

CHAPTER XX.

RAPID STRIDES OF DECLINE.

FROM A. D. 235 TO A. D. 283.

MAXIMIN.—HIS REIGN AND DEATH.—REVOLT IN AFRICA.—THE GORDIANS.—THE TWO EMPERORS.—BALBINUS AND MAXIMUS.—ANARCHY IN ROME.—MURDER OF THE EMPERORS.—PHILIP MARINUS AND DECIUS.—DESIGNATION OF CÆSAR.—HEREDITARY DESCENT.—THE GOTHIC INVASION.—VALERIAN AND GALLIENUS.—TERRIBLE FATE OF VALERIAN.—ACCESSION OF CLAUDIUS.—IMMENSE ARMY OF THE GOTHES.—VICTORIES OF CLAUDIUS.—CHARACTER AND FATE OF ZENOBIÆ.—AURELIAN.—INTERREGNUM.—TACITUS.—HIS DEATH.—PROBUS.—CARUS.—HIS MARCH TO PERSIA, AND DEATH.

IN the exaggerated annals of those days we are told that Maximin was eight and a half feet high, and well proportioned; that his wife's bracelet served him for a thumb ring; that his strength was equal to that of two oxen; that with a blow of his fist he could strike out the teeth of a horse, and break his thigh with a kick. His daily rations consisted of six gallons of wine, and forty pounds weight of flesh. The consciousness of his low origin exasperated him, and he endeavored to destroy all who had any personal knowledge of the obscurity from which he had sprung. In the intensity of his jealousy he had put four thousand persons to death whom he suspected of conspiring against him. Some were sewed up in hides of slaughtered animals and left to perish either of suffocation or hunger. Some were thrown into the amphitheater to be torn to pieces by wild beasts; and some were beaten to death by clubs. For some reason, perhaps ashamed of his low breeding and his ungainly address, he could not be persuaded to visit Rome; but spent his time in traveling from camp to camp, on the Rhine and on the Danube. No man of graceful manners or accomplished mind was permitted to appear before him. His graspings for wealth were insatiable.

All temples were robbed; and the most exquisite statues of gold and silver were remorselessly melted down. A short reign of three years finished the career of this monster. The story of his death is thus recorded:

Some gross outrages, perpetrated at the commencement of his reign of the tyrant, goaded both the army and the people of Africa to insurrection. The emissaries of Maximin in the African army were fiercely dispatched, and the standard of rebellion was unfurled. The soldiers compelled Gordian, proconsul of Africa, to accept the imperial purple. He was a Roman gentleman, of highest rank, and of vast wealth. His mansion, in Rome, was the palace which Pompey the Great, in his regal state, inhabited, and his villa, but a short distance from Rome, rivaled the imperial chateaux in the grandeur of architecture, and in costly furniture and embellishments. The Gordian family stood at the head of the Roman aristocracy. The old man was now eighty years of age, and the affairs of his province were mainly administered by his son, who had accompanied him to Africa, a lieutenant then in the prime of life.

The senate in Rome, disgusted with Maximin, who was at this time with the army in Pannonia, on the upper Danube, joyfully received the tidings of the revolt in Africa, and instantly sanctioned, by their suffrage, the choice of the Gordians. The father and son established their court at Carthage. Rome was in a tumult of joy. The populace ran through the streets brandishing their daggers, and shouting the praises of the Gordians. But the savage Maximin was a man not to be despised. An army was sent against Carthage. Young Gordian fell upon the plain where his routed troops were cut to pieces, and the aged father, in despair, put an end to his life. Bitter was the vengeance which Maximin wreaked upon Africa. And now the tyrant turned his steps toward Rome. The senate met in a state of inexpressible dismay. Not only confiscation and ruin awaited them and their families, but death

in the most revolting and cruel forms. One of the senators, more heroic than the rest, in a bold and rousing speech, said:

“We have lost two excellent princes, but unless we desert ourselves, the hopes of the republic have not perished with the Gordians. Many are the senators whose virtues have deserved, and whose abilities would sustain the imperial dignity. Let us elect two emperors, one of whom may conduct the war against the public enemy, whilst his colleague remains at Rome to direct the civil administration. I cheerfully expose myself to the danger of the nomination, and propose Maximus and Balbinus. Ratify my choice, or appoint others more worthy.”

