

FROM
The Life of Caesar

PLUTARCH

Translated from the Greek by
Rex Warner

The first modern biographer and the greatest biographer of the ancient world was Plutarch, who wrote The Life of Caesar more than a century after Caesar's death. Julius Caesar (102?-44 B.C.) was a dazzling military genius. After his victories in the Gallic Wars and the defeat of his rival, Pompey, in a civil war, Caesar became ruler of the Roman world. He had himself appointed dictator for life. This selection from Plutarch opens with Caesar's victorious return to Rome after crushing the last resistance to his power. However, as Caesar enters the city in triumph, a conspiracy to overthrow him is already under way.

As you read, ask yourself what interpretation Plutarch brings to the events he recounts. Can you determine his attitude toward his subject?

What made Caesar most openly and mortally hated was his passion to be made King. It was this which made the common people hate him for the first time, and it served as a most useful pretext for those others who had long hated him but had up to now disguised their feelings. Yet those who were trying to get this honor conferred on Caesar actually spread the story among the people that it was foretold in the Sibylline books;¹ that Parthia² could only be conquered by the Romans if the Roman army was led by a king; and as Caesar was coming

down from Alba to Rome, they ventured to salute him as "King," which caused a disturbance among the people. Caesar, upset by this himself, said that his name was not King but Caesar. These words were received in total silence, and he went on his way looking far from pleased. Then there was an occasion when a number of extravagant honors had been voted for him in the senate, and Caesar happened to be sitting above the rostra. Here he was approached by the consuls and the praetors³ with the whole senate following behind; but instead of rising to receive them, he behaved

1. Sibylline books: nine ancient prophetic books, supposed to reveal the destiny of Rome.
2. Parthia: ancient country southeast of the Caspian Sea, in what is now northeast Iran.

3. consuls: the two chief magistrates of the Roman republic; praetors (prætorz): A praetor was a magistrate with judicial duties, ranking just below consul.

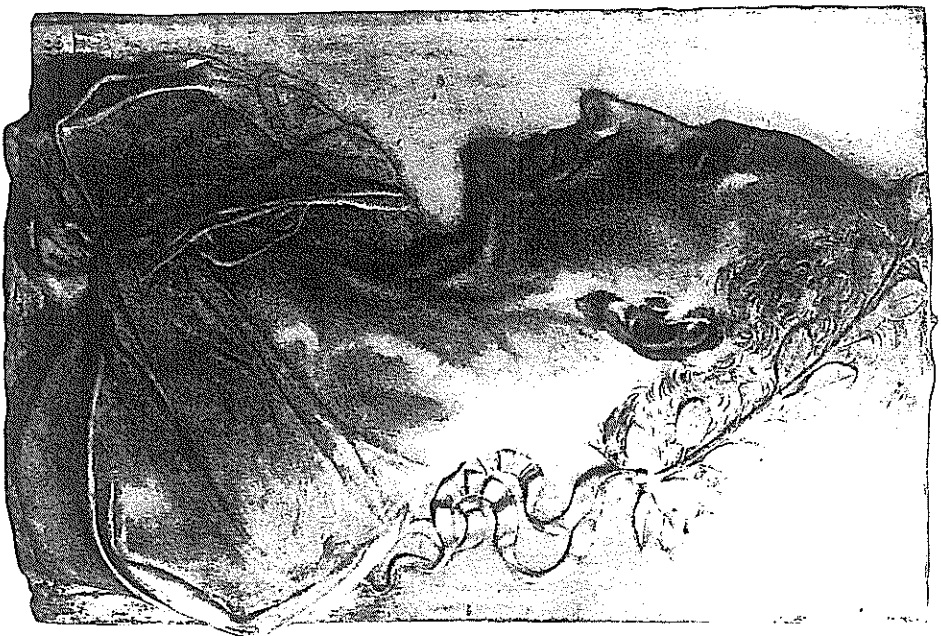
to them as though they were merely private individuals and, after receiving their message, told them that his honors ought to be cut down rather than increased. This conduct of his offended not only the senate but the people as well, who felt that his treatment of the senators was an insult to the whole state. There was a general air of the deepest dejection, and everyone who was in a position to do so went away at once. Caesar himself realized what he had done and immediately turned to go home. He drew back his toga and, uncovering his throat, cried out in a loud voice to his friends that he was ready to receive the blow from anyone who liked to give it to him. Later, however, he excused his behavior on account of his illness,⁴ saying that those who suffer from it are apt to lose control of their senses if they address a large crowd while standing; in these circumstances they are very subject to fits of giddiness and may fall into convulsions and insensibility. This excuse, however, was not true. Caesar himself was perfectly willing to rise to receive the senate; but, so they say, one of his friends, or rather his flatterers, Cornelius Balbus, restrained him from doing so. "Remember," he said, "that you are Caesar. You are their superior and ought to let them treat you as such."

