

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

Pestilence and famine contributed to fill up the measure of the calamities of Rome. [25] The first could be only imputed to the just indignation of the gods; but a monopoly of corn, supported by the riches and power of the minister, was considered as the immediate cause of the second. The popular discontent, after it had long circulated in whispers, broke out in the assembled circus. The people quitted their favorite amusements for the more delicious pleasure of revenge, rushed in crowds towards a palace in the suburbs, one of the emperor's retirements, and demanded, with angry clamors, the head of the public enemy. Cleander, who commanded the Praetorian guards, [26] ordered a body of cavalry to sally forth, and disperse the seditious multitude. The multitude fled with precipitation towards the city; several were slain, and many more were trampled to death; but when the cavalry entered the streets, their pursuit was checked by a shower of stones and darts from the roofs and windows of the houses. The foot guards, [27] who had been long jealous of the prerogatives and insolence of the Praetorian cavalry, embraced the party of the people. The tumult became a regular engagement, and threatened a general massacre. The Praetorians, at length, gave way, oppressed with numbers; and the tide of popular fury returned with redoubled violence against the gates of the palace, where Commodus lay, dissolved in luxury, and alone unconscious of the civil war. It was death to approach his person with the unwelcome news. He would have perished in this supine security, had not two women, his eldest sister Fadilla, and Marcia, the most favored of his concubines,

ventured to break into his presence. Bathed in tears, and with dishevelled hair, they threw themselves at his feet; and with all the pressing eloquence of fear, discovered to the affrighted emperor the crimes of the minister, the rage of the people, and the impending ruin, which, in a few minutes, would burst over his palace and person. Commodus started from his dream of pleasure, and commanded that the head of Cleander should be thrown out to the people. The desired spectacle instantly appeased the tumult; and the son of Marcus might even yet have regained the affection and confidence of his subjects. [28]

[Footnote 25: Herodian, l. i. p. 28. Dion, l. lxxii. p. 1215. The latter says that two thousand persons died every day at Rome, during a considerable length of time.]

[Footnote 26: *Tuncque primum tres praefecti praetorio fuere: inter quos libertinus.* From some remains of modesty, Cleander declined the title, whilst he assumed the powers, of Praetorian praefect. As the other freedmen were styled, from their several departments, a *rationibus*, *ab epistolis*, Cleander called himself a *pugione*, as intrusted with the defence of his master's person. Salmasius and Casaubon seem to have talked very idly upon this passage. * Note: M. Guizot denies that Lampridius means Cleander as praefect a pugione. The Libertinus seems to me to mean him.--M.]

[Footnote 27: Herodian, l. i. p. 31. It is doubtful whether he means the Praetorian infantry, or the *cohortes urbanae*, a body of six thousand

men, but whose rank and discipline were not equal to their numbers. Neither Tillemont nor Wotton choose to decide this question.]

[Footnote 28: Dion Cassius, l. lxxii. p. 1215. Herodian, l. i. p. 32. Hist. August. p. 48.]

But every sentiment of virtue and humanity was extinct in the mind of Commodus. Whilst he thus abandoned the reins of empire to these unworthy favorites, he valued nothing in sovereign power, except the unbounded license of indulging his sensual appetites. His hours were spent in a seraglio of three hundred beautiful women, and as many boys, of every rank, and of every province; and, wherever the arts of seduction proved ineffectual, the brutal lover had recourse to violence. The ancient historians [29] have expatiated on these abandoned scenes of prostitution, which scorned every restraint of nature or modesty; but it would not be easy to translate their too faithful descriptions into the decency of modern language. The intervals of lust were filled up with the basest amusements. The influence of a polite age, and the labor of an attentive education, had never been able to infuse into his rude and brutish mind the least tincture of learning; and he was the first of the Roman emperors totally devoid of taste for the pleasures of the understanding. Nero himself excelled, or affected to excel, in the elegant arts of music and poetry: nor should we despise his pursuits, had he not converted the pleasing relaxation of a leisure hour into the serious business and ambition of his life. But Commodus, from his earliest infancy, discovered an aversion to whatever was rational or

liberal, and a fond attachment to the amusements of the populace; the sports of the circus and amphitheatre, the combats of gladiators, and the hunting of wild beasts. The masters in every branch of learning, whom Marcus provided for his son, were heard with inattention and disgust; whilst the Moors and Parthians, who taught him to dart the javelin and to shoot with the bow, found a disciple who delighted in his application, and soon equalled the most skilful of his instructors in the steadiness of the eye and the dexterity of the hand.

