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CÆSAR. A SKETCH

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Between brackets [] some additional translations from Latin to Dutch by Tommie Hendriks

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It remains to offer a few general remarks on the person whose life and actions I have endeavoured to describe in the preceding pages.

In all conditions of human society distinguished men are the subjects of legend; but the character of the legend varies with the disposition of the time. In ages which we call heroic the saint works miracles, the warrior performs exploits beyond the strength of natural man. In ages less visionary which are given to ease and enjoyment the tendency is to bring a great man down to the common level, and to discover or invent faults which shall show that he is or was but a little man after all. Our vanity is soothed by evidence that those who have eclipsed us in the race of life are no better than ourselves, or in some respects are worse than ourselves; and if to these general impulses be added political or personal animosity, accusations of depravity are circulated as surely about such men, and are credited as readily, as under other influences are the marvellous achievements of a Cid or a St. Francis. In the present day we reject miracles and prodigies; we are on our guard against the mythology of hero worship, just as we disbelieve in the eminent superiority of any one of our contemporaries to another. We look less curiously into the mythology of scandal; we accept easily and willingly stories disparaging to illustrious persons in history, because similar stories are told and retold with so much confidence and fluency among the political adversaries of those who have the misfortune to be their successful rivals. The absurdity of a calumny may be as evident as the absurdity of a miracle; the ground for belief may be no more than a lightness of mind, and a less pardonable wish that it may be true. But the idle tale floats in society, and by and by is written down in books and passes into the region of established realities.

The tendency to idolize great men and the tendency to depreciate them arises alike in emotion; but the slanders of disparagement are as truly legends as the wonder-tales of saints and warriors; and anecdotes related of Cæsar at patrician dinner-parties at Rome as little deserve attention as the information so freely given upon the habits of modern statesmen in the *salons* of London and Paris. They are read now by us in classic Latin, but they were recorded by men who hated Cæsar and hated all that he had done; and that a poem has survived

for two thousand years is no evidence that the author of it, even though he might be a Catullus, was uninfluenced by the common passions of humanity.

Cæsar, it is allowed, had extraordinary talents, extraordinary energy, and some commendable qualities; but he was, as the elder Curio said, ‘omnium mulierum vir et omnium virorum mulier;’ [de man van alle vrouwen en de vrouw van alle mannen] he had mistresses in every country which he visited, and he had *liaisons* with half the ladies in Rome. That Cæsar's morality was altogether superior to that of the average of his contemporaries is in a high degree improbable. He was a man of the world, peculiarly attractive to women, and likely to have been attracted by them. On the other hand, the indiscriminating looseness attributed to him would have been peculiarly degrading in a man whose passions were so eminently under control, whose calmness was never known to be discomposed, and who, in everything which he did, acted always with deliberate will. Still worse would it be if, by his example, he made ridiculous his own laws against adultery and indulged himself in vices which he punished in others. What, then, is the evidence? The story of Nicomedes may be passed over. All that is required on that subject has been already said. It was never heard of before Cæsar's consulship, and the proofs are no more than the libels of Bibulus, the satire of Catullus, and certain letters of Cicero's which were never published, but were circulated privately in Roman aristocratic society.¹ A story is suspicious which is first produced after twenty years in a moment of political excitement. Cæsar spoke of it with stern disgust. He replied to Catullus with an invitation to dinner; otherwise he passed it over in silence—the only answer which an honourable man could give. Suetonius quotes a loose song sung by Cæsar's soldiers at his triumph. We know in what terms British sailors often speak of their favourite commanders. Affection, when it expresses itself most emphatically, borrows the language of its opposites. Who would dream of introducing into a serious life of Nelson catches chanted in the fore-castle of the ‘Victory’? But which of the soldiers sang these verses? Does Suetonius mean that the army sang them in chorus as they marched in procession? The very notion is preposterous. It is proved that during Cæsar's lifetime scandal was busy with his name; and that it would be so busy, whether justified or not, is certain from the nature of things. Cicero says that no public man in Rome escaped from such imputations. He himself flung them broadcast, and they were equally returned upon himself. The surprise is rather that Cæsar's name should have suffered so little, and that he should have been admitted on reflection by Suetonius to have been comparatively free from the abominable form of vice which was then so common.

