeed born to them – an event immediately followed by great rejoicing; not a trace of disappointment remained now that their desire was fulfilled. The entire people, seeing the pleasure of their rulers, made merry; everyone was pleased and all together were glad. The palace then was a place of perfect happiness, all sorrow and worries of all kinds banished, for their supporters showed a genuine, heartfelt pleasure, and the rest pretended to share their joy. For ordinary folk are in general not well-disposed to their rulers, but usually feign loyalty and by flattery win the favour of their betters. Anyway on this occasion the universal delight was there for all to see.

The little boy was of a swarthy complexion, with a broad forehead, rather thin cheeks, a nose that was neither flat nor aquiline, but something between the two, and darkish eyes which, as far as one can divine from the appearance of a newborn baby, gave evidence of a lively spirit. Naturally my parents wanted to promote the little one to the rank of emperor and leave to him the empire of the Romans as a heritage; in the Great Church of God, therefore, he was honoured by the rite of holy baptism and crowned. Such were the events that befell us, the *porphyrogennetoi*, from the very moment of our birth. What happened to us later on will be told in the appropriate place.

9. As I have said before, after driving the Turks from the coastal districts of Bithynia and the Bosphorus itself, as well as from their hinterlands, the emperor Alexios concluded a peace treaty with Solymas.³⁷ He then turned to Illyrikon, thoroughly defeated Robert and his son Bohemond, albeit not without much suffering, and rescued the provinces of the west from utter disaster. On his return from that campaign he found that the Turks of Apelkhasem³⁸ were not merely invading the east again, but had even reached the Propontis and the places on the coast there. I must now describe how the Emir Solymas, having left Nicaea, appointed this Apelkhasem governor of the city; how Pouzanos was sent by the Persian sultan to Asia and vanquished by the brother of the sultan, Toutouses;³⁹ and how he was killed by him, but Toutouses after the victory was strangled by Pouzanos' cousins.

An Armenian called Philaretos, highly respected for his bravery and intelligence, had been promoted to the rank of *domestikos* by the former emperor Romanos Diogenes, and when he saw Diogenes' downfall and knew moreover that he had been blinded, it was more than he could bear, for he had a deep affection for this emperor. He organized a rebellion⁴⁰ and seized power for himself in Antioch. As the Turks plundered the area round the city every day and there was no respite at all, Philaretos decided to join them and offered himself for circumcision, according to their custom. His son violently opposed this ridiculous impulse, but his good advice went