

CHAPTER XXXIX. A HALF CENTURY OF DECLINE: COMMODUS TO ALEXANDER SEVERUS

The day of the death of Marcus Aurelius may be taken as the decisive moment in which the ruin of the old civilisation was determined.

Now after the great effort of reason in high places, after Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, the reign of evil begins again, and is worse than ever. Farewell to goodness, farewell to reason! Now, all hail, folly! All hail, absurdity! All hail to the Syrian and his questionable gods! Genuine physicians have been able to do nothing; the sick man is more sick than ever: send for the charlatans.

— RENAN.

WE come now to a time of obvious decline. Even in the golden epoch the nation was probably static rather than progressive, notwithstanding the glory that surrounds the great names of its emperors. But now the deterioration is too rapid and too marked to be questioned. The period has no importance except as a transition time from the great days of the empire to the days of its degradation. Nevertheless, the events of this transition age marshal themselves before the eye in one of the most striking panoramas in all history. These events group themselves into a few strange scenes. The first shows us a philosopher's son given over to the lowest forms of vice; demeaning himself in the arena; associating with gladiators and slaves; and finally coming to an ignominious death at the hands of his wife and freedmen, who kill him that their own lives may be saved.

The second scene shows us, in sharp contrast to the ignoble son of the philosopher, the noble son of a slave assuming the purple. Pertinax passes across the stage as a good old man, well-meaning, but incompetent to stem the tide of the times. He meets what may be called the normal imperial fate — assassination; and the historic stage is cleared for one of the strangest spectacles that it has yet witnessed — the auction of an empire. This, to be sure, is not the first time that money has made its power felt in the disposal of the imperial office. It has long been the custom for a new emperor to make "presents" to the soldiers. But now the affair is reduced to the frank terms of sale and purchase.

In due course the man who has thus bargained for an empire pays the penalty of his ambition; then a turmoil ensues between the rival aspirants to the succession, which ends, naturally enough, with the death of all but one; he, Septimius Severus by name, gives to the empire a moment of relative tranquillity; and at last presents a spectacle hardly less strange than all the others. — the spectacle of a Roman emperor dying a natural death. We shall not see the like again for many a reign.

Following Severus come his two sons, Caracalla and Geta. The former plays well the part of heartless despot; he kills his brother and slaughters a host of helpless subjects in the East; and then, to emphasise a paradox, grants the bauble of Roman citizenship to all subjects of the empire. In due course he meets the imperial death, and is succeeded by Macrinus, who, slain at once, is followed by Elagabalus. This degenerate youth typifies his era; sinks to depths of debauchery which horrify even the Roman conscience; introduces new forms of worship from the East; wins the title of Sardanapalus; and, finally, slaughtered, his body thrown into the Tiber, is nicknamed Tiberinus, in mocking remembrance of his ignoble death and yet more ignoble life.

And now, at last, a ray of light pierces the gloom, and with the coming of Alexander Severus there is a brief recrudescence of the days when Rome was something more than the battle-ground of mercenaries and the court of voluptuaries. Yet, in the end, even this good emperor meets the fate of all the rest. Truly, the time is out of joint.

Let us take up now in more detailed presentation — yet still as briefly as historical completeness will permit — the story of these strange events, beginning with the reign of that renegade Commodus, who owed his position on the throne to the parental affection rather than the philosophic judgment of the best of emperors.^a

COMMODOUS (180-192 A.D.)

Marcus Aurelius was succeeded by his son, usually known as Commodus, whose full name was Marcus Lucius Ælius Aurelius Commodus Antoninus. This unworthy scion of a glorious house was born at Lanuvium on the 31st of August, 161, and proclaimed cæsar on the 12th of October, 166. In the year 177 the tribunician authority was bestowed on Commodus and he was summoned to take his place as “augustus” by his father’s side.

Three years later, on the 17th of March, 180, Aurelius died, and Commodus, who was at that time less than nineteen years of age, assumed the reins of government without difficulty. But he was not the man to rise to the occasion and reap the advantage of his father’s victories. He made a peace with the Germani, which might pass for honourable, but was far from furnishing a satisfactory safeguard for the interests of Rome. The principal conditions were the same that Marcus Aurelius had imposed upon the enemy five or six years before, but Commodus yielded up all the strongholds which the Romans had established in the heart of the enemy’s country. The lustre of the Roman arms was restored for the time, it is true, and the old and new commanders, trained in the school of the Parthian and German wars, guarded the frontiers of the empire at all points. But the change for the worse soon manifested itself in the internal policy of the empire.^b

At Rome, for the space of about three years, all was tranquillity; for Commodus, whose natural character, as we are assured, was weak and timid

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rather than wicked, allowed himself to be directed by the able and upright men to whom his father had recommended him. His hours were devoted to luxury and indulgence, till at length (183) an event occurred which revealed the latent cruelty of his nature.

After the death of L. Verus, Marcus had given his daughter Lucilla in marriage to Pompeianus, a most respectable senator; and after the death of her mother he allowed her all the honours of an empress, which her brother also continued to her. But on the marriage of Commodus with a lady named Crispina, Lucilla was obliged to yield precedence to the reigning empress. Her haughty spirit deemed this an indignity, and she resolved on revenge. Fearing to entrust her design to her noble-minded husband, she first communicated it to Quadratus, a wealthy young nobleman, with whom she carried on an adulterous intercourse; she also engaged in the plot Claudius Pompeianus, another of her paramours, who was betrothed to her daughter; some senators also were aware of it. As Commodus was entering the amphitheatre through a dusky passage, Pompeianus, who was lying in wait, drew his sword and cried, "The senate sends thee this." But the words prevented the execution of his design, and he was seized by the guards. He, Quadratus, and some others were executed; Lucilla was for the present confined in the isle of Capreæ, but she was ere long put to death, and a similar fate soon befell her rival Crispina on account of adultery. In her place Commodus took a freedwoman named Marcia, who had been the concubine of Quadratus, and to whom he gave all the honours of an empress, except that of having fire borne before her.

CRUELTIES AND DEATH OF COMMODUS

The unwise exclamation of Pompeianus sank deep in the mind of Commodus; he learned to regard the senate as his deadly enemies, and many of its most illustrious members were put to death on various pretexts. His only reliance was now on the guards, and the prætorian prefects soon became as important as in former times. The prefects now were Tarruntenus Paternus and Perennis, but the arts of the latter caused the former to be removed and put to death, and the whole power of the state fell into his hands, for the timid Commodus no longer ventured to appear in public. The prefect removed all he dreaded by false accusations, and he amassed wealth by the confiscation of the properties of the nobility. His son was in command of the Illyrian legions, and he now aspired to the empire. But he had offended the army of Britain — the army that in 184 had won brilliant success, — and they deputed (186) fifteen hundred of their number to accuse him to Commodus of designs on the empire. They were supported by the secret influence of the freedman Cleander, and Perennis was given up to their vengeance. Himself, his wife, his sister, and two of his children were massacred; his eldest son was recalled and murdered on the way to Rome.

The character of Perennis is doubtful, but that of Cleander who succeeded to his power was one of pure evil. Cleander, a Phrygian by birth, had been brought to Rome as a slave and sold in the public market. He was purchased for the palace, and placed about the person of Commodus, with whom he speedily ingratiated himself; and when the prince became emperor he made Cleander his chamberlain. The power of the freedman, when Perennis was removed, became absolute; avarice, the passion of a vulgar mind, was his guiding principle. All the honours and all the posts

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of the empire were put to sale; pardons for any crime were to be had for money; and in the short space of three years the wealth of Cleander exceeded that of the Pallas and Narcissus of the early days of the empire.

A conspiracy of an extraordinary nature occurred not long after the death of Perennis. A great number of men who had deserted from the armies put themselves under the command of a common soldier named Maternus; they were joined by slaves whom they freed from their bonds, and they ravaged for some time with impunity the provinces of Gaul and Spain. At length (187) when Maternus found the governors preparing to act with vigour against him, he resolved to make a desperate effort and be emperor or perish. He directed his followers to disperse and repair secretly to Rome, where he proposed that they should assume the dress of the guards, and fall on the emperor during the license of the festival of the Megalesia. All succeeded to his wishes; they repaired safely to Rome, but some of them out of envy betrayed the secret, and Maternus and some others were taken and executed.

The power of Cleander was now at its height; by gifts to Commodus and his mistresses he maintained his influence at court, and by the erection of baths and other public edifices he sought to ingratiate himself with the people. He had also the command of the guards, for whom he had for some time caused prætorian prefects to be made and unmade at his will. He at length divided the office between himself and two others, but he did not assume the title. As an instance of the way in which he disposed of offices, we find in one year (189) no less than five-and-twenty consuls.

What the ultimate views of Cleander may have been is unknown, for he shared the usual fate of aspiring freedmen. Rome was visited at this time by a direful pestilence, and the emperor on account of it resided out of the city. The pestilence was as usual attended by famine, and this visitation of heaven was by the people laid to the charge of the odious favourite. As



PECULIAR HEAD-DRESS OF A STANDARD-BEARER

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they were one day (189) viewing the horse races in the circus, a party of children entered, headed by a fierce-looking girl, and began to exclaim against Cleander. The people joined in the cries, and then rising rushed to where Commodus was residing in the suburbs, demanding the death of Cleander. But the favourite instantly ordered the praetorian cavalry to charge them, and they were driven back to the city with the loss of many lives. When, however, the cavalry entered the streets they were assailed by missiles from the roofs of the houses, and the people being joined by the urban cohorts rallied and drove them back to the palace, where Commodus still lay in total ignorance of all that had occurred, for fear of Cleander had kept all silent. But now Marcia, or as others said the emperor's sister Fadilla, seeing the danger so imminent, rushed into his presence and informed him of the truth. Without a moment's hesitation he ordered Cleander and his son to be put to death. The people placed the head of Cleander on a pole and dragged his body through the streets, and when they had massacred some of his creatures the tumult ceased.