As to his *liaisons* with women, the handsome, brilliant Cæsar, surrounded by a halo of military glory, must have been a Paladin of romance to any woman who had a capacity of admiration in her. His own distaste for gluttony and hard

¹ Suetonius, *Julius Cæsar*, 49.

drinking, and for the savage amusements in which the male Romans so much delighted, may have made the society of cultivated ladies more agreeable to him than that of men, and if he showed any such preference the coarsest interpretation would be inevitably placed upon it. These relations, perhaps, in so loose an age assumed occasionally a more intimate form; but it is to be observed that the first public act recorded of Cæsar was his refusal to divorce his wife at Sylla's bidding; that he was passionately attached to his sister; that his mother, Aurelia, lived with him till she died, and that this mother was a Roman matron of the strictest and severest type. Many names were mentioned in connection with him, yet there is no record of any natural child save Brutus, and one other whose claims were denied and disproved.

Two intrigues, it may be said, are beyond dispute. His connection with the mother of Brutus was notorious. Cleopatra, in spite of Oppius, was living with him in his house at the time of his murder. That it was so believed a hundred years after his death is, of course, indisputable; but in both these cases the story is entangled with legends which show how busily imagination had been at work. Brutus was said to be Cæsar's son, though Cæsar was but fifteen when he was born; and Brutus, though he had the temper of an Orestes, was devotedly attached to his mother in spite of the supposed adultery, and professed to have loved Cæsar when he offered him as a sacrifice to his country's liberty. Cleopatra is said to have joined Cæsar at Rome after his return from Spain, and to have resided openly with him as his mistress. Supposing that she did come to Rome, it is still certain that Calpurnia was in Cæsar's house when he was killed. Cleopatra must have been Calpurnia's guest as well as her husband's; and her presence, however commented upon in society, could not possibly have borne the avowed complexion which tradition assigned to it. On the other hand, it is quite intelligible that the young Queen of Egypt, who owed her position to Cæsar, might have come, as other princes came, on a visit of courtesy, and that Cæsar after their acquaintance at Alexandria should have invited her to stay with him. But was Cleopatra at Rome at all? The only real evidence for her presence there is to be found in a few words of Cicero: 'Reginae fuga mihi non molesta.'—'I am not sorry to hear of the flight of the queen.'² [De vlucht van de koningin heeft mij niet verdrotten] There is nothing to show that the 'queen' was the Egyptian queen. Granting that the word Egyptian is to be understood, Cicero may have referred to Arsinoë, who was called Queen as well as her sister, and had been sent to Rome to be shown at Cæsar's triumph.

But enough and too much on this miserable subject. Men will continue to form their opinions about it, not upon the evidence, but according to their preconceived notions of what is probable or improbable. Ages of progress and equality are as credulous of evil as ages of faith are credulous of good, and reason will not modify convictions which do not originate in reason.

² *To Atticus*, xiv. 8.

Let us pass on to surer ground.

In person Cæsar was tall and slight. His features were more refined than was usual in Roman faces; the forehead was wide and high, the nose large and thin, the lips full, the eyes dark gray like an eagle's, the neck extremely thick and sinewy. His complexion was pale. His beard and moustache were kept carefully shaved. His hair was short and naturally scanty, falling off toward the end of his life and leaving him partially bald. His voice, especially when he spoke in public, was high and shrill. His health was uniformly strong until his last year, when he became subject to epileptic fits. He was a great bather, and scrupulously clean in all his habits, abstemious in his food, and careless in what it consisted, rarely or never touching wine, and noting sobriety as the highest of qualities when describing any new people. He was an athlete in early life, admirable in all manly exercises, and especially in riding. In Gaul, as has been said already, he rode a remarkable horse, which he had bred himself, and which would let no one but Cæsar mount him. From his boyhood it was observed of him that he was the truest of friends, that he avoided quarrels, and was most easily appeased when offended. In manner he was quiet and gentlemanlike, with the natural courtesy of high-breeding. On an occasion when he was dining somewhere the other guests found the oil too rancid for them. Cæsar took it without remark, to spare his entertainer's feelings. When on a journey through a forest with his friend Oppius, he came one night to a hut where there was a single bed. Oppius being unwell, Cæsar gave it up to him, and slept on the ground.

