

Chapter XII: Reigns Of Tacitus, Probus, Carus And His Sons.--Part I.

Conduct Of The Army And Senate After The Death Of Aurelian.

--Reigns Of Tacitus, Probus, Carus, And His Sons.

Such was the unhappy condition of the Roman emperors, that, whatever might be their conduct, their fate was commonly the same. A life of pleasure or virtue, of severity or mildness, of indolence or glory, alike led to an untimely grave; and almost every reign is closed by the same disgusting repetition of treason and murder. The death of Aurelian, however, is remarkable by its extraordinary consequences. The legions admired, lamented, and revenged their victorious chief. The artifice of his perfidious secretary was discovered and punished.

The deluded conspirators attended the funeral of their injured sovereign, with sincere or well-feigned contrition, and submitted to the unanimous resolution of the military order, which was signified by the following epistle: "The brave and fortunate armies to the senate and people of Rome.--The crime of one man, and the error of many, have deprived us of the late emperor Aurelian. May it please you, venerable lords and fathers! to place him in the number of the gods, and to appoint a successor whom your judgment shall declare worthy of the Imperial purple! None of those whose guilt or misfortune have contributed to our loss, shall ever reign over us." [1] The Roman senators heard, without surprise, that another emperor had been

assassinated in his camp; they secretly rejoiced in the fall of Aurelian; and, besides the recent notoriety of the facts, constantly draws his materials from the Journals of the Senate, and the but the modest and dutiful address of the legions, when it was communicated in full assembly by the consul, diffused the most pleasing astonishment. Such honors as fear and perhaps esteem could extort, they liberally poured forth on the memory of their deceased sovereign. Such acknowledgments as gratitude could inspire, they returned to the faithful armies of the republic, who entertained so just a sense of the legal authority of the senate in the choice of an emperor. Yet, notwithstanding this flattering appeal, the most prudent of the assembly declined exposing their safety and dignity to the caprice of an armed multitude. The strength of the legions was, indeed, a pledge of their sincerity, since those who may command are seldom reduced to the necessity of dissembling; but could it naturally be expected, that a hasty repentance would correct the inveterate habits of fourscore years? Should the soldiers relapse into their accustomed seditions, their insolence might disgrace the majesty of the senate, and prove fatal to the object of its choice. Motives like these dictated a decree, by which the election of a new emperor was referred to the suffrage of the military order.

[Footnote 1: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 222. Aurelius Victor mentions a formal deputation from the troops to the senate.]

The contention that ensued is one of the best attested, but most

improbable events in the history of mankind. [2] The troops, as if satiated with the exercise of power, again conjured the senate to invest one of its own body with the Imperial purple. The senate still persisted in its refusal; the army in its request. The reciprocal offer was pressed and rejected at least three times, and, whilst the obstinate modesty of either party was resolved to receive a master from the hands of the other, eight months insensibly elapsed; an amazing period of tranquil anarchy, during which the Roman world remained without a sovereign, without a usurper, and without a sedition. [201] The generals and magistrates appointed by Aurelian continued to execute their ordinary functions; and it is observed, that a proconsul of Asia was the only considerable person removed from his office in the whole course of the interregnum.

[Footnote 2: Vopiscus, our principal authority, wrote at Rome, sixteen years only after the death of Aurelian; and, besides the recent notoriety of the facts, constantly draws his materials from the Journals of the Senate, and the original papers of the Ulpian library. Zosimus and Zonaras appear as ignorant of this transaction as they were in general of the Roman constitution.]

[Footnote 201: The interregnum could not be more than seven months; Aurelian was assassinated in the middle of March, the year of Rome 1028. Tacitus was elected the 25th September in the same year.--G.]