The cruelty of Commodus displayed itself more and more every day, and several men of rank became its victims.^c Thus, after many years of tranquillity, the upper classes of Roman society again found themselves in the intolerable position of going in perpetual fear of death. Once more Rome witnessed the spectacle of a wicked lad on the throne of the Caesars, falling a victim to the "madness of empire," trampling the dignity of his great office underfoot in furious lust of pleasure of every sort, and, in pompous dull-wittedness, playing the part of a sanguinary practical joker and a foolish spendthrift.^b At the same time his lust was unbounded; three hundred beautiful women and as many boys of all ages and countries filled his seraglio, and he abstained from no kind of infamy. He delighted also to exhibit proofs of his skill as a marksman, and he assumed the title and attributes of the hero Hercules. For some time, like Nero, he confined his displays to the interior of his residences, but at length the senate and people were permitted to witness his skill in the amphitheatre. A gallery ran round it for the safety and convenience of the emperor, from which he discharged his darts and arrows with unerring aim at the larger and fiercer animals, while he ventured into the arena to destroy the deer and other timid creatures. A hundred lions were at once let loose, and each fell by a single wound; an irritated panther had just seized a man, a dart was flung by the emperor and the beast fell dead, while the man remained uninjured. With crescent-headed arrows he cut off the heads of ostriches as they ran at full speed.

But his greatest delight was to combat as a gladiator. He appeared in the character of a secutor: he caused to be recorded 735 victories which he had gained, and he received each time an immense stipend out of the gladiatorial fund. Instead of Hercules he now styled himself Paulus, after a celebrated secutor, and caused it to be inscribed on his statues. He also took up his abode in the residence of the gladiators.

At length the tyrant met the fate he merited. It was his design to put to death the two consuls-elect for the year 193, and on New Year's Day to proceed from the gladiators' school in his gladiatorial habit and enter on the consulate. On the preceding day he communicated his design to Marcia, who tried in vain to dissuade him from it. Q. Æmilius Lætus, the praetorian prefect, and the chamberlain, Eclectus, also reasoned with him, but to as little purpose. He testified much wrath, and uttered some menaces. Knowing that the threats of the tyrant were the sure precursors of death, they saw their only hopes of safety lay in anticipation; they took their resolution

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on the moment ;¹ and when Commodus came from the bath, Marcia, as was her usual practice, handed him a bowl (in which she had now infused a strong poison), to quench his thirst.

He drank the liquor off, and then laid himself down to sleep. The attendants were all sent away. The conspirators were expecting the effect of the poison when the emperor began to vomit profusely. Fearing now that the poison would not take effect, they brought in a vigorous wrestler named Narcissus ; and induced by the promise of a large reward, he laid hold on and strangled the emperor.²

PERTINAX (P. HELVIUS PERTINAX), 193 A.D.

The conspirators had, it is probable, already fixed on the person who should succeed to the empire, and their choice was one calculated to do them credit. It was P. Helvius Pertinax, the prefect of the city, a man now advanced in years, who had with an unblemished character, though born in a humble rank, passed through all the civil and military gradations of the state. Pertinax was the son of a freedman who was engaged in the manufacture of charcoal at Alba Pompeia in the Apennines. He commenced life as a man of letters, but finding the literary profession unprofitable, he entered the army as a centurion, and his career of advancement was rapid.

It was yet night when Lætus and Eclectus proceeded with some soldiers to the house of Pertinax. When informed of their arrival he ordered them to be brought to his chamber, and then, without rising, told them that he had long expected every night to be his last, and bade them execute their office ; for he was certain that Commodus had sent them to put him to death. But they informed him that the tyrant himself was no more, and that they were come to offer him the empire. He hesitated to give credit to them, but having sent one on whom he could depend, and ascertained that Commodus was dead, he consented to accept the proffered dignity. Though it was not yet day they all repaired to the prætorian camp, and Lætus, having assembled the soldiers, told them that Commodus was suddenly dead of apoplexy, and that he had brought them his successor, a man whose merits were known to them all. Pertinax then addressed them, promising a large donative. The soldiers swore fidelity to the emperor.

Before dawn the senate was summoned to the temple of Concord, whither Pertinax had proceeded from the camp. He told them what had occurred, and, noticing his age and his humble extraction, pointed out divers senators as more worthy of the empire than himself. But they would not listen to his excuses, and they decreed him all the imperial titles. Then giving loose to their rage against the fallen tyrant, they termed him parricide, gladiator, the enemy of the gods and of his country, and decreed that his statues should be cast down, his titles be erased, and his body dragged with the hook through the streets. But Pertinax respected too much the memory of

¹ Herodian tells us of a list of those destined to be put to death taken by a child, and read by Marcia, as in the case of Domitian. But he is a very inaccurate writer, and Dion, who was a senator and in Rome at the time, could hardly have been ignorant of the circumstance if it were true.

[² During this reign the disciplined legions under able commanders still protected the frontiers. Most of the empire was peaceful and prosperous. The government still carried on great public works and benevolently succoured the afflicted. The Christians were tolerated, and those of the sect who were in prison were released. The great official machine was little disturbed by the caprices of the emperor.]

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Marcus to suffer the remains of his son to be thus treated, and they were by his order placed in the tomb of Hadrian.

Pertinax was cheerfully acknowledged by all the armies. Like Vespasian, he was simple and modest in his dress and mode of life, and he lived on terms of intimacy with the respectable members of the senate. He resigned his private property to his wife and son, but would not suffer the senate to bestow on them any titles. He regulated the finances with the greatest care, remitting oppressive taxes and cancelling unjust claims. He sold by auction all the late tyrant's instruments of luxury, and obliged his favourites to disgorge a portion of their plunder. He granted the waste lands in Italy and elsewhere for a term of years rent free to those who would undertake to improve them.

The reforming hand of the emperor was extended to all departments of the state; and men looked for a return of the age of the Antonines. But the soldiers dreaded the restoration of the ancient discipline; and Lætus, who found that he did not enjoy the power he had expected, secretly fomented their discontent. So early as the 3d of January they had seized a senator named Triarius Maternus, intending to make him emperor, but he escaped from them and fled to Pertinax for protection. Some time after, while the emperor was on the sea coast attending to the supply of corn, they prepared to raise Sosius Falco, then consul, to the empire; but Pertinax came suddenly to Rome, and having complained of Falco to the senate, they were about to proclaim him a public enemy, when the emperor cried that no senator should suffer death while he reigned; and Falco was thus suffered to escape punishment.

Some expressions which Pertinax used on this occasion irritated the soldiers; and Lætus, to exasperate them still more, put several of them to death, as if by his orders. Accordingly on the twenty-eighth of March a general mutiny broke out in the camp, and two or three hundred of the most desperate proceeded with drawn swords to the palace. No one opposed their entrance. Pertinax, when informed of their approach, advanced to meet them. He addressed them, reminding them of his own innocence and of the obligation of their oath. They were silent for a few moments; at length a Tungrian soldier struck him with his sword, crying, "The soldiers send thee this." They all then fell on him, and cutting off his head set it on a lance and carried it to the camp. Eclectus, faithful to the last, perished with the emperor; Lætus had fled in disguise at the approach of the mutineers. The reign of the virtuous Pertinax had lasted only eighty-six days; he was in the sixty-seventh year of his age.

JULIANUS (M. DIDIUS SEVERUS JULIANUS), 193 A.D.

The mutineers on their return to the camp found there Sulpicianus, the prefect of the city, the late emperor's father-in-law, who had been sent thither to try to appease the mutiny. The bloody proof which they bore of the empire's being vacant excited when it should have extinguished his ambition, and he forthwith began to treat for the dangerous prize. Immediately some of the soldiers ran and ascending the ramparts cried out aloud that the empire was for sale, and would be given to the highest bidder. The news reached the ears of Didius Julianus, a wealthy and luxurious senator, as he sat at table; and urged by his wife and daughter and his parasites, he rose and hastened to the camp. The military auctioneers stood on the wall,

one bidder within, the other without. Sulpicianus had gone as high as five thousand denarii a man, when his rival at one bidding rose to 6250. This spirited offer carried it; the soldiers also had a secret dread that Sulpicianus, if emperor, might avenge the death of his son-in-law. The gates were thrown open, and Julian was admitted and saluted emperor; but the soldiers had the generosity to stipulate for the safety of his rival.

From the camp Julian, escorted by the soldiers, proceeded to the senate house. He was there received with affected joy, and the usual titles and honours were decreed him; but the people stood aloof and in silence, and those who were more distant uttered loud curses on him. When Julian came to the palace, the first object that met his eyes was the corpse of his predecessor: he ordered it to be buried, and then it is said sat down and passed the greater part of the night at a luxurious banquet, and playing at dice. In the morning the senate repaired to him with their feigned compliments; but the people still were gloomy, and when he went down to the senate house and was about to offer incense to the Janus before the doors, they cried out that he was a parricide and had stolen the empire. He promised them money, but they would have none of it; and at length he ordered the soldiers to fall on them, and several were killed and wounded. Still they ceased not to revile him and the soldiers, and to call on the other armies, especially that of Pescennius Niger, to come to their aid.

The principal armies were that of Syria commanded by Niger; that of Pannonia under Septimius Severus, and that of Britain under Clodius Albinus, each composed of three legions, with its suitable number of auxiliaries.

C. Pescennius Niger was a native of Aquinum, of a simple equestrian family. He entered the army as a centurion, and rose almost solely by merit till he attained the lucrative government of Syria. As an officer Niger was a rigorous maintainer of discipline; as a governor he was just, but mild and indulgent, and he succeeded in gaining alike the affections of the soldiers and the subjects. In his private life he was chaste and temperate.

L. Septimius Severus was born at Leptis in Africa. He received a learned education, and devoted himself to the bar, and M. Aurelius made him advocate of the Fisc. He acted as civil governor of several provinces, and had occasionally a military command, but had seen little or no actual service. After his consulate, Commodus, through the influence of Lætus, gave him the command of the Pannonian legions, as reported in the *Augustan History*.

D. Clodius Albinus was also an African. He was born at Hadrumetum, of an honourable family, which derived its origin from the Postumii and Ceionii of Rome. He entered the army early, and rose through all the gradations of the service, being highly esteemed by M. Aurelius. He commanded in Bithynia, at the time of the revolt of Cassius, and kept his legions in their duty. Commodus gave him the command in Gaul and in Britain, and designed him for his successor. Albinus was a strict and even severe officer. He was fond of agriculture, on which subject he wrote some books. He was charged with private vices, but probably without reason.