[Footnote 29: Sororibus suis constupratis. Ipsas concubinas suas sub oculis...stuprari jubebat. Nec irruentium in se juvenum carebat infamia, omni parte corporis atque ore in sexum utrumque pollutus. Hist. Aug. p. 47.]

The servile crowd, whose fortune depended on their master's vices, applauded these ignoble pursuits. The perfidious voice of flattery reminded him, that by exploits of the same nature, by the defeat of the Nemean lion, and the slaughter of the wild boar of Erymanthus, the Grecian Hercules had acquired a place among the gods, and an immortal memory among men. They only forgot to observe, that, in the first ages of society, when the fiercer animals often dispute with man the possession of an unsettled country, a successful war against those savages is one of the most innocent and beneficial labors of heroism. In the civilized state of the Roman empire, the wild beasts had long since retired from the face of man, and the neighborhood of populous cities. To surprise them in their solitary haunts, and to transport them to

Rome, that they might be slain in pomp by the hand of an emperor, was an enterprise equally ridiculous for the prince and oppressive for the people. [30] Ignorant of these distinctions, Commodus eagerly embraced the glorious resemblance, and styled himself (as we still read on his medals [31] the Roman Hercules. [311] The club and the lion's hide were placed by the side of the throne, amongst the ensigns of sovereignty; and statues were erected, in which Commodus was represented in the character, and with the attributes, of the god, whose valor and dexterity he endeavored to emulate in the daily course of his ferocious amusements. [32]

[Footnote 30: The African lions, when pressed by hunger, infested the open villages and cultivated country; and they infested them with impunity. The royal beast was reserved for the pleasures of the emperor and the capital; and the unfortunate peasant who killed one of them though in his own defence, incurred a very heavy penalty. This extraordinary game-law was mitigated by Honorius, and finally repealed by Justinian. Codex Theodos. tom. v. p. 92, et Comment Gothofred.]

[Footnote 31: Spanheim de Numismat. Dissertat. xii. tom. ii. p. 493.]

[Footnote 311: Commodus placed his own head on the colossal statue of Hercules with the inscription, Lucius Commodus Hercules. The wits of Rome, according to a new fragment of Dion, published an epigram, of which, like many other ancient jests, the point is not very clear.

It seems to be a protest of the god against being confounded with the

emperor. Mai Fragm. Vatican. ii. 225.--M.]

[Footnote 32: Dion, l. lxxii. p. 1216. Hist. August. p. 49.]

Elated with these praises, which gradually extinguished the innate sense of shame, Commodus resolved to exhibit before the eyes of the Roman people those exercises, which till then he had decently confined within the walls of his palace, and to the presence of a few favorites. On the appointed day, the various motives of flattery, fear, and curiosity, attracted to the amphitheatre an innumerable multitude of spectators; and some degree of applause was deservedly bestowed on the uncommon skill of the Imperial performer. Whether he aimed at the head or heart of the animal, the wound was alike certain and mortal. With arrows whose point was shaped into the form of crescent, Commodus often intercepted the rapid career, and cut asunder the long, bony neck of the ostrich.

[33] A panther was let loose; and the archer waited till he had leaped upon a trembling malefactor. In the same instant the shaft flew, the beast dropped dead, and the man remained unhurt. The dens of the amphitheatre disgorged at once a hundred lions: a hundred darts from the unerring hand of Commodus laid them dead as they run raging round the Arena. Neither the huge bulk of the elephant, nor the scaly hide of the rhinoceros, could defend them from his stroke. Aethiopia and India yielded their most extraordinary productions; and several animals were slain in the amphitheatre, which had been seen only in the representations of art, or perhaps of fancy. [34] In all these exhibitions, the securest precautions were used to protect the person of

the Roman Hercules from the desperate spring of any savage, who might possibly disregard the dignity of the emperor and the sanctity of the god. [35]

[Footnote 33: The ostrich's neck is three feet long, and composed of seventeen vertebrae. See Buffon, *Hist. Naturelle*.]