In his public character he may be regarded under three aspects, as a politician, a soldier, and a man of letters.

Like Cicero, Cæsar entered public life at the bar. He belonged by birth to the popular party, but he showed no disposition, like the Gracchi, to plunge into political agitation. His aims were practical. He made war only upon injustice and oppression; and when he commenced as a pleader he was noted for the energy with which he protected a client whom he believed to have been wronged. At a later period, before he was praetor, he was engaged in defending Masintha, a young Numidian prince, who had suffered some injury from Hiempsal, the father of Juba. Juba himself came to Rome on the occasion, bringing with him the means of influencing the judges which Jugurtha had found so effective. Cæsar in his indignation seized Juba by the beard in the court; and when Masintha was sentenced to some unjust penalty Cæsar carried him off, concealed him in his house, and took him to Spain in his carriage. When he rose into the Senate, his powers as a speaker became strikingly remarkable. Cicero, who often heard him, and was not a favourable judge, said that there was a pregnancy in his sentences and a dignity in his manner which no orator in Rome could approach. But he never spoke to court popularity; his aim from first to last was better government, the prevention of bribery and extortion, and the distribution among deserving citizens of some portion of the public land which

the rich were stealing. The Julian laws, which excited the indignation of the aristocracy, had no other objects than these; and had they been observed they would have saved the Constitution. The obstinacy of faction and the civil war which grew out of it obliged him to extend his horizon, to contemplate more radical reforms—a large extension of the privileges of citizenship, with the introduction of the provincial nobility into the Senate, and the transfer of the administration from the Senate and annually elected magistrates to the permanent chief of the army. But his objects throughout were purely practical. The purpose of government he conceived to be the execution of justice; and a constitutional liberty under which justice was made impossible did not appear to him to be liberty at all.

The practicality which showed itself in his general aims appeared also in his mode of working. Cæsar, it was observed, when anything was to be done, selected the man who was best able to do it, not caring particularly who or what he might be in other respects. To this faculty of discerning and choosing fit persons to execute his orders may be ascribed the extraordinary success of his own provincial administration, the enthusiasm which was felt for him in the North of Italy, and the perfect quiet of Gaul after the completion of the conquest. Cæsar did not crush the Gauls under the weight of Italy. He took the best of them into the Roman service, promoted them, led them to associate the interests of the Empire with their personal advancement and the prosperity of their own people. No act of Cæsar's showed more sagacity than the introduction of Gallic nobles into the Senate; none was more bitter to the Scipios and Metelli, who were compelled to share their august privileges with these despised barbarians.

It was by accident that Cæsar took up the profession of a soldier; yet perhaps no commander who ever lived showed greater military genius. The conquest of Gaul was effected by a force numerically insignificant, which was worked with the precision of a machine. The variety of uses to which it was capable of being turned implied, in the first place, extraordinary forethought in the selection of materials. Men whose nominal duty was merely to fight were engineers, architects, mechanics of the highest order. In a few hours they could extemporize an impregnable fortress on an open hillside. They bridged the Rhine in a week. They built a fleet in a month. The legions at Alesia held twice their number pinned within their works, while they kept at bay the whole force of insurgent Gaul, entirely by scientific superiority. The machine, which was thus perfect, was composed of human beings who required supplies of tools, and arms, and clothes, and food, and shelter, and for all these it depended on the forethought of its commander. Maps there were none. Countries entirely unknown had to be surveyed; routes had to be laid out; the depths and courses of rivers, the character of mountain passes, had all to be ascertained. Allies had to be found among tribes as yet unheard of. Countless contingent difficulties had to be provided for, many of which must necessarily arise, though the exact nature of them could not be anticipated. When room for accidents is left open,

