With a new introduction by **Michael Ledeen**

From Caesar to the Mafia

Persons, Places and Problems in Italian Life

Second Edition

Luigi Barzini

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INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION

WE WHO KNEW Luigi Barzini still delight in his memory; forces of nature are not soon forgotten. He was one of those volcanic individuals who seem to be forever with us, a man so full of life that it's impossible to digest the fact of his death. And he left behind so many wonderful books and essays that we can reconnect with him just by reading. He comes at us, full-bore, on every page. Those who are about to experience Luigi's wit and wisdom for the first time in this book are lucky people.

Luigi was a master of two cultures and two languages, as much as home in America as in Italy, as fluent in American English as in northern Italian. It isn't as easy as it seems; Americans invariably find themselves very comfortable in Italy, but rarely get it right. And Italians who really understand America are rare birds indeed. The only other one I know is, as Luigi was, a journalist who spent decades in the United States. But only Luigi wrote a true masterpiece about us–*Oh America; When You and I Were Young*–a brilliant *tour de force* that deserves a place on our national book shelf right next to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America.*

He's great reading, but, true to his Italian traditions, he's also deceptive. The ease of his style masks the depth of his thought and the richness of his culture. Luigi was every bit as complex as some of the people he describes (only a very rich personality could have written the brilliant essay on the Count of Lampedusa, the enormously complicated author of that unique novel, *The Leopard*), and he loved to delight

his readers even though he realized that they might not grant him the same serious attention they would give to a more ponderous text. He also knew us well enough to distrust translators, precisely because he knew, better than any translator could, how Italian things sound in our own language. Some of the essays in this book were originally written in Italian, but Luigi personally translated them into an English that we recognize instantly as our own.

Luigi wrote with the easy confidence of a man who has mastered his subject and has precisely the right words to explain it to us. Each essay in this book is a gem. Collectively, they tell us some very important things about his own country and his own people, and about himself as well (as in his account of his first heart attack). If you read carefully you will find many brilliant insights into America as well. And yet...

And yet, how can contemporary Americans understand what this book is really all about? Luigi Barzini wrote for an earlier generation, the generation of World War II. They knew a great deal about history, and, having fought a terrible war against Europeans, understood its importance. Nowadays, Americans' knowledge about history is more often drawn from Hollywood than from the great scholars, or, alas, from heavily politicized tracts more intent on advancing a world view than on understanding the rich variety of cultures and their wildly different consequences.

Italians, even the present Europeanized crop, are quite different. They are an ancient people, and their history burdens them in a way that Americans, especially untutored Americans who know little about the old world's psychic makeup, struggle to grasp. To this enormous intellectual obstacle there is an additional hazard: Italy is deceptively charming. As Barzini never tires of reminding us, Italians have lived under foreign domination for so many centuries that they have mastered the art of seducing their masters. They excel at convincing others that the Italians are good friends and good neighbors, certainly not any sort of threat that would justify harsh domination. This deception is by now built into their national DNA, and it is often overlooked,

even by such geniuses as Mann and Goethe, who misdescribed Italians as delightfully natural and spontaneous. In reality, their considerable charm masks equally impressive components of guile and brutality. Machiavelli was a Florentine, after all, and wrote for his own countrymen.

Italians have long practiced political assassination, and continue to murder their leaders, as well as their lovers and their competitors. This bloody tradition runs in an unbroken line from Julius Caesar to Aldo Moro, and, in addition to murderous individuals, includes the Sicilian Mafia, the Neapolitan Camorra and other lesser known criminal organizations. Italians are not shocked by murder, whether driven by the lust for political or economic power, or by more carnal passions. Barzini's marvelous essay on Caesar's death reflects not the slightest surprise at his murder; all his energies are focused on the reasons for it and the intricate interplay of the schemers and Caesar's intelligence system, not on the act itself. Barzini is even willing to contemplate the brutal paradox that Caesar himself may have been a willing participant in the plot to kill him.

Having experienced so much through the centuries, Italians are not easily swayed by "big ideas" (the fondness for which Tocqueville identified as one of Americans' major weaknesses), but rather prefer to look at the smaller, more manageable things. This sometimes comes off as a cynical worldliness, but Barzini knows that it rests on sound historical understanding. For example, Italians know that even the finest principles can be wrecked if they are administered by the wrong leaders. And since they believe they are badly governed, they prefer to have their leaders as weak as possible:

> ...there are many cautious Italians who prefer confusion to the rule of law as a safeguard of their liberty. The law can be unjust and cruel. In the past it was imposed by foreigners to serve their interests, and later by compatriots who often preferred the triumph of their ideologies and the humiliation of their opponents to the public good.

Inspired as we are by the virtues of the rule of law, few of us would consider the possibility that our liberty might be better protected by chaos and confusion, but Italians–who

perfected the rule of law–know better. Barzini goes further into the paradox: Italians aren't great risk-takers, and would prefer an orderly government to chaos. But they know that their politicians are terribly corrupt, and therefore they prefer confusion to the phony "rule of law" the politicians pretend to enforce (while in reality advancing their own personal interests). Moreover, Italians have been subjected to foreign domination so often that they have developed a healthy distrust of government power of any sort, and this accentuates their preference for chaos.