An event somewhat similar, but much less authentic, is supposed to have

happened after the death of Romulus, who, in his life and character, bore some affinity with Aurelian. The throne was vacant during twelve months, till the election of a Sabine philosopher, and the public peace was guarded in the same manner, by the union of the several orders of the state. But, in the time of Numa and Romulus, the arms of the people were controlled by the authority of the Patricians; and the balance of freedom was easily preserved in a small and virtuous community. [3] The decline of the Roman state, far different from its infancy, was attended with every circumstance that could banish from an interregnum the prospect of obedience and harmony: an immense and tumultuous capital, a wide extent of empire, the servile equality of despotism, an army of four hundred thousand mercenaries, and the experience of frequent revolutions. Yet, notwithstanding all these temptations, the discipline and memory of Aurelian still restrained the seditious temper of the troops, as well as the fatal ambition of their leaders. The flower of the legions maintained their stations on the banks of the Bosphorus, and the Imperial standard awed the less powerful camps of Rome and of the provinces. A generous though transient enthusiasm seemed to animate the military order; and we may hope that a few real patriots cultivated the returning friendship of the army and the senate, as the only expedient capable of restoring the republic to its ancient beauty and vigor.

[Footnote 3: Liv. i. 17 Dionys. Halicarn. l. ii. p. 115. Plutarch in Numa, p. 60. The first of these writers relates the story like an orator, the second like a lawyer, and the third like a moralist, and none of them probably without some intermixture of fable.]

On the twenty-fifth of September, near eight months after the murder of Aurelian, the consul convoked an assembly of the senate, and reported the doubtful and dangerous situation of the empire. He slightly insinuated, that the precarious loyalty of the soldiers depended on the chance of every hour, and of every accident; but he represented, with the most convincing eloquence, the various dangers that might attend any further delay in the choice of an emperor. Intelligence, he said, was already received, that the Germans had passed the Rhine, and occupied some of the strongest and most opulent cities of Gaul. The ambition of the Persian king kept the East in perpetual alarms; Egypt, Africa, and Illyricum, were exposed to foreign and domestic arms, and the levity of Syria would prefer even a female sceptre to the sanctity of the Roman laws. The consul, then addressing himself to Tacitus, the first of the senators, [4] required his opinion on the important subject of a proper candidate for the vacant throne.

[Footnote 4: Vopiscus (in Hist. August p. 227) calls him "primae sententia consularis;" and soon afterwards Princeps senatus. It is natural to suppose, that the monarchs of Rome, disdaining that humble title, resigned it to the most ancient of the senators.]

If we can prefer personal merit to accidental greatness, we shall esteem the birth of Tacitus more truly noble than that of kings. He claimed his descent from the philosophic historian, whose writings will instruct the last generations of mankind. [5] The senator Tacitus was then

seventy-five years of age. [6] The long period of his innocent life was adorned with wealth and honors. He had twice been invested with the consular dignity, [7] and enjoyed with elegance and sobriety his ample patrimony of between two and three millions sterling. [8] The experience of so many princes, whom he had esteemed or endured, from the vain follies of Elagabalus to the useful rigor of Aurelian, taught him to form a just estimate of the duties, the dangers, and the temptations of their sublime station. From the assiduous study of his immortal ancestor, he derived the knowledge of the Roman constitution, and of human nature. [9] The voice of the people had already named Tacitus as the citizen the most worthy of empire. The ungrateful rumor reached his ears, and induced him to seek the retirement of one of his villas in Campania. He had passed two months in the delightful privacy of Baiae, when he reluctantly obeyed the summons of the consul to resume his honorable place in the senate, and to assist the republic with his counsels on this important occasion.

[Footnote 5: The only objection to this genealogy is, that the historian was named Cornelius, the emperor, Claudius. But under the lower empire, surnames were extremely various and uncertain.]

[Footnote 6: Zonaras, l. xii. p. 637. The Alexandrian Chronicle, by an obvious mistake, transfers that age to Aurelian.]

[Footnote 7: In the year 273, he was ordinary consul. But he must have been Suffectus many years before, and most probably under Valerian.]

[Footnote 8: Bis millies octingenties. Vopiscus in Hist. August p. 229.

This sum, according to the old standard, was equivalent to eight hundred and forty thousand Roman pounds of silver, each of the value of three pounds sterling. But in the age of Tacitus, the coin had lost much of its weight and purity.]

[Footnote 9: After his accession, he gave orders that ten copies of the historian should be annually transcribed and placed in the public libraries. The Roman libraries have long since perished, and the most valuable part of Tacitus was preserved in a single Ms., and discovered in a monastery of Westphalia. See Bayle, Dictionnaire, Art. Tacite, and Lipsius ad Annal. ii. 9.]