Another thing which caused offense was his insulting treatment of the tribunes.⁵ The feast of the Lupercalia⁶ was being celebrated. Caesar, sitting on a golden throne above the rostra and wearing a triumphal robe, was watching this ceremony; and Antony, who was consul at the time, was one of those taking part in the sacred running. When he came running into the forum, the crowd made way for him. He

4. *illness*: Caesar suffered from epilepsy.

5. *tribunes*: in ancient Rome, city officials responsible for guarding the interests of the common people.

6. *Lupercalia* (loo'par-kā'le-ə): a Roman religious festival held on February 15, during which priests, magistrates, and young noblemen held races through the streets of Rome.



Julius Caesar by a fifteenth-century sculptor. Bas-relief. Caesar is shown crowned with a laurel wreath, the symbol of victory.
Louvre, Paris

was carrying a diadem⁷ with a wreath of laurel tied round it, and he held this out to Caesar. His action was followed by some applause, but it was not much and it was not spontaneous. But when Caesar pushed the diadem away from him, there was a general shout of applause. Antony then offered him the diadem for the second time, and again only a few applauded, though, when Caesar again rejected it, there was applause from everyone. Caesar, finding that the experiment had proved a fail-

7. *diadem*: a crown, the symbol of royalty.

ure, rose from his seat and ordered the wreath to be carried to the Capitol. It was then discovered that his statues had been decorated with royal diadems, and two of the tribunes, Flavius and Marullus, went round the statues and tore down the decorations. They then found out who had been the first to salute Caesar as King, and led them off to prison. The people followed the tribunes and were loud in their applause, calling them Brutuses—because it was Brutus⁸ who first put an end to the line of Kings in Rome and gave to the senate and the people the power that had previously been in the hands of one man. This made Caesar angry. He deprived Marullus and Flavius of their tribuneship and in speaking against them he insulted the people at the same time.

It was in these circumstances that people began to turn their thoughts toward Marcus Brutus. He was thought to be, on his father's side, a descendant of the Brutus who had abolished the monarchy; on his mother's side he came from another famous family, the Servilii; and he was a son-in-law and a nephew of Cato.⁹ But his own zeal for destroying the new monarchy was blunted by the honors and favors which he had received from Caesar. It was not only that at Pharsalus¹⁰ after Pompey's fight his own life had been spared and the lives of many of his friends at his request; he was also a person in whom Caesar had particular trust. He had been given the most important of the praetorships for this very year and was to be consul three years later. For this post he had been preferred to Cassius, who had been the rival candidate. Caesar, indeed, is said to have admitted that Cassius had the better

8. Brutus: an earlier Brutus who was thought to be an ancestor of Caesar's friend Marcus Brutus.

9. Cato: Marcus Porcius Cato (95–46 B.C.), famous for his courage and honor. He supported Pompey against Caesar.

10. Pharsalus: a city in Greece, near which Caesar defeated Pompey in 48 B.C.

claims of the two for the office. "But," he added, "I cannot pass over Brutus." And once, when the conspiracy was already formed and some people were actually accusing Brutus to Caesar of being involved in it, Caesar laid his hand on his body and said to the accusers: "Brutus will wait for this skin of mine"—implying that Brutus certainly had the qualities which would entitle him to power, but that he would not, for the sake of power, behave basely and ungratefully.