It's a losing strategy in the long run, and the Italians know it. Political nature abhors a vacuum, and if the state is weak, other institutions will usurp the available power. The two Italian usurpers are the political parties and the mafias, and they are often intertwined. Americans, whose understanding of such things is primarily shaped by Hollywood, tend to think of the mafias (the Sicilian Mafia is the most infamous, but there are others throughout the South) as autonomous forces, but Barzini quietly dismisses this misconception. "The Mafia," he reminds us, "aided every successful revolution and landing of foreigners in Sicily...because the Mafia cannot afford not to be on the side of the winner in any historic conflict." In like manner, the parties form unholy alliances with one another, so that they will retain a share of wealth and power regardless of electoral outcomes. Like the mafias, they want the state to remain weak, and they are quite willing to work with organized crime to sabotage efforts to make the central government more honest and efficient. Indeed, the only twentieth-century Italian government that severely reduced the power of the mafias was Mussolini's dictatorship; the Fascist Party didn't have to worry about elections or opposition parties.

These themes are seen most clearly in the South, itself the victim of foreign domination ever since the unification of Italy in 1860. At that time, the Southern state–the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, including Naples–was in the hands of the Bourbon monarchy, and it was conquered by the Northern armies. The Northern monarchy, headed by King Victor Emanuel, then imposed its rule on the entire coun-

try. Ever since, there has been a profound cultural divide between North and South, strikingly similar to the one in the United States. I sometimes think there is some sort of natural law that makes the South of most all countries more lively, and more fascinating, than the North. North means orderliness, disciplined enterprise, a certain moral rectitude, and an appreciation of the merits of hard work. South means spicy food, sexy women, a resistance to the work ethic, and passionate music. One of the most famous Neapolitan witticisms goes: "if you feel the urge to work, lie down and rest a while. It will pass." In Italy, this natural geographical/psychological division is accentuated by the Northern domination, and the distrust between the regions runs very deep indeed.

Unlike many northerners, Barzini loves the South, and not merely, as he engagingly (and deceptively) suggests, because he looks like a Southerner. He loves it above all because it is the most tragic part of the country, which is itself a tragedy. But unlike the Northerners, who continue to pretend that hard work and discipline will eventually win out against corruption, the peoples of the South accept the hopelessness of that cause and look for fulfillment elsewhere. No wonder so many of the greatest writers, actors, singers and philosophers come from the South. Barzini cites many Sicilian examples, but he could just as easily have chosen Naples, the birthplace of Totò, Caruso, Sophia Loren, Vico, Croce, Eduardo De Filippo and dozens of other singular talents.

All of which make Barzini the greatest guide to Italy, and therefore to ourselves as well. A civilization as ancient as Italy's has a good deal to say to us, especially at a moment when our ability to lead the free world is being challenged once again. Rome dominated the world for centuries, and the Italians ask themselves why they have been reduced to the status of a second-rate power. They also challenge us to reflect on the problems they failed to solve, and to tell them if we are as worthy as they were to lead the civilized peoples. There are a few quiet lines in Luigi's essay on Caesar that speak to our condition with a rare elegance. Caesar's central challenge–the one that he failed to meet–was how to

give Rome and the Romans a new identity, and new institutions suitable for their new empire. "Yet," he whispers in our modern ears, "their very greatness was rooted in their obsolete virtues." If they abandoned the old virtues, they would lose their identity, and, like other empires of the past, sink into corruption and decadence.

> This...is the problem of many successful republics, whose simple virtues make them strong enough, at one point, to conquer other people and assume imperial responsibilities. How can men, who are dedicated to liberty and the defense of their own independence, efficiently dominate subject peoples, without damning their own soul?

And there, in two lovely sentences, is the conundrum the United States must solve if we are to have a second successive American Century.

Luigi knew that. It's why he took the time to craft those lines.

Michael Ledeen

Part One

PERSONS

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I

JULIUS CAESAR

THE IDEA that there was something contradictory, inexplicable, and elusive about Gaius Julius Caesar's behavior on the last morning of his life haunts us still as it haunted his contemporaries. Surely the most powerful and feared man in Rome had been fully informed of the conspirators' plans to kill him. We know the secret had not been kept and many people were aware that something was afoot. Why then had he gone to the Senate meeting? Why did he expose himself so recklessly? Had he gone because he had wanted to die that day? Did the Republic, to which he had given so many victories, owe him this last benefit too, his own death, the death of the tyrant who had extinguished the ancient liberties? Had he tried to rob the conspirators of their glory?

And, if his secret decision was to die, how had he come to it? Like many others in Rome at the time, he knew that all problems were tied up in one inextricable knot; there was no solution, peace was maintained only by the threat of his invincible armies camping outside the walls, and pressure was mounting daily. "He could not see a way out," Cicero wrote after his death, "and if a man of his intelligence could not see a way out, who could?" Disenchanted and embittered, was Caesar also too tired to fend off his own death when it seemed inevitable—even necessary? "Some of his friends", Suetonius relates, "suspected that, having no wish to live longer, he had not desired to take any precautions."