He arose to speak, when from every quarter of the house, he was saluted with the names of Augustus and emperor. "Tacitus Augustus, the gods preserve thee! we choose thee for our sovereign; to thy care we intrust the republic and the world. Accept the empire from the authority of the senate. It is due to thy rank, to thy conduct, to thy manners." As soon as the tumult of acclamations subsided, Tacitus attempted to decline the dangerous honor, and to express his wonder, that they should elect his age and infirmities to succeed the martial vigor of Aurelian. "Are these limbs, conscript fathers! fitted to sustain the weight of armor, or to practise the exercises of the camp? The variety of climates, and the hardships of a military life, would soon oppress a feeble constitution, which subsists only by the most tender management. My exhausted strength

scarcely enables me to discharge the duty of a senator; how insufficient would it prove to the arduous labors of war and government! Can you hope, that the legions will respect a weak old man, whose days have been spent in the shade of peace and retirement? Can you desire that I should ever find reason to regret the favorable opinion of the senate?" [10]

[Footnote 10: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 227.]

The reluctance of Tacitus (and it might possibly be sincere) was encountered by the affectionate obstinacy of the senate. Five hundred voices repeated at once, in eloquent confusion, that the greatest of the Roman princes, Numa, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, had ascended the throne in a very advanced season of life; that the mind, not the body, a sovereign, not a soldier, was the object of their choice; and that they expected from him no more than to guide by his wisdom the valor of the legions. These pressing though tumultuary instances were seconded by a more regular oration of Metius Falconius, the next on the consular bench to Tacitus himself. He reminded the assembly of the evils which Rome had endured from the vices of headstrong and capricious youths, congratulated them on the election of a virtuous and experienced senator, and, with a manly, though perhaps a selfish, freedom, exhorted Tacitus to remember the reasons of his elevation, and to seek a successor, not in his own family, but in the republic. The speech of Falconius was enforced by a general acclamation. The emperor elect submitted to the authority of his country, and received the voluntary homage of his equals. The judgment of the senate was confirmed by the



consent of the Roman people, and of the Praetorian guards. [11]

[Footnote 11: Hist. August. p. 228. Tacitus addressed the Praetorians by the appellation of sanctissimi milites, and the people by that of sacratissim. Quirites.]

The administration of Tacitus was not unworthy of his life and principles. A grateful servant of the senate, he considered that national council as the author, and himself as the subject, of the laws. [12] He studied to heal the wounds which Imperial pride, civil discord, and military violence, had inflicted on the constitution, and to restore, at least, the image of the ancient republic, as it had been preserved by the policy of Augustus, and the virtues of Trajan and the Antonines. It may not be useless to recapitulate some of the most important prerogatives which the senate appeared to have regained by the election of Tacitus. [13] 1. To invest one of their body, under the title of emperor, with the general command of the armies, and the government of the frontier provinces. 2. To determine the list, or, as it was then styled, the College of Consuls. They were twelve in number, who, in successive pairs, each, during the space of two months, filled the year, and represented the dignity of that ancient office. The authority of the senate, in the nomination of the consuls, was exercised with such independent freedom, that no regard was paid to an irregular request of the emperor in favor of his brother Florianus. "The senate," exclaimed Tacitus, with the honest transport of a patriot, "understand the character of a prince whom they have chosen." 3. To appoint the

proconsuls and presidents of the provinces, and to confer on all the magistrates their civil jurisdiction. 4. To receive appeals through the intermediate office of the praefect of the city from all the tribunals of the empire. 5. To give force and validity, by their decrees, to such as they should approve of the emperor's edicts. 6. To these several branches of authority we may add some inspection over the finances, since, even in the stern reign of Aurelian, it was in their power to divert a part of the revenue from the public service. [14]

[Footnote 12: In his manumissions he never exceeded the number of a hundred, as limited by the Caninian law, which was enacted under Augustus, and at length repealed by Justinian. See Casaubon ad locum Vopisci.]

