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I-B Caesar's Journal-Letter to Lucius Mamilius Turrinus on the Island of Capri.

[*For a description of this journal-letter see the opening of Document III.*]

968. [*On religious rites*]

I enclose in this week's packet a half-dozen of the innumerable reports which, as Supreme Pontiff, I receive from the Augurs, Soothsayers, Sky Watchers, and Chicken Nurses.

I enclose also the directions I have issued for the monthly Commemoration of the Founding of the City.

What's to be done?

I have inherited this burden of superstition and nonsense. I govern innumerable men but must acknowledge that I am governed by birds and thunderclaps.

All this frequently obstructs the operation of the State; it closes the doors of the Senate and the Courts for days and

weeks at a time. It employs several thousands of persons. Everyone who has anything to do with it, including the Supreme Pontiff, manipulates it to his own interest.

One afternoon, in the Rhine Valley, the augurs of our headquarters forbade me to join battle with the enemy. It seems that our sacred chickens were eating fastidiously. Mesdames Partlet were crossing their feet as they walked; they were frequently inspecting the sky and looking back over their shoulders, and with good reason. I too on entering the valley had been discouraged to observe that it was the haunt of eagles. We generals are reduced to viewing the sky with a chicken's eyes. I acceded for one day, though in my capability of surprising the enemy lay one of my few advantages, and I feared that I would be similarly impeded in the morning. That evening, however, Asinius Pollio and I took a walk in the woods; we gathered a dozen grubs; we minced them into fine pieces with our knives and strewed them about the sacred feeding pen. The next morning the entire army waited in suspense to hear the will of the Gods. The fateful birds were put out to feed. They first surveyed the sky emitting that chirp of alarm which is sufficient to arrest ten thousand men; then they turned their gaze upon their meal. By Hercules, their eyes protruded; they uttered cries of ravished gluttony; they flew to their repast, and I was permitted to win the Battle of Cologne.

Most of all, however, these observances attack and undermine the very spirit of life within the minds of men. They afford to our Romans, from the street sweepers to the consuls, a vague sense of confidence where no confidence is and at the same time a pervasive fear, a fear which neither arouses to action nor calls forth ingenuity, but which paralyzes. They remove from men's shoulders the unremitting obligation to create, moment by moment, their own Rome. They come to us sanctioned by the usage of our ancestors and breathing the security of our childhood; they flatter passivity and console inadequacy.

I can cope with the other enemies of order: the planless trouble making and violence of a Clodius; the grumbling discontents of a Cicero and a Brutus, born of envy and fed on the fine-spun theorizing of old Greek texts; the crimes and greed of my proconsuls and appointees; but what can I do against the apathy that is glad to wrap itself under the cloak of piety,

that tells me that Rome will be saved by overwatching Gods or is resigned to the fact that Rome will come to ruin because the Gods are maleficent?

I am not given to brooding, but often I find myself brooding over this matter.

What to do?

At times, at midnight, I try to imagine what would happen if I abolished all this; if, Dictator and Supreme Pontiff, I abolished all observation of lucky and unlucky days, of the entrails and flights of birds, of thunder and lightning; if I closed all temples except those of Capitoline Jove.

And what of Jove?

You will hear more of this.

Prepare your thoughts for my guidance.

The next night.

[*The letter continues in Greek.*]

Again it is midnight, my dear friend. I sit before my window, wishing that it overhung the sleeping city and not the Trasteverine gardens of the rich. The mites dance about my lamp. The river barely reflects a diffused starlight. On the farther bank some drunken citizens are arguing in a wine shop and from time to time my name is borne to me on the air. I have left my wife sleeping and have tried to quiet my thoughts by reading in Lucretius.

Every day I feel more pressure upon me, arising from the position I occupy. I become more and more aware of what it enables me to accomplish, of what it summons me to accomplish.

But what is it saying to me? What does it require of me?

I have pacified the world; I have extended the benefits of Roman law to innumerable men and women; against great opposition, I am extending to them also the rights of citizenship. I have reformed the calendar and our days are regulated by a serviceable accommodation of the movements of the sun and the moon. I am arranging that the world be fed equably; my laws and my fleets will adjust the intermittence of harvests and surplus to the public need. Next month torture will be removed from the penal code.

But these are not enough. These measures have been merely the work of a general and of an administrator. In them I am to

the world what a mayor is to a village. Now some other work is to be done, but what? I feel as though now, and only now, I am ready to *begin*. The song which is on everyone's lips calls me: father.

For the first time in my public life I am unsure. My actions have hitherto conformed to a principle which I may call a superstition: I do not experiment. I do not initiate an action in order to be instructed by its results. In the art of war and in the operations of politics I do nothing without an extremely precise intention. If an obstacle arises I promptly create a new plan, every potential consequence of which is clear to me. From the moment I saw that Pompey left a small portion of every venture to *chance*, I knew that I was to be the master of the world.

The projects which now visit me, however, involve elements about which I am not certain that I am certain. To put them into effect I must be clear in my mind as to what are the aims in life of the average man and what are the capabilities of the human being.

