

THE CAESARS

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The Caesars by Thomas de Quincey

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THOMAS DE QUINCEY

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THE CÆSARS.

BY

THOMAS DE QUINCEY,

AUTHOR OF

'CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER,' ETC. ETC.

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THE CÆSARS.

THE condition of the Roman Emperors has never yet been fully appreciated ; nor has it been sufficiently perceived in what respects it was absolutely unique. There was but one Rome : no other city, as we are satisfied by the collation of many facts, either of ancient or modern times, has ever rivalled this astonishing metropolis in the grandeur of magnitude ; and not many — if we except the cities of Greece, none at all — in the grandeur of architectural display. Speaking even of London, we ought in all reason to say — the *Nation of London*, and not the City of London ; but of Rome in her palmy days, nothing less could be said in the naked severity of logic. A million and a half of souls — that population, apart from any other distinctions, is *per se* for London a justifying ground for such a classification ; *à fortiori*, then, will it belong to a city which counted from one horn to the other of its mighty suburbs not less than four millions of inhabitants¹ at the very least, as we resolutely maintain after reviewing all that has been written on that much vexed

theme, and very probably half as many more. Republican Rome had her *prerogative* tribe; the earth has its *prerogative* city; and that city was Rome.

As was the city, such was its prince — mysterious, solitary, unique. Each was to the other an adequate counterpart, each reciprocally that perfect mirror which reflected, as it were *in alia materia*, those incommunicable attributes of grandeur, that under the same shape and denomination never upon this earth were destined to be revived. Rome has not been repeated; neither has Cæsar. *Ubi Cæsar, ibi Roma* — was a maxim of Roman jurisprudence. And the same maxim may be translated into a wider meaning; in which it becomes true also for our historical experience. Cæsar and Rome have flourished and expired together. The illimitable attributes of the Roman prince, boundless and comprehensive as the universal air, — like that also bright and apprehensible to the most vagrant eye, yet in parts (and those not far removed) unfathomable as outer darkness, (for no chamber in a dungeon could shroud in more impenetrable concealment a deed of murder than the upper chambers of the air,) — these attributes, so impressive to the imagination, and which all the subtlety of the Roman² wit could as little fathom as the fleets of Cæsar could traverse the Polar basin, or unlock the gates of the Pacific, are best symbolized, and find their most appropriate exponent, in the illimitable city itself — that Rome, whose centre, the Capitol,

was immovable as Teneriffe or Atlas, but whose circumference was shadowy, uncertain, restless, and advancing as the frontiers of her all-conquering empire. It is false to say, that with Cæsar came the destruction of Roman greatness. Peace, hollow rhetoricians ! Until Cæsar came, Rome was a minor ; by him, she attained her majority, and fulfilled her destiny. Caius Julius, you say, deflowered the virgin purity of her civil liberties. Doubtless, then, Rome had risen immaculate from the arms of Sylla and of Marius. But, if it were Caius Julius who deflowered Rome, if under him she forfeited her dowery of civic purity, if to him she first unloosed her maiden zone, then be it affirmed boldly — that she reserved her greatest favors for the noblest of her wooers, and we may plead the justification of Falconbridge for his mother's transgressions with the lion-hearted king — such a sin was self-ennobled. Did Julius deflower Rome ? Then, by that consummation, he caused her to fulfil the functions of her nature ; he compelled her to exchange the imperfect and inchoate condition of a mere *fœmina* for the perfections of a *mulier*. And metaphor apart, we maintain that Rome lost no liberties by the mighty Julius. That which in tendency, and by the spirit of her institutions — that which, by her very corruptions and abuses co-operating with her laws, Rome promised and involved in the germ — even that, and nothing less or different, did Rome unfold and accomplish under