

further persecution, and wrote to the senate in their favor. Independently of his rank, Aurelius was in character and acquirements a distinguished man. Many of his philosophical and humane sayings are still quoted, and remains of his writings, which are still read with interest, give him a high position among the classic writers of antiquity. While devoting himself with untiring diligence to the welfare of his subjects, even giving popular lectures to the masses of the people in Rome, upon all matters pertaining to their domestic welfare, tidings came that the Russian Tartars were invading the empire. The emperor grasped his sword, and having reached Vienna, in this his last campaign, was seized by the plague, and suddenly died about the year 180, in the fifty-ninth year of his age, and the nineteenth of his reign.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### COMMENCEMENT OF THE DECLINE AND FALL.

FROM A. D. 180 TO A. D. 235.

MARCUS AURELIUS.—PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY.—COMMODOUS.—HIS DEATH.—COMMENCEMENT OF THE DECLINE AND FALL.—THE PRETORIAN GUARD.—ITS CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE.—THE THRONE SOLD AT AUCTION.—JULIAN.—THE RIVAL EMPERORS.—TRIUMPH OF SEVERUS.—HIS PERFIDY.—REIGN OF CARACALLA AND GETA.—MURDER OF GETA.—ASSASSINATION OF CARACALLA.—MACRINUS.—HIS SHORT REIGN AND DEATH.—ELAGABALUS.—BOTH PONTIFF AND EMPEROR.—HIS EXTRAORDINARY DEPRAVITY.—ANECDOTES OF MAXIMIN.

ALL writers unite in the praises of Marcus Aurelius, the second of the Antonines, as he is sometimes called. Still he displayed one trait of character which has ever given occasion for perplexing comment. His wife, Faustina, beautiful, fascinating, and sensual to the highest degree, was notorious and unblushing in her amours. She affected no concealment. Reveling with the gay voluptuaries of the court in the most luxurious and wanton dissoluteness, she left her philosophic and phlegmatic husband to the meditations of his study and the schemes of his cabinet.

Marcus Aurelius seemed to be the only man in the empire who was utterly indifferent to this libidinousness of his spouse. Avowing himself a disciple of Zeno the stoic, and in his renowned "Meditations" advocating that philosophy, which renders it essential to virtue that one should be indifferent, so far as his inward happiness is concerned, to all external things, Aurelius did not allow the shameless conduct of his wife to disturb his serenity in the slightest degree. On the contrary, the more gross her crimes the more he lavished upon her caresses, endearing epithets, and titles of honor. Even her

lovers he sought out and loaded with favors, giving them conspicuous posts of trust and emolument.

During a connection of thirty years, Aurelius was unintermitting in the tenderness of his attentions to his dissolute wife. He lost no opportunity of manifesting respect for her in public. He caused a decree to be issued, proclaiming her "Mother of the Camps and Armies." All Rome smiled to read in the "Meditations" of their revered emperor the expression of his thanks to the gods for having conferred upon him a wife so faithful, so gentle, and of such wonderful simplicity of manners. The senate at the earnest request of the emperor, declared her to be a goddess, temples were erected for her worship, and she was invested with the attributes of Juno, Venus, and Ceres.

This same weakness of character was indicated by the manner in which his son Commodus was educated. Unrestrained by his father, and incited by the example of his mother, he grew up a monster of depravity. Commodus was nineteen years of age at the time of his father's death. The virtues of Aurelius secured for him easy accession to the throne, and he was promptly recognized by the army, the senate, and all the provinces. He was a burly, beastly man, of huge frame and of such herculean strength, that he often appeared, in theatrical exhibitions, in the character of Hercules, dressed in a lion's skin and armed with a club.

The atrocities of Commodus can never be described. Civilization would tear out and trample under foot the page containing the abominable recital. Nothing can be conceived of in the way of loathsome, brutal, fiend-like vice, and cruelty of which he was not guilty. He filled his palace with debauchery, ransacked the brothels of Rome, compelled his sisters to yield to his incestuous love, and killed one of them, Lucilla, for venturing to repel him. He amused himself with cutting off people's lips and noses. The rich were slain for their money; the influential and powerful from jealousy, and

the friends of the slain were also dispatched lest they should murmur and excite discontent. At length one of his concubines, named Marcia, apprehensive that she was doomed to death by the tyrant, presented him with a goblet of poisoned wine.

Commodus drank freely, and almost immediately fell into heavy slumbers. But soon deadly sickness and vomiting ensued. Marcia, who had enlisted others in her enterprise, fearful that he might escape the effects of the poison, sent a young gladiator into the room to finish the deed with the dagger. Commodus, stupefied and weakened by the drug, was probably easily despatched. The conspirators, exulting in their achievement, and conscious that the tyrant could find no competitor, resolved to fill the vacant throne with one whose avenger would secure the support of the army, the senate, and the people.