The nomination was promptly ratified. Balbinus was a distinguished orator and magistrate, of noble birth, and affluent fortune. Maximus was a rough soldier, of lowly birth, who by courage and genius had fought his way to no inconsiderable renown. Maximin was now foaming and raging like a wild beast. With an immense army, which had been struggling against the barbarians on the banks of the Danube, he crossed the Julian Alps. But he found in his path only smoldering ruins, desolation, and solitude. The inhabitants, terrified by his known savage nature, had fled in all directions, driving away their cattle, breaking down bridges, and removing or destroying their provisions. The first Italian city he approached was Aquileia, at the head of the Adriatic gulf.

This city was then called the second Rome, and was fortified with the highest resources of art, as a barrier against barbarian invasion. Maximin was a fearless, skillful, and determined soldier. Leaving a portion of his army to conduct the siege with all possible destructiveness and cruelty, he pressed on with another division of his troops to Ravenna. In this dreadful hour, when Rome was threatened with vengeance, the recital of which would cause every ear which should hear it to tingle, some exasperated soldiers of his own camp, taking advantage of the execration which the monster's inhumanity had created, in open day broke into his tent, thrust him

through and through with their javelins, cut off his head, and with every species of derision and insult, paraded it on a pike through the camp! A shout of exultation rose from the whole army, and with general acclaim they accepted Maximus and Balbinus as their lawful emperors. Maximin had been invested with the purple but three years.

The whole Roman empire seemed agitated with joy, as the news spread of the downfall of the tyrant. But in Rome, anarchy succeeded. A conflict arose between the senate and the populace of Rome on the one side, supporting the new emperors, and the Pretorian guard on the other. The soldiers were victorious, and breaking into the palace, they seized Maximus and Balbinus, stripped them of their robes, dragged them ignominiously through the streets, and then, piercing them with a thousand spears, threw their mangled remains into a gutter, to be devoured by dogs. The soldiers then seized a grandson of the elder Gordian, who had perished in Africa, and bore the lad, who was but thirteen years of age, in triumph to the camp, and proclaimed him emperor. In six months, five emperors had perished. The senate, with the sword at their throats, prudently acceded to the demand of the soldiers, and, by accepting Gordian as their sovereign, saved the empire from the miseries of civil war.

The reign of young Gordian was short, and uneventful. He had but just entered his nineteenth year when, while at the head of his army in Mesopotamia, waging war against the Persians, he was poisoned by one of his leading generals, an Arabian soldier, by the name of Philip, who having previously formed a conspiracy of the troops, was immediately proclaimed emperor. But the army on the Danube, which was gathered there in great strength, to repel the constantly menacing invader of the barbarians, was not disposed to accept an emperor from the Persian army. Repudiating the election of Philip, they elected one of their own generals

named Marinus, a man of but little note. Still Philip was alarmed, for the Danubian army was very formidable.

He immediately sent Decius, one of the most illustrious of the Roman senate, to the Danubian army, to endeavor, by his personal influence, to quell the insurrection. But the insurgent soldiers, rejoicing to obtain so illustrious a captive, seized him, and with threats of instant death, compelled him to accept the post of Emperor. In the meantime they repudiated Marinus who was powerless. Thus constrained, Decius yielded to their wishes, and led his army into Italy. Philip hastened to meet him. The two hostile armies, under their several leaders, met at Verona. The troops of Philip were routed, and one of Philip's own soldiers, with a blow of his heavy sword, cleft the monarch's head asunder. The senate, the people, and the Pretorian guard at Rome, all welcomed the new sovereign, who could enforce his claim with so many veteran legions.

