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Robert Graves's edition of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, all for Penguin Classics; *Roman Literature* (Penguin); *The Climax of Rome*; *The Ancient Historians*; *Gladiators*; *Latin Literature and Greek Literature*; *Cleopatra*; *The Jews of the Roman World*; *Roman Myths*; *The Army of the Caesars*; *The Twelve Caesars*; *The Fall of the Roman Empire*; *Cities of Vesuvius*; *Saint Paul*; *Jesus*; *History of Rome*; *The Etruscans*; *Greek and Latin Authors 800 BC-AD 1,000*; *The Dawn of the Middle Ages*; *From Alexander to Cleopatra*; *The Roman Emperors*; *Greece and Rome: Guide to the Ancient World*; *The Rise of the Greeks*; *The Classical Greeks*; *The Visible Past*; *Greeks and Romans: A Social History*; *Readings in the Classical Historians*; *Julius Caesar*; *Nero*; *The Antonines*; *Art in the Roman Empire*; and *The Severans*.

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THE
TWELVE
CAESARS



Gaius Suetonius
Tranquillus



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Penguin Books



1979

45. Caesar is said to have been tall, fair, and well-built, with a rather broad face and keen, dark-brown eyes. His health was sound, apart from sudden comas and a tendency to nightmares which troubled him towards the end of his life; but he twice had epileptic fits while on campaign. He was something of a dandy, always keeping his head carefully trimmed and shaved; and has been accused of having certain other hairy parts of his body depilated with tweezers. His baldness was a disfigurement which his enemies harped upon, much to his exasperation; but he used to comb the thin strands of hair forward from his poll, and of all the honours voted him by the Senate and People, none pleased him so much as the privilege of wearing a laurel wreath on all occasions – he constantly took advantage of it.

His dress was, it seems, unusual: he had added wrist-length sleeves with fringes to his purple-striped senatorial tunic, and the belt which he wore over it was never tightly fastened – hence Sulla's warning to the aristocratic party: 'Beware of that boy with the loose clothes!'

46. Caesar's first home was a modest house in the Subura quarter, but later, as Chief Pontiff, he used the official residence on the Sacred Way. Contemporary literature contains frequent references to his fondness for luxurious living. Having built a country mansion at Nemus from the foundations up, one story goes, he found certain features in it to dislike, so that, although poor at the time and heavily in debt, he tore the whole place down. It is also recorded that he carried tessellated and mosaic pavements with him on his campaigns.

47. Pearls seem to have been the lure that prompted his invasion of Britain; he would sometimes weigh them in the palm of his hand to judge their value, and was also a keen collector of gems, carvings, statues, and Old Masters. So high were the prices he paid for slaves of good appearance and attainments that he became ashamed of his extravagance and would not allow the sums to be entered in his accounts.

48. I find also that, while stationed abroad, he always had dinner served in two separate rooms: one for his officers and Greek friends, the other for Roman citizens and the more important provincials. He paid such strict attention to his domestic economy, however small the detail, that he once put his baker in irons for giving him a different sort of bread from that served to his guests; and executed a favourite

freedman for committing adultery with a knight's wife, although no complaint had been lodged by the husband.

49. The only specific charge of unnatural practices ever brought against him was that he had been King Nicomedes' bedfellow – always a dark stain on his reputation and frequently quoted by his enemies. Licinius Calvus published the notorious verses:

The riches of Bithynia's King
Who Caesar on his couch abused.

Dolabella called him 'the Queen's rival and inner partner of the royal bed', and Curio the Elder: 'Nicomedes' Bithynian brothel'.