accidents do not fail to be heard of. Yet Cæsar was never defeated when personally present, save once at Gergovia, and once at Durazzo; and the failure at Gergovia was caused by the revolt of the Ædui; and the manner in which the failure at Durazzo was retrieved showed Cæsar's greatness more than the most brilliant of his victories. He was rash, but with a calculated rashness, which the event never failed to justify. His greatest successes were due to the rapidity of his movements, which brought him on the enemy before they heard of his approach. He travelled sometimes a hundred miles a day, reading or writing in his carriage, though countries without roads, and crossing rivers without bridges. No obstacles stopped him when he had a definite end in view. In battle he sometimes rode; but he was more often on foot, bareheaded, and in a conspicuous dress, that he might be seen and recognized. Again and again by his own efforts he recovered a day that was half lost. He once seized a panic-stricken standard-bearer, turned him round, and told him that he had mistaken the direction of the enemy. He never misled his army as to an enemy's strength, or if he misstated their numbers it was only to exaggerate. In Africa, before Thapsus, when his officers were nervous at the reported approach of Juba, he called them together and said briefly, 'You will understand that within a day King Juba will be here with the legions, thirty thousand horse, a hundred thousand skirmishers, and three hundred elephants. You are not to think or ask questions. I tell you the truth, and you must prepare for it. If any of you are alarmed, I shall send you home.'

Yet he was singularly careful of his soldiers. He allowed his legions rest, though he allowed none to himself. He rarely fought a battle at a disadvantage. He never exposed his men to unnecessary danger, and the loss by wear and tear in the campaigns in Gaul was exceptionally and even astonishingly slight. When a gallant action was performed, he knew by whom it had been done, and every soldier, however humble, might feel assured that if he deserved praise he would have it. The army was Cæsar's family. When Sabinus was cut off, he allowed his beard to grow, and he did not shave it till the disaster was avenged. If Quintus Cicero had been his own child, he could not have run greater personal risk to save him when shut up at Charleroy. In discipline he was lenient to ordinary faults, and not careful to make curious inquiries into such things. He liked his men to enjoy themselves. Military mistakes in his officers too he always endeavoured to excuse, never blaming them for misfortunes, unless there had been a defect of courage as well as judgment. Mutiny and desertion only he never overlooked. And thus no general was ever more loved by, or had greater power over, the army which served under him. He brought the insurgent 10th legion into submission by a single word. When the civil war began and Labienus left him, he told all his officers who had served under Pompey that they were free to follow if they wished. Not another man forsook him.

Suetonius says that he was rapacious, that he plundered tribes in Spain who were allies of Rome, that he pillaged shrines and temples in Gaul, and

destroyed cities merely for spoil. He adds a story which Cicero would not have left untold and uncommented on if he had been so fortunate as to hear of it: that Cæsar when first consul took three thousand pounds weight of gold out of the Capitol and replaced it with gilded brass. A similar story is told of the Cid and of other heroes of fiction. How came Cicero to be ignorant of an act which, if done at all, was done under his own eyes? When prætor Cæsar brought back money from Spain to the treasury; but he was never charged at the time with peculation or oppression there. In Gaul the war paid its own expenses; but what temples were there in Gaul which were worth spoiling? Of temples, he was, indeed, scrupulously careful. Varro had taken gold from the Temple of Hercules at Cadiz. Cæsar replaced it. Metellus Scipio had threatened to plunder the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. Cæsar protected it. In Gaul the Druids were his best friends; therefore he certainly had not outraged religion there; and the quiet of the province during the civil war is a sufficient answer to the accusation of gratuitous oppression.

The Gauls paid the expenses of their conquest in the prisoners taken in battle, who were sold to the slave merchants; and this is the real blot on Cæsar's career. But the blot was not personally upon Cæsar, but upon the age in which he lived. The great Pomponius Atticus himself was a dealer in human chattels. That prisoners of war should be sold as slaves was the law of the time, accepted alike by victors and vanquished; and the crowds of libertini who assisted at Cæsar's funeral proved that he was not regarded as the enemy of these unfortunates, but as their special friend.

His leniency to the Pompeian faction has already been spoken of sufficiently. It may have been politic, but it arose also from the disposition of the man. Cruelty originates in fear, and Cæsar was too indifferent to death to fear anything. So far as his public action was concerned, he betrayed no passion save hatred of injustice; and he moved through life calm and irresistible, like a force of nature.