To the eye of reason, nothing can seem more absurd than the doctrine of the hereditary descent of power. That a babe, a feeble girl, a semi-idiot or a monster of depravity, should be invested with the sovereignty over millions, merely from the accident of birth, is apparently as preposterous as any folly which intelligence can scrutinize; a folly which the history of hereditary sovereignties most fearfully illustrates. And yet a nation may be so unintelligent, or so depraved, that they can do nothing better than submit to this chance. The accident of birth may be more likely to be favorable than their own stupid or vicious choice. But where there is any thing like intelligence and integrity pervading a nation, the only course of dignity and of safety, is for the people to choose their rulers. But Rome had become so dissolute and barbaric, that had every name in the empire been cast into the wheel of the lottery, and had the first one thrown out been accepted as emperor, the result could not have been more disastrous, than that which ensued from the nominal

suffrage of the senate and the army. It is not too much to say that the weakest and least successful of the Presidents of the United States has been superior, as a ruler, to the best of the Cæsars; not *greater* in administrative energy, but *better as a sovereign*.

History also teaches the folly of electing a ruler for life. Millions may thus be doomed to suffer for half a century under a Nero, a Caracalla, or a Maximin, and there is no refuge but in the immorality of the dagger. Thus assassination becomes, as in ancient Rome, an institution, and almost ceases to be a crime. The election of a ruler, for a short term of service, who is then to return again to the bosom of the people, to share in the taxes which have been imposed, and to be subject to the laws which have been enacted, is surely the highest deduction of political intelligence. Admitting that there are people, so debased, unintelligent or unfortunate that they are incapable of being benefited by this privilege, happy is that people who can enjoy and appreciate the dignity and utility of popular suffrage.

Decius, at the head of his legions, marched from the bloody field of Verona to Rome, received the homage of the senate, the huzzas of the people, and took up his abode in the palaces of the Cæsars. The withdrawal of the troops from the Danube encouraged the Goths to cross that stream in desolating bands. Marching downward from the shores of the Baltic sea, they had ravaged the province of Dacia, a country which extended for many leagues along the northern shores of the Danube, comprising nearly all the present region of Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallacia.

Just across the Danube, lining the southern banks, was the Roman province of Mœsia, now Bulgaria. In wolfish bands these fierce warriors swam the stream, and trampling down the feeble opposition they encountered, cut down the inhabitants and swept the land, plundering and burning. Decius, spurring on his troops, was soon upon them.

The barbarians, disdainng to retreat, pressed onward south westerly into Thrace, and, as Decius incautiously pursued, they turned upon him at Philipopoli, routed the legions, plundered their camp, scaled the walls of the city, and put to the sword its whole population, indiscriminately, amounting to one hundred thousand souls. This was the first successful irruption of the barbarians into the Roman empire, and no tongue can tell the dismay with which the tidings were received in Rome. It was in A. D. 250.

Decius rallied his dispersed forces, gathered recruits, and again met his foes on the plains of Mœsia. Again the Romans, enervated by vice and luxury, were beaten down by the burly arms of the barbarians. The conflict was terrible. Decius himself was slain, and his body, trampled in the mire of a morass, could never be found. A son of Decius also perished with his father on that disastrous day. The broken battalions of the Romans fled, bleeding and panic-stricken, in all directions. The senate, confounded by the calamity, immediately chose again two emperors, probably intending in that form to restore gradually the old Roman republic with two annual consuls.

Hostilianus, a son of Decius, was elected as civil emperor, to remain in Rome, while Gallus, a veteran soldier and a renowned general, was elected military emperor, to take command of the armies. But Rome had already fallen so low that Gallus was compelled to the ignominy of purchasing peace of the barbarians, by allowing them to retire, with all their plunder. They took with them thousands of Roman captives, illustrious men and beautiful women, to serve as slaves in the fields and the harems of the Goths. By the law of human retribution this was right. Rome had made slaves of all nations, and it was just that Rome should drink of the cup of slavery herself.