[Footnote 13: See the lives of Tacitus, Florianus, and Probus, in the Augustan History; we may be well assured, that whatever the soldier gave the senator had already given.]

[Footnote 14: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 216. The passage is perfectly clear, both Casaubon and Salmasius wish to correct it.]

Circular epistles were sent, without delay, to all the principal cities of the empire, Treves, Milan, Aquileia, Thessalonica, Corinth, Athens, Antioch, Alexandria, and Carthage, to claim their obedience, and to inform them of the happy revolution, which had restored the Roman senate to its ancient dignity. Two of these epistles are still extant.

We likewise possess two very singular fragments of the private correspondence of the senators on this occasion. They discover the most excessive joy, and the most unbounded hopes. "Cast away your indolence," it is thus that one of the senators addresses his friend, "emerge from your retirements of Baiae and Puteoli. Give yourself to the city, to the senate. Rome flourishes, the whole republic flourishes. Thanks to the Roman army, to an army truly Roman; at length we have recovered our just authority, the end of all our desires. We hear appeals, we appoint proconsuls, we create emperors; perhaps too we may restrain them--to the wise a word is sufficient." [15] These lofty expectations were, however, soon disappointed; nor, indeed, was it possible that the armies and the provinces should long obey the luxurious and unwarlike nobles of Rome. On the slightest touch, the unsupported fabric of their pride and power fell to the ground. The expiring senate displayed a sudden lustre, blazed for a moment and was extinguished forever.

[Footnote 15: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 230, 232, 233. The senators celebrated the happy restoration with hecatombs and public rejoicings.]

All that had yet passed at Rome was no more than a theatrical representation, unless it was ratified by the more substantial power of the legions. Leaving the senators to enjoy their dream of freedom and ambition, Tacitus proceeded to the Thracian camp, and was there, by the Praetorian praefect, presented to the assembled troops, as the prince whom they themselves had demanded, and whom the senate had bestowed. As soon as the praefect was silent, the emperor addressed himself to the

soldiers with eloquence and propriety. He gratified their avarice by a liberal distribution of treasure, under the names of pay and donative. He engaged their esteem by a spirited declaration, that although his age might disable him from the performance of military exploits, his counsels should never be unworthy of a Roman general, the successor of the brave Aurelian. [16]

[Footnote 16: Hist. August. p. 228.]

Whilst the deceased emperor was making preparations for a second expedition into the East, he had negotiated with the Alani, [161] a Scythian people, who pitched their tents in the neighborhood of the Lake Moeotis. Those barbarians, allured by presents and subsidies, had promised to invade Persia with a numerous body of light cavalry. They were faithful to their engagements; but when they arrived on the Roman frontier, Aurelian was already dead, the design of the Persian war was at least suspended, and the generals, who, during the interregnum, exercised a doubtful authority, were unprepared either to receive or to oppose them. Provoked by such treatment, which they considered as trifling and perfidious, the Alani had recourse to their own valor for their payment and revenge; and as they moved with the usual swiftness of Tartars, they had soon spread themselves over the provinces of Pontus, Cappadocia, Cilicia, and Galatia. The legions, who from the opposite shores of the Bosphorus could almost distinguish the flames of the cities and villages, impatiently urged their general to lead them against the invaders. The conduct of Tacitus was suitable to his age and

station. He convinced the barbarians of the faith, as well as the power, of the empire. Great numbers of the Alani, appeased by the punctual discharge of the engagements which Aurelian had contracted with them, relinquished their booty and captives, and quietly retreated to their own deserts, beyond the Phasis. Against the remainder, who refused peace, the Roman emperor waged, in person, a successful war. Seconded by an army of brave and experienced veterans, in a few weeks he delivered the provinces of Asia from the terror of the Scythian invasion. [17]

[Footnote 161: On the Alani, see ch. xxvi. note 55.--M.]

[Footnote 17: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 230. Zosimus, l. i. p. 57. Zonaras, l. xii. p. 637. Two passages in the life of Probus (p. 236, 238) convince me, that these Scythian invaders of Pontus were Alani. If we may believe Zosimus, (l. i. p. 58,) Florianus pursued them as far as the Cimmerian Bosphorus. But he had scarcely time for so long and difficult an expedition.]