[Footnote 34: Commodus killed a camelopardalis or Giraffe, (Dion, l. lxxii. p. 1211,) the tallest, the most gentle, and the most useless of the large quadrupeds. This singular animal, a native only of the interior parts of Africa, has not been seen in Europe since the revival of letters; and though M. de Buffon (*Hist. Naturelle*, tom. xiii.) has endeavored to describe, he has not ventured to delineate, the Giraffe. *

Note: The naturalists of our days have been more fortunate. London probably now contains more specimens of this animal than have been seen in Europe since the fall of the Roman empire, unless in the pleasure gardens of the emperor Frederic II., in Sicily, which possessed several. Frederic's collections of wild beasts were exhibited, for the popular amusement, in many parts of Italy. Raumer, *Geschichte der Hohenstaufen*, v. iii. p. 571. Gibbon, moreover, is mistaken; as a giraffe was presented to Lorenzo de Medici, either by the sultan of Egypt or the king of Tunis. Contemporary authorities are quoted in the old work, *Gesner de Quadrupedibus* p. 162.--M.]

[Footnote 35: Herodian, l. i. p. 37. *Hist. August.* p. 50.]

But the meanest of the populace were affected with shame and indignation when they beheld their sovereign enter the lists as a gladiator, and glory in a profession which the laws and manners of the Romans had branded with the justest note of infamy. [36] He chose the habit and arms of the Secutor, whose combat with the Retiarius formed one of the most lively scenes in the bloody sports of the amphitheatre. The Secutor was armed with a helmet, sword, and buckler; his naked antagonist had only a large net and a trident; with the one he endeavored to entangle, with the other to despatch his enemy. If he missed the first throw, he was obliged to fly from the pursuit of the Secutor, till he had prepared his net for a second cast. [37] The emperor fought in this character seven hundred and thirty-five several times. These glorious achievements were carefully recorded in the public acts of the empire; and that he might omit no circumstance of infamy, he received from the common fund of gladiators a stipend so exorbitant that it became a new and most ignominious tax upon the Roman people. [38] It may be easily supposed, that in these engagements the master of the world was always successful; in the amphitheatre, his victories were not often sanguinary; but when he exercised his skill in the school of gladiators, or his own palace, his wretched antagonists were frequently honored with a mortal wound from the hand of Commodus, and obliged to seal their flattery with their blood. [39] He now disdained the appellation of Hercules. The name of Paulus, a celebrated Secutor, was the only one which delighted his ear. It was inscribed on his colossal statues, and repeated in the redoubled acclamations [40] of the mournful and applauding senate. [41] Claudius Pompeianus, the virtuous husband of Lucilla, was the only senator who

asserted the honor of his rank. As a father, he permitted his sons to consult their safety by attending the amphitheatre. As a Roman, he declared, that his own life was in the emperor's hands, but that he would never behold the son of Marcus prostituting his person and dignity. Notwithstanding his manly resolution Pompeianus escaped the resentment of the tyrant, and, with his honor, had the good fortune to preserve his life. [42]

[Footnote 36: The virtuous and even the wise princes forbade the senators and knights to embrace this scandalous profession, under pain of infamy, or, what was more dreaded by those profligate wretches, of exile. The tyrants allured them to dishonor by threats and rewards. Nero once produced in the arena forty senators and sixty knights. See Lipsius, Saturnalia, 1. ii. c. 2. He has happily corrected a passage of Suetonius in Nerone, c. 12.]

[Footnote 37: Lipsius, 1. ii. c. 7, 8. Juvenal, in the eighth satire, gives a picturesque description of this combat.]

[Footnote 38: Hist. August. p. 50. Dion, 1. lxxii. p. 1220. He received, for each time, decies, about 8000l. sterling.]

[Footnote 39: Victor tells us, that Commodus only allowed his antagonists a...weapon, dreading most probably the consequences of their despair.]

[Footnote 40: They were obliged to repeat, six hundred and twenty-six times, Paolus first of the Secutors, &c.]

[Footnote 41: Dion, l. lxxii. p. 1221. He speaks of his own baseness and danger.]

[Footnote 42: He mixed, however, some prudence with his courage, and passed the greatest part of his time in a country retirement; alleging his advanced age, and the weakness of his eyes. "I never saw him in the senate," says Dion, "except during the short reign of Pertinax." All his infirmities had suddenly left him, and they returned as suddenly upon the murder of that excellent prince. Dion, l. lxxiii. p. 1227.]