However, those who were eager for the change and who looked to Brutus as the only, or at least the most likely, man to bring it about, used, without venturing to approach him personally, to come by night and leave papers all over the platform and the chair where he sat to do his work as praetor. Most of the messages were of this kind: "You are asleep, Brutus" or "You are no real Brutus." And when Cassius observed that they were having at least something of an effect on Brutus' personal pride, he redoubled his own efforts to incite him further. Cassius, as I have mentioned in my *Life of Brutus*, had reasons of his own for hating Caesar; moreover, Caesar was suspicious of him, and once said to his friends: "What do you think Cassius is aiming at? Personally I am not too fond of him; he is much too pale." And on another occasion it is said that, when Antony and Dolabella were accused to him of plotting a revolution, Caesar said: "I'm not much afraid of these fat, long-haired people. It's the other type I'm more frightened of, the pale thin ones"—by which he meant Brutus and Cassius.

Fate however, seems to be not so much unexpected as unavoidable. Certainly, before this event, they say that strange signs were shown and strange apparitions were seen. As for the lights in the sky, the crashing sounds heard in all sorts of directions by night, the solitary specimens of birds coming down into the

forum, all these, perhaps, are scarcely worth mentioning in connection with so great an event as this. But the philosopher Strabo says that a great crowd of men all on fire were seen making a charge; also that from the hand of a soldier's slave a great flame sprang out so that the hand seemed to the spectators to be burning away; but when the flame died out, the man was uninjured. He also says that when Caesar himself was making a sacrifice, the heart of the animal being sacrificed was missing—a very bad omen indeed, since in the ordinary course of nature no animal can exist without a heart. There is plenty of authority too for the following story:

A soothsayer¹¹ warned Caesar to be on his guard against a great danger on the day of the month of March which the Romans call the Ides;¹² and when this day had come, Caesar, on his way to the senate house, met the soothsayer and greeted him jestingly with the words: "Well, the Ides of March have come," to which the soothsayer replied in a soft voice: "Yes, but they have not yet gone." And on the previous day Marcus Lepidus was entertaining Caesar at supper and Caesar, according to his usual practice, happened to be signing letters as he reclined at table. Meanwhile the conversation turned to the question of what sort of death was the best, and, before anyone else could express a view on the subject, Caesar cried out: "The kind that comes unexpectedly." After this, when he was sleeping as usual by the side of his wife, all the doors and windows of the bedroom flew open at once; Caesar, startled by the noise and by the light of the moon shining down on him, noticed that Calpurnia was fast asleep, but she was saying something

in her sleep which he could not make out and was groaning in an inarticulate way. In fact she was dreaming at that time that she was holding his murdered body in her arms and was weeping over it. Though some say that it was a different dream which she had. They say that she dreamed that she saw the gable ornament¹³ of the house torn down and for this reason fancied that she was weeping and lamenting. In any case, when it was day, she implored Caesar, if it was possible, not to go out and begged him to postpone the meeting of the senate; or if, she said, he had no confidence in her dreams, then he ought to inquire about the future by sacrifices and other methods of divination.¹⁴ Caesar himself, it seems, was affected and by no means easy in his mind; for he had never before noticed any superstition in Calpurnia and now he could see that she was in very great distress. And when the prophets, after making many sacrifices, told him that the omens were unfavorable, he decided to send for Antony and to dismiss the senate.

At this point Decimus Brutus, surnamed Albinus, intervened. Caesar had such confidence in him that he had made him the second heir in his will, yet he was in the conspiracy with the other Brutus and Cassius. Now, fearing that if Caesar escaped this day the whole plot would come to light, he spoke derisively of the prophets and told Caesar that he ought not to give the senate such a good opportunity for thinking that they were being treated discourteously; they had met, he said, on Caesar's instructions, and they were ready to vote unanimously that Caesar should be declared King of all the provinces outside Italy with the right of wearing a diadem in any other place except

¹¹ soothsayer: literally, truth-sayer, one who claims to be able to foretell events.