Cicero has said of Cæsar's oratory that he surpassed those who had practised no other art. His praise of him as a man of letters is yet more delicately and gracefully emphatic. Most of his writings are lost; but there remain seven books of commentaries on the wars in Gaul (the eighth was added by another hand), and three books upon the civil war, containing an account of its causes and history. Of these it was that Cicero said, in an admirable image, that fools might think to improve on them, but that no wise man would try it; they were *nudi omni ornatu orationis, tanquam veste detractâ*—bare of all oratorical ornament, like an undraped human figure [geheel ontbloot van oratorische versierselen, puur natuur, als een mens zonder kleren]. In his composition, as in his actions, Cæsar is entirely simple. He indulges in no images, no laboured descriptions, no conventional reflections. His art is unconscious, as the highest art always is. The actual fact of things stands out as it really was, not as mechanically photographed, but interpreted by the calmest intelligence, and

described with unexaggerated feeling. No military narrative has approached the excellence of the history of the war in Gaul. Nothing is written down which could be dispensed with; nothing important is left untold; while the incidents themselves are set off by delicate and just observations on human character. The story is rendered attractive by complimentary anecdotes of persons; while details of the character and customs of an unknown and remarkable people show the attention which Cæsar was always at leisure to bestow on anything which was worthy of interest, even when he was surrounded with danger and difficulty. The books on the civil war have the same simplicity and clearness, but a vein runs through them of strong if subdued emotion. They contain the history of a great revolution related by the principal actor in it; but no effort can be traced to set his own side in a favourable light, or to abuse or depreciate his adversaries. The coarse invectives which Cicero poured so freely upon those who differed from him are conspicuously absent. Cæsar does not exult over his triumphs or parade the honesty of his motives. The facts are left to tell their own story; and the gallantry and endurance of his own troops are not related with more feeling than the contrast between the confident hopes of the patrician leaders at Pharsalia and the luxury of their camp with the overwhelming disaster which fell upon them. About himself and his own exploits there is not one word of self-complacency or self-admiration. In his writings, as in his life, Cæsar is always the same—direct, straightforward, unmoved save by occasional tenderness, describing with unconscious simplicity how the work which had been forced upon him was accomplished. He wrote with extreme rapidity in the intervals of other labour; yet there is not a word misplaced, not a sign of haste anywhere, save that the conclusion of the Gallic war was left to be supplied by a weaker hand. The Commentaries, as an historical narrative, are as far superior to any other Latin composition of the kind as the person of Cæsar himself stands out among the rest of his contemporaries.

His other compositions have perished, in consequence, perhaps, of the unforgiving republican sentiment which revived among men of letters after the death of Augustus—which rose to a height in the ‘Pharsalia’ of Lucan—and which leaves so visible a mark in the writings of Tacitus and Suetonius. There was a book ‘De Analogiâ,’ written by Cæsar after the conference at Lucca, during the passage of the Alps. There was a book on the Auspices, which, coming from the head of the Roman religion, would have thrown a light much to be desired on this curious subject. In practice Cæsar treated the auguries with contempt. He carried his laws in open disregard of them. He fought his battles careless whether the sacred chickens would eat or the calves’ livers were of the proper colour. His own account of such things in his capacity of Pontifex would have had a singular interest.

From the time of his boyhood he kept a common-place book, in which he entered down any valuable or witty sayings, inquiring carefully, as Cicero takes pains to tell us, after any smart observation of his own. Niebuhr remarks that no

pointed sentences of Cæsar's can have come down to us. Perhaps he had no gift that way, and admired in others what he did not possess.

He left in verse 'an account of the stars'—some practical almanac, probably, in a shape to be easily remembered; and there was a journal in verse also, written on the return from Munda. Of all the lost writings, however, the most to be regretted is the 'Anti-Cato.' After Cato's death Cicero published a panegyric upon him. To praise Cato was to condemn Cæsar; and Cæsar replied with a sketch of the Martyr of Utica as he had himself known him. The pamphlet, had it survived, would have shown how far Cæsar was able to extend the forbearance so conspicuous in his other writings to the most respectable and the most inveterate of his enemies. The verdict of fact and the verdict of literature on the great controversy between them have been summed up in the memorable line of Lucan—

Victrix causa Deis placuit, sed victa Catoni.

