

## Julius Caesar by Leo Rosten

<sup>1</sup>WE SHALL NEVER KNOW the truth about him, for we can only guess at the interplay within him of patriot, opportunist, statesman, megalomaniac.

He seemed incapable of fear. Captured by pirates, young Caesar taunted them for setting too low a ransom on his head and promised that, once freed, he would return, capture and kill them. He did exactly that. He once persuaded oarsmen to row him into a sea swarming with enemy ships: "Fear not; you carry Caesar and his fortunes." When a trusted legion mutinied, Caesar invited them to appear before him *en masse*—carrying their swords! They did—and begged his forgiveness. In Africa, he told his centurions, fearful of a vastly superior foe: "King Juba... has 30,000 horse, 100,000 skirmishers, 300 elephants. Your part is neither to think about [that] nor ask questions. I tell you the truth." Unsparingly honest, it was psychologically flawless. And as if to prove his superhuman traits, during 20 years of fighting, in innumerable hand-to-hand melees, he was not once wounded... But Rome produced many a paragon of courage. Caesar was more: a military genius, a brilliant orator, a remarkable observer-historian, a peerless leader of men, a superb writer whose *Commentaries* are marvels of dry vigor and control.

His mind was exceptionally quick; his memory, remarkable; his phrasing, unforgettable: "Men willingly believe what they wish...In extreme danger, fear knows no pity...In war, events of importance result from trivial causes." He wasted neither words nor feelings; during gladiator shows, he often turned away from the arena to dictate, read or write. He had few friends and no confidants. He confused his contemporaries, who could not be sure of his motives. Many thought him a demigod, others a demagogue. Sallust lauded his "humanity and benevolence"; Cicero alternately distrusted, admired and despised him: "the prince of scoundrels," "a wretched madman."

He was magnanimous one day, merciless the next. In Gaul, he cut the hands off every man in one rebellious tribe. He invited German chieftains into his camp under a flag of truce, then massacred their troops. But in later years, he wrote: "Let us see if...we can win all hearts...[in] a new way of conquering, [using] compassion and generosity," and spared the life of Brutus, who had deeply hurt him by joining Pompey. Perhaps Caesar was ruthless to Rome's subjects and compassionate to his countrymen. "There has never been a victor more merciful," says Edith Hamilton, in that "pitiless ancient world," but even she cannot penetrate "that inscrutable thing, Caesar's heart."

Gaius Julius Caesar was born between 100 and 102 BC, of a noble family. An aristocrat, well-educated, charming, he used an effete hairdo to hide his premature baldness. A fine horseman and swimmer, he drove himself to prodigious feats of discipline and endurance. He was abstemious—of food and drink—but a philanderer about whom the canard ran: "every woman's man and every man's woman." Rome suppurated with corruption and chicanery, bloody vendettas and double crosses. Thugs roamed the Forum, beating, stabbing, strangling for pay. Political rivals seesawed in murdering each other's minions. For the prizes of office were stupendous: A proconsul of Rome could tax and plunder his province with abandon.

Caesar's patrician lineage marked him for a seat in the Senate, but his aunt had married Marins, the remarkable plebeian general who led the demagogic *populares* against the oligarchs, and Marius made his nephew a priest of Jupiter. (The Romans believed in omens, auguries and the reading of entrails.) When Marius died, Caesar fled Sulla's bloodbath served as a soldier in Asia Minor, returned to the capital after Sulla's demise. Pompey, the great general and Crassus, the richest Roman, were consuls —hated by the Senate. Caesar borrowed fantastic sums from

Crassus to woo the populace with public entertainments of unexampled lavishness. When his wife died, he married Sulla's granddaughter (!) and went to Spain to put down a rebellion. He was over 40 before he commanded an army.

In 60 BC, Caesar, Pompey and Crassus formed the first Triumvirate. The republic was doomed. As governor of Gaul and Illyria, Caesar brilliantly fought provincial chieftains and armies for nine tumultuous years. A master of maneuver, he crushed forces ten times his own by the swiftness of his movement, the audacity of his tactics, the ingenuity of his stratagems. He crossed the Alps through ice-locked passes. He converted infantrymen into cavalry men, combat troops into engineers—making trenches, fortifications, roads. When tribes in Brittany retreated to their islands, he built his own fleet and attacked their ships with improvised weapons: long poles with sickles to cut the ships' rigging. He twice invaded Britain, and crossed the Rhine on a bridge he threw over its powerful current in ten days.

The Triumvirate ended when Crassus was slain in Asia Minor, and mighty Pompey reigned unchallenged in Rome. His wife, Caesar's beloved daughter, died; the two captains jockeyed for power. The Senate, alarmed by Caesar's triumphs, ordered him to surrender command of his army. Caesar agreed—if Pompey would do the same. Pompey refused. Caesar crossed the Rubicon ("The die is cast.") and marched on Rome. The capital fell without resistance.

Pompey fled to Greece; Caesar sped to Spain, smashing his rival's army there, hurried home, then crossed the Adriatic and destroyed Pompey's forces at Pharsalus. "Pompey knows how to win battles but not wars," he said. When Pompey escaped to Egypt, he was murdered. Caesar, who had pursued him, now restored the accomplished, seductive, but not surpassingly beautiful, Cleopatra to the throne of the Ptolemies. For nine months, he dallied with the queen (a son she later bore was probably his), marched to Pontus, scored a stunning victory ("I came, I

saw, I conquered.") and entered Rome in unequalled glory, to become dictator.

In less than two years, he overhauled the government, enlarged and revitalized the Senate, ended the looting of the provinces. His public works employed thousands; he made landlords hire one free man for every two slaves. He planned Rome's first public library. He consulted leading mathematicians to devise the calendar we use today (July honors his name). And his public extravaganzas purchased the crowd's adulation with 600 gladiators clad in silver and one feast where "23,000 dining couches were laid out."

Vainglory and monarchic dreams destroyed him. He claimed divine descent from Venus, daily wore the toga reserved for triumphs. Statues of him appeared in temples. He alone judged important cases. He even chose his successor, his adopted grandnephew Octavius, who would become Augustus. Suspicion and hatred boiled around him. During a festival, applause was heard when Caesar *removed* the crown Mark Antony placed on his head...

A soothsayer warned him of peril on the Ides of March: March 15, 44 BC. The night before, his guests discussed what death is best, and Caesar broke in, "A sudden one." He went to the Senate, despite the premonitory dream of his third wife, Calpurnia. The conspirators fell upon him with daggers. He died under Pompey's statue.

After 2,000 years, the key to Caesar's character is still lost amidst the legends (and the libels) that attend his name. He brought Rome order, after decades of upheaval, but sacrificed the republic to his lust for power. Whatever his motives, he bent his world to his will—pushing Rome's frontiers to the Atlantic, into England, deeper into Africa, pacifying an empire from Spain to the Caspian Sea. How many later caesars and kaisers and czars took him as their paradigm for glory?

—LEO ROSTEN

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