Commodus had now attained the summit of vice and infamy. Amidst the acclamations of a flattering court, he was unable to disguise from himself, that he had deserved the contempt and hatred of every man of sense and virtue in his empire. His ferocious spirit was irritated by the consciousness of that hatred, by the envy of every kind of merit, by the just apprehension of danger, and by the habit of slaughter, which he contracted in his daily amusements. History has preserved a long list of consular senators sacrificed to his wanton suspicion, which sought out, with peculiar anxiety, those unfortunate persons connected, however remotely, with the family of the Antonines, without sparing even the ministers of his crimes or pleasures. [43] His cruelty proved at last fatal to himself. He had shed with impunity the noblest blood of Rome: he perished as soon as he was dreaded by his own domestics. Marcia,

his favorite concubine, Eclectus, his chamberlain, and Laetus, his Praetorian praefect, alarmed by the fate of their companions and predecessors, resolved to prevent the destruction which every hour hung over their heads, either from the mad caprice of the tyrant, [431] or the sudden indignation of the people. Marcia seized the occasion of presenting a draught of wine to her lover, after he had fatigued himself with hunting some wild beasts. Commodus retired to sleep; but whilst he was laboring with the effects of poison and drunkenness, a robust youth, by profession a wrestler, entered his chamber, and strangled him without resistance. The body was secretly conveyed out of the palace, before the least suspicion was entertained in the city, or even in the court, of the emperor's death. Such was the fate of the son of Marcus, and so easy was it to destroy a hated tyrant, who, by the artificial powers of government, had oppressed, during thirteen years, so many millions of subjects, each of whom was equal to their master in personal strength and personal abilities. [44]

[Footnote 43: The prefects were changed almost hourly or daily; and the caprice of Commodus was often fatal to his most favored chamberlains. Hist. August. p. 46, 51.]

[Footnote 431: Commodus had already resolved to massacre them the following night they determined to anticipate his design. Herod. i. 17.--W.]

[Footnote 44: Dion, l. lxxii. p. 1222. Herodian, l. i. p. 43. Hist.

August. p. 52.]

The measures of the conspirators were conducted with the deliberate coolness and celerity which the greatness of the occasion required. They resolved instantly to fill the vacant throne with an emperor whose character would justify and maintain the action that had been committed. They fixed on Pertinax, praefect of the city, an ancient senator of consular rank, whose conspicuous merit had broke through the obscurity of his birth, and raised him to the first honors of the state. He had successively governed most of the provinces of the empire; and in all his great employments, military as well as civil, he had uniformly distinguished himself by the firmness, the prudence, and the integrity of his conduct. [45] He now remained almost alone of the friends and ministers of Marcus; and when, at a late hour of the night, he was awakened with the news, that the chamberlain and the praefect were at his door, he received them with intrepid resignation, and desired they would execute their master's orders. Instead of death, they offered him the throne of the Roman world. During some moments he distrusted their intentions and assurances. Convinced at length of the death of Commodus, he accepted the purple with a sincere reluctance, the natural effect of his knowledge both of the duties and of the dangers of the supreme rank. [46]

[Footnote 45: Pertinax was a native of Alba Pompeia, in Piedmont, and son of a timber merchant. The order of his employments (it is marked by Capitolinus) well deserves to be set down, as expressive of the form

of government and manners of the age. 1. He was a centurion. 2. Praefect of a cohort in Syria, in the Parthian war, and in Britain. 3. He obtained an Ala, or squadron of horse, in Maesia. 4. He was commissary of provisions on the Aemilian way. 5. He commanded the fleet upon the Rhine. 6. He was procurator of Dacia, with a salary of about 1600l. a year. 7. He commanded the veterans of a legion. 8. He obtained the rank of senator. 9. Of praetor. 10. With the command of the first legion in Rhaetia and Noricum. 11. He was consul about the year 175. 12. He attended Marcus into the East. 13. He commanded an army on the Danube. 14. He was consular legate of Maesia. 15. Of Dacia. 16. Of Syria. 17. Of Britain. 18. He had the care of the public provisions at Rome. 19. He was proconsul of Africa. 20. Praefect of the city. Herodian (l. i. p. 48) does justice to his disinterested spirit; but Capitolinus, who collected every popular rumor, charges him with a great fortune acquired by bribery and corruption.]