[De winnende zaak beviel de goden, de verliezende Cato]

Was Cato right, or were the gods right? Perhaps both. There is a legend that at the death of Charles V. the accusing angel appeared in heaven with a catalogue of deeds which no advocate could palliate—countries laid desolate, cities sacked and burnt, lists of hundreds of thousands of widows and children brought to misery by the political ambition of a single man. The evil spirit demanded the offender's soul, and it seemed as if mercy itself could not refuse him the award. But at the last moment the Supreme Judge interfered. The Emperor, He said, had been sent into the world at a peculiar time, for a peculiar purpose, and was not to be tried by the ordinary rules. Titian has painted the scene: Charles kneeling before the Throne, with the consciousness, as became him, of human infirmities, written upon his countenance, yet neither afraid nor abject, relying in absolute faith that the Judge of all mankind would do right.

Of Cæsar, too, it may be said that he came into the world at a special time and for a special object. The old religions were dead, from the Pillars of Hercules to the Euphrates and the Nile, and the principles on which human society had been constructed were dead also. There remained of spiritual conviction only the common and human sense of justice and morality; and out of this sense some ordered system of government had to be constructed, under which quiet men could live and labour and eat the fruit of their industry. Under a rule of this material kind there can be no enthusiasm, no chivalry, no saintly aspirations, no patriotism of the heroic type. It was not to last forever. A new life was about to dawn for mankind. Poetry, and faith, and devotion were to spring again out of the seeds which were sleeping in the heart of humanity. But the life which is to endure grows slowly; and as the soil must be prepared before the wheat can be sown, so before the Kingdom of Heaven could throw up its shoots there was needed a kingdom of this world where the nations were neither torn in pieces by violence nor were rushing after false ideals and spurious ambitions.

Such a kingdom was the Empire of the Cæsars—a kingdom where peaceful men could work, think, and speak as they pleased, and travel freely among provinces ruled for the most part by Gallios, who protected life and property, and forbade fanatics to tear each other in pieces for their religious opinions. ‘It is not lawful for us to put any man to death,’ was the complaint of the Jewish priests to the Roman governor. Had Europe and Asia been covered with independent nations, each with a local religion represented in its ruling powers, Christianity must have been stifled in its cradle. If St. Paul had escaped the Sanhedrim at Jerusalem, he would have been torn to pieces by the silver-smiths at Ephesus. The appeal to Cæsar's judgment-seat was the shield of his mission, and alone made possible his success.

And this spirit, which confined government to its simplest duties, while it left opinion unfettered, was especially present in Julius Cæsar himself. From cant of all kinds he was totally free. He was a friend of the people, but he indulged in no enthusiasm for liberty. He never dilated on the beauties of virtue, or complimented, as Cicero did, a Providence in which he did not believe. He was too sincere to stoop to unreality. He held to the facts of this life and to his own convictions; and as he found no reason for supposing that there was a life beyond the grave he did not pretend to expect it. He respected the religion of the Roman State as an institution established by the laws. He encouraged or left unmolested the creeds and practices of the uncounted sects or tribes who were gathered under the eagles. But his own writings contain nothing to indicate that he himself had any religious belief at all. He saw no evidence that the gods practically interfered in human affairs. He never pretended that Jupiter was on his side. He thanked his soldiers after a victory, but he did not order *Te Deums* to be sung for it; and in the absence of these conventionalisms he perhaps showed more real reverence than he could have displayed by the freest use of the formulas of pietism.

He fought his battles to establish some tolerable degree of justice in the government of this world; and he succeeded, though he was murdered for doing it.

Strange and startling resemblance between the fate of the founder of the kingdom of this world and of the Founder of the kingdom not of this world, for which the first was a preparation. Each was denounced for making himself a king. Each was maligned as the friend of publicans and sinners; each was betrayed by those whom he had loved and cared for; each was put to death; and Cæsar also was believed to have risen again and ascended into heaven and become a divine being.

