

Chapter VI: Death Of Severus, Tyranny Of Caracalla, Usurpation Of Marcinus.--
Part I.

The Death Of Severus.--Tyranny Of Caracalla.--Usurpation
Of Macrinus.--Follies Of Elagabalus.--Virtues Of Alexander
Severus.--Licentiousness Of The Army.--General State Of
The Roman Finances.

The ascent to greatness, however steep and dangerous, may entertain an active spirit with the consciousness and exercise of its own powers: but the possession of a throne could never yet afford a lasting satisfaction to an ambitious mind. This melancholy truth was felt and acknowledged by Severus. Fortune and merit had, from an humble station, elevated him to the first place among mankind. "He had been all things," as he said himself, "and all was of little value." [1] Distracted with the care, not of acquiring, but of preserving an empire, oppressed with age and infirmities, careless of fame, [2] and satiated with power, all his prospects of life were closed. The desire of perpetuating the greatness of his family was the only remaining wish of his ambition and paternal tenderness.

[Footnote 1: Hist. August. p. 71. "Omnia fui, et nihil expedit."]

[Footnote 2: Dion Cassius, l. lxxvi. p. 1284.]

Like most of the Africans, Severus was passionately addicted to the vain

studies of magic and divination, deeply versed in the interpretation of dreams and omens, and perfectly acquainted with the science of judicial astrology; which, in almost every age except the present, has maintained its dominion over the mind of man. He had lost his first wife, while he was governor of the Lionnese Gaul. [3] In the choice of a second, he sought only to connect himself with some favorite of fortune; and as soon as he had discovered that the young lady of Emesa in Syria had a royal nativity, he solicited and obtained her hand. [4] Julia Domna (for that was her name) deserved all that the stars could promise her.

She possessed, even in advanced age, the attractions of beauty, [5] and united to a lively imagination a firmness of mind, and strength of judgment, seldom bestowed on her sex. Her amiable qualities never made any deep impression on the dark and jealous temper of her husband; but in her son's reign, she administered the principal affairs of the empire, with a prudence that supported his authority, and with a moderation that sometimes corrected his wild extravagancies. [6] Julia applied herself to letters and philosophy, with some success, and with the most splendid reputation. She was the patroness of every art, and the friend of every man of genius. [7] The grateful flattery of the learned has celebrated her virtues; but, if we may credit the scandal of ancient history, chastity was very far from being the most conspicuous virtue of the empress Julia. [8]

[Footnote 3: About the year 186. M. de Tillemont is miserably embarrassed with a passage of Dion, in which the empress Faustina,

who died in the year 175, is introduced as having contributed to the marriage of Severus and Julia, (l. lxxiv. p. 1243.) The learned compiler forgot that Dion is relating not a real fact, but a dream of Severus; and dreams are circumscribed to no limits of time or space. Did M. de Tillemont imagine that marriages were consummated in the temple of Venus at Rome? Hist. des Empereurs, tom. iii. p. 389. Note 6.]

[Footnote 4: Hist. August. p. 65.]

[Footnote 5: Hist. August. p. 5.]

[Footnote 6: Dion Cassius, l. lxxvii. p. 1304, 1314.]

[Footnote 7: See a dissertation of Menage, at the end of his edition of Diogenes Laertius, de Foeminis Philosophis.]

[Footnote 8: Dion, l. lxxvi. p. 1285. Aurelius Victor.]

Two sons, Caracalla [9] and Geta, were the fruit of this marriage, and the destined heirs of the empire. The fond hopes of the father, and of the Roman world, were soon disappointed by these vain youths, who displayed the indolent security of hereditary princes; and a presumption that fortune would supply the place of merit and application. Without any emulation of virtue or talents, they discovered, almost from their infancy, a fixed and implacable antipathy for each other.

[Footnote 9: Bassianus was his first name, as it had been that of his maternal grandfather. During his reign, he assumed the appellation of Antoninus, which is employed by lawyers and ancient historians. After his death, the public indignation loaded him with the nicknames of Tarantus and Caracalla. The first was borrowed from a celebrated Gladiator, the second from a long Gallic gown which he distributed to the people of Rome.]