[Footnote 46: Julian, in the Caesars, taxes him with being accessory to the death of Commodus.]

Laetus conducted without delay his new emperor to the camp of the Praetorians, diffusing at the same time through the city a seasonable report that Commodus died suddenly of an apoplexy; and that the virtuous Pertinax had already succeeded to the throne. The guards were rather surprised than pleased with the suspicious death of a prince, whose indulgence and liberality they alone had experienced; but the emergency of the occasion, the authority of their praefect, the reputation of

Pertinax, and the clamors of the people, obliged them to stifle their secret discontents, to accept the donative promised by the new emperor, to swear allegiance to him, and with joyful acclamations and laurels in their hands to conduct him to the senate house, that the military consent might be ratified by the civil authority. This important night was now far spent; with the dawn of day, and the commencement of the new year, the senators expected a summons to attend an ignominious ceremony. [461] In spite of all remonstrances, even of those of his creatures who yet preserved any regard for prudence or decency, Commodus had resolved to pass the night in the gladiators' school, and from thence to take possession of the consulship, in the habit and with the attendance of that infamous crew. On a sudden, before the break of day, the senate was called together in the temple of Concord, to meet the guards, and to ratify the election of a new emperor. For a few minutes they sat in silent suspense, doubtful of their unexpected deliverance, and suspicious of the cruel artifices of Commodus: but when at length they were assured that the tyrant was no more, they resigned themselves to all the transports of joy and indignation. Pertinax, who modestly represented the meanness of his extraction, and pointed out several noble senators more deserving than himself of the empire, was constrained by their dutiful violence to ascend the throne, and received all the titles of Imperial power, confirmed by the most sincere vows of fidelity. The memory of Commodus was branded with eternal infamy. The names of tyrant, of gladiator, of public enemy resounded in every corner of the house. They decreed in tumultuous votes, [462] that his honors should be reversed, his titles erased from the public monuments, his

statues thrown down, his body dragged with a hook into the stripping room of the gladiators, to satiate the public fury; and they expressed some indignation against those officious servants who had already presumed to screen his remains from the justice of the senate. But Pertinax could not refuse those last rites to the memory of Marcus, and the tears of his first protector Claudius Pompeianus, who lamented the cruel fate of his brother-in-law, and lamented still more that he had deserved it. [47]

[Footnote 461: The senate always assembled at the beginning of the year, on the night of the 1st January, (see Savaron on Sid. Apoll. viii. 6,) and this happened the present year, as usual, without any particular order.--G from W.]

[Footnote 462: What Gibbon improperly calls, both here and in the note, tumultuous decrees, were no more than the applauses and acclamations which recur so often in the history of the emperors. The custom passed from the theatre to the forum, from the forum to the senate. Applauses on the adoption of the Imperial decrees were first introduced under Trajan. (Plin. jun. Panegy. 75.) One senator read the form of the decree, and all the rest answered by acclamations, accompanied with a kind of chant or rhythm. These were some of the acclamations addressed to Pertinax, and against the memory of Commodus. *Hosti patriae honores detrahantur. Parricidae honores detrahantur. Ut salvi simus, Jupiter, optime, maxime, serva nobis Pertinacem.* This custom prevailed not only in the councils of state, but in all the meetings of the senate. However

inconsistent it may appear with the solemnity of a religious assembly, the early Christians adopted and introduced it into their synods, notwithstanding the opposition of some of the Fathers, particularly of St. Chrysostom. See the Coll. of Franc. Bern. Ferrarius de veterum acclamatione in Graevii Thesaur. Antiq. Rom. i. 6.--W. This note is rather hypercritical, as regards Gibbon, but appears to be worthy of preservation.--M.]

[Footnote 47: Capitolinus gives us the particulars of these tumultuary votes, which were moved by one senator, and repeated, or rather chanted by the whole body. Hist. August. p. 52.]

These effusions of impotent rage against a dead emperor, whom the senate had flattered when alive with the most abject servility, betrayed a just but ungenerous spirit of revenge.