Surely no murder in history was more clearly and more insistently predicted by supernatural and natural signs. No murder of a great man could have been more easily prevented. The

presages were so many and so evident that Plutarch, listing some of them, felt insecure without the backing of an authoritative contemporary witness: he quoted Strabo. The Greek Strabo was an 11-year-old schoolboy in Rome when Caesar died; presumably what details he related in his *History* (which has been lost) he had seen with his own eyes or learned first-hand and were indelibly etched in his memory like all dramatic events in children's lives. These are some of them: "On the day preceding the death of Caesar, men were seen looking as if they were heated through by fire, contending with each other; a quantity of flames issued from the hands of a soldier's servant, so that who saw it thought he must be burned . . ." Plutarch, who knew that similar prodigies had also appeared in the past to warn the public at large of indeterminate catastrophes, advised the reader to ignore most of them. "As to the lights in heaven," he says warily, "the noises in the night, and the wild birds perched in the Forum, these are perhaps not worth noticing . . ." Only the omens clearly concerning one man, Caesar, and pointing to one possible event, his death, were to be considered.

The meaning of some was unmistakable. A few months before, the veterans who had been sent to settle on land near Capua were breaking up ancient tombs to gather stones to build their farmhouses. One tomb turned out to be that of Capys, the legendary founder of the city, and there the men found a bronze tablet with a Greek inscription to this effect: "Disturb the tomb of Capys and a man of Trojan stock will be murdered by his kindred, and later avenged at great cost to Italy." (Caesar believed he was the descendant of Aeneas, the fugitive Trojan prince who found refuge in Italy.) A few days before his death, news reached him about a herd of horses which he had freed, after fording the river Rubicon—they were beginning to show a repugnance for the pasture and were shedding bucketsful of tears. On the very day before the Ides of March a little bird called a "king wren" flew into the hall of Pompey's theater (which the Senate used at the time for their meeting) with a sprig of laurel in its beak. Pursued by a swarm of hostile different birds it was torn to pieces there and then.

All these signs were obviously aimed at Caesar, as direct as arrows from a bow. The veterans looking for stones were his own soldiers; they wanted to build farmhouses on land granted to them by the "Julian Law", the law he himself had proposed to reward them. The weeping horses were his own, sacred to the fateful river he had to cross to start the civil war. The bird had been killed where the Senate met and not anywhere else, and was called "king".

Other omens were, if possible, even more personal and specific. When Caesar was at a sacrifice a few days before his death, the animal's heart could not be found. The night before his death, as he was in bed with his wife, all the doors and windows of the house suddenly flew open at once. He was startled at the noise and the light that broke into the room; he sat up in his bed; by the moonlight he saw Calpurnia asleep, and heard her utter indistinct words and inarticulate groans. She had dreamed she was weeping over Caesar, holding his body, harried with wounds, in her arms. Suetonius adds this most explicit omen of all: "During a sacrifice, the augur Spurinna warned him that the danger threatening him would not pass until the Ides of March. 'Beware of the Ides of March!' he said. . . ."

* * *

IT IS IMPORTANT to describe these portents, obviously not because we believe that future events can be read in the entrails of slaughtered animals, lights in the sky, or nightmares, but because such omens were considered at the time clear and awe-inspiring warnings which the bravest man could not easily bring himself to disregard. That Caesar himself knew what they meant is suggested by something he said the night before his murder. He was dining at the camp of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, outside Rome, where an army was being outfitted and trained for an expedition. He signed a few letters, reclined on his triclinium, and chatted with his old comrades during the long meal. Somebody asked idly what kind of death was the best. Before anyone else could speak, as if the thought had been in his mind for days, Caesar said: "A sudden one."

He was certainly also warned of his fate by more down-to-earth means. Like all dictators, he too had a network of spies in important households and government offices in Rome and the provinces. He too must have received anonymous letters and informers' tips. (Anonymous letters have always been a curse of Roman life: even today they descend like autumn leaves on the desk of every high official.) An ordinary tip was probably concealed in Spurinna's words, "Beware of the Ides of March!" Information had surely come from at least one of the many conspirators: how irresistible must have been, for the weakest of them, the temptation to assure himself a future of immense power and wealth by betraying his friends and saving the life of Caesar! Surely slaves had noticed and gossiped about their masters' mysterious meetings in strange places at night, the masked-ball disguises they wore, the preposterous orders they gave to ensure secrecy. Wives probably complained about the behavior of their husbands, so similar to their behavior when falling in love with other women, their abrupt replies to civil questions, the anxious expression always on their pale faces.

We know that there were leaks. Only minutes before the assassination, one senator, Popilius Laenas, approached Brutus and Cassius and said: "My wishes are with you, that you may accomplish what you design, and I advise you to make no delay, for the thing is now no secret . . ." We also know that one man who had learned about the plot tried to warn Caesar at the last moment. He was the Greek scholar Artemidorous, a former tutor of Brutus who had remained his friend; he was also an old acquaintance of Caesar who had met him in Greece many years before. He reached the dictator's house just as the litter started, ran after it and caught up with it in front of Pompey's theater. He gave Caesar a written message, containing the list of conspirators and their plans, and besought him to read it immediately, for it was a matter of life and death. Caesar had no time to open it. Petitioners were crowding around him, giving him written requests, and these he did not read either and handed them to his followers.