Their aversion, confirmed by years, and fomented by the arts of their interested favorites, broke out in childish, and gradually in more serious competitions; and, at length, divided the theatre, the circus, and the court, into two factions, actuated by the hopes and fears of their respective leaders. The prudent emperor endeavored, by every expedient of advice and authority, to allay this growing animosity. The unhappy discord of his sons clouded all his prospects, and threatened to overturn a throne raised with so much labor, cemented with so much blood, and guarded with every defence of arms and treasure. With an impartial hand he maintained between them an exact balance of favor, conferred on both the rank of Augustus, with the revered name of Antoninus; and for the first time the Roman world beheld three emperors. [10] Yet even this equal conduct served only to inflame the contest, whilst the fierce Caracalla asserted the right of primogeniture, and the milder Geta courted the affections of the people and the soldiers. In the anguish of a disappointed father, Severus foretold that the weaker of his sons would fall a sacrifice to the stronger; who, in his turn, would be ruined by his own vices. [11]

[Footnote 10: The elevation of Caracalla is fixed by the accurate M. de Tillemont to the year 198; the association of Geta to the year 208.]

[Footnote 11: Herodian, l. iii. p. 130. The lives of Caracalla and Geta, in the Augustan History.]

In these circumstances the intelligence of a war in Britain, and of an invasion of the province by the barbarians of the North, was received with pleasure by Severus. Though the vigilance of his lieutenants might have been sufficient to repel the distant enemy, he resolved to embrace the honorable pretext of withdrawing his sons from the luxury of Rome, which enervated their minds and irritated their passions; and of inuring their youth to the toils of war and government. Notwithstanding his advanced age, (for he was above threescore,) and his gout, which obliged him to be carried in a litter, he transported himself in person into that remote island, attended by his two sons, his whole court, and a formidable army. He immediately passed the walls of Hadrian and Antoninus, and entered the enemy's country, with a design of completing the long attempted conquest of Britain. He penetrated to the northern extremity of the island, without meeting an enemy. But the concealed ambuscades of the Caledonians, who hung unseen on the rear and flanks of his army, the coldness of the climate and the severity of a winter march across the hills and morasses of Scotland, are reported to have cost the Romans above fifty thousand men. The Caledonians at length yielded to the powerful and obstinate attack, sued for peace, and surrendered a

part of their arms, and a large tract of territory. But their apparent submission lasted no longer than the present terror. As soon as the Roman legions had retired, they resumed their hostile independence. Their restless spirit provoked Severus to send a new army into Caledonia, with the most bloody orders, not to subdue, but to extirpate the natives. They were saved by the death of their haughty enemy. [12]

[Footnote 12: Dion, l. lxxvi. p. 1280, &c. Herodian, l. iii. p. 132, &c.]

This Caledonian war, neither marked by decisive events, nor attended with any important consequences, would ill deserve our attention; but it is supposed, not without a considerable degree of probability, that the invasion of Severus is connected with the most shining period of the British history or fable. Fingal, whose fame, with that of his heroes and bards, has been revived in our language by a recent publication, is said to have commanded the Caledonians in that memorable juncture, to have eluded the power of Severus, and to have obtained a signal victory on the banks of the Carun, in which the son of the King of the World, Caracul, fled from his arms along the fields of his pride. [13]

Something of a doubtful mist still hangs over these Highland traditions; nor can it be entirely dispelled by the most ingenious researches of modern criticism; [14] but if we could, with safety, indulge the pleasing supposition, that Fingal lived, and that Ossian sung, the striking contrast of the situation and manners of the contending nations might amuse a philosophic mind.

The parallel would be little to the advantage of the more civilized people, if we compared the unrelenting revenge of Severus with the generous clemency of Fingal; the timid and brutal cruelty of Caracalla with the bravery, the tenderness, the elegant genius of Ossian; the mercenary chiefs, who, from motives of fear or interest, served under the imperial standard, with the free-born warriors who started to arms at the voice of the king of Morven; if, in a word, we contemplated the untutored Caledonians, glowing with the warm virtues of nature, and the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery.

[Footnote 13: Ossian's Poems, vol. i. p. 175.]