When the intelligence of the murder of Pertinax and the sale of the empire to Julian reached the armies of Syria and Pannonia, their generals saw the prospect of empire open to them as the avengers of the emperor whom they had acknowledged. Each of them assembled his troops and expatiated on the atrocity of the deed which had been perpetrated at Rome, and each was saluted Augustus by his army and the subjects. But while Niger, seeing all the provinces and allied princes of Asia unanimous in his favour, and therefore indulging in confidence, remained inactive at Antioch,

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Severus resolved to push on for the capital, and possess himself of that seat of empire. Having secured the adherence of the army of Gaul, he wrote a most friendly letter to Albinus, giving him the title of *cæsar*, and adopting him as his son; by which he made sure of his neutrality, if not of his co-operation. He then advanced by rapid marches for Rome. Day and night he appeared in full armour, and surrounded by a guard of six hundred chosen men, who never laid aside their corslets. Resistance was nowhere offered; all hailed him as the avenger of Pertinax.

The wretched Julian was filled with dismay when he heard of the approach of the formidable Pannonian army. He made the senate declare Severus a public enemy; he distributed large sums of money to the prætorians to induce them to prepare to defend him; but these dissolute troops were vigorous only for evil, and they could not resume the discipline they had lost; the marines summoned from Misenum were still more inefficient; and an attempt at training elephants for war in the oriental manner only excited derision. Julian also caused an entrenchment to be run in front of the city, and he secured the palace with strong doors and bars, as if that could be maintained when all else was lost. He put to death Marcia, Lætus, and all concerned in the murder of Commodus, probably with a view to the favour of the soldiery.

Severus meantime had reached Ravenna and secured the fleet. Julian, having made some fruitless attempts on his life, caused the senate to declare him his associate in the empire. But Severus now disdained such divided power; he had written to the prætorians, assuring safety to all but the actual assassins of Pertinax, and they had accepted the conditions. The consul, Silius Messalla, assembled the senate, and it was resolved to put Julian to death and give the empire to Severus. When those charged with the mandate for his death came to Julian, his only words were, "What evil have I done? Whom have I slain?" He was then killed by a common soldier, after a reign of only sixty-six days.

SEVERUS (L. SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS), 193–211 A.D.

Severus was met at Interamna (Terni), in Umbria, seventy miles from Rome, by deputies from the senate. He received them with favour, and still continued to advance. As he drew nigh to Rome he commanded the execution of the murderers of Pertinax, and he sent orders to the remaining prætorians to leave their arms in their camp and come to meet him, dressed as they were wont when attending the emperors on solemn occasions. They obeyed, and Severus received them in the plain before his camp, and addressed them from a tribunal, reproaching them with the murder of Pertinax and the sale of the empire to Julian. He would spare their lives, he said, but he would leave them nothing save their tunics, and death should be the fate of any of them who ever came within a hundred miles of the capital. While he was speaking his soldiers had imperceptibly surrounded them; resistance was vain, and they quietly yielded up their swords and their rich habiliments, and mournfully retired. A detachment had meantime taken possession of their camp, to obviate the effects of their despair.

Severus entered the city at the head of his army. The senate and people met him with all the marks of joy and festivity. He ascended the Capitol and worshipped; he then visited the other temples, and at length proceeded to the palace. In the morning he met the senate, to whom he made a

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speech full of the fairest promises, assuring them that Marcus should be his model and swearing that he would put no senator to death unless condemned by themselves — an oath which he kept but indifferently. The usual titles and powers had been already decreed him; among these was the title of Pertinax, of which prince he affected to be the avenger, and the ceremony of whose deification he performed with the greatest magnificence and solemnity. He distributed large sums of money among the soldiers and people; he regulated the supply of provisions, and he examined into the con-

duct of several governors of provinces, and punished those who were proved guilty of oppression.

Severus restored the prætorian guards on a new model, and raised them to four times their original number. Augustus had admitted none but Italians into this body; the youth of Spain, Noricum, and Macedonia had gradually been suffered to enlist in it; but Severus threw it open to all, selecting the ablest and most faithful soldiers from the legions for the higher pay and more easy life of the guardsmen.

After a stay of only thirty days in Rome, Severus set out for the war against Niger, who was master of all Asia and held the strong city of Byzantium in Europe. The preparations on both sides occupied some time; at length Severus took the field, and leaving part of his troops to carry on the siege of Byzantium, he sent the main body of his army, under his generals, over the Hellespont. Æmilianus, the proconsul of Asia, gave them battle (194) near Cyzicus, but was de-



SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

(From a bust in the Capitoline Museum)

feated. He fled to Cyzicus, and thence to another unnamed town, where he was seized and put to death. Niger in person afterwards engaged the Severian general, Candidus, between Nicæa and Cius. The contest was long and arduous, but victory declared for the European army, and Niger, leaving troops to guard the passes of Mount Taurus, hastened to Antioch to raise men and money. The elements, however, favoured Severus; heavy falls of rain and snow destroyed the defences constructed by Niger, and his troops were obliged to abandon the passes and leave Cilicia open to the enemy.

Niger made his final stand at the Cilician Gates, as the pass from Cilicia into Syria at the head of the Bay of Issus was named, a place famous for the defeat of Darius by Alexander the Great. The troops of Niger were more numerous, but they were mostly raw levies, yet they fought with constancy; but the elements, we are told, again favoured the Severians, a storm of rain and thunder came over the sea and blew full in the faces of the Nigrians,

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and they fled with the loss of twenty thousand men. Niger hastened to Antioch, and thence, on the approach of the enemy, he fled to the Euphrates, in order to seek refuge with the Parthians; but he had hardly quitted the town when he was seized, and his head was cut off and sent to Severus.

CONQUESTS OF SEVERUS

This emperor, who had been in none of the preceding actions, now appeared. He put to death all the senators who had borne arms for Niger; he banished some, and seized the property of others. He put numbers of inferior rank to death, and he treated severely Antioch and some other towns. He then (195) led his army over the Euphrates, and his generals employed this and a part of the following year in reducing the various tribes and princes of Mesopotamia. While he was thus engaged (196), he received the joyful intelligence of the surrender of Byzantium, which, strong by situation and fortifications, had held out for nearly three years against the valour and skill of the besieging army, and was only subdued at last by famine. The magistrates and soldiers were all put to death; the property of the inhabitants was sold; the walls and the public edifices were demolished; Byzantium was deprived of its title of city, and subjected as a village to the jurisdiction of Perinthus.

It is said that Severus was meditating an invasion of Parthia, but his thoughts were more fixed on securing the succession to his children by removing Albinus. Suitably to his character, he resolved to proceed by treachery rather than by force. He wrote to Albinus in the most affectionate terms, as to his dearest brother; but the bearers of the letter were instructed to ask a private audience, as having matters of greater importance to communicate, and then to assassinate him. The suspicions of Albinus, however, being awaked, he put them to the torture, and extracted the truth. He saw that he had no alternative, that he must be emperor or nothing, and he therefore declared himself Augustus and passed with his army over to Gaul. Severus returned with all possible speed from the East, and advanced in person into Gaul against his rival. He crossed the Alps in the depth of winter, and after some minor engagements a decisive battle was fought on the 19th of February, 197, in the neighbourhood of Lyons. The united number of the combatants was 150,000 men; the battle was long and dubious, the left wing on each side was routed, but Severus, who now fought for the first time, brought up the prætorians to the support of his beaten troops, and though he received a wound and was driven back, he rallied them once more, and being supported by the cavalry, under his general, Lætus, he defeated and pursued the enemy to Lyons. The loss on both sides was considerable; Albinus slew himself, and his head was cut off and brought to his ungenerous enemy, who meanly insulted it; his wife and children were at first spared, but they were soon after put to death, and their bodies cast into the Rhine.

The city of Lyons was pillaged and burned; the chief supporters of Albinus, both men and women, Romans and provincials, were put to death, and their properties confiscated. Having spent some time in regulating the affairs of Gaul and Britain, Severus returned to Rome, breathing vengeance against the senate, for he knew that that body was in general more inclined to Albinus than himself, and he had found, among his rival's papers, the letters of several individual senators. The very day after his arrival he

addressed them, commending the stern policy of Sulla, Marius, and Augustus, and blaming the mildness of Pompey and Cæsar, which proved their ruin. He spoke in terms of praise of Commodus, saying that the senate had no right to dishonour him, as many of themselves lived worse than he had done. He spoke severely of those who had written letters or sent presents to Albinus. Of these he pardoned five-and-thirty, but he put to death nine-and-twenty, among whom was Sulpicianus, the father-in-law of Pertinax. These, however, were not the only victims; the whole family of Niger, and several other illustrious persons perished. The properties of all were confiscated; [wherefore the usual charge of avarice was brought against Severus.]

After a short stay at Rome Severus set out again for the East; for the Parthians, taking advantage of his absence, had invaded Mesopotamia, and laid siege to Nisibis. They retired, however, when they heard of his approach, and Severus, having passed the winter in Syria making preparations for the war, crossed the Tigris the following summer (198) and laid siege to Ctesiphon. The Roman soldiers suffered greatly for want of supplies, and were reduced to feed on roots and herbage, which produced dysenteries, but the emperor persevered, and the city at length was taken. All the full-grown males were massacred, and the women and children, to the number of one hundred thousand, were sold for slaves. As want of supplies did not permit the Romans to remain beyond the Tigris, they returned to Mesopotamia, and on his way to Syria (199) Severus laid siege to the redoubtable Atræ, but he was forced to retire, with a great loss both of men and machines. He renewed the attack some time after (it is uncertain in what year) but with as little success, being obliged to retire with loss and disgrace from before the impregnable fortress.

Severus remained in the East till the year 202. He spent a part of that time in Egypt, where he took great pleasure in examining the pyramids and the other curiosities of that country. He at length returned to Rome, to celebrate the marriage of his elder son.