¹² Ides: the 15th of March in the ancient Roman calendar. The Romans called the day that fell in the middle of the month "the Ides."

¹³, gable ornament: This ornament was put up by decree of the senate as a mark of honor and distinction.

¹⁴, divination: the act of trying to foretell the future or penetrate the unknown, using magic or other special rites.

Italy, whether on sea or land; but if, when they were already in session, someone were to come and tell them that they must go away for the time being and come back again when Calpurnia had better dreams, it would be easy to imagine what Caesar's enemies would have to say themselves and what sort of a reception they would give to Caesar's friends when they tried to prove that Caesar was not a slave master or a tyrant. If, however, he had really made up his mind to treat this day as inauspicious, then, Decimus Brutus said, it would be better for him to go himself to the senate, speak personally to the senators, and adjourn the meeting.

While he was speaking, Brutus took Caesar by the hand and began to lead him toward the door. And before he had gone far from the door a slave belonging to someone else tried to approach him, but being unable to get near him because of the crowds who pressed round him, forced his way into the house and put himself into the hands of Calpurnia, asking her to keep him safe until Caesar came back, since he had some very important information to give him.

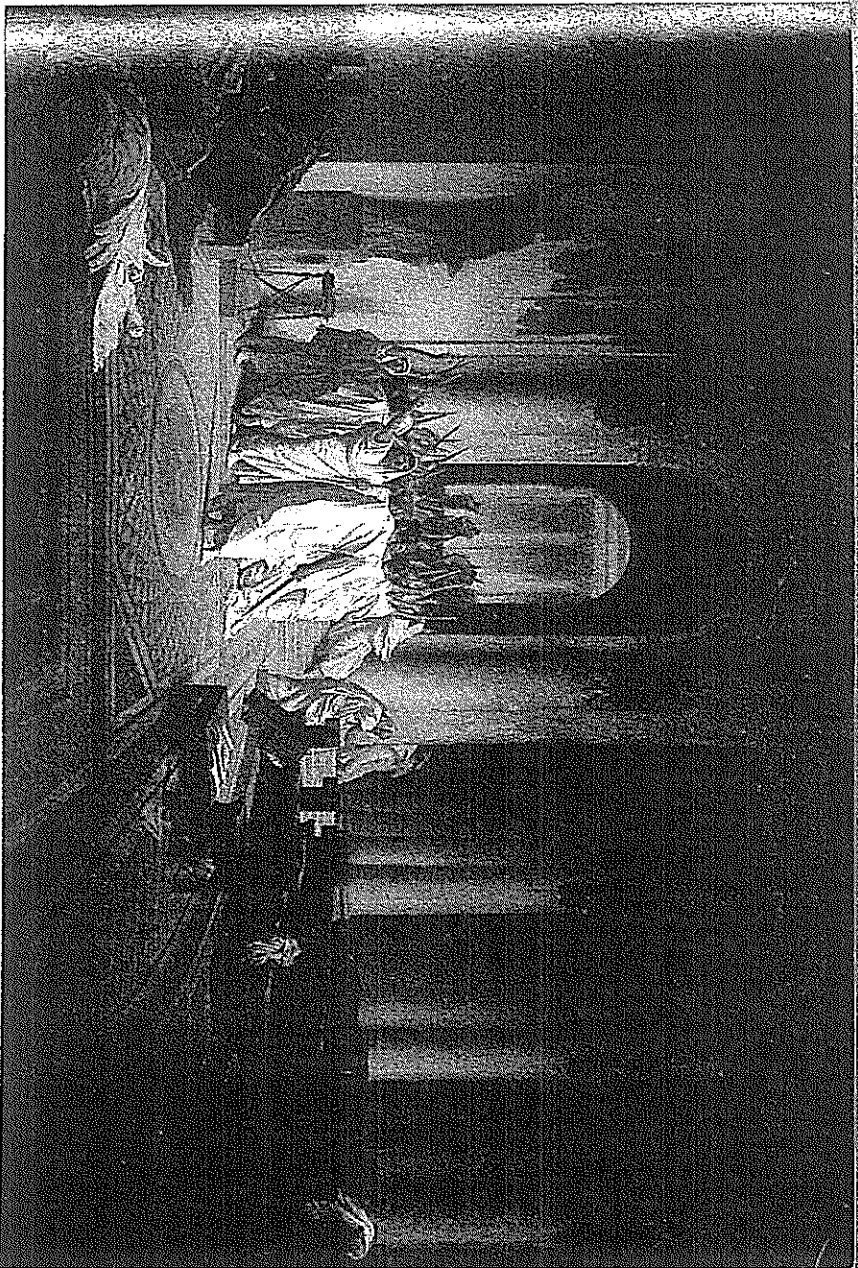
Then there was Artemidorus, a Cnidian by birth, and a teacher of Greek philosophy, who, for that reason, had become acquainted with Brutus and his friends. He had thus acquired a very full knowledge of the conspiracy and he came to Caesar with a small document in which he had written down the information which he intended to reveal to him. But when he saw that Caesar took each document that was given to him and then handed it to one of his attendants, he came close up to him and said: "Read this one, Caesar, and read it quickly and by yourself. I assure you that it is important and that is concerns you personally." Caesar then took the document and was several times on the point of reading it, but was prevented from doing so by the numbers of