Man—what is that? What do we know of him? His Gods, liberty, mind, love, destiny, death—what do these mean? You remember how you and I as boys in Athens, and later before our tents in Gaul, used to turn these things over endlessly. I am an adolescent again, philosophizing. As Plato, the dangerous beguiler, said: the best philosophers in the world are boys with their beards new on their chins; I am a boy again.

But look what I have done in the meantime in regard to this matter of the State religion. I have bolstered it by re-establishing the monthly Commemoration of the Founding of the City.

I did it, perhaps, to explore in myself what last vestiges of such piety as I can discover there. It flatters me also to know that I am of all Romans the most learned in old religious lore, as my mother was before me. I confess that as I declaim the uncouth collects and move about in the complicated ritual, I am filled with a real emotion; but the emotion has no relation to the supernatural world: I am remembering myself when at nineteen, as Priest of Jupiter, I ascended the Capitol with my Cornelia at my side, the unborn Julia beneath her girdle. What moment has life since offered to equal that?

Hush! There has just been a change of guard at my door. The sentries have clashed their swords and exchanged the password. The password for tonight is CAESAR WATCHES.

THE IDES OF MARCH

409.1 THE IDES OF MARCH] In *The World's Best* (New York: Dial Press, 1950), an anthology of excerpts from the work of 105 authors with their comments, edited by Whit Burnett, Wilder submitted a section from Caesar's journal (439.34–445.16) and contributed this note:

> During the nineteenth century the novelists seem never to have been troubled by the claim to omniscience which is at the base of their art. First signs of discomfort in regard to it appeared in Flaubert and Turgenev. It became acute in Henry James and now in some form or other undermines the self-confidence of all storytellers. Are readers believing that our stories are "true" and in what sense do we believe them ourselves?
>
> This is the crisis of the novel. Writers for the stage are not confronted by it.
>
> The assumption of omniscience is no less present in writing for the theatre, but once the action is passing upon the stage we are not aware of the narrator who is presenting it to us. A novel may be described as "everything pertinent to our understanding of an action or a series of actions" and throughout a novel we are aware that an all-knowing intelligence is recounting to us this pertinent matter. On the stage, however, it is always "now"; no intervening editorial voice is present; and in a very dramatic sense our seeing is believing.
>
> In *The Ides of March* I tried to dispense with the fictional narrator. When one purports to recount the thoughts of a Caesar, a Cicero, and a Catullus, the claim to omniscience becomes doubly preposterous. All art is pretense but the pretense of the historical novel is particularly difficult to swallow. I therefore moved the pretense over to a different terrain: I pretended to have discovered a large collection of letters and documents written by these notable persons. I attempted to coerce belief by submitting a sort of apparatus of historical method and scholarship. It all "looks" more credible than if I had written a running narrative full of such phrases as "Caesar remembered their first meeting" and "Cleopatra concealed her anger." But more important from the point of view of credibility was the fact that I had approached the effect of the theatre. Each of the letters and documents is in the present tense; no narrator is heard describing the whole action as having taken place in the past. As on the stage each speech rises from the actor in an immediate spontaneity—as their "time" on the stage becomes our "time" in the audience—so in a novel-in-letters each document tends to give the impression of a speech, a cry, at which we are present.
>
> I am far from pretending that this affords a solution to the problem of the novel. The novel-in-letters runs into other difficulties, difficulties so great that the form can only be the vehicle for a very limited

> type of story. Time is a sense in which I did not seriously attempt to cope with them, as Richardson did. I begged the question by surrounding my work with a veil of irony, offering it as a sort of parody of historical scholarship. I begged the question in that I not so much asked the reader to "believe" me as to "play this game" with me.

In a copy of the English edition of the novel that he gave to his friend, diplomat Terrance Catherman, Wilder added many marginal comments to the book, including these remarks he appended to his foreword:

> So it's a kind of crossword puzzle. Many of the events we traverse four times. They're like a statue that you view from four sides.
>
> Hence the book only begins to speak at its *second reading*.
>
> But in this way I get (for my own interest, anyway) a sense of the density of life—its intermixedness, its surprises,—its mysteriousness.
>
> The way of telling a story chronologically, from beginning to end, bored me—seemed too slick—not rich and complicated and true enough.
>
> In life we often learn much later what really took place.

416.16 the mixolydian mode] Diatonic musical scale, supposedly based on one invented by Sappho.

417.24 the Battle of Cologne] In 55 BCE, because Caesar felt it beneath Roman dignity to cross a river by boat, he ordered the construction of a bridge across the Rhine, allowing his troops to attack Germanic tribes.

418.18–19 Trasteverine] Its name derived from "trans Tiberim" (Latin: across the Tiber), this Roman neighborhood lies on the west bank of the river.

419.37–38 my Cornelia . . . unborn Julia] Cornelia Cinna minor (94–69 BCE) was married to Caesar in 83 BCE and gave birth to their daughter one year later.

420.25 sumptuary laws] Laws regulating lavish consumption that were meant to curb excesses, especially in dress.