But the glory and life of Tacitus were of short duration. Transported, in the depth of winter, from the soft retirement of Campania to the foot of Mount Caucasus, he sunk under the unaccustomed hardships of a military life. The fatigues of the body were aggravated by the cares of the mind. For a while, the angry and selfish passions of the soldiers had been suspended by the enthusiasm of public virtue. They soon broke out with redoubled violence, and raged in the camp, and even in the tent of the aged emperor. His mild and amiable character served only to

inspire contempt, and he was incessantly tormented with factions which he could not assuage, and by demands which it was impossible to satisfy. Whatever flattering expectations he had conceived of reconciling the public disorders, Tacitus soon was convinced that the licentiousness of the army disdained the feeble restraint of laws, and his last hour was hastened by anguish and disappointment. It may be doubtful whether the soldiers imbrued their hands in the blood of this innocent prince.

[18] It is certain that their insolences was the cause of his death. He expired at Tyana in Cappadocia, after a reign of only six months and about twenty days. [19]

[Footnote 18: Eutropius and Aurelius Victor only say that he died; Victor Junior adds, that it was of a fever. Zosimus and Zonaras affirm, that he was killed by the soldiers. Vopiscus mentions both accounts, and seems to hesitate. Yet surely these jarring opinions are easily reconciled.]

[Footnote 19: According to the two Victors, he reigned exactly two hundred days.]

The eyes of Tacitus were scarcely closed, before his brother Florianus showed himself unworthy to reign, by the hasty usurpation of the purple, without expecting the approbation of the senate. The reverence for the Roman constitution, which yet influenced the camp and the provinces, was sufficiently strong to dispose them to censure, but not to provoke them to oppose, the precipitate ambition of Florianus. The discontent would

have evaporated in idle murmurs, had not the general of the East, the heroic Probus, boldly declared himself the avenger of the senate.

The contest, however, was still unequal; nor could the most able leader, at the head of the effeminate troops of Egypt and Syria, encounter, with any hopes of victory, the legions of Europe, whose irresistible strength appeared to support the brother of Tacitus. But the fortune and activity of Probus triumphed over every obstacle. The hardy veterans of his rival, accustomed to cold climates, sickened and consumed away in the sultry heats of Cilicia, where the summer proved remarkably unwholesome. Their numbers were diminished by frequent desertion; the passes of the mountains were feebly defended; Tarsus opened its gates; and the soldiers of Florianus, when they had permitted him to enjoy the Imperial title about three months, delivered the empire from civil war by the easy sacrifice of a prince whom they despised. [20]

[Footnote 20: Hist. August, p. 231. Zosimus, l. i. p. 58, 59. Zonaras, l. xii. p. 637. Aurelius Victor says, that Probus assumed the empire in Illyricum; an opinion which (though adopted by a very learned man) would throw that period of history into inextricable confusion.]

The perpetual revolutions of the throne had so perfectly erased every notion of hereditary title, that the family of an unfortunate emperor was incapable of exciting the jealousy of his successors. The children of Tacitus and Florianus were permitted to descend into a private station, and to mingle with the general mass of the people. Their

poverty indeed became an additional safeguard to their innocence. When Tacitus was elected by the senate, he resigned his ample patrimony to the public service; [21] an act of generosity specious in appearance, but which evidently disclosed his intention of transmitting the empire to his descendants. The only consolation of their fallen state was the remembrance of transient greatness, and a distant hope, the child of a flattering prophecy, that at the end of a thousand years, a monarch of the race of Tacitus should arise, the protector of the senate, the restorer of Rome, and the conqueror of the whole earth. [22]

[Footnote 21: Hist. August. p. 229]

[Footnote 22: He was to send judges to the Parthians, Persians, and Sarmatians, a president to Taprobani, and a proconsul to the Roman island, (supposed by Casaubon and Salmasius to mean Britain.) Such a history as mine (says Vopiscus with proper modesty) will not subsist a thousand years, to expose or justify the prediction.]