Hostilianus suddenly sickened and died. Gallus, who thus became sole sovereign, was charged with his murder. At the

same time Æmilianus, governor of the province of Mœsia, gained some little advantages over a wandering band of the barbarians; thereupon the Danubian legions declared him emperor, and placing him at their head, commenced a march into Italy. The senate, deeming Æmilianus the stronger of the rivals, murdered Gallus and his son, and conferred the imperial purple upon Æmilianus. The Roman empire at this time consisted of a belt of territory about one thousand miles in width, encircling the Mediterranean sea as its central lake. Poetry can hardly conceive of a location more beautiful or better adapted for the accumulation of wealth and power.

And now, along the whole line of the Danube, barbarian tribes, of unknown names and customs, began to menace the empire; crossing the river with the sweep of the tornado, but to destroy with resistless energy, and as suddenly to disappear. Gallus, just before his death, had summoned Valerian, a Roman senator and general of renown, to his aid with the army from Gaul. As Valerian was crossing the Alps he received the tidings of the death of Gallus, and determined to avenge him. As the two hostile armies, the one led by Valerian, the other by Æmilianus, approached Spoleto, the soldiers of Æmilianus, unwilling to contend with troops confessedly more powerful, murdered their *imperator*, and with enthusiasm declared for Valerian. Æmilianus had reigned less than four months.

Valerian was already an old man, and he associated with him, in the cares of government his son Gallienus. To multiply the troubles of Rome, the Persians were now, in vast armies, assailing the empire in the East. To meet these menaces Gallienus took charge of the troops of the German frontier, and Valerian marched to repel the Persian cohorts in the East. But the power of ancient Rome was no more. The barbarian Franks, in tribes of various names, trampling down the enervated legions of the Cæsars, in successive waves of

invasion, swept over Gaul and Spain, and even crossed the straits of Hercules and penetrated Africa.

Another barbarian nation, called the Alemanni, came howling through the defiles of the Rhætian Alps, and, almost unresisted, swept over the plains of Lombardy. Leaving behind them traces of the most awful destruction, they retired, with shouts of exultation and burdened with booty to their northern wilds. The Goths of the Ukraine, about the same time, in three expeditions of hitherto unparalleled destructiveness, took possession of the coasts of the Euxine, overran Asia Minor. In the flat-bottomed boats which had transported their bands across the Euxine to Asia, they descended the Bosphorus and the Hellespont, and loaded their fleet to the water's edge with the spoils of the Archipelago. Thence they marched upon Epirus, and even began to threaten Italy.

As Valerian marched through Greece and Asia Minor, with his veteran legions, the Goths sullenly retreated, laden with the plunder of the provinces. Pressing forward on his route he crossed the Euphrates, and met his Persian foes, in strong military array, on the plains of Mesopotamia. Here Sapor, the Persian monarch, triumphed in a decisive battle, and Valerian, hemmed in on all sides by overpowering numbers, was compelled to make an unconditional surrender. The Roman emperor now drained to the dregs the cup of humiliation and misery. Derisively robed in the imperial purple, Valerian was compelled to stoop, as a footstool before his conqueror, who put his foot upon his neck to mount his horse. Every conceivable indignity was heaped upon him for seven years. It is said that at length his eyes were put out, he was flayed alive. His skin tanned, died red, and stuffed, was preserved for ages in commemoration of Persia's triumph over imperial Rome.

Gallienus was left, by the captivity and death of Valerian, sole emperor. Fond of rank and power, he could not refrain

from the indecent expression of gratification in view of those misfortunes which had relieved him from the colleagueship of his father. Regardless of the dishonor which had befallen the empire, he attempted to *purchase* peace with the barbarians, and devoted himself to the cultivation of poetry, rhetoric, and the elegant arts. Many provinces were invaded and ravaged with impunity, while Gallienus only smiled at the intelligence, remarking that Rome was too great to be disturbed by a loss so contemptible. The discontent became so general, that it is said that thirty insurgents rose, during his reign, endeavoring to crowd him from the throne, and grasp the scepter. Civil war, incessantly roused by these local feuds, everywhere desolated the empire.

Odenathus at Palmyra, near the Euphrates, carved him out a kingdom from the crumbling state, and maintained himself in his rebellious sovereignty for twelve years. At his death he transmitted his scepter to his widow Zenobia. Inefficiency and cruelty were combined in the character of Gallienus.