* * *

NEVERTHELESS, Caesar disregarded everything: the supernatural omens, the prophecies, the informers' tips, his wife's entreaties, his own premonitions. He did even more. He walked alone into the meeting, having dismissed the armed Spanish bodyguard who usually escorted him, as if he had taken at its face value the Senators' recent oath of loyalty and granted their request henceforth to entrust his safety to them when in their midst. This he did on a morning when gladiatorial contests were scheduled in Pompey's theater, and the place was teeming with unknown armed ruffians. He carried no weapons. He did not keep a short poignard (or *pugio*) concealed under the elegant folds of his crimson bordered toga, as he had often done; did not even wear a breastplate or a coat of mail, as the conspirators immediately discovered when they pressed close to him, before striking.

And yet he knew (even if he had known nothing more) that he was walking into a partly hostile assembly, to be surrounded by men who had fought valiantly against him in open battles during the Civil War and had been forgiven. Some he had even elevated to the highest positions: Brutus became governor of Gaul and Cassius one of his legates. Caesar was too wise not to know that, if forgiveness makes of many defeated opponents irreconcilable enemies, magnanimity and generosity make some of them ruthless and full of hatred. Can there be any doubt, then, when all this is considered, that Caesar contributed to his own death, and even collaborated with his murderers? Without his help they would not have succeeded.

He might, to be sure, have been unaware of doing so. He was never the kind of man who would be awed by omens or prophecies. "No regard for religion," Suetonius wrote, "ever turned him from any undertaking." Once, in Africa, he had even made irreverent use of a hallowed prediction. He was facing the remnants of Pompey's army commanded by Metellus Scipio, and (according to Plutarch) "was informed that his enemies relied much upon an ancient oracle, that the family of the Scipios should always be victorious in Africa. There was in his army a man, otherwise mean and contemptible but of the house of

Africanus, and his name was Scipio Sallutio. This man Caesar put at the head of his troops as if he were the general." Caesar won, of course.

He had been too much pursued by bad omens all his life to pay much attention to them. Not many months before, as he was riding through the Velabrum on the day of his Gallic triumph, one of the four he celebrated after he had become the sole master of the Roman world, the axle of his chariot broke and he was almost flung out. He calmly straightened the crown on his head, rearranged his clothes, and went on with the show. The very last omens of his life, drawn from the innards of the chickens sacrificed on the very steps of Pompey's theater a few minutes before his death, were appalling. Yet they did not stop him from walking on.

* * *

WE KNOW, on the other hand, that he had habitually disregarded warnings, friends' pleas and informers' tips many times in the past. He had a low opinion of ordinary men's fortitude and determination to undertake dangerous projects. He often said he doubted there was anybody in Rome great enough to kill Caesar. It was not only a practically impossible undertaking—and a sacrilegious one, now that he had been proclaimed Divus Julius, a god among the gods—but also, above all, a pointless one. Who would gain by his death? He had come to think of himself as an immovable pivot of the world's equilibrium, the keystone without which everything would crumble, an indispensable tool of history.

This delusion sometimes overtakes old and tired leaders who mingle with dangerous crowds, shake off their escorts, and announce their itineraries beforehand, as if everybody was as aware as they were that their death would solve no problem but only create new ones. A few days before the Ides of March Caesar had said disdainfully: "It is more important for Rome than for myself that I should survive. I have long been sated with power and glory. But should anything happen to me, Rome will enjoy no peace. A new civil war will break out under far

worse conditions than the last . . ." He, of course, should have known that some men at least, irresponsible fools or great heroes, start civil wars lightly and plunge the world into chaos without knowing how it will end or who will win. Had he himself not done just that only a few years before?

Perhaps it was simply impossible for Caesar not to take risks. He had never lived prudently, even as a disreputable debt-ridden young playboy dabbling in rabble-rousing oratory and dubious politics, sleeping with the bored wives of powerful men. His nature irresistibly drove him to face the greatest dangers. They attracted him like a magnet. In his military campaigns, he rarely played for safety except when he faced an inferior and weaker enemy: he did not want to waste his own men's lives to achieve a practically certain victory. But when he found himself on unfavorable ground—with a small army worn out by marches, without supplies and far from their base, facing a superior, confident and well-entrenched enemy—he had always attacked. He attacked also because, at such times, the enemy least expected him to do so. "He joined battle," Suetonius records, "not only after planning his movements but on a sudden opportunity as well, often immediately at the end of a march, and sometimes in the foulest weather, when one would least imagine him to make a move."

He surely did so the day he crossed the Rubicon, his biggest gamble. On one side of the river he was a loyal and victorious general in command of legions whose mission was to pacify the Gauls. On the other side, he formally became a rebel, at the head of a seditious army which had to be destroyed by the forces of law and order. People who knew him well, as Pompey did (and Pompey was the general facing him, commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the Republic, his son-in-law and his partner for years), were certain that he could not resist the temptation to cross the river but thought he would have to wait at Ravenna for the arrival of his full army. With only one legion at hand Caesar spurred his horse over the little bridge, explaining: "If I do not cross this river my holding back will be the source of my misfortunes. If I cross it, it will bring misfortunes

to the whole of the human race. The die is cast . . ." He was not a man who would prefer his own to the world's ruin.