Bibulus, Caesar's colleague in the consulship, described him in an edict as 'the Queen of Bithynia . . . who once wanted to sleep with a monarch, but now wants to be one'. And Marcus Brutus recorded that, about the same time, one Octavius, a scatterbrained creature who would say the first thing that came into his head, walked into a packed assembly where he saluted Pompey as 'King' and Caesar as 'Queen'. Moreover, Gaius Memmius directly charges Caesar with having joined a group of Nicomedes' debauched young friends at a banquet, where he acted as the royal cup-bearer; and adds that certain Roman merchants, whose names he supplies, were present as guests. Cicero, too, not only wrote in several letters:

Caesar was led by Nicomedes' attendants to the royal bedchamber, where he lay on a golden couch, dressed in a purple shift . . . So this descendant of Venus lost his virginity in Bithynia.

but also once interrupted Caesar while he was addressing the House in defence of Nicomedes' daughter Nysa and listing his obligations to Nicomedes himself. 'Enough of that,' Cicero shouted, 'if you please! We all know what he gave you, and what you gave him in return.' Lastly, when Caesar's own soldiers followed his decorated chariot in the Gallic triumph, chanting ribald songs, as they were privileged to do, this was one of them:

Gaul was brought to shame by Caesar;
By King Nicomedes, he.
Here comes Caesar, wreathed in triumph
For his Gallic victory!
Nicomedes wears no laurels,
Though the greatest of the three.

57. Caesar was a most skilful swordsman and horseman, and showed surprising powers of endurance. He always led his army, more often on foot than in the saddle, went bareheaded in sun and rain alike, and could travel for long distances at incredible speed in a gig, taking very little luggage. If he reached an unfordable river he would either swim or propel himself across it on an inflated skin; and often arrived at his destination before the messengers whom he had sent ahead to announce his approach.

58. It is a disputable point which was the more remarkable when he went to war: his caution or his daring. He never exposed his army to ambushes, but made careful reconnaissances; and refrained from crossing over into Britain until he had collected reliable information about the harbours there, the best course to steer, and the navigational risks. On the other hand, when news reached him that his camp in Germany was being besieged, he disguised himself as a Gaul and picked his way through the enemy outposts to take command on the spot.

He ferried his troops from Brundisium to Dyrrhachium in the winter season, running the blockade of Pompey's fleet. And one night, when Antony had delayed the supply of reinforcements, despite repeated pleas, Caesar muffled his head with a cloak and secretly put to sea in a small boat, alone and incognito; forced the helmsman to steer into the teeth of a gale, and narrowly escaped shipwreck.

59. Religious scruples never deterred him for a moment. At the formal sacrifice before he launched his attack on Scipio and King Juba, the victim escaped; but he marched off at once. He had also slipped and fallen as he disembarked on the coast of Africa, but turned an unfavourable omen into a favourable one by shouting: 'Africa, I have tight hold of you!' Then, to ridicule the prophecy according to which it was the Scipios' fate to be perpetually victorious in Africa, he took about with him a contemptible member of the Cornelian branch of the Scipio family nicknamed 'Salvito' – or 'Greetings! but off with him!' – the 'Off with him!' being a mockery of his way of life.

60. Sometimes he fought after careful tactical planning, sometimes on the spur of the moment – at the end of a march, often; or in miserable weather, when he would be least expected to make a move.

Towards the end of his life, however, he took fewer chances; having come to the conclusion that his unbroken run of victories ought to sober him, now that he could not possibly gain more by winning yet another battle than he would lose by a defeat. It was his rule never to let enemy troops rally when he had routed them, and always therefore to assault their camp at once. If the fight were a hard-fought one he used to send the chargers away – his own among the first – as a warning that those who feared to stand their ground need not hope to escape on horseback.

61. This charger of his, an extraordinary animal with feet that looked almost human – each of its hoofs was cloven in five parts, resembling human toes – had been foaled on his private estate. When the soothsayers pronounced that its master would one day rule the world, Caesar carefully reared, and was the first to ride, the beast; nor would it allow anyone else to do so. Eventually he raised a statue to it before the Temple of Mother Venus.

62. If Caesar's troops gave ground he would often rally them in person, catching individual fugitives by the throat and forcing them round to face the enemy again; even if they were panic-stricken – as when one standard-bearer threatened him with the sharp butt of his Eagle and another, whom he tried to detain, ran off leaving the Eagle in his hand.