The family of Severus consisted of his wife and two sons. The empress, named Julia Domna, was a native of Emesa in Syria, whom Severus, who was addicted to astrology, is said to have espoused because she had a royal nativity. She was a woman of great beauty, sense, and spirit, and a cultivator of literature and philosophy. The elder son was at first named Bassianus; but his father, at the time of the war against Albinus, created him cæsar, by the name of Aurelius Antoninus;¹ and he was subsequently nicknamed Caracalla, which, to avoid confusion, is the name employed by modern historians. In the year 198 Severus created him augustus, and made him his associate in the empire. The name of the emperor's younger son was Geta, and he also was styled Antoninus.

The bride selected for Caracalla was Plautilla, the daughter of Plautianus, the prætorian prefect. This man was a second Sejanus, and it is very remarkable that two emperors of such superior mental powers as Tiberius and Severus should have been so completely under the influence of their ministers. Plautianus, like his master, was an African by birth; he was of mean extraction, and he seems to have early attached himself to the fortune of his aspiring countryman, whose favour and confidence he won in an extraordinary degree; and when Severus attained the empire, the power of Plautianus grew to such a height, that he, the historian observes, was, as it

¹ Severus, 'not content with expressing his veneration and respect for the memory of M. Aurelius, had the folly to pretend to be his son. "What most amazed us," says Dion, "was his saying that he was the son of Marcus and brother of Commodus."

[202-208 A.D.]

were, emperor, and Severus captain of the guards. Persons like Plautianus, when elevated, rarely bear their faculties meekly. He was therefore proud, cruel, and avaricious; he was the chief cause of so many persons of rank and fortune being put to death, in order that he might gain their properties. He seized whatever took his fancy, whether sacred or profane, and he thus amassed such wealth that it was commonly said he was richer than Severus and his sons. Such was his pride that no one dared approach him without his permission; and when he appeared in public criers preceded him, ordering that no one should stop and gaze at him, but turn aside and look down. He would not allow his wife to visit or to receive visits, not even excepting the empress. As his power was so great, he was of course the object of universal adulation. The senators and soldiers swore by his fortune, and his statues were set up in all parts of the empire. He was in effect more dreaded and more honoured than the emperor himself.

Such power is, however, unstable in its very nature, and the marriage of his daughter with the son of the emperor caused the downfall of Plautianus. The wedding was celebrated with the utmost magnificence; the dower of the bride, we are told, would have portioned fifty princesses. [But the usual allowances must be made for exaggerations of the gossipers. Some of the tales related by Dion Cassius *e* are not worthy of repetition even, though perhaps told in good faith. Doubtless all details as to the death of Plautianus must be heard with reservations.] Plautilla was haughty like himself; and Caracalla, who had been forced to marry her, hated father and daughter alike, and resolved on their destruction. He induced one Saturninus and two other centurions to declare that Plautianus had ordered them and seven of their comrades to murder Severus and his son. A written order to this effect was forged and shown to the emperor, who forthwith summoned Plautianus to his presence. He came suspecting nothing; he was admitted, but his followers were excluded. Severus, however, addressed him in a mild tone, and asked him why he had meditated killing him. Plautianus was expressing his surprise and commencing his defence, when Caracalla sprang forward, tore his sword from him, struck him with his fist, and would have slain him with his own hand but for the interference of his father. He then made some of his attendants despatch him, and sent his head to the empress and Plautilla, a joyful sight to the one, a mournful spectacle to the other. Plautilla and her brother Plautius were sent to the isle of Lipara, where they lived in poverty and misery for the remainder of the reign of Severus, and their murder was one of the first acts of Caracalla when emperor.

Severus now remained in Italy for a space of four years, actively engaged in the administration of justice, the regulation of the finances, and the correction of all kinds of abuses. He conferred the important post of prætorian prefect on Papinian, the most renowned of jurisconsults; and as it was now a part of this officer's duty to try civil causes, Papinian appointed as his assessors Paulus and Ulpian — names nearly as distinguished as his own.

In the year 208, Severus, though far advanced in years and a martyr to the gout, set out for Britain, where the northern tribes had for some time been making their usual incursions into the Roman part of the island. Various motives are assigned for this resolution; the most probable is that he wished to remove his sons from the luxury of Rome, and to restore the relaxed discipline of the legions. He entered the wild country north of the Roman wall, cut down the woods, and passed the marshes, and succeeded in penetrating to the extremity of the island, though with a loss, it

is said, of fifty thousand men ; for the barbarians, who would never venture to give him battle, hung on his flanks and rear, formed numerous ambuscades, and cut off all stragglers. In order to check their future incursions, he repaired and strengthened the mound or wall which Hadrian had constructed from the shore of Solway Firth to the mouth of the Tyne.

Severus had associated his second son Geta in the empire the year he came to Britain. But the two brothers hated each other mortally, and Caracalla made little secret of his resolution to reign alone. This abandoned youth, it is said, even attempted to kill his father in the very sight of the Roman legions and the barbarian enemies ; for as the emperor was riding one day to receive the arms of the Caledonians, Caracalla drew his sword to stab him in the back ; those who were about them cried out, and Severus, on turning round, saw the drawn sword in the hand of his son. He said nothing at the time, but when he returned he called Caracalla with Papinian and the chamberlain Castor to him in private, and causing a sword to be laid before him, rebuked his son, and then told him if he desired his death to slay him with his own hand, or to order Papinian the prefect to do it, who of course would obey him as he was emperor. Caracalla showed no signs of remorse ; and though Severus had often blamed M. Aurelius for subordinating his public duty to his private affections in the case of Commodus, he himself exhibited even more culpable weakness.

Severus was once more about to take the field against the barbarians, who had renewed their ravages (211), when a severe fit of the gout carried him off at York (Eboracum), in the sixty-sixth year of his age and the eighteenth of his reign.

Though this emperor had passed the greater part of his life in civil rather than military employments, it is remarkable that his government relied more on the arms of the soldiery than that of any of his predecessors. We have seen the important changes which he made in the prætorian guards, whom he also seems to have been the first to employ on foreign service. Hitherto the legions of the frontiers had maintained something of the appearance of those of the republic, but Severus allowed them to have their wives and families in their camps, and to wear gold rings like the knights. He also increased their pay and accustomed them to donatives. His dying counsel to his sons, "Be united, enrich the soldiers, despise all others," revealed his principles of despotic government.^c In judging Severus, however, it is necessary to recall that the entire period through which we are now passing—up to the time of Diocletian—is in a sense an epoch of revolution, the contending forces being the senate, the emperor, the populace of Rome, the prætorians, and the legions. The weakness and brutality of Commodus precipitated the revolution. The prætorians not only trampled upon the senate and the residents of the capital, but also asserted the right to make and to unmake emperors. This was the first stage of the revolution. In the second stage, beginning with Septimius Severus, the legions, jealous of the pampered guard, fought against it, against the senate, and against one another. This civil war, after rendering the prætorians helpless and depriving the senate of its last remnant of authority, decided that the sovereign should be a general, the choice of the soldiers who protected the empire. Thus far the result of the revolution was in a great degree just and beneficent. It is to be noted that Severus was the anti-senatorial candidate for the imperial office,—hence his unfavourable treatment at the hands of the historian. Though harsh in the punishment of political offences, Severus was in other respects a great and admirable ruler. The fact that

[211-212 A.D.]

the three great jurists, Papinian, Ulpian, and Paulus co-operated with him speaks volumes in his favour. He strengthened the empire, encouraged education, and made his reign an epoch in wise legislation.^a

CARACALLA (M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS CARACALLA), 211-217 A.D.

In spite of the efforts of Caracalla to the contrary, the army proclaimed the two sons of Severus joint-emperors. The Caledonian war was abandoned, and the emperors returned to Rome to celebrate the obsequies of their father. On the way Caracalla made various attempts on the life of his brother, but Geta was protected by the soldiery, of whom he was the favourite. The brothers adopted every precaution against each other on the road, and at Rome they divided the palace, securing all the approaches to their several portions. The court, the camp, the senate, and the people were divided in their affections to the brothers, neither of whom was in reality deserving of the attachment of any man of worth; but Geta had a certain degree of mildness and humanity, of affability and of devotion to literature, which gave him the advantage over his more ferocious brother, and gained him the affection of their mother Julia.

As there seemed no probability of concord between the brothers, a division of the empire was proposed and arranged, by which Caracalla was to retain the European portion, while Geta was to rule in Asia and Egypt, residing at Antioch or Alexandria. This arrangement, it is said, was defeated by the tears and entreaties of Julia; and Caracalla, bent on reigning alone, then resolved on the murder of his brother. At his desire (212) Julia invited her two sons to a meeting in her apartments. Geta came suspecting no danger; suddenly some centurions, whom Caracalla had placed in concealment, rushed out and fell on him. He threw himself on his mother's bosom for protection, but her efforts to save him were vain; she herself received a wound in the arm, and was covered with the blood of her murdered son. When the deed was done Caracalla hastened to the camp, crying all the way that a plot had been laid for his life. He flung himself down before the standards in the camp chapel to return thanks for his preservation; and then addressed the soldiers, assuring them that he was one of themselves, and depended on them alone. He promised to raise their pay one half, and to distribute among them all the treasures accumulated by his father. Such arguments could not fail of convincing, and he was readily proclaimed sole emperor. He thence proceeded to the camp at the Alban Mount, where he found more difficulty, as the soldiers there were much attached to Geta; but by dint of promises he gained them also to acknowledge him.

Followed by the soldiers, Caracalla then proceeded to the senate house; he had a cuirass under his robe, and he brought some of his military followers into the house. He justified his conduct by the example of Romulus and others; but he spoke of Geta with regret, and gave him a magnificent funeral, and placed him among the gods.

The unhappy empress dared not lament the death of her son; she was even obliged to wear an aspect of joy for the safety of the emperor, who all through his reign continued to treat her with respect, and to give her a share in the affairs of state. But on all the other friends and favourers of Geta, both civil and military, he let his vengeance fall without restraint, and the number of those who perished on this account is estimated at twenty

thousand. Among these the most regretted was the great Papinian. Caracalla, it is said, wished him to compose an apology for the murder of Geta, but he replied with virtuous intrepidity that it was not so easy to excuse a parricide as to commit it. A soldier cut off his head with an axe, and Caracalla rebuked him for not having used a sword. Fadilla, the surviving daughter of M. Aurelius, was put to death for having lamented Geta. Helvius Pertinax, son of the emperor, Thræsea Priscus, a descendant of the great lover of liberty, and many other persons of rank and virtue were involved in the common ruin. To such an extent it is said did Caracalla carry his hatred to his brother that the comic poets no longer ventured to employ the name of Geta in their plays.