The peasants of Illyricum, who had already given Claudius and Aurelian to the sinking empire, had an equal right to glory in the elevation of Probus. [23] Above twenty years before, the emperor Valerian, with his usual penetration, had discovered the rising merit of the young soldier, on whom he conferred the rank of tribune, long before the age prescribed by the military regulations. The tribune soon justified his choice, by a victory over a great body of Sarmatians, in which he saved the life of a near relation of Valerian; and deserved to receive from the emperor's



hand the collars, bracelets, spears, and banners, the mural and the civic crown, and all the honorable rewards reserved by ancient Rome for successful valor. The third, and afterwards the tenth, legion were intrusted to the command of Probus, who, in every step of his promotion, showed himself superior to the station which he filled. Africa and Pontus, the Rhine, the Danube, the Euphrates, and the Nile, by turns afforded him the most splendid occasions of displaying his personal prowess and his conduct in war. Aurelian was indebted for the honest courage with which he often checked the cruelty of his master.

Tacitus, who desired by the abilities of his generals to supply his own deficiency of military talents, named him commander-in-chief of all the eastern provinces, with five times the usual salary, the promise of the consulship, and the hope of a triumph. When Probus ascended the Imperial throne, he was about forty-four years of age; [24] in the full possession of his fame, of the love of the army, and of a mature vigor of mind and body.

[Footnote 23: For the private life of Probus, see Vopiscus in Hist. August p. 234--237]

[Footnote 24: According to the Alexandrian chronicle, he was fifty at the time of his death.]

His acknowledge merit, and the success of his arms against Florianus, left him without an enemy or a competitor. Yet, if we may credit his own professions, very far from being desirous of the empire, he had accepted

it with the most sincere reluctance. "But it is no longer in my power," says Probus, in a private letter, "to lay down a title so full of envy and of danger. I must continue to personate the character which the soldiers have imposed upon me." [25] His dutiful address to the senate displayed the sentiments, or at least the language, of a Roman patriot: "When you elected one of your order, conscript fathers! to succeed the emperor Aurelian, you acted in a manner suitable to your justice and wisdom. For you are the legal sovereigns of the world, and the power which you derive from your ancestors will descend to your posterity. Happy would it have been, if Florianus, instead of usurping the purple of his brother, like a private inheritance, had expected what your majesty might determine, either in his favor, or in that of other person. The prudent soldiers have punished his rashness. To me they have offered the title of Augustus. But I submit to your clemency my pretensions and my merits." [26] When this respectful epistle was read by the consul, the senators were unable to disguise their satisfaction, that Probus should condescend thus numbly to solicit a sceptre which he already possessed. They celebrated with the warmest gratitude his virtues, his exploits, and above all his moderation. A decree immediately passed, without a dissenting voice, to ratify the election of the eastern armies, and to confer on their chief all the several branches of the Imperial dignity: the names of Caesar and Augustus, the title of Father of his country, the right of making in the same day three motions in the senate, [27] the office of Pontifex, Maximus, the tribunitian power, and the proconsular command; a mode of investiture, which, though it seemed to multiply the authority of the emperor,

expressed the constitution of the ancient republic. The reign of Probus corresponded with this fair beginning. The senate was permitted to direct the civil administration of the empire. Their faithful general asserted the honor of the Roman arms, and often laid at their feet crowns of gold and barbaric trophies, the fruits of his numerous victories. [28] Yet, whilst he gratified their vanity, he must secretly have despised their indolence and weakness. Though it was every moment in their power to repeal the disgraceful edict of Gallienus, the proud successors of the Scipios patiently acquiesced in their exclusion from all military employments. They soon experienced, that those who refuse the sword must renounce the sceptre.

[Footnote 25: This letter was addressed to the Praetorian praefect, whom (on condition of his good behavior) he promised to continue in his great office. See Hist. August. p. 237.]

[Footnote 26: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 237. The date of the letter is assuredly faulty. Instead of Nen. Februar. we may read Non August.]

[Footnote 27: Hist. August. p. 238. It is odd that the senate should treat Probus less favorably than Marcus Antoninus. That prince had received, even before the death of Pius, Jus quintoe relationis. See Capitolin. in Hist. August. p. 24.]

[Footnote 28: See the dutiful letter of Probus to the senate, after his German victories. Hist. August. p. 239.]