Helvius Pertinax, the prefect or governor of Rome, had risen from lowly birth to senatorial dignity and consular rank. He had filled many of the first offices of the state, and all with much honor to himself. At a late hour of the night, the conspirators rushed into his apartment to offer him the crown. With great reluctance Pertinax accepted, at their hands, the imperial purple. He was immediately conducted to the camp, while a report was circulated through the city that Commodus had died of apoplexy. The people and the army, with joyful acclaim, accepted the new emperor, and conducted him to the senate-house. The senators had been suddenly convened. It was in the early dawn of the morning of the first of January, A. D. 193. In great consternation they had assembled, fearing that the summons would prove but some new trick of the tyrant. When assured that Commodus was no more, their joy surpassed all bounds. Decrees were passed consigning the memory of Commodus to infamy, and Pertinax was invested with imperial title and power.

From the reign of Commodus is generally dated the beginning of the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Here, Gib-

bon commences his renowned history. Pertinax immediately entered upon vigorous measures of reform. His domestic establishment was arranged on a very economical scale; exiles were recalled, prison-doors thrown open, and confiscated estates restored. The bodies of victims, illustrious in rank, which had been thrown into ignominious graves, were consigned to honorable sepulture, and all possible consolations were bestowed upon ruined families.

The extortions of Commodus had been boundless, the whole empire having been taxed to its utmost point of endurance to minister to his limitless luxury. Though the treasury was utterly exhausted, so that Pertinax commenced his reign with an empty purse, and at a time when the support of the army, which was absolutely essential, could only be secured by lavishing gold upon the legions with a profuse hand, he nobly remitted all the oppressive taxes imposed by Commodus, declaring in a decree of the senate, "that he was better satisfied to administer a poor republic with innocence, than to acquire riches by the way of tyranny and dishonor."

The instruments of luxurious indulgence which the tyrant had accumulated, gold and silver plate, chariots of curious construction and enormous cost, robes of imperial dye and heavily embroidered with gems and gold, and last, and yet most worthy of note, as indicative of the barbarism of the times, a large number of beautiful slaves, both boys and girls, whom Commodus, in his depravity, had assembled in his harem, alike to minister to his lust, were sold, and the proceeds placed in the exhausted treasury. It is said that there were three hundred of each sex whom the monster had thus collected, and many of these were children of tender years, who had been born in a state of freedom, and had been torn from the arms of their weeping parents. The free-born were set at liberty; the others though of the same race, were left in bondage.

These reforms, so salutary to the state, were all hateful to the corrupt soldiery. They loved war, and rapine, and license

—the plunder of provinces, the golden bribes of their officers, the possession of captive matrons and maidens. The brutal men had found in Commodus the leader they desired. The just administration of Pertinax excited their indignation and contempt. Murmurs deep and loud rose from the Pretorian guard. Three hundred of them in a body, and in open day, marched to the palace, entered unresisted, dispatched Pertinax with swords and javelins, and parading his gory head upon a lance, marched triumphantly through the streets back to their barracks. The citizens of Rome looked on in dismay and submission. It was not safe for any one to utter a word against the army. One hundred thousand soldiers, well armed and drilled, are deemed amply sufficient to hold in subjection ten millions of unarmed people. The establishment of a standing army, and the disarming of the militia, places any nation at the mercy of a successful general.

The Pretorian guard amounted to but sixteen thousand men, organized in sixteen cohorts. These renowned Pretorian bands, in the highest state of discipline, were assembled in a permanent camp, just outside the walls of Rome, on the broad summit of the Quirinal and Viminal hills. The remains of their line of ramparts, it is supposed, may still be traced. These helmeted troops overawed the four millions of Rome; and, through the subject senate, and the still more servile populace of the metropolis, held the mastery of an empire of one hundred and fifty millions.

The soldiers, in their intrenched camp, rallying around the head of Pertinax, the hideous trophy of their power, perpetrated the memorable scandal of selling the throne, at auction, to the highest bidder. They felt safe in taking the bids, for if any one failed to pay the proffered price, the soldiers had, as it was well known, a very short and decisive way of settling the account. Rome had indeed now fallen; for the emperor had become but the prow of the national ship, while the soldiers manned the oars, and held the rudder.

There were two bidders for the imperial purple. It is a singular comment upon the morals of that age, that the first bidder was Sulpicianus, governor of Rome, and son-in-law of Pertinax. Alarmed by the mutiny he had hastened in his official capacity to the camp; but he immediately forgot the murder of his father, in eager graspings for the crown which had fallen from that mangled brow. Sulpicianus offered a sum, amounting to about eight hundred dollars of our money, to each man of the guard. A senator, Didius Julianus, the richest man in Rome, incited by the ambition of his wife and daughter, offered a thousand dollars to each man. "Moreover," said he, "you will not have to wait for me to collect it from taxes, for I can pay you immediately, as I have the money at home."

"Going, going, gone!" The Roman empire was struck off to Julian. The soldiers reared an altar in the camp, placed Julian upon it, and took the oath of obedience. Then the whole band, in close order of battle, with their new emperor enclosed in the center of their ranks, descended from their encampment and entered the streets of Rome. The motley crowd from all nations, which then thronged the capital, were doubtless but little conscious of the degradation. To them it was but another gala day. It is to be presumed that ladies smiled from the balconies, waved their scarfs, and sprinkled the pavements with flowers, as the gorgeous procession passed along, with glittering helmets, shields, and spears, with silken banners floating in the breeze, and with music from a hundred bands.

The soldiers had summoned an assembly of the senate. The newly appointed emperor presented himself to receive the confirmation of that docile body, and had the good sense simply to say:

"Fathers, you want an emperor. I am the proper person for you to choose."

There were sixteen thousand arguments, in the shape of

sixteen thousand swords, to sustain this simple proposition. Julian was confirmed with universal acclaim. The soldiers then, in triumphal march, conducted him to the palace. The decapitated body of Pertinax had not yet been removed, and the supper was still upon the table, at which the emperor was just about to sit down, when his assassins burst in upon him. These sights must have been suggestive of interesting thoughts to the new monarch. Till midnight the halls of the palace resounded with revelry. There was illumination, feasting, music, and dancing. But when the guests had retired, and darkness and solitude came, Julian found the imperial pillow filled with thorns, and he could not sleep.

But there were other armies in distant parts of the empire, proud, flushed with victory, and far more numerous than the Pretorian bands. Just across the Adriatic sea, in Illyricum, was Septimius Severus, a renowned general, at the head of three Roman legions, amounting to nearly twenty thousand men, and also with a large force of auxiliaries. In Britain, Clodius Albinus commanded a similar force. He was a man of the highest patrician rank, and regarded with contempt the plebeian origin of Julian. In Syria, Pescennius Niger held an army still more powerful than that of Severus or Albinus.

Each of these armies immediately imitated the Pretorian band, and each, in its own encampment, enthroned its leader, declaring him to be invested with the imperial purple. There were now four emperors, and from Illyricum, Britain, and Syria, sixty thousand Roman troops, with large accompanying bands of auxiliaries, were marching upon Rome. To meet them Julian had but the Pretorian bands. Severus, in Illyricum, was the nearest to Rome, and was approaching with rapid strides. Julian, terrified, sent ambassadors to treat with him, offering to share the empire. Severus, conscious of the superiority of his army, rejected the proposal. Eager to reach Rome and to consolidate his power before either of

his rivals should appear beneath the walls, he placed himself at the head of his columns, marching on foot, scarcely allowing time for sleep or food, sharing the hardships of the humblest soldier, and animating all by the glittering prize within their grasp. He crossed the Alps. City after city, neither able nor disposed to oppose, joyfully received him. Ravenna, the great seaport of the northern Adriatic, surrendered, and with it Severus obtained the whole Adriatic fleet. With unintermitted strides he pressed on, and was now within two hundred and fifty miles of Rome.

Julian, almost delirious with terror, acted like a mad man. He was continually sending ambassadors to the camp of Severus to negotiate, and assassins to stab. He invoked the gods, the senate, the people, the guards. He sent the vestal virgins, and the priests in their sacerdotal garb, to plead his cause with Severus. He had recourse to enchantments to paralyze his foe. But all was in vain. Severus was now within seventy miles of Rome, and as yet had met with no opposition calling for the unsheathing of the sword. His agents were already in the capital, and mingling with the Pretorian bands, were attempting to purchase their espousal of his cause. The soldiers cared but little who was emperor, if it were but one from whom they could receive liberal rewards. It was evident now that Severus would be victorious.

The soldiers of the Pretorian guard accordingly reassembled the senate, and ordered them to depose Julian. Then they conducted Julian very politely into one of the private apartments of his palace, carefully, and without any needless rudeness or violence, cut off his head, and sent the bloody trophy on a pike a peace-offering to Severus. Such was the end of Julian's reign of sixty-six days. Severus entered Rome in triumph, despoiled the Pretorian guard, which had become enervated through luxury, of their arms and wealth, disbanded the body and banished the members, on pain of

death, to the distance of one hundred miles from the metropolis. But Severus, though thus triumphant, was in danger of encountering the same fate which had overwhelmed Julian.

There were two hostile armies now approaching Rome, the one under Albinus, from Britain, equal to that of Severus, and the other still more formidable, under Niger, from Syria. The union of these armies would render the ruin of Severus certain. With characteristic cunning, and perfidy, Severus disarmed Albinus, by entering into an alliance with him, giving him the title of Cæsar, and virtually sharing with him the empire. Having accomplished this feat, he turned, with all his energy, upon Niger, and in three great battles destroyed his army. Niger fled helpless to Antioch. For a defeated general there was no possible escape. The executioners of Severus pursued the fugitive, and cutting off his head sent it to the conqueror.

Severus now extended his scepter undisputed over the nations of the East. But Albinus still lived, in command of armies, and claiming a sort of collegueship with the imperial victor. It was needful, for the concentration of dignity and power in the hands of Severus, that Albinus should be disposed of. Severus wrote to him affectionately, as follows :

“Brother of my soul and empire; the gods have given us the victory over our enemies. Niger is no more, and his army is destroyed. I entreat you to preserve the troops and the public faithful to our common interests. Present my affectionate salutation to your wife Julia, and to your little family.”\*

The messenger who conveyed this epistle was directed to watch his chance and plunge a dagger into the heart of Albinus. By some chance the conspiracy was discovered, and Albinus, enraged, and conscious that death was his inevitable doom, resolved to sell his life dearly. Severus was now altogether too powerful to be vanquished by the leader of a few legions

\* The whole of this curious letter is still extant.

in Britain. Albinus, however, put himself at the head of his troops, crossed the channel, and met the victorious army of Severus in Gaul, near the site of the present city of Lyons. The battle was fiercely fought, through a long day. The army of Albinus was cut to pieces, and he himself completed the victory of Severus, by thrusting a sword through his own heart. The head of the unfortunate general was sent a trophy to Rome. The brutal victor trampled the body beneath his horse's hoofs, and after leaving the mangled corpse, for a time, to be devoured by dogs, ordered the remains to be thrown into the Rhine. The wife and children of Albinus were also inhumanly massacred. Enriching his army abundantly with the spoils of the vanquished, Severus returned to Rome, where a splendid triumphal arch was erected to commemorate his success, which arch still remains in a good state of preservation.

An insurrection in Britain called the emperor to that island. Appointing his two sons, Caracalla and Geta as joint successors in the empire, with a powerful army he landed in Britain. Sending a division of his army, under Geta to overawe the lower provinces, he advanced, accompanied by Caracalla, to attack the Caledonians. His army encountered incredible fatigue in forcing their way through forests and marshes, and over unbridged rivers. In a few months fifty thousand men perished from sickness and the sword. But the Caledonians were at length compelled to beg for peace. They were forced to surrender a portion of their country, and, as a protection from their future incursions, Severus built the famous wall, which still goes by his name, from Solway Frith to the German ocean. Soon after this Severus died in the city of York, in Britain, at the age of sixty-six, after a reign of eighteen years.

During his reign a new Pretorian guard was organized, four times as numerous as the one disbanded. He lavished great wealth upon his troops, so that they became enervated

by the most sensual indulgence. All power was wrested from the senate, and a long step was thus taken in the road to national ruin. Gloom overshadowed his last days, "Omnia fui," he exclaimed, "et nihil expedit." *I have been all things and all is of little value.* Satiated with riches and fame, weary of the cares of empire, and disturbed by the bickerings of his sons, into whose depraved and hostile hands he was to surrender unlimited power, and with nothing to contemplate beyond the grave but darkness impenetrable, he sank in sadness to the tomb. And yet the hoary-headed tyrant bequeathed to his boys the political aphorism, by obedience to which he had gained all his power. It was this, "Enrich your soldiers at any price, and regard all the rest of your subjects as mere ciphers."

The two sons of Severus had from childhood been implacably hostile to each other. Gradually they had divided the court into two antagonistic factions. The incessant quarrels of these two heirs of the throne had greatly embittered the last days of their father. Caracalla was the elder of the princes, and his soul seemed ever agitated with the wildest ambition, and the most depraved passions. Geta was more voluptuous and effeminate, and he was more popular with the people. Caracalla had made several unsuccessful attempts to poison his father, and at one time had nearly succeeded in exciting a mutiny among the troops. Immediately after the death of Severus, the two young men, who thus succeeded to the crown, commenced a rapid journey, through Gaul and Italy, to Rome.

They traveled the same road, with separate retinues, jealously watching each other, to guard against assassination, and never venturing to eat at the same table, or sleep in the same house. Thus, the fame of their discord was widely spread. On their arrival at Rome they occupied different palaces, with guards stationed around the doors, and with no communication existing between them, except that which was marked