63. Caesar's reputation for determination is fully borne out by the instances quoted. After Pharsalus, he had sent his legions ahead of him into Asia and was crossing the Hellespont in a small ferry-boat, when Lucius Cassius with ten naval vessels approached. Caesar made no attempt to escape but rowed towards the flagship and demanded Cassius' surrender; Cassius gave it and stepped aboard Caesar's craft.

64. Again, while attacking a bridge at Alexandria, Caesar was forced by a sudden enemy sortie to jump into a row-boat. So many of his men followed him that he dived into the sea and swam 200 yards until he reached the nearest Caesarean ship – holding his left hand above water the whole way to keep certain documents dry; and towing his purple cloak behind him with his teeth, to save this trophy from the Egyptians.

65. He judged his men by their fighting record, not by their morals or social position, treating them all with equal severity – and equal indulgence; since it was only in the presence of the enemy that he

offender imprisoned. But Caesar reprimanded and summarily deposed them both: either because the suggestion that he should be crowned King had been so rudely rejected, or else because - this was his own version - they had given him no chance to reject it himself and so earn deserved credit. From that day forward, however, he lay under the odious suspicion of having tried to revive the title of King; though, indeed, when the commons greeted him with 'Long live the King!' he now protested: 'No, I am Caesar, not King'; and though, again, when he was addressing the crowd from the Rostra at the Luperalian Festival, and Mark Antony, the Consul, made several attempts to crown him, he refused the offer each time and at last sent the crown away for dedication to Capitoline Jupiter. What made matters worse was a persistent rumour that Caesar intended to move the seat of government to Troy or Alexandria, carrying off all the national resources, drafting every available man in Italy for military service, and letting his friends govern the city. At the next meeting of the House (it was further whispered), Lucius Cotta would announce a decision of the Fifteen who had charge of the Sibylline Books, that since these prophetic writings stated clearly: 'Only a king can conquer the Parthians,' the title of King must be conferred on Caesar.

80. Because his enemies shrank from agreeing to this proposal, they pressed on with their plans for his assassination. Several groups, each consisting of two or three malcontents, now united in a general conspiracy. Even the commons had come to disapprove of how things were going, and no longer hid their disgust at Caesar's tyrannical rule but openly demanded champions to protect their ancient liberties. When foreigners were admitted to the Senate someone put up a poster which read: 'Long live our country;' but if any newly-appointed senator inquires the way to the Senate House, let nobody direct him there! And the following popular song was sung everywhere:

Caesar led the Gauls in triumph,
Led them uphill, led them down,
To the Senate House he took them,
Once the glory of our town.
'Pull those breeches off,' he shouted,
'Change into a purple gown!'

1. *Bonum factum (sit)*, a formula prefixed to edicts.

At Quintus Maximus, one of the three-months' Consuls, entered the Theatre, the lictor called out as usual: 'Make way for the Consul!' Cries of protest went up: 'What? For him? He's no Consul!' The deposition of Caesetius and Marullus caused such widespread annoyance that at the next Consular elections the commons cast a great many votes in their favour. Someone then wrote on the pedestal of Lucius Brutus' statue: 'If only you were alive now!' and on that of Caesar himself:

'Brutus was elected Consul
When he sent the kings away;
Caesar sent the Consuls packing,
Caesar is our King today.'

More than sixty conspirators banded together against him, led by Gaius Cassius and Marcus and Decimus Brutus. A suggested plan was to wait until the consular elections, when Caesar would take his stand on the wooden bridge along which voters walked to the poll; one group of conspirators would then topple him over, while another waited underneath with daggers drawn. An alternative was to attack him in the Sacred Way or at the entrance to the Theatre. The conspirators wavered between these plans until Caesar called a meeting of the Senate in the Pompeian Assembly Room for the Ides of March; they then decided at once that this would be a convenient time and place.