The legality of these decrees was, however, supported by the principles of the Imperial constitution. To censure, to depose, or to punish with death, the first magistrate of the republic, who had abused his delegated trust, was the ancient and undoubted prerogative of the Roman senate; [48] but the feeble assembly was obliged to content itself with inflicting on a fallen tyrant that public justice, from which, during his life and reign, he had been shielded by the strong arm of military despotism. [481]

[Footnote 48: The senate condemned Nero to be put to death *more majorum*.

Sueton. c. 49.]

[Footnote 481: No particular law assigned this right to the senate: it was deduced from the ancient principles of the republic. Gibbon appears to infer, from the passage of Suetonius, that the senate, according to its ancient right, punished Nero with death. The words, however, more majerum refer not to the decree of the senate, but to the kind of death, which was taken from an old law of Romulus. (See Victor. Epit. Ed. Artzen p. 484, n. 7.)--W.]

Pertinax found a nobler way of condemning his predecessor's memory; by the contrast of his own virtues with the vices of Commodus. On the day of his accession, he resigned over to his wife and son his whole private fortune; that they might have no pretence to solicit favors at the expense of the state. He refused to flatter the vanity of the former with the title of Augusta; or to corrupt the inexperienced youth of the latter by the rank of Caesar. Accurately distinguishing between the duties of a parent and those of a sovereign, he educated his son with a severe simplicity, which, while it gave him no assured prospect of the throne, might in time have rendered him worthy of it. In public, the behavior of Pertinax was grave and affable. He lived with the virtuous part of the senate, (and, in a private station, he had been acquainted with the true character of each individual,) without either pride or jealousy; considered them as friends and companions, with whom he had shared the danger of the tyranny, and with whom he wished to enjoy the security of the present time. He very frequently invited them to

familiar entertainments, the frugality of which was ridiculed by those who remembered and regretted the luxurious prodigality of Commodus. [49]

[Footnote 49: Dion (l. lxxiii. p. 1223) speaks of these entertainments, as a senator who had supped with the emperor; Capitolinus, (Hist. August. p. 58,) like a slave, who had received his intelligence from one of the scullions.]

To heal, as far as I was possible, the wounds inflicted by the hand of tyranny, was the pleasing, but melancholy, task of Pertinax. The innocent victims, who yet survived, were recalled from exile, released from prison, and restored to the full possession of their honors and fortunes. The unburied bodies of murdered senators (for the cruelty of Commodus endeavored to extend itself beyond death) were deposited in the sepulchres of their ancestors; their memory was justified and every consolation was bestowed on their ruined and afflicted families. Among these consolations, one of the most grateful was the punishment of the Delators; the common enemies of their master, of virtue, and of their country. Yet even in the inquisition of these legal assassins, Pertinax proceeded with a steady temper, which gave every thing to justice, and nothing to popular prejudice and resentment. The finances of the state demanded the most vigilant care of the emperor. Though every measure of injustice and extortion had been adopted, which could collect the property of the subject into the coffers of the prince, the rapaciousness of Commodus had been so very inadequate to his extravagance, that, upon his death, no more than eight

thousand pounds were found in the exhausted treasury, [50] to defray the current expenses of government, and to discharge the pressing demand of a liberal donative, which the new emperor had been obliged to promise to the Praetorian guards. Yet under these distressed circumstances, Pertinax had the generous firmness to remit all the oppressive taxes invented by Commodus, and to cancel all the unjust claims of the treasury; declaring, in a decree of the senate, "that he was better satisfied to administer a poor republic with innocence, than to acquire riches by the ways of tyranny and dishonor. Economy and industry he considered as the pure and genuine sources of wealth; and from them he soon derived a copious supply for the public necessities. The expense of the household was immediately reduced to one half. All the instruments of luxury Pertinax exposed to public auction, [51] gold and silver plate, chariots of a singular construction, a superfluous wardrobe of silk and embroidery, and a great number of beautiful slaves of both sexes; excepting only, with attentive humanity, those who were born in a state of freedom, and had been ravished from the arms of their weeping parents. At the same time that he obliged the worthless favorites of the tyrant to resign a part of their ill-gotten wealth, he satisfied the just creditors of the state, and unexpectedly discharged the long arrears of honest services. He removed the oppressive restrictions which had been laid upon commerce, and granted all the uncultivated lands in Italy and the provinces to those who would improve them; with an exemption from tribute during the term of ten years. [52]

[Footnote 50: Decies. The blameless economy of Pius left his successors

a treasure of vices septies millies, above two and twenty millions sterling. Dion, l. lxxiii. p. 1231.]