Like Commodus, the emperor devoted most of his time to the circus and amphitheatre. In order to defray his enormous expenses he increased the taxes and confiscated all the properties he could lay hold on. When his mother one day blamed him for bestowing such enormous sums on the soldiers, and said that he would soon have no source of revenue remaining, he laid his hand on his sword, and said, in the true spirit of despotism, "Never fear, mother; while we have this we shall not want for money."

One of the acts of Caracalla at this time was to confer the rights of citizenship, of which the old republicans had been so chary, on all the subjects of the empire.

His restless temper soon urged him to seek for glory in a contest with the Germans. He marched to the Rhine and obtained (by purchase as it would seem) some advantages over the confederacy of the Alamanni, whose name now first appears in history. He henceforth wonderfully affected the Germans, even wearing a blond periwig to resemble them; and he placed a number of them about him as guards. It is thought that it was on the occasion of his return to Rome from Gaul after this war (214) that he distributed among the people the long Gallic coats named *caracals*, whence he derived the appellation by which he is usually known. After his German war, he marched to the Danube (215), visited the province of Dacia, and had some skirmishes with the neighbouring barbarians. He then passed over to Asia with the intention of making war on the Parthians, and spent the winter at Nicomedia.

As he professed an especial regard for the memory of Achilles, he visited the remains of Ilium, offered sacrifices at the tomb of the hero, led his troops in arms round it, and erected a brazen statue on its summit. One of his freedmen happening to die, or being poisoned by him for the purpose, he acted over again the Homeric funeral of Patroclus, pouring, like Achilles, wine to the winds to induce them to inflame the pyre, and cutting off the hair, with which nature had furnished him most scantily, to cast into the flames. In thus honouring Achilles, he sought to follow the example of Alexander the Great, a prince of whom his admiration was such that he erected statues of him everywhere; and he formed a phalanx of sixteen thousand Macedonians armed as in the time of that prince, whom he styled the Eastern Augustus. He even persecuted the peripatetic philosophers, because Aristotle was accused of being concerned in the death of his royal pupil.

In the spring (216) Caracalla set out for Antioch. The Parthians averted a war by the surrender of two persons whom he demanded. By treachery he made himself master of the persons of the king of Armenia and his sons, and of the prince of Edessa; but the Armenians defeated the troops which he sent against them under Theocritus, a common player, whom he had raised to the dignity of prætorian prefect. He then proceeded to

[216-217 A.D.]

Alexandria with the secret resolve of taking a bloody vengeance on the inhabitants for their railleries and witticisms against him on the occasion of the murder of his brother. When he approached the city the people came forth to meet him with all the marks of joy and respect, and he received them graciously, and entered the town. Then pretending a design of forming a phalanx in honour of Alexander, he directed all the youth to appear in the plain without the walls. When they had done as required, he went through them as it were to inspect them; and then retiring to the temple of Serapis, he gave the signal to his soldiers to fall on them and massacre them. The slaughter was dreadful both within and without the walls, for no age or rank was spared. Trenches were dug, and the dead and dying were flung into them in order to conceal the extent of the massacre. He deprived the city of all its privileges, and its total ruin was only averted by his death.

After this slaughter of his helpless subjects, Caracalla returned to Antioch, and in order to have a pretext for making war on the Parthians he sent to Artabanus their king, demanding his daughter in marriage. The Parthian monarch having refused this strange suit, Caracalla invaded and ravaged his territories; and having taken Arbela, where were the royal tombs, he opened them and scattered the bones of the monarchs which were deposited within them. He then took up his winter quarters in Edessa.

In the spring (217) both sides were engaged in active preparation for war; when a conspiracy in his own army terminated the life and reign of the Roman emperor. Of the two prætorian prefects, the one, Adventus, was a mere soldier, the other, Macrinus, was a civilian well versed in the laws. The rough and brutal Caracalla often ridiculed him on this account, and even menaced his life; and Macrinus, having got sure information that his destruction was designed, resolved to anticipate the tyrant. He accordingly communicated his designs to some of the officers of the guards, among whom was one Martial, whom Caracalla had mortally offended by refusing him the post of centurion, or, as others say, by putting his brother to death. Accordingly on the 8th of April, 217, as the emperor was riding from Edessa to Carrhæ in order to worship at the temple of the Moon, and had retired and alighted for a private occasion, Martial ran up as if called, and stabbed him in the throat. The emperor fell down dead. Martial mounted his horse and fled; but he was shot by a Scythian archer of the guard.

MACRINUS (M. OPILIUS MACRINUS), 217-218 A.D.

When the news of the murder of the emperor was divulged, Macrinus was the first to hasten to the spot, and to deplore his death. As Caracalla had left no heir, the army was uncertain whom to proclaim emperor in his stead, and the empire was for four days without a chief. Meantime the officers who were in the interests of Macrinus used all their influence with their men, and on the fourth day he was saluted emperor. He accepted the office with feigned reluctance, and he distributed, according to custom, large sums of money among the soldiers. Adventus was the bearer of the ashes of Caracalla to Rome, where they were deposited in the tomb of the Antonines; and Macrinus and the senate were obliged to yield to the instances of the soldiers, and place the monster among the gods. The senate received with joy the letter in which Macrinus announced his elevation to the empire, and they decreed him all the usual titles and honours.

While these changes were taking place in the Roman Empire, Artabanus had passed the Tigris with a large army. Macrinus having in vain proposed terms of accommodation, led out his legions, and some fighting took place in the neighbourhood of Nisibis, in which the advantage was on the side of the Parthians; but as they now began to feel the want of supplies, and were anxious to return home, they readily listened to the renewed proposals of the Roman emperor, and a peace was concluded. Macrinus then led his troops back to Antioch for the winter.

Macrinus, as we have already observed, was not a military man. He was a native of Cæsarea in Africa (Algiers), of humble origin, and he was indebted for his elevation to his countryman Plautianus. He was a man of



ROMAN GENERAL
(From a vase)

an amiable disposition, and a sincere lover of justice. He therefore turned his attention chiefly to civil regulations, and he made some necessary reforms and excellent laws; but he was timid by nature, and in his anxiety to serve and advance his friends, he did not sufficiently consider their fitness for the employments which he bestowed on them. He committed a great and irreparable fault in not setting out for Rome at once, and in keeping the army all together in Syria; and he further commenced too soon a necessary, but imprudent attempt at bringing back the discipline of the legions to what it had been under Severus; for though he applied it only to recruits and did not interfere with the old soldiers, these last apprehended that the reform would at length reach themselves, and they became highly discontented. This feeling of the soldiers was soon taken advantage of, and a rival set up to Macrinus.

The empress Julia was at Antioch at the time of the murder of Caracalla. Macrinus wrote to her in very obliging terms; but in the first transports of her grief at the death of her son or the loss of her power, she had given herself several blows on the breast, and thus irritated a cancer with which she was afflicted, and her death ensued. Her sister, named Mæsa, who had lived at court during the last two reigns and had acquired immense wealth, retired by order of

Macrinus to her native town of Emesa. She had two daughters named Soæmias and Mamæa, each of whom was a widow with an only son; that of the former was named Bassianus; he was now a handsome youth of seventeen years of age, and the influence of his family had procured for him the lucrative priesthood of the Sun, who was worshipped at Emesa under the title of Elagabalus. The Roman troops who were encamped near the town used to frequent the temple, and they greatly admired the comely young priest, whom they knew to be a cousin of their lamented Caracalla. The artful Mæsa resolved to take advantage of that feeling, and she made no scruple to sacrifice the reputation of her daughters to the hopes of empire: she therefore declared (what was perhaps true) that Caracalla used to cohabit with her daughters in the palace, and that Bassianus was in

[218 A.D.]

reality his son. Her assertion, backed with large sums of money and lavish promises of more, found easy acceptance with the soldiers. On the night of the 15th of May, 218, she and her daughter and grandson, and the rest of her family, conducted by their eunuch Gannys, a man of great talent, stole out of the city and proceeded to the camp, where they were joyfully received; and Bassianus was proclaimed emperor by the title of M. Aurelius Antoninus. The camp was immediately put into a state of defence against a siege; and numbers of the other soldiers hastened to sustain the cause of the son of Caracalla.

Macrinus sent the prætorian prefect Ulpianus against the rebels. This officer was successful in his first attack on their camp; but having neglected to push his advantage, he gave the enemy time for tampering with his troops, a part of whom abandoned him; and he was taken and slain. Macrinus had meantime advanced as far as Apamea, where he declared his son Diadumenianus, a boy of only ten years of age, Augustus, and took this opportunity of promising a large gratuity to the army; he also wrote against Bassianus to the senate and governors of provinces. But instead of advancing rapidly against the rebels, he fell back to Antioch, whither they speedily followed him, and he was forced to give them battle near that town. The troops of Bassianus were ably disposed by the eunuch Gannys, who now in arms for the first time in his life showed the talents of a general. But the prætorians on the side of Macrinus fought with such determined valour that the rebels were on the point of flying, when Mæsa and Soæmias rushed out and stopped them; and Bassianus, sword in hand, led them on to the combat. Still the prætorians gave not way, and victory would have declared for Macrinus had he not shamefully fled in the midst of the battle. His troops when assured of his flight declared for Bassianus.

Macrinus fled in disguise, and never stopped till he came to Chalcedon, where he was taken and put to death, and his innocent son shared his fate. His reign had lasted only fourteen months.^c

ELAGABALUS (VARIUS AVITUS BASSIANUS), 218-222 A.D.

Bassianus now hastened to assert his claim to the succession. He was entirely successful; ascending the throne under title of M. Aurelius Antoninus Elagabalus, or, as the Latins called him, Heliogabalus. Dion Cassius^e (as preserved by Xiphilinusⁱ) has left us a picturesque account of the accession and brief reign of this effeminate youth, whose name has become a proverb for sensuality of the most degenerate type. We turn to his account, making such omissions as the restrictions of modern taste demand; — the classical writers, as we have had occasion to note heretofore, adjudged the limits between frankness and prudery by standards quite different from ours.

This narrative of Dion Cassius has the unique interest of being the account of an exact contemporary. The author was a member of the Roman senate, at the time of Elagabalus' accession. The following year he was governor of Pergamus and Smyrna. "He had conversed with Macrinus after his elevation, and yet was in the senate when the letters of Macrinus were read on the elevation of Elagabalus" (Clinton^g).

Here, then, is the story of Rome's most degenerate emperor, as told by this contemporary witness. The account is the most authoritative one that has come down to us; but it will be observed that allowance must be made for current superstitions in parts of the narrative.^a

DION CASSIUS ON THE ACCESSION AND REIGN OF ELAGABALUS

Avitus [Elagabalus], who is called pseudo Antoninus, or the Assyrian, or, again, Sardanapalus or Tiberinus (the last name having been bestowed upon him after his body was cast into the Tiber), made his entry next day [after the defeat of Macrinus] into Antioch, having promised five hundred drachmæ to the soldiers if they refrained from pillaging the city, as they greatly desired to do. This sum he of course exacted from the inhabitants. He likewise wrote a letter to Rome, in which, among other matters befitting the occasion, he heaped invectives upon Macrinus for the obscurity of his origin and his conspiracy against Antoninus, and made lavish promises, not only to the soldiers but to the senate and populace (pretending to act in all things after the example of Augustus, whose age he compared with his own, and of Marcus Antoninus); and, in allusion to the censures passed upon him by Macrinus, he added, "He took upon himself to censure my youth, he who nominated his six-year-old son emperor."

Such was his message to the senate. To that assembly and to the legions he despatched an account of what had taken place among the soldiers, together with the letter written by Macrinus to Maximus, in order further to inflame their hatred of Macrinus and their attachment to his own person. In his letter to the senate and his address to the people he styled himself emperor, Cæsar, the son of Antoninus, the grandson of Severus, the pious, the fortunate, Augustus, proconsul, prince invested with tribunician authority. He is also reported to have said, "Let them give me no titles which have to do with war; in 'the pious' and 'the fortunate' I have enough."

A number of persons having, in both a public and a private capacity, committed offences in word and deed against him and against Caracalla, he declared that he would punish no man whatever; nor did he punish any, although in the rest of his conduct he carried debauchery, injustice, and cruelty to such lengths that certain customs wholly unknown at Rome were practised there as having come down from our forefathers, and that crimes committed in single instances by other men and in other places there flourished freely for the three years and nine months of his reign, reckoning from the battle which put him in possession of the sovereign power.

In Syria he shed the blood of Nestor and of Fabius Agrippinus, governor of the province, and of the chief of the knights who had been about Macrinus, and at Rome he acted likewise towards those who had been most strongly attached to the cause of the late monarch; in Arabia he slew Picas Cærianus, to whom the government of that country had been committed, for not having immediately come over to his side; in Cyprus, Claudius Attalus, a former governor of Thrace, who had been expelled from the senate by Severus at the time of the war with Niger, restored to his honours by Tarantus,¹ and placed by fate at the head of the province of Cyprus, merely because he had given offence to Comazon. For while the latter was serving in Thrace Attalus had placed him among the oarsmen as a punishment for dereliction of duty.

Thus the pseudo Antoninus put Attalus to death, — though he had written concerning him to the senate saying that he had recalled him to Rome, whence he had been banished by Macrinus, together with Julius Asper, — and Sulla, a former governor of Cappadocia, because he was involved in

[¹ Tarantus was a nickname given to Caracalla after his death. It was the name of a gladiator of ignoble aspect.]

[218-222 A.D.]

certain intrigues and because, having been summoned to Rome, he had gone before some Celtic soldiers on their way home from Bithynia, where they had passed the winter, and had stirred up some disorders. Such were the motives from which these two personages perished, no word thereof being sent to the senate. As for Seius Carus, the grandson of Fuscianus, a former prefect of Rome, the reason was that he was rich and noble, and a man of ability; the pretext, that he had incited the soldiers of the Alban legion to mutiny.

The monarch being his only accuser, the trial of Seius was held in the palace, where he was slain. Valerianus Pætus was put to death because he had caused portraits of himself to be made in gold as ornaments for his mistresses. This action brought upon him the charge of intending to go into Cappadocia, a province bordering on his native land (for he was a Galatian) to stir up a rebellion, and having for this purpose made gold pieces bearing his own image.

Besides these, Silius Messalla and Pomponius Bassus were put to death by the senate on a charge of having disapproved of the emperor's conduct, as he said. He did not hesitate to write to the senate, which he styled the examiner of his life and the censor of what took place in the palace: "As for the proofs of their conspiracy, I have not sent them, for it would be idle to read them, since the men are already dead." Messalla had frequently expressed his opinions forcibly in the senate, for which reason the emperor had commanded his attendance in Syria, as though he were indispensable to him, but really lest he should cause an opinion different to his own to prevail in that assembly; as for Bassus, he had a beautiful wife of noble birth (a granddaughter of Claudius Severus and of Marcus Antoninus); whom Elagabalus himself wedded, not permitting her (such was the terror with which he inspired her) to weep for her husband's unhappy fate. We shall presently hear of espousals in which he played the part of bridegroom and bride, for he gave himself out as man or woman indifferently, and behaved with the utmost shamelessness in either character.

The murder of Gannys, who had paved the way for the rebellion, had brought him to the camp and procured him the victory over Macrinus — of Gannys, his foster-father and guardian, which he committed in Nicomedia, caused him to be regarded from the very beginning of his reign as the most impious of men. Gannys lived an effeminate life and loved to receive presents, but, far from doing injury to any man, he conferred many benefits upon numbers of persons; and, what was still more important, he was zealously devoted to his sovereign and enjoyed the favour of Mæsa and Soæmias. But this was not the reason why the emperor put him to death. His real motive was that Gannys obliged him to observe the rules of temperance and wisdom. The monarch, with his own hand, dealt Gannys the first wound, since none of the soldiers dared to begin the attack. In such wise did matters go.

Thus much we have said of the blood that was shed. As for the things done by Elagabalus contrary to the customs of our forefathers, they were matters of small account and did no great harm; unless, indeed, it be that he introduced innovations contrary to our usage, by assuming of his own accord, as I have said, titles of office, substituting himself for Macrinus in the consulate without being elected, and so forth.

He wedded Cornelia Paula, desiring, as he said, to become a father quickly; he, who was not so much as a man. At the celebration of these nuptials, not the senate and the knights alone, but even the wives of the

senators received liberal presents. There was a banquet for the populace which cost 150 drachmæ, and one for the soldiers which cost more than 100. He also gave gladiatorial shows, at which he was present clad in the toga prætexta, and he appeared in the same garb at the votive games. He likewise caused a great number of wild beasts to be slaughtered, among the rest an elephant and fifty-one tigers, a larger number than had ever been exhibited at one time. Afterwards, having put away Paula under the pretext



A ROMAN MATRON
(From the Capitol)

that she had a blemish on her body, he wedded Aquilia Severa, in open violation of the laws, for with flagrant impiety he defiled a woman who was a vestal. He was bold enough to say, "I have done it that of myself, the pontifex maximus, and of her, the vestalis maxima, divine children may be born"; nor did he hesitate to boast of these sacrilegious acts, for which he should have been first scourged with rods in the Forum and then cast into prison and put to death. Nevertheless he did not keep Severa long, but took another wife, and then another and another, after which he went back to her.

Among his most flagrant violations of the law was the worship of the god Elagabalus, not only by reason of the introduction of a foreign divinity into Rome and the granting of new and gorgeous honours to such a divinity, but by reason of the superiority which the emperor gave him over Jupiter; and the priesthood of Elagabalus which he caused to be bestowed upon himself, by reason of his circumcision and abstinence from pork (as though this abstinence made the worship of this god purer), and also by reason of the barbarous vestments worn by Syrian priests, in which he was often to be seen, a fact which had much to do with his surname of the Assyrian.

As the height of absurdity he bestowed a wife upon Elagabalus, as though the god had need of a wife and children. Moreover, since this wife ought not to be poor or of humble birth, he chose the Urania of Carthage, had the goddess brought from thence, established her in the palace, and exacted wedding gifts for her from all the subjects of his empire, as he had done for his own wives.

Nevertheless this Sardanapalus, who must needs unite the gods by regular marriages, himself led the most irregular of lives. He married several wives, and had relations with many other women with whom he formed no legal tie.

Such was his conduct to all who had to do with him; yet this did not prevent him from playing the part of a bride to a favourite, by name Hierocles, on whom he wished to bestow the title of cæsar, himself being called imperatrix. Being opposed by his grandmother in this design, he broke out into threats against her, and by his shameful conduct no less than for other reasons incurred the hatred of the soldiery. These extravagances were the cause of his ruin.

[218-222 A.D.]

He was destined soon to receive the due reward of his infamy. By the things he did and suffered to be done he brought upon himself the hatred of the people and of the soldiers, the main prop of his throne, and was finally assassinated by them in his own camp. The thing came to pass on this fashion. He had brought his cousin Bassianus into the senate, and, taking his place beside Mæsa and Soæmias, he adopted him as his son; he boasted of his good fortune in having become all at once the father of such a child, as though he himself were already far more advanced in years, and he declared that he had no need of any other son, since his house was henceforth safe from extinction. Elagabalus himself had commanded him to take this course and to bestow on his cousin the name of Alexander. For my own part I am convinced that these occurrences were actually the work of a god, not because of the emperor's words but because of the saying that one Alexander, from Emesa, would succeed him, and also because of what took place in Upper Mysia and in Thrace.

Shortly before this time a genius appeared, I know not how, in the countries about the Ister, claiming to be the celebrated Alexander of Macedon, and bearing the form and all the equipments of that prince. Starting thence he traversed Mœsia and Thrace after the manner of Bacchus, accompanied by four hundred men, armed with thyrsi and wearing goatskins. They did no harm, and, as those who then dwelt in Thrace are convinced, everything was supplied them, both lodging and provisions, at the expense of the cities; for no one dared oppose him either by word or deed, neither chief, nor soldier, nor procurator, nor provincial governor; and in open daylight, as he had announced, he advanced in procession as far as Byzantium. Thence, returning upon his footsteps, he crossed over into Chalcedon, and there, having performed certain sacrifices by night and buried a wooden horse in the ground, he disappeared. These facts I learned in Asia, as I have said, before anything was done at Rome with regard to Bassianus.

As long as Sardanapalus loved his cousin he himself remained alive, but when he began to suspect all men and learned that popular favour was turning towards Alexander, he changed his purpose and did all he could to get rid of him. He was not only unsuccessful in an attempt to destroy him, but came near to perishing himself, for Alexander was jealously guarded by his mother, his grandmother, and the soldiery. The prætorian guards, becoming aware of his intentions, stirred up a fearful riot, which did not cease until Sardanapalus, coming into the camp with Alexander, appealed to them with urgent entreaties, yielded up, under compulsion, the companions of his debaucheries whose death they demanded, only pleading piteously in favour of Hierocles, and finally succeeded in mollifying them.

Afterwards, having again laid snares for Alexander, and having gone with the latter to the camp to appease a tumult which had been excited among the prætorians by this attempt, he perceived that they were watching him with intent to put him to death, and strove to flee while his mother and Alexander's, more openly at strife than before, were endeavouring to excite the soldiers. He tried to escape by hiding in a chest, but was caught and slain at the age of eighteen. His mother perished with him. Their heads were cut off and their bodies stripped of their ornaments and dragged through the streets of the city; then that of the woman was cast forth unburied, and that of Sardanapalus thrown into the Tiber. The god Elagabalus was banished from Rome.^e The administration has not suffered greatly through Elagabalus, for while he abandoned himself to his sensual worship, he left the government in the hands of his prudent grandmother Mæsa.^a

ALEXANDER SEVERUS (M. AURELIUS ALEXANDER SEVERUS), 222-235 A.D.

Both the senate and the army joyfully concurred in the elevation of Alexander Severus; and the former body, lest any competitor should appear, hastened to confer on him all the imperial titles and powers. On account of his youth and his extremely amiable disposition he was entirely directed by his grandmother and mother, but Mæsa dying soon after his accession, the sole direction of her son fell to Mamæa. [The statues and coins of this woman show that she was a pagan, though the contrary has been inferred from the correspondence with Origen.] Nevertheless in her guidance of public affairs she exhibited a spirit of wisdom, justice, and moderation such as had not appeared in any preceding empress. Her enemies laid to her charge the love of power and the love of money, and blamed her son for deferring too much to her; but their accusations are vague, and no act of cruelty caused by avarice stains the annals of this reign.

The first care of Mamæa was to form a wise and upright council for her son. Sixteen of the most respectable of the senate, with the learned Ulpian, the prætorian prefect, at their head, composed his council, and nothing was ever done without their consent and approbation. A general system of reformation was commenced and steadily pursued. All the absurd acts of the late tyrant were reversed. His god was sent back to Emesa; the statues of the other deities were restored to their temples; the ministers of his vices and pleasures were sold or banished, some of the worst were drowned; the unworthy persons whom he had placed in public situations were dismissed, and men of knowledge and probity put in their places.

Mamæa used the utmost care to keep away from her son all those persons by whom his morals might be corrupted, and in order to have his time fully occupied she induced him to devote the greater part of each day to the administration of justice, where none but the wise and good would be his associates. The good seed fortunately fell into a kindly soil. Alexander was naturally disposed to every virtue, and all his efforts were directed to the promotion of the welfare of the empire over which he ruled.

The first ten years of the reign of this prince were passed at Rome and devoted to civil occupations. His daily course of life has been thus transmitted to us. He usually rose early and entered his private chapel (*larium*), in which he had caused to be placed the images of those who had been teachers and benefactors of the human race, among whom he included the divine founder of the Christian religion. Having performed his devotions he took some kind of exercise, and then applied himself for some hours to public business with his council. He then read for some time, his favourite works being the *Republics* of Plato and Cicero, and the verses of Horace, and the *Life of Alexander the Great*, whom he greatly admired. Gymnastic exercises, in which he excelled, succeeded. He then was anointed and bathed, and took a light breakfast, usually of bread, milk, and eggs. In the afternoon he was attended by his secretaries, and he heard his letters read and signed the answers to them. The business of the day being concluded, his friends in general were admitted, and a frugal and simple dinner followed, at which the conversation was mostly of a serious instructive nature, or some literary work was read out to the emperor and his guests.

The dress of Alexander was plain and simple, his manners were free from all pride and haughtiness; he lived with the senators on a footing of friendly equality, like Augustus, Vespasian, and the wiser and better

[222-232 A.D.]

emperors. He was liberal and generous to all orders of the people, and he took an especial pleasure in assisting those persons of good family who had fallen into poverty without reproach. Among the virtues of Alexander was the somewhat rare one in that age of chastity. His mother early caused him to espouse a lady of noble birth named Memmia, whom however he afterwards divorced and even banished to Africa. The accounts of this affair differ greatly. According to one, the father of the empress formed a conspiracy against his son-in-law, which being discovered, he was put to death and his daughter divorced. Others say that as Alexander showed great respect for his father-in-law, Mamaea's jealousy was excited, and she caused him to be slain and his daughter to be divorced or banished. It appears that Alexander soon married again.

We have already observed that a portion of the civil jurisdiction had fallen to the prætorian prefects. This imposed a necessity that one of them should be a civilian, and Mamaea had therefore caused this dignity to be conferred on Ulpian. From the love of law and order which distinguished this prefect, he naturally sought to bring back discipline in the prætorian camp; the consequence was that repeated attempts were made on his life, and the emperor more than once found it necessary to cast his purple over him to save him from the fury of the soldiers. At length (228) they fell on him in the night; he escaped from them to the palace, but they pursued and slaughtered him in the presence of the emperor and his mother.

Some slight actions on the German and Moorish frontiers were the only occupation given to the Roman arms during the early years of the reign of Alexander, but in the year 232 so powerful an enemy menaced the oriental provinces of the empire, that the presence of the emperor became absolutely requisite in the East.

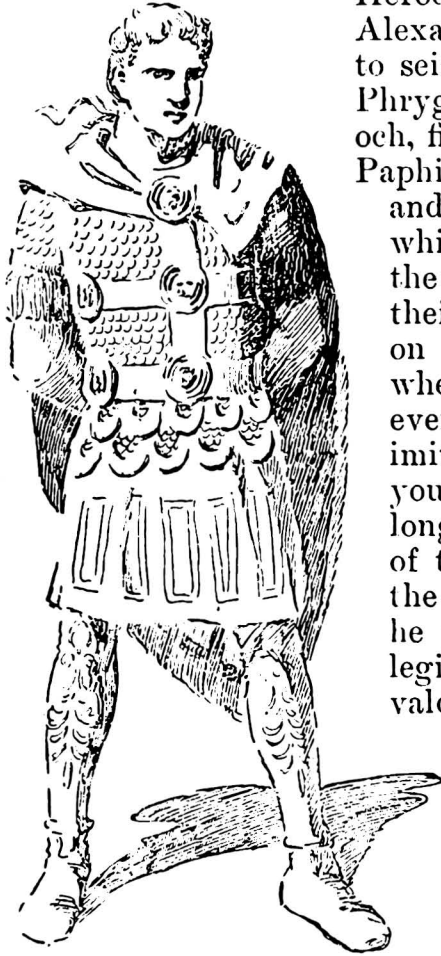
The Parthians, whom we have had such frequent occasion to mention, are said to have been a Scythian (*i.e.*, Turkish) people of the north of Persia, who, taking advantage of the declining power of the Macedonian kings of Syria, cast off their yoke (250 B.C.), and then gradually made themselves masters of the whole of Persia. Their dominion had now lasted for five hundred years, and their power had from the usual causes, such as family dissensions, contested successions, and such like, been long on the decline; and in the fourth year of Alexander Severus (226) a native Persian, named Artaxerxes (Ardashir), who pretended to be of the ancient royal line but who is said to have been of humble birth and a mere soldier of fortune, raised a rebellion against the Parthian king, Artabanus. Fortune favoured the rebel, and Artabanus was defeated and slain. Artaxerxes then assumed the tiara, and his line, which existed till the Mohammedan conquest, was named the Sassanian, from the name of his father.

Affecting to be the descendant of the ancient Achæmenians, Artaxerxes sought to restore Persia to its condition under those princes. The Magian or Light religion resumed the rank from which it had fallen under the sway of the Parthians, and flourished in its pristine glory. As the dominions of the house of Cyrus had extended to the coasts of the Ægean Sea, Artaxerxes ordered the Romans to quit Asia, and when his mandate was unheeded he led his troops over the Tigris. But his ill fortune induced him to attack the invincible Atræ, and he was forced to retire with loss and disgrace. He then turned his arms against the Medes and some other of the more northern tribes, and when he had reduced them he again invaded Mesopotamia (232). Alexander now resolved to take the command of his troops in person. He left Rome, followed by the tears and prayers of the people, and proceeded

through Illyricum to the East. On his march the strictest discipline was maintained, while every attention was paid to the wants of the soldiers and care taken that they should be abundantly supplied with clothes and arms. The emperor himself used the same fare as the men, and he caused his tent to be thrown open when he was at his meals that they might perceive his mode of life.

Alexander halted at Antioch to make preparations for the war; meantime he sent an embassy with proposals of peace to Artaxerxes. The Persian in return sent four hundred of his most stately men splendidly clothed and armed to order the Romans to quit Asia; and if we can believe

Herodian (for the circumstance is almost incredible), Alexander was so regardless of the laws of nations as to seize and strip them, and send them prisoners to Phrygia. It is also said that while he was at Antioch, finding that some of the soldiers frequented the Paphian grove of Daphne, he cast them into prison; and that when a mutiny broke out in the legion to which they belonged, he ascended his tribunal, had the prisoners brought before him, and addressed their comrades, who stood around in arms, dwelling on the necessity of maintaining discipline. But when his arguments proved of no effect, and they even menaced him with their arms, he cried out, in imitation of Cæsar, "Quirites, depart, and lay down your arms." The legion obeyed, and the men, no longer soldiers, took up their abode in the houses of the town instead of the camp. After a month the emperor was prevailed on to pardon them, but he punished their tribunes with death; and this legion was henceforth equally distinguished by valour and fidelity.



CENTURION IN STREET COSTUME
SHOWING THE WAY HIS MEDALS
WERE WORN

In imitation of Alexander the Great, the emperor formed six of his legions into a phalanx of thirty thousand men, to whom he gave higher pay. He also had, like that conqueror, bodies of men distinguished by gold-adorned and silver-adorned shields — chrysoaspids and argyroaspids.

The details of the war cannot be learned with any certainty. One historian says that Alexander made three divisions of his army; one of which was to enter Media through Armenia, another Persia at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates, while the emperor was in person to lead the third through Mesopotamia, and all were to join in the enemy's country; but that, owing to the timidity of Alexander, who loitered on the way, the second division was cut to pieces, and the first nearly all perished while retreating through Armenia in the winter. This account labours under many difficulties; for the emperor certainly triumphed on his return to Rome; and in his speech to the senate on that occasion he asserted that of 700 war elephants which were in the enemy's array he had killed 200, and taken 300; of 1000 scythed chariots he had taken 200; and of 120,000 heavy-armed horsemen he had slain 10,000, besides taking a great number of prisoners. Notwithstanding this report to the senate, the Romans were

[232-235 A.D.]

probably beaten in this war, though the Persians likewise suffered great loss. The latter made no further attempts on Mesopotamia for some years.^a

The Germans had taken advantage of the absence of the emperor and the greater part of the troops in the East, to pass the Rhine and ravage Gaul. Alexander therefore, leaving sufficient garrisons in Syria, led home the Illyrian and other legions, and having celebrated a triumph for the Persian War at Rome, where he was received with the most abundant demonstrations of joy, he departed with a large army for the defence of Gaul. The Germans retired at his approach; he advanced to the Rhine and took up his winter quarters in the neighbourhood of Mogontiacum (Mainz), with the intention of opening the campaign beyond the river in the spring (235).

The narratives of the events of this reign are so very discordant that we cannot hope often to arrive at the real truth. In no part are they more at variance than in their account of the circumstances of the emperor's death. We can only collect that, whether from his efforts to restore discipline, from the intrigues of Maximin, an ambitious officer who had the charge of disciplining the young troops, or from some other cause, a general discontent prevailed in the army, and that Alexander was assassinated in his tent, either by his own guards or by a party sent for the purpose by Maximin, and that his mother and several of his friends perished with him. The troops forthwith proclaimed Maximin emperor, and the senate and people of Rome, deeply lamenting the fate of the virtuous Alexander, were forced to acquiesce in the choice of the army.

Alexander had reigned thirteen years. Even the historian least partial to him acknowledges that towards his subjects his conduct was blameless, and that no bloodshed or unjust condemnations stain the annals of his reign. His fault seems to have been a certain degree of effeminacy and weakness, the consequence probably of his Syrian origin, which led to his extreme submission to his mother, against whom the charges of avarice and meanness are not perhaps wholly unfounded.¹

Dion Cassius, whose history ends with this reign, gives the following view of the numbers and disposition of the legions, at this period. Of the twenty-five which were formed by Augustus, only nineteen remained, the rest having been broken or distributed through the others; but the emperors, from Nero to Severus inclusive, had formed thirteen new ones, and the whole now amounted to thirty-two legions. Of these, three were in Britain, one in Upper and two in Lower Germany, one in Italy, one in Spain, one in Numidia, one in Arabia, two in Palestine, one in Phœnicia, two in Syria, two in Mesopotamia, two in Cappadocia, two in Lower and one in Upper Mœsia, two in Dacia, and four in Pannonia, one in Noricum, and one in Rætia. He does not tell us where the two remaining ones were quartered, neither does he give the number of men in a legion at this time, but it is conjectured to have been five thousand.^c

RENAN'S CHARACTERISATION OF THE PERIOD

On principles less disastrous than those of unbridled military despotism, the empire might have survived the ruin of the Roman spirit in the death of Marcus Aurelius, might have given peace to Christianity a century earlier and have avoided the streams of blood shed to no purpose by Decius and

¹ *The Life of Alexander*, by Lampridius, in the *Augustan History*, is, as Gibbon observes, "the mere idea of a perfect prince, an awkward imitation of the *Cyropædia*." [The best rulers had to bear the charge of avarice.]

Dioctetian. The part of the Roman aristocracy was played out; after having worn folly threadbare in the first century, it had worn virtue threadbare in the second. But the hidden forces of the great Mediterranean confederacy were not exhausted. Thus, after the downfall of the political edifice founded on the sovereignty of the family of Augustus, a provincial dynasty, that of the Flavians, was found to restore the empire, even as after the downfall of the edifice built up by the adoptions of the Roman aristocracy, there were found provincials, Orientals and Syrians, to restore the great association in which all men found peace and profit. Septimius Severus did, without moral grandeur but not without glory, what Vespasian had done.

It is true that the representatives of this new dynasty are not to be compared to the great emperors of the second century. Even Alexander Severus, who equals Antoninus and Marcus in kindness, is very inferior to them in intelligence and greatness of soul. The principles of the government are detestable; men outbid one another for the favour of the legions; a price is set on mutiny; none approaches the soldier except with purse in hand. Military despotism never took a more shameless form; but military despotism can be long-lived.

Side by side with hideous spectacles, under the Syrian emperors, what reforms do we find! What progress in legislation! What a day was that when, under Caracalla, all free men dwelling within the empire attained equal rights!

We must not exaggerate the advantages offered by such equality; yet in politics words are never wholly void of meaning. Many excellent things had been inherited. The philosophers of the school of Marcus Aurelius had disappeared, but their place was taken by the masters of jurisprudence. Papinian, Ulpian, Paul, Gaius, Modestinus, Florentinus, Marcian, during years of execrable evil, created masterpieces and actually brought the law of the future into being. The Syrian emperors, though far inferior to Trajan and to the Antonines as far as political traditions are concerned, inasmuch as they were not Romans and had none of the Roman prejudices, often give proof of an openness of mind which would have been impossible to the great emperors of the second century, all of whom were intensely conservative. They permitted and even encouraged colleges or syndicates. They went to extreme lengths in this matter, and they would have organised the trade guilds as castes with a distinctive garb. They flung the doors of the empire wide open. One of them, that noble and pathetic figure Alexander Severus, the son of Mamæa, almost equalled in his plebeian goodness the patrician virtues of the great age; the loftiest ideas pale before the honest effusions of his heart.

It was in religion above all that these Syrian emperors inaugurated a liberality of mind and a tolerance unknown before.¹ The Syrian women of Emesa, Julia Donna, Julia Mæsa, Julia Mamæa, Julia Soæmias, beautiful, intelligent, venturous to the point of utopianism, are hampered by no tradition or conventionality. They dared to do what no Roman woman had ever done; they entered the senate, took part in its deliberations, and practically governed the empire, dreaming of Semiramis and Nitocris. It was a thing that such a woman as Faustina would not have done for all her

[¹ The substitution of the Syro-Phœnician sun-god by Elagabalus naturally recalls the monotheistic reformation of Amenhotep IV (Khun-aten) in Egypt more than sixteen centuries before. In Amenhotep's day, Syrian influence predominated at the Egyptian court, as it did at Rome in the beginning of the third century A.D. That the culminating result of this should have been so much the same in both cases is a matter that seems to call for at least passing notice.]

[180-235 A.D.]

frivolity; she would have been checked by tact, by the sense of absurdity, by the rules of good Roman society. The Syrian women hesitated at nothing. They had a senate of women, which enacted every sort of absurdity. The Roman religion seemed to them cold and meaningless. They had no family reasons for attachment to it, and being more in harmony, imaginatively, with Christianity than with Italian paganism, they delighted in the tales of the travels of gods upon the earth. Philostratus enchanted them with his *Apollonius*; perhaps they had a secret leaning towards Christianity.

During this time the last noble ladies of the older society, such as the elderly daughter of Marcus Aurelius, honoured by all men and put to death by Caracalla, lived in obscurity, looking on at an orgy which formed so strange a contrast to the memories of their youth.

The provinces, and those of the East more particularly, which were far more active and enlightened than those of the West, gained a decided ascendancy. Elagabalus was certainly a madman, but nevertheless his chimerical idea of a central monotheistic religion, established in Rome and absorbing all others, shows that the narrow circle of Antonine conceptions had been to a great extent broken through. Mamaea and Alexander Severus were to go further; whilst the juriconsults continued to transcribe their old and ferocious maxims against liberty of conscience with the calmness of habit, the Syrian emperor and his mother studied Christianity, and manifested sympathy with it. Not content with granting security to the Christians, Alexander, with touching eclecticism, introduced the name of Jesus among his household gods. Peace seemed made, not, as under Constantine, by the abasement of one party, but by a generous reconciliation. In all this there was certainly a daring attempt at reform, inferior in rationality to that of the Antonines, but more likely to succeed because it was much more popular and took the provinces and the East more into account.

In such a democratic work, people with no ancestors, such as these Africans and Syrians, had more chance of success than rigid men of irreproachable bearing, like the aristocratic emperors. But the innate viciousness of the imperial system revealed itself for the tenth time. Alexander Severus was assassinated by the soldiers on the 19th of March, 235. It was clear that the army would tolerate none but tyrants. The empire had fallen successively from the Roman aristocracy to provincial officers, now it passed to subordinate officers and military assassins. Whereas, until the time of Commodus, the murdered emperors are intolerable monsters, it is now the good emperor, the man who desires to restore some kind of discipline and represses the crimes of the army, who is inevitably marked for death. Still, it cannot be denied that there was need of strong, able commanders on the eve of the barbarian invasions. With all his virtues, Alexander was a weakling, unfit to rule at such a time. With his death the military revolution entered upon a third stage. It became more than ever necessary to strengthen the imperial office, because, it having been decided that the emperor should be a soldier, the choice of the soldiers, rival claimants of the office were threatening, by their civil strife, to break up the Roman world into a multitude of warring states.^a