81. Unmistakable signs forewarned Caesar of his assassination. A few months previously the veterans who had been sent to colonize Capua under the Julian Law were breaking up some ancient tombs in search of stone for their new farm-houses - all the more eagerly when they came across a large hoard of ancient vases. One of these tombs proved to be that of Capys, founder of the city, and there they found a bronze tablet with a Greek inscription to this effect: 'Disturb the bones of Capys, and a man of Trojan stock will be murdered by his kindred, and later avenged at great cost to Italy.' This story should not be dismissed as idle fiction, or a lie, because our authority for it is none other than Cornelius Balbus, a close friend of Caesar's. Soon afterwards news reached Caesar that a herd of horses which he had dedicated to the river Rubicon, after fording it, and allowed to roam untended in the valley, were beginning to show a repugnance for the



AUGUSTUS

AFTERWARDS DEIFIED

THE FAMILY OF THE OCTAVII, by all accounts, were famous in ancient Velitrae. An 'Octavian Street' runs through the busiest part of the city, and an altar is shown there consecrated by one Octavius, a local commander. Apparently news of an attack by a neighbouring city reached him while he was sacrificing a victim to Mars; snatching the intestines from the fire, he offered them only half-burned, and hurried away to win the battle. The records at Velitrae include a decree that all future offerings to Mars must be made in the same fashion, the carcase of every victim becoming a perquisite of the Octavians.

2. King Tarquinius Priscus admitted the Octavii, among other lesser families, to the Roman Senate, and though Servius Tullius awarded them patrician privileges, they later reverted to plebeian rank until eventually Julius Caesar made them patricians once more. Gaius Rufus was the first Octavius elected to office by the popular vote - he won a quaestorship. His sons Gnaeus and Gaius fathered

two very different branches of the family, Gnaeus' descendants held all the highest offices of state in turn; but Gaius' branch, either by accident or choice, remained simple knights until the entry into the Senate of Augustus' father. Augustus' great-grandfather had fought as a colonel under Aemilius Papus¹ in Sicily during the Second Punic War. His grandfather, who enjoyed a comfortable income, was apparently content with a municipal magistracy, and lived to an advanced age. This information is given by others; it is not derived from Augustus' own memoirs, which merely record that he came of a rich old equestrian family, and that his father had been the first Octavius to enter the Senate. Mark Antony wrote scornfully that Augustus' great-grandfather had been only a freedman, a ropemaker from the neighbourhood of Thurii; and his grandfather, a money-changer. This is as much information as I have managed to glean about the paternal ancestors of Augustus.

3. I cannot believe that Gaius Octavius, his father, was also a money-changer who distributed bribes among the voters in the Campus and undertook other electioneering services. He was certainly born rich; from the start of his life a man of wealth and repute, brought up in sufficient affluence to achieve office without having to engage in such practices; and proved a capable administrator. After his praetorship, he became governor of Macedonia, and the Senate commissioned him to pass through Thurii on his way there and disperse a group of outlawed slaves who, having fought under Spartacus and Catiline, were now holding possession of the district. He governed Macedonia courageously and justly, winning a big battle in Thrace, mainly against the Bessians; and letters survive from Cicero reproaching his brother Quintus, then proconsular governor of Asia, for inefficiency, and advising him to make Octavius his model in all diplomatic dealings with allies.

4. Gaius died suddenly on his return to Rome, before he could stand as a candidate for the consulship. He left three children: Octavia the Elder, Octavia the Younger, and Augustus. The mother of Octavia the Elder was Ancharia; the other two were his children by Atia, daughter of Marcus Atius Balbus and Julius Caesar's sister Julia. Balbus' family originated in Aricia, and could boast of many ancestral busts of senators; his mother was also closely related to

1. 205 B.C.

shame that most of those charged with being bachelors or childless, or too poor to sustain their rank, were in fact married, or fathers of families, or quite comfortably off; and one knight, accused of having attempted suicide with a dagger, tore off his clothes and cried: 'Then show me the scar!' Among Claudius' memorable acts as Censor was the purchase of a beautiful silver chariot, offered for sale in the Sigillarian Street; he then had it hacked to pieces before his eyes! Two of the twenty edicts which he once published on a single day were: 'This year's vintage is unusually abundant, so everyone must pitch his wine-jars well,' and: 'Yew-juice is sovereign against snake-bite.'

17. Claudius' sole campaign was of no great importance. The Senate had already voted him triumphal regalia, but he thought it beneath his dignity to accept these, and decided that Britain was the country where a real triumph could be most readily earned. Its conquest had not been attempted since Julius Caesar's day; and the Britons were now threatening vengeance because the Senate refused to return certain deserters. Sailing from Ostia, Claudius was twice nearly wrecked off the Ligurian coast, and again near the Stoechades Islands, but made port safely at Massilia. In consequence he marched north through Gaul until reaching Gesoriacum; crossed the Channel from there; and was back in Rome six months later. He had fought no battles and suffered no casualties, but reduced a large part of the island to submission. His triumph was a very splendid one, and among those whom he invited to witness it were his provincial governors, and certain exiles as well. The emblems of his victory included the naval crown¹, representing the crossing and conquest, so to speak, of the ocean which he set on the Palace gable beside the civic crown.² His wife, Messalina, followed the chariot in a covered carriage, and behind her marched the generals who had won triumphal regalia in Britain. All wore purple-bordered togas except Marcus Crassus Frugi; having earned this same honour on a previous occasion, he now came dressed in a palm-embroidered tunic and rode a caparisoned charger.

18. Claudius always interested himself in the proper upkeep of the city and the regular arrival of grain supplies. When an obstinate fire ravaged the Aemilian quarter, he lodged at the Election hut on the

1. Decorated with the beaks of ships.

2. Of oak-leaves; awarded for the saving of Roman citizens' lives.

Campus Martius for two nights running; and, because a force of Guards and another of Palace servants proved insufficient to cope with the blaze, made the magistrates summon the commons from every city district and then sat, with bags of coin piled before him, recruiting fire-fighters; whom he paid, on the nail, whatever seemed a suitable fee for their services.

Once, after a series of droughts had caused a scarcity of grain, a mob stopped Claudius in the Forum and pelted him so hard with curses and stale crusts that he had difficulty in regaining the Palace by a side-door; as a result he took all possible steps to import grain, even during the winter months - insuring merchants against the loss of their ships in stormy weather (which guaranteed them a good return on their ventures), and offering a large bounty for every new grain-transport built, proportionate to its tonnage.

19. The shipowner, if he happened to be a Roman citizen, was exempted from the Papien-Poppaeian Law;¹ if only a possessor of Latin rights, acquired full Roman citizenship; if a woman, enjoyed the privileges granted to mothers of four children. These regulations have never since been modified.

20. Claudius' public works, though not numerous, were important. They included, in particular, an aqueduct begun by Gaius; the draining of the Fucine Lake and the building of the harbour at Ostia - though he knew that Augustus had turned down the Marsians' frequent requests for emptying the Lake, and that Julius Caesar, while often on the point of excavating the harbour at Ostia, had always abandoned the project as impractical. Claudius also brought the cool and abundant springs called the Caerulean and the Curtian, or Albidignan, as well as the New Anio, into Rome; the water ran along a stone aqueduct, with lofty arches, now known by his name, and was then distributed into a number of ornamental reservoirs. He undertook the Fucine drainage scheme as much for profit as for glory: a group of businessmen had offered to shoulder the expense if he awarded them the reclaimed land. The outlet took eleven years to dig, although 30,000 men were kept continuously at work; it was three miles long, and his engineers had to level part of a hill and tunnel through the remainder. At Ostia, Claudius constructed a new port by throwing out curved breakwaters on either side of the

1. Which increased sanctions against celibacy.