It appears, by exact registers, that in the course of a few years, the population of the Roman empire had decreased, probably one half, from wars, pestilence, and famine. The barbarians were incessantly ravaging the frontiers, and making incursions almost within sight of the domes of Rome. At the same time, in almost every province, bands of the army were pronouncing some successful general *imperator*, and were raising the standard of rebellion. One of the insurgents, named Aureolus, from the Upper Danube, crossed the Rhætian Alps, and marched boldly upon Rome. Gallienus thus roused, attacked him, defeated him, and drove him back upon Milan. Here Gallienus, in a nocturnal attack, received a mortal dart from an unknown hand, probably from an assassin in his own ranks.

With his dying breath he named as his successor a distinguished general, Claudius, of plebeian birth, then in command

of a division of the Roman army near Pavia. He was a veteran soldier, and the senate and the army cordially accepted him. Claudius was then fifty-four years of age. With energy he assailed Aureolus, captured him and put him to death. Heroically he engaged in the attempt to infuse new life into the decaying empire. The barbarians of the north, under the general name of Goths, were now, in armaments more formidable than ever before, crossing the frontiers, from the German ocean to the Euxine sea, a distance of more than fifteen hundred miles.

One army, which it was affirmed consisted of three hundred and twenty thousand, descended the Dneister in six thousand barges. Encountering but feeble opposition they spread in all directions, plundering and destroying the coasts of Europe and of Asia. Claudius marched against them. The letter he addressed to the senate, on this occasion, is still extant.

By a series of signal victories Claudius drove the barbarians back again into their forests. As he was pursuing them with sleepless energy, he fell a victim to exhaustion and exposure, and died of a fever, after a reign of two years. He gathered his officers around his dying bed, and recommended to them one Aurelian, one of his ablest generals, as his successor on the throne. Aurelian was the son of a peasant. His reign lasted four years and nine months; and was wonderfully successful. He chastised the Goths with a rod of iron, and drove them in dismay from the empire. He recovered Spain, Gaul, and Britain from Tetricus, who had usurped the sovereignty there. He then prepared an expedition to crush rebellion in the east.

History describes Zenobia, the queen of Palmyra, as marvelously beautiful, being endowed with almost every moral, intellectual, and physical grace. She was not only a proficient in Latin and Greek, but also understood the Egyptian and Syriac languages. With her own pen she had written an epi-

some of oriental history. For five years, bidding defiance to Rome, she had reigned over Palmyra and Syria. Her dominions extended from the Euphrates to the borders of Bithynia. Without directly avowing hostility to Rome, she seemed, at times, to assume the character of a Roman empress, in command of the eastern division of the empire. Longinus, the renowned critic, whose works are studied with admiration to the present day, was her secretary.

Aurelian having vanquished the Goths, with a victorious army marched along the shores of the Euxine, into the territory claimed by Zenobia. Two great battles were fought, in both of which Zenobia was defeated, and her troops cut to pieces. As usual, her subjects accepted the conqueror. Zenobia, however, with intrepidity seldom surpassed, retired to her citadel, in Palmyra, resolved to surrender her crown only with her life.

"The Roman people," Aurelian wrote, "speak with contempt of the war which I am waging against a woman. They are ignorant both of the character and the power of Zenobia. It is impossible to enumerate her warlike preparations of stones, arrows, and every species of missile weapon. Every part of the walls is provided with two or three *balistæ*; and artificial fire is thrown from her military engines. The fear of punishment has armed her with a desperate courage. Yet, still I trust in the protecting deities of Rome, who have hitherto been favorable to all my undertakings."

At length Zenobia, after a long and heroic conflict, despairing of her ability longer to maintain the siege, and conscious of the doom which awaited her should she fall into the hands of the Romans, endeavored to escape and seek the protection of the Persian court. She mounted one of her fleetest dromedaries and had reached the distance of sixty miles from Palmyra, when she was overtaken and brought back a captive to Aurelian. When the heroic queen was conducted into the presence of her victor he sternly inquired: