

Chapter IV: The Cruelty, Follies And Murder Of Commodus.--Part I.

The Cruelty, Follies, And Murder Of Commodus--Election Of
Pertinax--His Attempts To Reform The State--His
Assassination By The Praetorian Guards.

The mildness of Marcus, which the rigid discipline of the Stoics was unable to eradicate, formed, at the same time, the most amiable, and the only defective part of his character. His excellent understanding was often deceived by the unsuspecting goodness of his heart. Artful men, who study the passions of princes, and conceal their own, approached his person in the disguise of philosophic sanctity, and acquired riches and honors by affecting to despise them. [1] His excessive indulgence to his brother, [105] his wife, and his son, exceeded the bounds of private virtue, and became a public injury, by the example and consequences of their vices.

[Footnote 1: See the complaints of Avidius Cassius, Hist. August. p. 45. These are, it is true, the complaints of faction; but even faction exaggerates, rather than invents.]

[Footnote 105: His brother by adoption, and his colleague, L. Verus. Marcus Aurelius had no other brother.--W.]

Faustina, the daughter of Pius and the wife of Marcus, has been as much celebrated for her gallantries as for her beauty. The grave simplicity

of the philosopher was ill calculated to engage her wanton levity, or to fix that unbounded passion for variety, which often discovered personal merit in the meanest of mankind. [2] The Cupid of the ancients was, in general, a very sensual deity; and the amours of an empress, as they exact on her side the plainest advances, are seldom susceptible of much sentimental delicacy. Marcus was the only man in the empire who seemed ignorant or insensible of the irregularities of Faustina; which, according to the prejudices of every age, reflected some disgrace on the injured husband. He promoted several of her lovers to posts of honor and profit, [3] and during a connection of thirty years, invariably gave her proofs of the most tender confidence, and of a respect which ended not with her life. In his Meditations, he thanks the gods, who had bestowed on him a wife so faithful, so gentle, and of such a wonderful simplicity of manners. [4] The obsequious senate, at his earnest request, declared her a goddess. She was represented in her temples, with the attributes of Juno, Venus, and Ceres; and it was decreed, that, on the day of their nuptials, the youth of either sex should pay their vows before the altar of their chaste patroness. [5]

[Footnote 2: *Faustinam satis constat apud Cajetam conditiones sibi et nauticas et gladiatorias, elegisse. Hist. August. p. 30.* Lampridius explains the sort of merit which Faustina chose, and the conditions which she exacted. *Hist. August. p. 102.*]

[Footnote 3: *Hist. August. p. 34.*]

[Footnote 4: Meditat. 1. i. The world has laughed at the credulity of Marcus but Madam Dacier assures us, (and we may credit a lady,) that the husband will always be deceived, if the wife condescends to dissemble.]

[Footnote 5: Dion Cassius, l. lxxi. [c. 31,] p. 1195. Hist. August. p. 33. Commentaire de Spanheim sur les Caesars de Julien, p. 289. The deification of Faustina is the only defect which Julian's criticism is able to discover in the all-accomplished character of Marcus.]

The monstrous vices of the son have cast a shade on the purity of the father's virtues. It has been objected to Marcus, that he sacrificed the happiness of millions to a fond partiality for a worthless boy; and that he chose a successor in his own family, rather than in the republic. Nothing however, was neglected by the anxious father, and by the men of virtue and learning whom he summoned to his assistance, to expand the narrow mind of young Commodus, to correct his growing vices, and to render him worthy of the throne for which he was designed. But the power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy, except in those happy dispositions where it is almost superfluous. The distasteful lesson of a grave philosopher was, in a moment, obliterated by the whisper of a profligate favorite; and Marcus himself blasted the fruits of this labored education, by admitting his son, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, to a full participation of the Imperial power. He lived but four years afterwards: but he lived long enough to repent a rash measure, which raised the impetuous youth above the restraint of reason and authority.

Most of the crimes which disturb the internal peace of society, are produced by the restraints which the necessary but unequal laws of property have imposed on the appetites of mankind, by confining to a few the possession of those objects that are coveted by many. Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is of the most imperious and unsociable nature, since the pride of one man requires the submission of the multitude. In the tumult of civil discord, the laws of society lose their force, and their place is seldom supplied by those of humanity. The ardor of contention, the pride of victory, the despair of success, the memory of past injuries, and the fear of future dangers, all contribute to inflame the mind, and to silence the voice of pity. From such motives almost every page of history has been stained with civil blood; but these motives will not account for the unprovoked cruelties of Commodus, who had nothing to wish and every thing to enjoy. The beloved son of Marcus succeeded to his father, amidst the acclamations of the senate and armies; [6] and when he ascended the throne, the happy youth saw round him neither competitor to remove, nor enemies to punish. In this calm, elevated station, it was surely natural that he should prefer the love of mankind to their detestation, the mild glories of his five predecessors to the ignominious fate of Nero and Domitian.

[Footnote 6: Commodus was the first Porphyrogenitus, (born since his father's accession to the throne.) By a new strain of flattery, the Egyptian medals date by the years of his life; as if they were synonymous to those of his reign. Tillemont, *Hist. des Empereurs*, tom. ii. p. 752.]

Yet Commodus was not, as he has been represented, a tiger born with an insatiate thirst of human blood, and capable, from his infancy, of the most inhuman actions. [7] Nature had formed him of a weak rather than a wicked disposition. His simplicity and timidity rendered him the slave of his attendants, who gradually corrupted his mind. His cruelty, which at first obeyed the dictates of others, degenerated into habit, and at length became the ruling passion of his soul. [8]

[Footnote 7: Hist. August. p. 46.]

[Footnote 8: Dion Cassius, l. lxxii. p. 1203.]

Upon the death of his father, Commodus found himself embarrassed with the command of a great army, and the conduct of a difficult war against the Quadi and Marcomanni. [9] The servile and profligate youths whom Marcus had banished, soon regained their station and influence about the new emperor. They exaggerated the hardships and dangers of a campaign in the wild countries beyond the Danube; and they assured the indolent prince that the terror of his name, and the arms of his lieutenants, would be sufficient to complete the conquest of the dismayed barbarians, or to impose such conditions as were more advantageous than any conquest. By a dexterous application to his sensual appetites, they compared the tranquillity, the splendor, the refined pleasures of Rome, with the tumult of a Pannonian camp, which afforded neither leisure nor materials for luxury. [10] Commodus listened to the pleasing advice; but

whilst he hesitated between his own inclination and the awe which he still retained for his father's counsellors, the summer insensibly elapsed, and his triumphal entry into the capital was deferred till the autumn. His graceful person, [11] popular address, and imagined virtues, attracted the public favor; the honorable peace which he had recently granted to the barbarians, diffused a universal joy; [12] his impatience to revisit Rome was fondly ascribed to the love of his country; and his dissolute course of amusements was faintly condemned in a prince of nineteen years of age.

[Footnote 9: According to Tertullian, (Apolog. c. 25,) he died at Sirmium. But the situation of Vindobona, or Vienna, where both the Victors place his death, is better adapted to the operations of the war against the Marcomanni and Quadi.]

[Footnote 10: Herodian, l. i. p. 12.]

[Footnote 11: Herodian, l. i. p. 16.]

[Footnote 12: This universal joy is well described (from the medals as well as historians) by Mr. Wotton, Hist. of Rome, p. 192, 193.] During the three first years of his reign, the forms, and even the spirit, of the old administration, were maintained by those faithful counsellors, to whom Marcus had recommended his son, and for whose wisdom and integrity Commodus still entertained a reluctant esteem. The young prince and his profligate favorites revelled in all the license of

sovereign power; but his hands were yet unstained with blood; and he had even displayed a generosity of sentiment, which might perhaps have ripened into solid virtue. [13] A fatal incident decided his fluctuating character.

[Footnote 13: Manilius, the confidential secretary of Avidius Cassius, was discovered after he had lain concealed several years. The emperor nobly relieved the public anxiety by refusing to see him, and burning his papers without opening them. Dion Cassius, l. lxxii. p. 1209.]

One evening, as the emperor was returning to the palace, through a dark and narrow portico in the amphitheatre, [14] an assassin, who waited his passage, rushed upon him with a drawn sword, loudly exclaiming, "The senate sends you this." The menace prevented the deed; the assassin was seized by the guards, and immediately revealed the authors of the conspiracy. It had been formed, not in the state, but within the walls of the palace. Lucilla, the emperor's sister, and widow of Lucius Verus, impatient of the second rank, and jealous of the reigning empress, had armed the murderer against her brother's life. She had not ventured to communicate the black design to her second husband, Claudius Pompeianus, a senator of distinguished merit and unshaken loyalty; but among the crowd of her lovers (for she imitated the manners of Faustina) she found men of desperate fortunes and wild ambition, who were prepared to serve her more violent, as well as her tender passions. The conspirators experienced the rigor of justice, and the abandoned princess was punished, first with exile, and afterwards with death. [15]

[Footnote 14: See Maffei degli Amphitheatra, p. 126.]

[Footnote 15: Dion, l. lxxi. p. 1205 Herodian, l. i. p. 16 Hist. August p. 46.]

But the words of the assassin sunk deep into the mind of Commodus, and left an indelible impression of fear and hatred against the whole body of the senate. [151] Those whom he had dreaded as importunate ministers, he now suspected as secret enemies. The Delators, a race of men discouraged, and almost extinguished, under the former reigns, again became formidable, as soon as they discovered that the emperor was desirous of finding disaffection and treason in the senate. That assembly, whom Marcus had ever considered as the great council of the nation, was composed of the most distinguished of the Romans; and distinction of every kind soon became criminal. The possession of wealth stimulated the diligence of the informers; rigid virtue implied a tacit censure of the irregularities of Commodus; important services implied a dangerous superiority of merit; and the friendship of the father always insured the aversion of the son. Suspicion was equivalent to proof; trial to condemnation. The execution of a considerable senator was attended with the death of all who might lament or revenge his fate; and when Commodus had once tasted human blood, he became incapable of pity or remorse.

[Footnote 151: The conspirators were senators, even the assassin

himself. Herod. 81.--G.]

Of these innocent victims of tyranny, none died more lamented than the two brothers of the Quintilian family, Maximus and Condianus; whose fraternal love has saved their names from oblivion, and endeared their memory to posterity. Their studies and their occupations, their pursuits and their pleasures, were still the same. In the enjoyment of a great estate, they never admitted the idea of a separate interest: some fragments are now extant of a treatise which they composed in common; [152] and in every action of life it was observed that their two bodies were animated by one soul. The Antonines, who valued their virtues, and delighted in their union, raised them, in the same year, to the consulship; and Marcus afterwards intrusted to their joint care the civil administration of Greece, and a great military command, in which they obtained a signal victory over the Germans. The kind cruelty of Commodus united them in death. [16]

[Footnote 152: This work was on agriculture, and is often quoted by later writers. See P. Needham, *Proleg. ad Geoponic.* Camb. 1704.--W.]

[Footnote 16: In a note upon the Augustan History, Casaubon has collected a number of particulars concerning these celebrated brothers. See p. 96 of his learned commentary.]

The tyrant's rage, after having shed the noblest blood of the senate, at length recoiled on the principal instrument of his cruelty. Whilst

Commodus was immersed in blood and luxury, he devolved the detail of the public business on Perennis, a servile and ambitious minister, who had obtained his post by the murder of his predecessor, but who possessed a considerable share of vigor and ability. By acts of extortion, and the forfeited estates of the nobles sacrificed to his avarice, he had accumulated an immense treasure. The Praetorian guards were under his immediate command; and his son, who already discovered a military genius, was at the head of the Illyrian legions. Perennis aspired to the empire; or what, in the eyes of Commodus, amounted to the same crime, he was capable of aspiring to it, had he not been prevented, surprised, and put to death. The fall of a minister is a very trifling incident in the general history of the empire; but it was hastened by an extraordinary circumstance, which proved how much the nerves of discipline were already relaxed. The legions of Britain, discontented with the administration of Perennis, formed a deputation of fifteen hundred select men, with instructions to march to Rome, and lay their complaints before the emperor. These military petitioners, by their own determined behaviour, by inflaming the divisions of the guards, by exaggerating the strength of the British army, and by alarming the fears of Commodus, exacted and obtained the minister's death, as the only redress of their grievances. [17] This presumption of a distant army, and their discovery of the weakness of government, was a sure presage of the most dreadful convulsions.

[Footnote 17: Dion, l. lxxii. p. 1210. Herodian, l. i. p. 22. Hist.

August. p. 48. Dion gives a much less odious character of Perennis, than

the other historians. His moderation is almost a pledge of his veracity. Note: Gibbon praises Dion for the moderation with which he speaks of Perennis: he follows, nevertheless, in his own narrative, Herodian and Lampridius. Dion speaks of Perennis not only with moderation, but with admiration; he represents him as a great man, virtuous in his life, and blameless in his death: perhaps he may be suspected of partiality; but it is singular that Gibbon, having adopted, from Herodian and Lampridius, their judgment on this minister, follows Dion's improbable account of his death. What likelihood, in fact, that fifteen hundred men should have traversed Gaul and Italy, and have arrived at Rome without any understanding with the Praetorians, or without detection or opposition from Perennis, the Praetorian praefect? Gibbon, foreseeing, perhaps, this difficulty, has added, that the military deputation inflamed the divisions of the guards; but Dion says expressly that they did not reach Rome, but that the emperor went out to meet them: he even reproaches him for not having opposed them with the guards, who were superior in number. Herodian relates that Commodus, having learned, from a soldier, the ambitious designs of Perennis and his son, caused them to be attacked and massacred by night.--G. from W. Dion's narrative is remarkably circumstantial, and his authority higher than either of the other writers. He hints that Cleander, a new favorite, had already undermined the influence of Perennis.--M.]

The negligence of the public administration was betrayed, soon afterwards, by a new disorder, which arose from the smallest beginnings. A spirit of desertion began to prevail among the troops: and the

deserters, instead of seeking their safety in flight or concealment, infested the highways. Maternus, a private soldier, of a daring boldness above his station, collected these bands of robbers into a little army, set open the prisons, invited the slaves to assert their freedom, and plundered with impunity the rich and defenceless cities of Gaul and Spain. The governors of the provinces, who had long been the spectators, and perhaps the partners, of his depredations, were, at length, roused from their supine indolence by the threatening commands of the emperor. Maternus found that he was encompassed, and foresaw that he must be overpowered. A great effort of despair was his last resource. He ordered his followers to disperse, to pass the Alps in small parties and various disguises, and to assemble at Rome, during the licentious tumult of the festival of Cybele. [18] To murder Commodus, and to ascend the vacant throne, was the ambition of no vulgar robber. His measures were so ably concerted that his concealed troops already filled the streets of Rome. The envy of an accomplice discovered and ruined this singular enterprise, in a moment when it was ripe for execution. [19]

[Footnote 18: During the second Punic war, the Romans imported from Asia the worship of the mother of the gods. Her festival, the Megalesia, began on the fourth of April, and lasted six days. The streets were crowded with mad processions, the theatres with spectators, and the public tables with unbidden guests. Order and police were suspended, and pleasure was the only serious business of the city. See Ovid. *de Fastis*, l. iv. 189, &c.]

[Footnote 19: Herodian, l. i. p. 23, 23.]

Suspicious princes often promote the last of mankind, from a vain persuasion, that those who have no dependence, except on their favor, will have no attachment, except to the person of their benefactor. Cleander, the successor of Perennis, was a Phrygian by birth; of a nation over whose stubborn, but servile temper, blows only could prevail. [20] He had been sent from his native country to Rome, in the capacity of a slave. As a slave he entered the Imperial palace, rendered himself useful to his master's passions, and rapidly ascended to the most exalted station which a subject could enjoy. His influence over the mind of Commodus was much greater than that of his predecessor; for Cleander was devoid of any ability or virtue which could inspire the emperor with envy or distrust. Avarice was the reigning passion of his soul, and the great principle of his administration. The rank of Consul, of Patrician, of Senator, was exposed to public sale; and it would have been considered as disaffection, if any one had refused to purchase these empty and disgraceful honors with the greatest part of his fortune. [21] In the lucrative provincial employments, the minister shared with the governor the spoils of the people. The execution of the laws was penal and arbitrary. A wealthy criminal might obtain, not only the reversal of the sentence by which he was justly condemned, but might likewise inflict whatever punishment he pleased on the accuser, the witnesses, and the judge.

[Footnote 20: Cicero pro Flacco, c. 27.]

[Footnote 21: One of these dear-bought promotions occasioned a current... that Julius Solon was banished into the senate.]

By these means, Cleander, in the space of three years, had accumulated more wealth than had ever yet been possessed by any freedman. [22]

Commodus was perfectly satisfied with the magnificent presents which the artful courtier laid at his feet in the most seasonable moments.

To divert the public envy, Cleander, under the emperor's name, erected baths, porticos, and places of exercise, for the use of the people.

[23] He flattered himself that the Romans, dazzled and amused by this apparent liberality, would be less affected by the bloody scenes which were daily exhibited; that they would forget the death of Byrrhus, a senator to whose superior merit the late emperor had granted one of his daughters; and that they would forgive the execution of Arrius Antoninus, the last representative of the name and virtues of the Antonines. The former, with more integrity than prudence, had attempted to disclose, to his brother-in-law, the true character of Cleander. An equitable sentence pronounced by the latter, when proconsul of Asia, against a worthless creature of the favorite, proved fatal to him. [24] After the fall of Perennis, the terrors of Commodus had, for a short time, assumed the appearance of a return to virtue. He repealed the most odious of his acts; loaded his memory with the public execration, and ascribed to the pernicious counsels of that wicked minister all the errors of his inexperienced youth. But his repentance lasted only thirty days; and, under Cleander's tyranny, the administration of Perennis was

often regretted.

[Footnote 22: Dion (l. lxxii. p. 12, 13) observes, that no freedman had possessed riches equal to those of Cleander. The fortune of Pallas amounted, however, to upwards of five and twenty hundred thousand pounds; Ter millies.]

[Footnote 23: Dion, l. lxxii. p. 12, 13. Herodian, l. i. p. 29. Hist. August. p. 52. These baths were situated near the Porta Capena. See Nardini Roma Antica, p. 79.]

[Footnote 24: Hist. August. p. 79.]