A few months later, trying to pursue Pompey and his army across the Adriatic Sea, he arrived in Brindisi with a handful of men. Even as a youth he loved to rush ahead practically alone at great speed, without stopping for rest and food; he was pleased to be able to arrive somewhere even before the news of his departure from Rome had gotten through. His army would not be in Brindisi for days or weeks. The winter weather was forbidding, the sea was rough, he had few ships and no supplies. He said to his staff: "I consider rapidity of movement the best substitute for all the things I want . . . The most potent thing in war is the unexpected." And so he crossed the Adriatic.

Above all he believed in himself. He believed that his very presence would dominate men's wills, still passions, and deflect history. He had fully employed his mesmeric charm in both politics and war, and he owed his rise largely to it. Centuries before Clausewitz, Caesar had understood that politics and war were closely connected—almost inseparable—and governed roughly by the same rules. He could arouse or persuade the common people of Rome, the senators, enemy sovereigns, or his legionaries at will, with a well-studied and ornate speech, a few angry sentences, or his silent presence. He once quelled a mutiny of his best men, the veterans of the Tenth Legion, with a single word. He addressed them contemptuously as "Citizens". "We are your soldiers, Caesar," they shouted, "not citizens." And, being his soldiers, they suddenly realized they had to obey him.

He also overawed men who did not know who he was, and this even before he had become great and famous. Once, in his youth, while on his way to Rhodes to study literature and oratory, he was captured by pirates. He treated them disdainfully as his servants; when he wanted to sleep he sent orders to them to keep quiet; and for the best part of six weeks joined in their games, practiced his rhetoric on them, called them illiterate barbarians to their faces, and in raillery threatened to have them crucified. Somehow sensing the leader in him, they admired and obeyed him meekly. Six weeks later, when his

ransom arrived and he was freed, he hired several galleys, returned to surprise the pirates in their lair, and crucified the lot as he had promised.

Men were eager to die for him for no other apparent reason than that he was he. "Those who in ordinary expeditions were but ordinary men displayed a courage past defeating . . . where Caesar's glory was concerned," wrote Plutarch, who goes on to cite examples of his gift to inspire in others an unnatural contempt for life. "One time in Africa, Scipio, having taken a ship of Caesar's in which Granius Petro, lately appointed quaestor, was sailing, gave the other passengers as free prizes to his soldiers, but thought fit to offer the quaestor his life. Granius Petro said it was not for Caesar's soldiers to take but give mercy, and, having said so, fell upon his sword and killed himself."

Many times, in one of those desperately uneven battles in which Caesar liked to stake his luck, he saved the day by rushing where his men were being beaten back. During one of his early campaigns in Gaul, his troops were surprised, while they were busy building trenches, by an overwhelming army of Nervii. Caesar says in his *Commentaries* that "he himself had everything to do at one moment": raise the red battle-ensign, sound the alarm, bring in the men who were digging trenches and felling timber, and give orders. He then rushed over to the Twelfth Legion, which was being massacred and was falling back in disorder. He seized a shield from one of the soldiers in the rear ranks, pushed his way to the front, called upon the centurions by name, then sounded the charge. The mere gesture revived his men and made them surge forward. At the end of the day the Nervii were hacked to pieces. "This engagement," Caesar drily noted in his memoirs, "brought the name and nation of the Nervii almost to utter destruction."

Caesar's presence had saved the last battle he ever fought, near Munda, in 45 B.C. in Spain, against Pompey's son Gnaeus. Caesar's men were frightened and had started to run away. When he saw the confusion and panic in their ranks, he felt helpless for the first time in his life and cried out against Fortune "who had reserved him so unworthy an end". "The thought of

death could be read in his face," writes Florus. He was so desperate he even tried to appeal to the gods: he raised his hands to heaven and implored them "not to make him lose the fruits of so many victories in one single battle." Then he rallied. He sent away his horse, dropped his shield, removed his helmet and sword which hindered him, and ran "like a madman" to the front line, where he insulted, exhorted and threatened his men.

As this did not check their panic, he once again seized a shield from a soldier, and, running forward, cried: "It is here that I am going to die, killed by the enemy, and that you see the end of your military service . . ." (Defeated soldiers could scarcely enjoy slaves and estates in their retirement.) "With these words," Appian relates, "he dashed from the ranks and advanced toward the enemy until he was no more than ten feet away. A hailstorm of two hundred arrows descended upon him; some passed without touching him, his shield protected him from the others. Then each of the tribunes came running towards him and fought at his side. This movement led the entire army to turn with vehemence against the enemy."

The fighting ended in the evening. "Never had Caesar waged a more bloody and more perilous battle," says Velleius Paterculus. As he entered his tent he told his men: "I have often fought for victory, but today, for the first time, I have fought for my life."

* * *

IN TROUBLED TIMES, things look infinitely simple to young men in a hurry at the bottom of the ladder. The problem of reaching the next rung and the rung after that absorbs them almost completely. Their preference in political abstractions (if they think about them at all) is for the most drastic and radical; whether of the right or the left matters little as long as they promise to get them to the top fast enough. They have a natural liking for revolution: there is nothing like a revolution to liberate the top echelons quickly and thoroughly. At 16 years of age, Julius Caesar, the penniless patrician, was just the type: ambitious, impatient, immensely gifted, proud, restless, dis-

solute and angry—as angry as the sons of an hereditary élite can be who grow up to see themselves dispossessed by *nouveaux riches* with crass, cynical and dull ideas.

