

WORDS OF CAESAR

by BRANCH CABELL

WHEN they crowded about you, Caesar, the last faces which you saw upon earth, and in the chill March sunlight three and twenty knives were a-glitter—waveringly, in a confused onset, so perturbed by their victim's greatness that your half-panic-stricken murderers cut and mangled not only you but one another also,—then there was yet time to enrich the back of the dictionary with one more classical quotation. You seized that chance, you who let slip few chances. You cried out, in the instant that Marcus Brutus, your youthful well-loved protégé, was seen to have drawn his sword against you, "And you also,—my son, Brutus!"

That, Caesar, was finely said. Than this brief acknowledgment of paternity, in these exact circumstances, nothing could have been more dramatic, more simple, more poignant, or more easily memorable—which, after all, is a chief point to be regarded by the great in selecting their dying words.

Thereafter, it is recorded, drawing up your robe before your face, you expired with extreme dignity, in the Senate House at Rome, in the precise centre of the terrene stage, before a large and select audience of earth's very foremost notabilities. With such neatness was all contrived that you fell just in front of Pompey's statue, like a proffered sacrifice to the *manes* of him from whom you had wrested the world. As you his destruction some four years earlier, so now he supervised yours. And to complete everything, Marcus Brutus, the child of that Servilia whom you had loved in youth, had been quite unwittingly your son until the instant he became your murderer. No death scene, in brief, was ever better stage managed than when chance thus happily led up to the superb theatrical situation with which you made your exit.

And yet time—which, in the cliché, at least, tests all—time has brushed aside your last words (along with your once famous epigrams, "The die is cast" and "I came, I saw, I conquered") as an utterance in no deep sense characteristic. And chance, Caesar, all-treacherous chance, has fostered among us doubt if upon this high occasion you did actually light on *le mot juste*. We have begun to feel that you who died with such savoir faire, at the bright crest of your fame and of earthly omnipotence, as an acknowledged immortal, ought to have foreseen a bit more clearly the nature of this immortality.

That your nescience was human, one grants—and, indeed, it may have been unavoidable. Even had affairs so fallen out as to restrict you to a more trite ending, upon a leisurely death-bed of the sort favored by Lytton Strachey and regrettably futilized by his imitators, it appears doubtful that, in the customary three pages of reminiscences through which so very many famous persons have of late years travelled backward to infancy, you would have remembered to include your enduring achievement. To Cleopatra (who would by this time have been your fourth wife) and to your beloved Brutus, weeping at the bedside, you would have said, we know, something heroic and well-chosen and wholly adequate, with the tact of a skilled diplomat rising handsomely to the occasion. But it seems improbable that even then, in such more happily unhurried mortuary moments, Gaius Julius Caesar would have remarked, "All Gaul is divided into three parts."

Yet it is by these words, Caesar, that you have been immortalized, by these words alone you are remembered among us. So unpredictable are fate's workings that, in our later and lesser times, we employ the political propaganda which you called your "Commentaries on the Gallic War" as a school book. And the simplicity of language with which, as became an accomplished politician, you were careful to address the unlettered, but voting, lower classes has well earned for you the distinction of being that Roman writer against whom our young may charge most hopefully in the opening skirmish with Latin syntax. Thus is it brought about that, in the freely impressionable hours of childhood, no great while after learning that Jack Sprat could eat no fat and that George Washington cut down a cherry-tree, each one of us acquires likewise the knowledge that all Gaul is divided into three parts: and these maxims abide with us throughout life.

No one of us, Caesar, at any future time forgets your initial statement—or, at any rate, the first part of it. (Many

memories, I admit, do skid at "of which the Belgians" and so on.) We recall forever that it was Caesar who said, "All Gaul is divided into three parts."

Nor may the pensive begrudge you, Caesar, your enduring fame: fame here was merited; for that in the greatness of your multiform achievements, and in the variousness of your talents, you exceeded all other men who have worn mortality, appears hardly disputable. In considering you, the one difficulty is to light on any rôle in which Caesar did not excel. For you were not only the chief executive, the world's king, and the military commander who had led armies into all known countries, without ever finding defeat. One recalls that, beginning life as a highly thought-of clergyman, you became equally looked-up-to as a criminal lawyer, in extensive practise, besides being famous as an orator; that you were a virtuoso of every liberal art, and the most popular of seducers among the less scrupulous sex, as well as among your own sex; that you were an applauded poet, a well-thought-of astronomer, and the peerless war correspondent of your day; that you were a conceded authority on sewage, published a first-rate treatise upon rhetoric, and founded a dozen or two cities. All things, in brief, were possible to you, Caesar, who wrote our calendar, as it were, with one hand and organized the world's first police department with the other, in the same instant that you were being worshipped as a god, with your own private shrine, in the temple of Quirinus. Not even in the politician's most delicate art of embezzlement had you any serious rival.

This much, O lordliest of all humankind, one can recall idly, upon the spur of the moment, without bothering to consult Plutarch, or Suetonius, or any encyclopædia, so that a little research work may complete the list of your unexampled exploits. For the point is that no one of these doings has mattered a bean's worth. Out of all this splendor, as the lean product of mankind's supreme achievement in the way of mortal living, survive just seven words; and the one memento of the greatness of Gaius Julius Caesar, the most mighty of human heroes, remains the not even true statement that all Gaul is divided into three parts.