people who came to speak to him. It was the only document which he did keep with him and he was still holding it in his hand when he went on into the senate.

It may be said that all these things could have happened as it were by chance. But the place where the senate was meeting that day and which was to be the scene of the final struggle and of the assassination made it perfectly clear that some heavenly power was at work, guiding the action and directing that it should take place just here. For here stood a statue of Pompey, and the building had been erected and dedicated by Pompey as one of the extra amenities attached to his theater. Indeed it is said that, just before the attack was made on him, Caesar turned his eyes toward the statue of Pompey and silently prayed for its good will. This was in spite of the fact that Caesar was a follower of the doctrines of Epicurus;¹⁵ yet the moment of crisis, so it would seem, and the very imminence of the dreadful deed made him forget his former rationalistic views and filled him with an emotion that was intuitive or divinely inspired.

Now Antony, who was a true friend of Caesar's and also a strong man physically, was detained outside the senate house by Brutus Albinus, who deliberately engaged him in a long conversation. Caesar himself went in and the senate rose in his honor. Some of Brutus' party took their places behind his chair and others went to meet him as though they wished to support the petition being made by Tullius Cimber on behalf of his brother who was in exile. So, all joining in with him in his entreaties, they accompanied Caesar to his chair. Caesar took his seat and continued to reject their request; as they pressed him more and more urgently, he began to grow angry with them.

15. Epicurus: a Greek philosopher who taught that happiness is achieved through the pursuit of honor, prudence, and peace of mind. The Epicureans did not believe in an afterlife, nor in divine intervention in human affairs.



The Death of Caesar (1859) by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). Oil on canvas. Caesar's body lies at the base of Pompey's statue. The Walter Art Gallery, Baltimore

Tullius then took hold of his toga with both hands and pulled it down from his neck. This was the signal for the attack. The first blow was struck by Casca, who wounded Caesar in the neck with his dagger. The wound was not mortal and not even a deep one, coming as it did from a man who was no doubt much disturbed in mind at the beginning of such a daring venture. Caesar, therefore, was able to turn round and grasp the knife and hold on to it. At almost the same moment the striker of the blow and he who was struck cried out together—Caesar, in Latin, “Casca, you villain, what are you doing?” while Casca called to his brother in Greek: “Help, brother.”