[Footnote 14: That the Caracul of Ossian is the Caracalla of the Roman History, is, perhaps, the only point of British antiquity in which Mr. Macpherson and Mr. Whitaker are of the same opinion; and yet the opinion is not without difficulty. In the Caledonian war, the son of Severus was known only by the appellation of Antoninus, and it may seem strange that the Highland bard should describe him by a nickname, invented four years afterwards, scarcely used by the Romans till after the death of that emperor, and seldom employed by the most ancient historians. See Dion, l. lxxvii. p. 1317. Hist. August. p. 89 Aurel. Victor. Euseb. in Chron. ad ann. 214. Note: The historical authority of Macpherson's Ossian has not increased since Gibbon wrote. We may, indeed, consider it exploded. Mr. Whitaker, in a letter to Gibbon (Misc. Works, vol. ii. p. 100,) attempts, not very successfully, to weaken this objection of the

historian.--M.]

The declining health and last illness of Severus inflamed the wild ambition and black passions of Caracalla's soul. Impatient of any delay or division of empire, he attempted, more than once, to shorten the small remainder of his father's days, and endeavored, but without success, to excite a mutiny among the troops. [15] The old emperor had often censured the misguided lenity of Marcus, who, by a single act of justice, might have saved the Romans from the tyranny of his worthless son. Placed in the same situation, he experienced how easily the rigor of a judge dissolves away in the tenderness of a parent. He deliberated, he threatened, but he could not punish; and this last and only instance of mercy was more fatal to the empire than a long series of cruelty. [16] The disorder of his mind irritated the pains of his body; he wished impatiently for death, and hastened the instant of it by his impatience. He expired at York in the sixty-fifth year of his life, and in the eighteenth of a glorious and successful reign. In his last moments he recommended concord to his sons, and his sons to the army. The salutary advice never reached the heart, or even the understanding, of the impetuous youths; but the more obedient troops, mindful of their oath of allegiance, and of the authority of their deceased master, resisted the solicitations of Caracalla, and proclaimed both brothers emperors of Rome. The new princes soon left the Caledonians in peace, returned to the capital, celebrated their father's funeral with divine honors, and were cheerfully acknowledged as lawful sovereigns, by the senate, the people, and the provinces. Some preeminence of rank seems to have been

allowed to the elder brother; but they both administered the empire with equal and independent power. [17]

[Footnote 15: Dion, l. lxxvi. p. 1282. Hist. August. p. 71. Aurel. Victor.]

[Footnote 16: Dion, l. lxxvi. p. 1283. Hist. August. p. 89]

[Footnote 17: Dion, l. lxxvi. p. 1284. Herodian, l. iii. p. 135.]

Such a divided form of government would have proved a source of discord between the most affectionate brothers. It was impossible that it could long subsist between two implacable enemies, who neither desired nor could trust a reconciliation. It was visible that one only could reign, and that the other must fall; and each of them, judging of his rival's designs by his own, guarded his life with the most jealous vigilance from the repeated attacks of poison or the sword. Their rapid journey through Gaul and Italy, during which they never ate at the same table, or slept in the same house, displayed to the provinces the odious spectacle of fraternal discord. On their arrival at Rome, they immediately divided the vast extent of the imperial palace. [18] No communication was allowed between their apartments; the doors and passages were diligently fortified, and guards posted and relieved with the same strictness as in a besieged place. The emperors met only in public, in the presence of their afflicted mother; and each surrounded by a numerous train of armed followers. Even on these occasions of

ceremony, the dissimulation of courts could ill disguise the rancor of their hearts. [19]

[Footnote 18: Mr. Hume is justly surprised at a passage of Herodian, (l. iv. p. 139,) who, on this occasion, represents the Imperial palace as equal in extent to the rest of Rome. The whole region of the Palatine Mount, on which it was built, occupied, at most, a circumference of eleven or twelve thousand feet, (see the Notitia and Victor, in Nardini's Roma Antica.) But we should recollect that the opulent senators had almost surrounded the city with their extensive gardens and suburb palaces, the greatest part of which had been gradually confiscated by the emperors. If Geta resided in the gardens that bore his name on the Janiculum, and if Caracalla inhabited the gardens of Maecenas on the Esquiline, the rival brothers were separated from each other by the distance of several miles; and yet the intermediate space was filled by the Imperial gardens of Sallust, of Lucullus, of Agrippa, of Domitian, of Caius, &c., all skirting round the city, and all connected with each other, and with the palace, by bridges thrown over the Tiber and the streets. But this explanation of Herodian would require, though it ill deserves, a particular dissertation, illustrated by a map of ancient Rome. (Hume, Essay on Populousness of Ancient Nations.--M.)]

[Footnote 19: Herodian, l. iv. p. 139]

This latent civil war already distracted the whole government, when

a scheme was suggested that seemed of mutual benefit to the hostile brothers. It was proposed, that since it was impossible to reconcile their minds, they should separate their interest, and divide the empire between them. The conditions of the treaty were already drawn with some accuracy. It was agreed that Caracalla, as the elder brother should remain in possession of Europe and the western Africa; and that he should relinquish the sovereignty of Asia and Egypt to Geta, who might fix his residence at Alexandria or Antioch, cities little inferior to Rome itself in wealth and greatness; that numerous armies should be constantly encamped on either side of the Thracian Bosphorus, to guard the frontiers of the rival monarchies; and that the senators of European extraction should acknowledge the sovereign of Rome, whilst the natives of Asia followed the emperor of the East. The tears of the empress Julia interrupted the negotiation, the first idea of which had filled every Roman breast with surprise and indignation. The mighty mass of conquest was so intimately united by the hand of time and policy, that it required the most forcible violence to rend it asunder. The Romans had reason to dread, that the disjointed members would soon be reduced by a civil war under the dominion of one master; but if the separation was permanent, the division of the provinces must terminate in the dissolution of an empire whose unity had hitherto remained inviolate.

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[Footnote 20: Herodian, l. iv. p. 144.]

Had the treaty been carried into execution, the sovereign of Europe

might soon have been the conqueror of Asia; but Caracalla obtained an easier, though a more guilty, victory. He artfully listened to his mother's entreaties, and consented to meet his brother in her apartment, on terms of peace and reconciliation. In the midst of their conversation, some centurions, who had contrived to conceal themselves, rushed with drawn swords upon the unfortunate Geta. His distracted mother strove to protect him in her arms; but, in the unavailing struggle, she was wounded in the hand, and covered with the blood of her younger son, while she saw the elder animating and assisting [21] the fury of the assassins. As soon as the deed was perpetrated, Caracalla, with hasty steps, and horror in his countenance, ran towards the Praetorian camp, as his only refuge, and threw himself on the ground before the statues of the tutelar deities. [22] The soldiers attempted to raise and comfort him. In broken and disordered words he informed them of his imminent danger, and fortunate escape; insinuating that he had prevented the designs of his enemy, and declared his resolution to live and die with his faithful troops. Geta had been the favorite of the soldiers; but complaint was useless, revenge was dangerous, and they still revered the son of Severus. Their discontent died away in idle murmurs, and Caracalla soon convinced them of the justice of his cause, by distributing in one lavish donative the accumulated treasures of his father's reign. [23] The real sentiments of the soldiers alone were of importance to his power or safety. Their declaration in his favor commanded the dutiful professions of the senate. The obsequious assembly was always prepared to ratify the decision of fortune; [231] but as Caracalla wished to assuage the first emotions of public indignation,

the name of Geta was mentioned with decency, and he received the funeral honors of a Roman emperor. [24] Posterity, in pity to his misfortune, has cast a veil over his vices. We consider that young prince as the innocent victim of his brother's ambition, without recollecting that he himself wanted power, rather than inclination, to consummate the same attempts of revenge and murder. [241]

[Footnote 21: Caracalla consecrated, in the temple of Serapis, the sword with which, as he boasted, he had slain his brother Geta. Dion, l. lxxvii p. 1307.]

[Footnote 22: Herodian, l. iv. p. 147. In every Roman camp there was a small chapel near the head-quarters, in which the statues of the tutelary deities were preserved and adored; and we may remark that the eagles, and other military ensigns, were in the first rank of these deities; an excellent institution, which confirmed discipline by the sanction of religion. See Lipsius de Militia Romana, iv. 5, v. 2.]

[Footnote 23: Herodian, l. iv. p. 148. Dion, l. lxxvii. p. 1289.]

[Footnote 231: The account of this transaction, in a new passage of Dion, varies in some degree from this statement. It adds that the next morning, in the senate, Antoninus requested their indulgence, not because he had killed his brother, but because he was hoarse, and could not address them. Mai. Fragm. p. 228.--M.]