Power in Rome clearly no longer depended on birth, a respected name, a well-ramified family, as it had done when the Republic was small, virtuous, and poor. Power now came from wealth. Well-managed wealth gave a man friends, allies, *dignitas* (which meant status, prestige and honor); it could give him power to increase his wealth and, thus, to acquire more power. Ordinarily only men of noble birth sat in the Senate, but, without wealth and power of their own, they had become bit players without importance. A man with wealth and power no longer needed to sit in the Senate: he got others to do that for him. If power came from wealth, wealth itself (when not inherited) had to come from power. And the wealthiest, most powerful men in Rome were the generals. A commander-in-chief at the head of loyal legions could always threaten the Senate with civil war. Plunder and army contracts enriched many people, but Rome's commanders most of all.

This was a relatively recent development, and the cause of many of Rome's misfortunes. In the old days, when wars had been simple and short, fought not far from home against primitive tribes or effete Greek colonies, temporary armies were formed by Roman citizens, mostly farmers in the infantry and a few richer men in the cavalry. These men fought hard to defeat the enemy as quickly as possible and to get back to their fields and plows. Political responsibility was in the hands of the Senate, as it had always been. After the Punic wars, when vast domains across the seas were conquered—Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain—waging wars became the most profitable industry of Rome. Tributes, plunder and the sale of slaves enriched the treasury, the army commanders, and the soldiers; contracts enriched a new business class. The soldiers, however, had to fight far from home and for indefinite periods, sometimes for many years. Obviously, the Latin farmers were no longer suited for these campaigns. Who could take their place?

It was Marius, the plebeian dictator and leader of the popular

party (and the husband of Caesar's aunt) who solved the problem. For the first time, he made use of volunteer professional soldiers, men belonging to all classes, landless city rabble, dispossessed farmers, freed slaves, foreigners who enrolled only for the hope of getting rich. Naturally these men preferred long wars against affluent and defenseless enemies and, as soon as one war had ended, they enrolled for the next one. Their loyalty no longer went to the Republic but to their paymaster whose fortune was their fortune. Political power gradually passed to the generals in the fields, and it was they who became the protagonists of life in Rome: they had the wealth, the power, the legions to threaten the Senate. When two or more of them were simultaneously in the field, civil war was an irresistible temptation and indeed became endemic.

How could a relatively obscure young man become a general? It took time, luck and pertinacity. He had to climb the political ladder, one election after another, to always more important posts, without ever making a mistake. Finally, if everything went well, the people would elect him consul and the Senate would give him a key province to govern and the command of the legions garrisoned there. But to win even minor offices, a man needed both a large popular backing and plenty of money with which to campaign and to bribe the electorate. The two things went together. A strong popular backing brought in the money: but money was needed in the first place to win popular backing. As in other lands and other times, in Rome during the last years of the Republic, it took wealth to amass wealth, money went where money was, and the first hundred million sesterces were the hardest to make. This was the vicious circle that young Caesar, without wealth or power, had to break. It was a formidable obstacle.

He developed a plan (or perhaps his homing instinct took him in the right direction). First, a short spell of military service (every man had to have a grounding of that, just in case, in a State in which generals were chosen among the leading politicians) and it was easier to learn the first elements in subordinate positions when one was young. Then he concentrated on the

study of jurisprudence and Greek rhetoric. Caesar's native capacity to talk convincingly and his incredibly persuasive presence were his best assets. He later became one of the best orators of his age. He could charm his most obstinate opponents with words. Cicero, no mean judge, wrote: "He is the master of an eloquence which is brilliant and without a suggestion of routine . . . Which orator is more pointed and terse in his periods, or employs more polished and elegant language?" He was also a witty private conversationalist: "His talk showed good taste and exquisite savor," Cicero noted after he had entertained Caesar at dinner, three months before the Ides of March.

Rhetoric, young Caesar rightly assumed, was an inexpensive way to acquire a reputation in the Forum, an initial popular following, and to make a few important people notice him as a promising young man. Friends, he reckoned, would help him get elected to the lower and easier posts. With the money he could make or borrow and the more important friends he could gather, he would then climb on, a rung at a time. How high depended on the help of Venus (the goddess of love who was one of his "ancestors"), depended on luck and on himself.

Caesar was also physically well suited for such a career. He was tall—tall, that is, for a Roman of his day. He had black, piercing eyes, and an ironic expression hovering over his face. He was subject to fits of epilepsy, but otherwise enjoyed excellent health and an abnormal capacity to endure hardships. He was an excellent swimmer and a fine horseman, he could travel at great speed, like a courier, work or fight day and night without rest. In his mature age he used to dictate literary works and military reports to two or three secretaries simultaneously. He was always extremely elegant, although he had the slovenly habit of keeping his belt loosely tied, an affectation which was later copied by everybody. To disguise his premature baldness, he combed his hair forward and, in later years, frequently wore a laurel wreath. His gallantries were notorious. He started early in his youth sleeping with the wives of some of the most important gentlemen in Rome and the famous beauties of his time. Rumor whispered that he often also slept with their

husbands as well. As with many ambitious men, beds were stepping-stones in his career.

Caesar did not have to choose political sides: although an aristocrat, he was born a member of the proletarian party. He was 14 when his uncle-in-law Marius triumphed over the patricians' party, conquered Rome for a time, and had the leading men in the Senate massacred by his soldiers. Caesar was 16 when Marius died in 86 B.C.; 20 when Sulla, the champion of the conservatives, defeated the *populares*, and proceeded to slaughter all his opponents. Caesar had to flee. A party of Sulla's soldiers found his refuge in the Samnium, but he saved his life by promptly bribing their commander. There were no other serious attempts to persecute him: he was, it was said, too dissolute and wild to be taken seriously. And by heritage at least, he had many aristocratic relatives among the winners.

He thought it prudent nevertheless to go to the farthest war he could find and start his training. In 81 B.C. he was in Asia, on the staff of the praetor Minucius Thermus, where he distinguished himself in various ways. He was given an award for bravery and entrusted with delicate diplomatic tasks at the court of the King of Bythinia. "There," says Suetonius, "he wasted so much time that a homosexual relationship between him and the King was suspected." Perhaps he was shrewdly using the royal bed as a conference table. He later campaigned in Cilicia with another army, all the while keeping carefully away from Rome.

When news of Sulla's death reached him, he gave up soldiering for a time and proceeded to the next stage in the education of the future "conqueror of the world". He went to school in Rhodes, studying literature, philosophy, and the arts of persuasive eloquence under the most famous master of his days, Apollonius Molon, who had also taught Cicero. He tried his new abilities as soon as he returned to Rome, dabbling for a time in law practice. For one of his first legal cases, he chose a powerful opponent, a former consul, Dolabella, and prosecuted him for extortion while in power. He lost the case, but obviously Caesar was more interested in notoriety than in justice or righteousness. Dolabella, he should have known, was too big to

be convicted. But the young lawyer's eloquence won many admirers; people talked about him, and he began to gather a small following.

To make friends he kept an open house and (according to Plutarch) "the general splendor of his life increased his political influence." His opponents did not suspect his aims. They thought he was one more frivolous young man who frittered away ill-gotten gains on entertainment, and that his growing influence would vanish when his credit gave out. Only Cicero, a provincial who had made good in Rome and knew how hard it was, detected in him the first signs of an unquenchable thirst for absolute power. "But," he said, "when I see his hair so carefully arranged, and observe him adjusting it with one finger, I cannot imagine it should enter into such a man's head to subvert the Roman state."

The borrowed money soon did give out and Caesar quickly plunged into further debts which soon reached such an unheard of magnitude that his creditors, men of considerable power, began to worry. Caesar must have figured that some of them would be obliged to help him get an army command in hopes of being paid back. This, of course, was his great gamble—the way he had devised to break the vicious circle.

"Even before he had any public employment", Plutarch explains, "he was in debt thirteen hundred talents, and many thought that by incurring such expense to be popular he changed a solid good for what would prove but a short and uncertain return; but in truth he was purchasing what was of the greatest value at an inconsiderable price. When he was *aedile* he spent great sums out of his private purse; he provided such a number of gladiators that he entertained the people with 300 single combats, besides offering theatrical shows, processions, public feastings . . . Everyone was eager to find new offices and new honors for him in return for his munificence."

He ran for election to minor positions, climbing steadily. In 61 B.C., fourteen years after his return from Rhodes, when his debts were on the point of overwhelming him, he managed to reach his first substantial and profitable post: he was appointed

praetor in charge of quelling rebellious Spanish tribes. This was the chance he had been working for. At the last minute an apparently insurmountable obstacle threatened to prevent his voyage and defeat his plans to find power and wealth in Spain. Some of his creditors insisted he pay a large part of the money owed them before he left, and had his baggage, carriages, and horses seized. His great gamble looked like a failure. He could not get to Spain if he did not pay his debts; he could not pay his debts (and prepare himself to conquer greater power) unless he went to Spain.

Caesar turned to the only man who could save him—Crassus. Crassus was the richest man in Rome, known as "*Dives*", The Wealth, and, like many very rich men in times of anarchy and chaos, was almost paralyzed with fear. He was so nervous he had been playing every side, "being", as Plutarch deplores, "neither a trusted friend nor an implacable enemy, and he easily abandoned both his attachments and his animosities, so that in a short space of time the same men and the same measures had him both as their supporter and their opponent . . ." Crassus knew that the men then in power (an oligarchy of conservative patricians feebly controlling the Senate) could have been overturned by almost anybody with enough strength and determination.

What would happen, for instance, when the great Pompey—the most glorious general of his time, with his huge seasoned army, immense fleet, and all the treasures of the East he had plundered—came back from war? Crassus knew: his own father and brother had been killed for opposing Marius, although they had not been his active or outspoken opponents. Rich men, even those who paid no attention to politics or who were on both sides of every dispute, somehow had a much better chance of being murdered than anybody else, and of having their property seized and distributed among the winners. Crassus knew he needed as many strong friends as he could find: ruthless, ambitious, clever, bold men, possibly in need of money but with a strong popular backing. Caesar was everything Crassus could wish for.

