

VII. CICERO AND CATILINE

Plutarch thought that Marcus Tullius was called Cicero because of a wart, shaped like a vetch (*cicer*), on an ancestor's nose; more probably his forehead. In his *Laws* Cicero describes with engaging tenderness the modest villa that had seen his birth near Arpinum, halfway between Rome and Naples, in the foothills of the Apennines. His father was just rich enough to give his son the best education that the age could provide. He engaged the Greek poet Archias to tutor Marcus in literature and Greek and then sent the youth to study law with Q. Mucius Scaevola, the greatest jurist of his time. Cicero listened eagerly to the trials and debates in the Forum, and rapidly learned the arts and tricks of forensic speech. "To succeed in the law," he said, "a man must renounce all pleasures, avoid all amusements, say farewell to recreation, games, entertainment, almost to intercourse with his friends."⁶⁶

Soon he was practicing law himself and making speeches whose brilliance and courage won him the gratitude of the middle classes and the plebs. He prosecuted a favorite of Sulla and denounced the proscriptions in the midst of the Sullan terror (80 B.C.).⁶⁷ Shortly afterward, perhaps to avoid the dictator's revenge, he went to Greece, and continued there his studies of oratory and philosophy. After three happy years in Athens he passed over to Rhodes, where he heard the lectures of Apollonius, son of Molon, on rhetoric, and those of Poseidonius on philosophy. From the first he learned the periodic sentence structure and purity of speech that were to distinguish his style; and from the other that mild Stoicism which he would later expound in his essays on religion, government, friendship, and old age.

Returning to Rome at the age of thirty, he married Terentia, whose ample dowry now enabled him to go into politics. In 75 he distinguished himself by his just administration of a quaestorship in Sicily. In 70, having resumed the practice of law, he raised a furor among the aristocracy by accepting a retainer from the cities of Sicily and bringing suit against the senator Caius Verres, on the charge that as propraetor there (73-71) Verres had sold his appointments and decisions, had lowered individual tax assessments in inverse proportion to bribes received, had despoiled Syracuse of nearly all its statuary, had assigned the revenues of a whole city to his mistress, and all in all had carried injustice, extortion, and robbery to such a pitch as to leave the island more desolate than after two Servile Wars. Worse yet, Verres had kept for himself some of the spoils that usually went to the publicans. The business class supported Cicero in the indictment, while Hortensius, aristocratic leader of the Roman bar, led the defense for Verres. Cicero was allowed some hundred days to gather evidence in Sicily; he took only fifty, but he presented so much damaging testimony in his opening address that Hortensius—who had decorated his gardens with part of Verres' sculptural loot—abandoned his client. Condemned to pay a fine of 40,000,000 sesterces,