So it began, and those who were not in the conspiracy were so horror-struck and amazed at what was being done that they were afraid

to run away and afraid to come to Caesar's help; they were too afraid even to utter a word. But those who had come prepared for the murder all bared their daggers and hemmed Caesar in on every side. Whichever way he turned he met the blows of daggers and saw the cold steel aimed at his face and at his eyes. So he was driven this way and that, and, like a wild beast in the toils,¹⁶ had to suffer from the hands of each one of them; for it had been agreed that they must all take part in this sacrifice and all flesh themselves with his blood. Because of this compact Brutus also gave him one wound in the groin. Some say that Caesar fought back against all the rest, darting this way and that to avoid the blow and crying out for help, but when he saw that Brutus had

16. in the toils: at bay, in a net or trap.

drawn his dagger, he covered his head with his toga and sank down to the ground. Either by chance or because he was pushed there by his murderers, he fell down against the pedestal on which the statue of Pompey stood, and the pedestal was drenched with his blood, so that one might have thought that Pompey himself was presiding over this act of vengeance against his enemy, who lay there at his feet struggling convulsively under so many wounds.¹⁷

So Caesar was done to death and, when it was over, Brutus stepped forward with the intention of making a speech to explain what had been done. The senators, however, would not wait to hear him. They rushed out through the doors of the building and fled to their homes, thus producing a state of confusion, terror, and bewilderment amongst the people. Some bolted their doors; others left their counters and shops and could be observed either running to see the place where Caesar had been killed or, once they had seen it, running back again. Antony and Lepidus, who were Caesar's chief friends, stole away and hid in houses belonging to other people. Brutus and his party, on the other hand, just as they were, still hot and eager from the murder, marched all together in one body from the senate house to the Capitol, holding up their naked daggers in front of them and, far from giving the impression that they wanted to escape, looking glad and confident. They called out to the people that liberty had been restored, and they invited the more distinguished persons whom they met to join in with them. Some of these did join in the procession and go up with them to the Capitol, pretending that they had taken part in the deed and thus claiming their share in the glory of it.

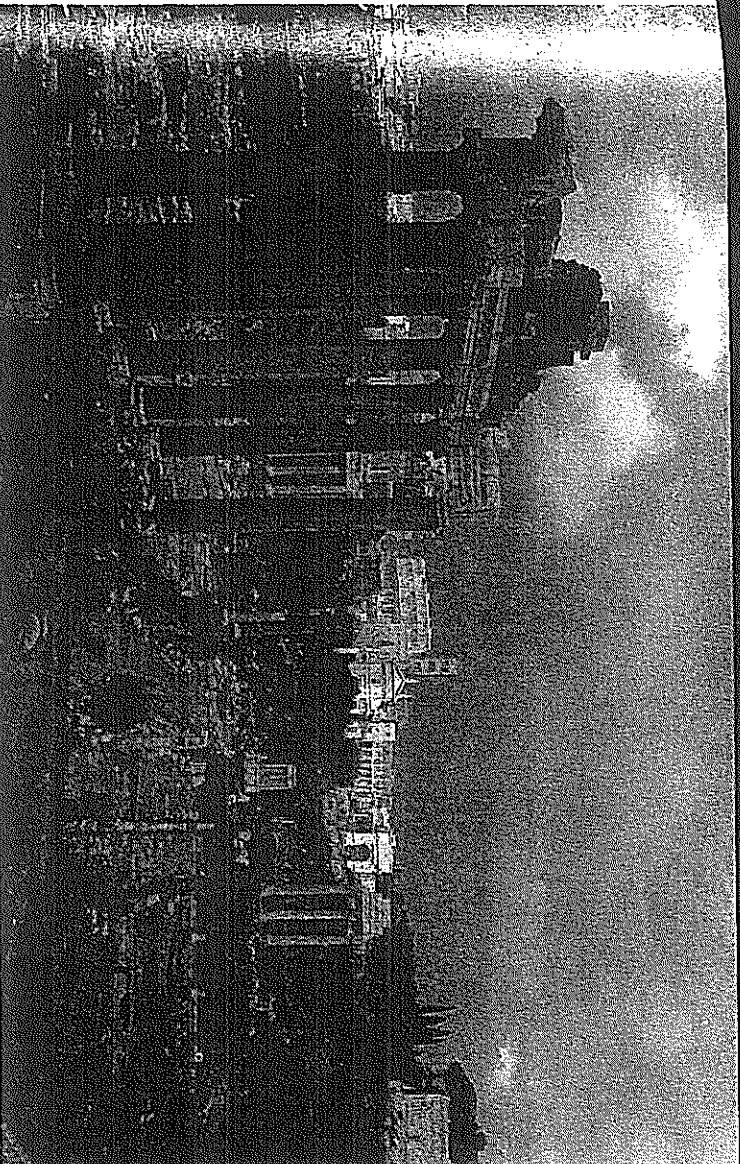
17. wounds: Caesar is said to have received twenty-three wounds, and many of his assailants were wounded by one another in the confusion.