[Footnote 51: Besides the design of converting these useless ornaments into money, Dion (l. lxxiii. p. 1229) assigns two secret motives of Pertinax. He wished to expose the vices of Commodus, and to discover by the purchasers those who most resembled him.]

[Footnote 52: Though Capitolinus has picked up many idle tales of the private life of Pertinax, he joins with Dion and Herodian in admiring his public conduct.]

Such a uniform conduct had already secured to Pertinax the noblest reward of a sovereign, the love and esteem of his people.

Those who remembered the virtues of Marcus were happy to contemplate in their new emperor the features of that bright original; and flattered themselves, that they should long enjoy the benign influence of his administration. A hasty zeal to reform the corrupted state, accompanied with less prudence than might have been expected from the years and experience of Pertinax, proved fatal to himself and to his country. His honest indiscretion united against him the servile crowd, who found their private benefit in the public disorders, and who preferred the favor of a tyrant to the inexorable equality of the laws. [53]

[Footnote 53: Leges, rem surdam, inexorabilem esse. T. Liv. ii. 3.]

Amidst the general joy, the sullen and angry countenance of the Praetorian guards betrayed their inward dissatisfaction. They had reluctantly submitted to Pertinax; they dreaded the strictness of the ancient discipline, which he was preparing to restore; and they regretted the license of the former reign. Their discontents were secretly fomented by Laetus, their praefect, who found, when it was too late, that his new emperor would reward a servant, but would not be ruled by a favorite. On the third day of his reign, the soldiers seized on a noble senator, with a design to carry him to the camp, and to invest him with the Imperial purple. Instead of being dazzled by the dangerous honor, the affrighted victim escaped from their violence, and took refuge at the feet of Pertinax. A short time afterwards, Sosius Falco, one of the consuls of the year, a rash youth, [54] but of an ancient and opulent family, listened to the voice of ambition; and a conspiracy was formed during a short absence of Pertinax, which was crushed by his sudden return to Rome, and his resolute behavior. Falco was on the point of being justly condemned to death as a public enemy had he not been saved by the earnest and sincere entreaties of the injured emperor, who conjured the senate, that the purity of his reign might not be stained by the blood even of a guilty senator.

[Footnote 54: If we credit Capitolinus, (which is rather difficult,)

Falco behaved with the most petulant indecency to Pertinax, on the day of his accession. The wise emperor only admonished him of his youth and inexperience. Hist. August. p. 55.]

These disappointments served only to irritate the rage of the Praetorian guards. On the twenty-eighth of March, eighty-six days only after the death of Commodus, a general sedition broke out in the camp, which the officers wanted either power or inclination to suppress. Two or three hundred of the most desperate soldiers marched at noonday, with arms in their hands and fury in their looks, towards the Imperial palace.

The gates were thrown open by their companions upon guard, and by the domestics of the old court, who had already formed a secret conspiracy against the life of the too virtuous emperor. On the news of their approach, Pertinax, disdainful of either flight or concealment, advanced to meet his assassins; and recalled to their minds his own innocence, and the sanctity of their recent oath. For a few moments they stood in silent suspense, ashamed of their atrocious design, and awed by the venerable aspect and majestic firmness of their sovereign, till at length, the despair of pardon reviving their fury, a barbarian of the country of Tongress [55] levelled the first blow against Pertinax, who was instantly despatched with a multitude of wounds. His head, separated from his body, and placed on a lance, was carried in triumph to the Praetorian camp, in the sight of a mournful and indignant people, who lamented the unworthy fate of that excellent prince, and the transient blessings of a reign, the memory of which could serve only to aggravate their approaching misfortunes. [56]

[Footnote 55: The modern bishopric of Liege. This soldier probably belonged to the Batavian horse-guards, who were mostly raised in the

duchy of Gueldres and the neighborhood, and were distinguished by their valor, and by the boldness with which they swam their horses across the broadest and most rapid rivers. Tacit. Hist. iv. 12 Dion, l. lv p. 797 Lipsius de magnitudine Romana, l. i. c. 4.]

[Footnote 56: Dion, l. lxxiii. p. 1232. Herodian, l. ii. p. 60. Hist. August. p. 58. Victor in Epitom. et in Caesarib. Eutropius, viii. 16.]