So Crassus paid off most of Caesar's debts and pledged himself to finance the rest of the expedition. On Caesar's arrival in Spain "he took money from the proconsul who was his predecessor . . . and from the Roman allies, for the discharge of his debt" (according to Suetonius) and proceeded to subdue the Lusitanians and the Calaici in a quick campaign. "Advancing as far as the Ocean he conquered new tribes which had never been subject to the Romans," Suetonius continues, and which, therefore, had never been thoroughly plundered before. Caesar sent some of the booty home to the Roman treasnry, distributed more than a fair share among his soldiers, and, for the first time in his life, became a wealthy man. He was finally ready to try for bigger stakes.

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THE SITUATION in Rome in 60 B.C. was extremely precarious. The conservative oligarchy had been in command since the death of Sulla. Sporadic revolts and uprisings showed the angry mood of the people. The *populares*, after Marius' defeat, were broken, disheartened, impotent. Caesar was sympathetic—it was the party of his youth—but there was little he could do immediately. He encouraged popular agitations, whenever possible, even tried his hand at promoting a revolution (on a trip back from Spain, the uprising of the Transpadanes demanding full political rights), but with only modest results. He played a careful game. Democratic enough to be considered the moral head of the *populares*, their champion, he fanned the people's discontent with his speeches, whenever it looked convenient and safe. He was a demagogue just sufficiently to alarm the oligarchy and to force them to try to win his favor, but not enough to provoke their fear and serious enmity.

Once again time was ripe for a great leader, with the means and the will to reach for supreme power, as Marius and Sulla had in their days. But who? There was no single obvious leader. There were three men, each one of whom could have tried it:

Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar. Crassus had his immense wealth, the backing of a large section of the population and of a fair share of the Senate, and could easily find military commanders who would lease him their legions for a price. Pompey was the great military conqueror, who had destroyed the pirates infesting the Mediterranean, had defeated Mithridates, and had amassed money and men. There was enmity between the two leaders which might have broken out into a new civil war at any time.

Caesar was clearly the weakest of the three: he had neither the money of one nor the armies of the other. What should he do? The obvious course was to encourage the enmity between Crassus and Pompey, play his hand very prudently, and hope to come out as sole survivor of the struggle. When one of them seemed to be winning, he could rush to his aid. But it was a risky plan. Would the winner tolerate a minor rival for long? Would he not destroy Caesar, too, in the end?

Caesar's final decision shows the magnitude of his versatile political genius. It took immense diplomatic ability and exceptional persuasive power. It would have probably been impossible to any other man. Afterwards, the main developments of his whole life inevitably fell into place, one after another, as predictably as the moves of a chess game played by a champion after the opening gambit. He simply convinced Pompey and Crassus to make peace and secretly join with him in a partnership to dominate Rome. What each one of them could not hope to achieve without an exhausting and hazardous war, the three of them could do overnight by merely sealing a pact.

"Everybody was astounded," wrote Guglielmo Ferrero, the Italian historian who is recognized as an authority on this period. "The rivalry between Crassus and Pompey had been the principal reason why the reactionary clique had preserved power for so long; it was such an old rivalry that everybody considered it permanent. Then, overnight, as if by magic, the two enemies were seen to agree and to join forces with the very popular leader of the Roman populace . . . It was obvious that

the alliance of the three men could dispose of the people's assemblies, all public officers, the banks; they were, as the Americans would say, the bosses of an all-powerful political machine. From then on it would be impossible to obtain a post, a command, or a loan without their consent. The majority of Senators without party, who always sided with the strongest, tumultuously deserted the little faction of intransigent conservatives which had held power until then; and, if they did not immediately pay obeisance to the three, they certainly avoided coming into open conflict with them."

With the help of his partners, Caesar in 59 B.C. easily became consul and, within a year, governor of the two Gauls (Northern Italy and France). His military achievements are too famous to be recounted here. He spent ten years in Gaul (always coming back to North Italy, but not to Rome, to mend political fences and direct the work of his agents in the city). He consolidated the Roman domination, pacified the inhabitants simply by killing one million of them out of a total of three, defended the Rhine frontier against the encroaching Germans, and made two expeditions into Britain. Meantime, he amassed one of the greatest fortunes of his times, possibly larger than that of Crassus, acquired unsurpassed military experience and became one of the most successful generals of all ages, with a brilliant and tested staff of officers and a number of practically invincible legions, all loyal to him to the death.

He also collected statues, mosaics, paintings, cameos, engraved precious stones, rare jewels (the invasion of Britain was prompted also by the hope of finding fresh-water pearls which he loved). He bought the most expensive slaves, the best specialists in all fields; entertained imperially (one dining room in camp was reserved for his officers and Greek friends, another for mere Roman citizens and provincials). He himself ate and drank little. (Cato said of him: "He is the only sober man who tried to wreck the Constitution.") He spent fortunes for his household but kept a strict account of every penny and condemned to death negligent or wasteful servants.

He dressed like a dandy. His affairs with women continued