Among these were Caius Octavius and Lentulus Spinther who suffered later for their imposture. They were put to death by Antony and young Caesar, and did not even have the satisfaction of enjoying the fame which caused their death, since no one believed that they had taken part in the action. Even those who inflicted the death penalty on them were punishing them not for what they did but for what they would have liked to have done.

Next day Brutus and his party came down from the Capitol and Brutus made a speech. The people listened to what he said without expressing either pleasure or resentment at what had been done. Their complete silence indicated that they both pitied Caesar and respected Brutus. The senate passed a decree of amnesty¹⁸ and tried to reconcile all parties. It was voted that Caesar should be worshiped as a god and that there should be no alteration made, however small, in any of the measures passed by him while he was in power. On the other hand, provinces and appropriate honors were given to Brutus and his friends. Everyone thought, therefore, that things were not only settled but settled in the best possible way.

But when Caesar's will was opened and it was discovered that he had left a considerable legacy to each Roman citizen, and when the people saw his body, all disfigured with its wounds, being carried through the forum, they broke through all bounds of discipline and order. They made a great pile of benches, railings, and tables from the forum and, placing the body upon this, burned it there. Then, carrying blazing brands, they ran to set fire to the houses of the murderers, while others went up and down through the city trying to find the men themselves to tear them to pieces. They, however, were well barricaded and not one of them came in the way of the mob. But

18. amnesty: general pardon.



The Roman Forum.

there was a man called Cinna, one of Caesar's friends, who, they say, happened to have had a strange dream during the previous night. He dreamed that Caesar invited him to supper and he declined the invitation; Caesar then led him along by the hand, though he did not want to go and was pulling in the opposite direction. Now when Cinna heard that they were burning Caesar's body in the forum he got up and went there out of respect for his memory, though he felt a certain amount of misgiving as a result of his dream and was also suffering from a fever. One of the crowd who saw him there asked who he was and, when he had learned the name, told it to another. So the name was passed on and it was quickly accepted by everyone that here was one of the men who had murdered Caesar, since among the conspirators there was in fact a man with this same name of Cinna. The crowd, thinking that this was he, rushed on him and tore him limb from limb on the spot. It was thus more than anything else which frightened Brutus

and Cassius, and within a few days they withdrew from the city. What they did and what happened to them before they died has been related in my *Life of Brutus*.

Caesar was fifty-six years old when he died.¹⁹ He had survived Pompey by not much more than four years. As for the supreme power which he had pursued during the whole course of his life throughout such dangers and which at last and with such difficulty he had achieved, the only fruit he reaped from it was an empty name and a glory which made him envied by his fellow citizens. But that great divine power or genius, which had watched over him and helped him in his life, even after his death remained active as an avenger of his murder, pursuing and tracking down the murderers over every land and sea until not one of them was left and visiting with retribution all, with-

19. Caesar... died: According to Plutarch, Caesar was born in 100 B.C., but modern scholars believe that he was actually born in 102 B.C. Thus he was fifty-eight, not fifty-six, when he died.

out exception, who were in any way concerned either with the death itself or with the planning of it.

So far as human coincidences are concerned, the most remarkable was that which concerned Cassius. After his defeat at Philippi he killed himself with the very same dagger which he had used against Caesar. And of supernatural events there was, first, the great comet, which shone very brightly for seven nights after Caesar's murder and then disappeared; and also the dimming of the sun. For the whole of that year the sun's orb rose dull and pale; the heat which came down from it was feeble and ineffective, so that the atmosphere, with insufficient warmth to penetrate it, lay dark and heavy on the earth and fruits and vegetables never properly ripened, withering away and falling off before they were mature because of the coldness of the air.