[Footnote 24: Geta was placed among the gods. *Sit divus, dum non sit vivus* said his brother. *Hist. August.* p. 91. Some marks of Geta's consecration are still found upon medals.]

[Footnote 241: The favorable judgment which history has given of Geta is not founded solely on a feeling of pity; it is supported by the testimony of contemporary historians: he was too fond of the pleasures of the table, and showed great mistrust of his brother; but he was humane, well instructed; he often endeavored to mitigate the rigorous decrees of Severus and Caracalla. *Herod iv. 3. Spartian in Geta.--W.*]

The crime went not unpunished. Neither business, nor pleasure, nor flattery, could defend Caracalla from the stings of a guilty conscience; and he confessed, in the anguish of a tortured mind, that his disordered fancy often beheld the angry forms of his father and his brother rising into life, to threaten and upbraid him. [25] The consciousness of his crime should have induced him to convince mankind, by the virtues of his reign, that the bloody deed had been the involuntary effect of fatal necessity. But the repentance of Caracalla only prompted him to remove from the world whatever could remind him of his guilt, or recall the memory of his murdered brother. On his return from the senate to the palace, he found his mother in the company of several noble matrons, weeping over the untimely fate of her younger son. The jealous emperor threatened them with instant death; the sentence was executed against Fadilla, the last remaining daughter of the emperor Marcus; [251] and even the afflicted Julia was obliged to silence her lamentations, to

suppress her sighs, and to receive the assassin with smiles of joy and approbation. It was computed that, under the vague appellation of the friends of Geta, above twenty thousand persons of both sexes suffered death. His guards and freedmen, the ministers of his serious business, and the companions of his looser hours, those who by his interest had been promoted to any commands in the army or provinces, with the long connected chain of their dependants, were included in the proscription; which endeavored to reach every one who had maintained the smallest correspondence with Geta, who lamented his death, or who even mentioned his name. [26] Helvius Pertinax, son to the prince of that name, lost his life by an unseasonable witticism. [27] It was a sufficient crime of Thræsea Priscus to be descended from a family in which the love of liberty seemed an hereditary quality. [28] The particular causes of calumny and suspicion were at length exhausted; and when a senator was accused of being a secret enemy to the government, the emperor was satisfied with the general proof that he was a man of property and virtue. From this well-grounded principle he frequently drew the most bloody inferences. [281]

[Footnote 25: Dion, l. lxxvii. p. 1307]

[Footnote 251: The most valuable paragraph of dion, which the industry of M. Manas recovered, relates to this daughter of Marcus, executed by Caracalla. Her name, as appears from Fronto, as well as from Dion, was Cornificia. When commanded to choose the kind of death she was to suffer, she burst into womanish tears; but remembering her father

Marcus, she thus spoke:--"O my hapless soul, (... animula,) now imprisoned in the body, burst forth! be free! show them, however reluctant to believe it, that thou art the daughter of Marcus." She then laid aside all her ornaments, and preparing herself for death, ordered her veins to be opened. Mai. Fragm. Vatican ii p. 220.--M.]

[Footnote 26: Dion, l. lxxvii. p. 1290. Herodian, l. iv. p. 150. Dion (p. 2298) says, that the comic poets no longer durst employ the name of Geta in their plays, and that the estates of those who mentioned it in their testaments were confiscated.]

[Footnote 27: Caracalla had assumed the names of several conquered nations; Pertinax observed, that the name of Geticus (he had obtained some advantage over the Goths, or Getae) would be a proper addition to Parthicus, Alemannicus, &c. Hist. August. p. 89.]

[Footnote 28: Dion, l. lxxvii. p. 1291. He was probably descended from Helvidius Priscus, and Thrasea Paetus, those patriots, whose firm, but useless and unseasonable, virtue has been immortalized by Tacitus. Note: M. Guizot is indignant at this "cold" observation of Gibbon on the noble character of Thrasea; but he admits that his virtue was useless to the public, and unseasonable amidst the vices of his age.--M.]

[Footnote 281: Caracalla reproached all those who demanded no favors of him. "It is clear that if you make me no requests, you do not trust me; if you do not trust me, you suspect me; if you suspect me, you fear me;

if you fear me, you hate me." And forthwith he condemned them as conspirators, a good specimen of the sorites in a tyrant's logic. See Fragn. Vatican p.--M.]