But, more than anything else, the phantom which appeared to Brutus made it clear that the murder of Caesar was not pleasing to the gods. The story is as follows: Brutus was about to take his army across from Abydos²⁰ to the mainland on the other side of the straits, and one night was lying down, as usual, in his tent, not asleep, but thinking about the future. He fancied that he heard a noise at the entrance to the tent and, looking toward the light of the lamp which was almost out, he saw a terrible figure, like a man, though unnaturally large and with a very severe expression. He was frightened at first, but, finding that this apparition just stood silently by his bed without doing or saying anything, he said: "Who are you?" Then the phantom replied: "Brutus, I am your evil genius. You shall see me at Philippi." On this occasion Brutus answered courageously: "Then I shall see you," and the supernatural visitor at once went away. Time

²⁰ Abydos: an ancient town on the Dardanelles, in Asia Minor.

passed and he drew up his army against Antony and Caesar²¹ near Philippi. In the first battle he conquered the enemy divisions that were opposed to him, and, after routing them, broke through and sacked Caesar's camp. But in the night before the second battle the same phantom visited him again. It spoke no word, but Brutus realized that his fate was upon him and exposed himself to every danger in the battle. He did not die, however, in the fighting. It was after his troops had been routed that he retired to a steep rocky place, put his naked sword to his breast and with the help of a friend, so they say, who assisted him in driving the blow home, killed himself.

²¹ Caesar: Gaius Octavius (63 B.C.–A.D. 14), the nephew of Julius Caesar, who, in 27 B.C., under the title of Augustus Caesar, became the first Roman emperor.

Reading Check

1. Why did Caesar deprive the tribunes Marullus and Flavius of their office?
2. How had Caesar treated Marcus Brutus so that he was reluctant at first to join the conspiracy?
3. Who were the two men that Caesar feared the most?
4. What was the soothsayer's warning?
5. How did Decimus convince Caesar to go to the senate?
6. What was the signal for the conspirators to attack Caesar?
7. How did the people respond to Brutus' speech?
8. What caused the people to turn against the conspirators?
9. Why did the mob kill an innocent man named Cinna?
10. How did Cassius and Brutus die?

For Study and Discussion

Analyzing and Interpreting the Selection

1. Historians often do more than report the events of a person's life: they also may state or imply explanations for those events. One historian might show that people shape their own lives. Another historian might show that a force outside the control of a person—upbringing, environment, “fate”—is the shaping influence.
 - a. Do you think Plutarch shows that Caesar was in control of his destiny?
 - b. Does he suggest that if Caesar had been a different kind of man, he might have avoided being killed? Cite passages from the text to support your answers.
2. Plutarch implies certain truths—lessons to be drawn from Caesar's life and death.
 - a. Where, for example, does he imply that a divine justice punishes the guilty?
 - b. What lesson about the use of power does he want you to draw from Caesar's assassination?
3. Plutarch was inclined toward mysticism in religion and he served as a priest in the Temple of Apollo in Greece. Look back at his narrative of the events that followed Caesar's death. What details show that Plutarch believed that supernatural forces caused the natural world to respond to human events?
4. Has Plutarch presented a favorable portrayal of Caesar, or is he neutral in his feelings about him? Explain.
- 5a. Does Plutarch present Brutus in a more positive light than the other conspirators? Explain. **b.** What do you think is Plutarch's attitude toward Brutus?

About the Author

Plutarch (46?–120?)

Plutarch was born in central Greece about a hundred years after the death of Julius Caesar. Plutarch's main interest was the characters of famous men and how these men shaped history. He was particularly interested in the story of the collapse of the Roman Republic between about 100 and 30 B.C. After much reading and research, he wrote biographies of ten important Romans who lived during the decline of Rome. Among them are Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, and Antony, all of whom figure, in one way or another, in Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare, in fact, read Plutarch in a translation that was published in England in 1579, and he based his play on Plutarch's biography.