

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

The vacancy of the throne was not productive of any disturbance. The ambition of the aspiring generals was checked by their natural fears, and young Numerian, with his absent brother Carinus, were unanimously acknowledged as Roman emperors.

The public expected that the successor of Carus would pursue his father's footsteps, and, without allowing the Persians to recover from their consternation, would advance sword in hand to the palaces of Susa and Ecbatana. [77] But the legions, however strong in numbers and discipline, were dismayed by the most abject superstition.

Notwithstanding all the arts that were practised to disguise the manner of the late emperor's death, it was found impossible to remove the opinion of the multitude, and the power of opinion is irresistible.

Places or persons struck with lightning were considered by the ancients with pious horror, as singularly devoted to the wrath of Heaven. [78]

An oracle was remembered, which marked the River Tigris as the fatal boundary of the Roman arms. The troops, terrified with the fate of Carus and with their own danger, called aloud on young Numerian to obey the will of the gods, and to lead them away from this inauspicious scene of war. The feeble emperor was unable to subdue their obstinate prejudice, and the Persians wondered at the unexpected retreat of a victorious enemy. [79]

[Footnote 77: See Nemesian. Cynegeticon, v. 71, &c.]

[Footnote 78: See Festus and his commentators on the word Scribonianum. Places struck by lightning were surrounded with a wall; things were buried with mysterious ceremony.]

[Footnote 79: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 250. Aurelius Victor seems to believe the prediction, and to approve the retreat.]

The intelligence of the mysterious fate of the late emperor was soon carried from the frontiers of Persia to Rome; and the senate, as well as the provinces, congratulated the accession of the sons of Carus. These fortunate youths were strangers, however, to that conscious superiority, either of birth or of merit, which can alone render the possession of a throne easy, and as it were natural. Born and educated in a private station, the election of their father raised them at once to the rank of princes; and his death, which happened about sixteen months afterwards, left them the unexpected legacy of a vast empire. To sustain with temper this rapid elevation, an uncommon share of virtue and prudence was requisite; and Carinus, the elder of the brothers, was more than commonly deficient in those qualities. In the Gallic war he discovered some degree of personal courage; [80] but from the moment of his arrival at Rome, he abandoned himself to the luxury of the capital, and to the abuse of his fortune. He was soft, yet cruel; devoted to pleasure, but destitute of taste; and though exquisitely susceptible of vanity, indifferent to the public esteem. In the course of a few months, he successively married and divorced nine wives, most of whom he left

pregnant; and notwithstanding this legal inconstancy, found time to indulge such a variety of irregular appetites, as brought dishonor on himself and on the noblest houses of Rome. He beheld with inveterate hatred all those who might remember his former obscurity, or censure his present conduct. He banished, or put to death, the friends and counsellors whom his father had placed about him, to guide his inexperienced youth; and he persecuted with the meanest revenge his school-fellows and companions who had not sufficiently respected the latent majesty of the emperor.

With the senators, Carinus affected a lofty and regal demeanor, frequently declaring, that he designed to distribute their estates among the populace of Rome. From the dregs of that populace he selected his favorites, and even his ministers. The palace, and even the Imperial table, were filled with singers, dancers, prostitutes, and all the various retinue of vice and folly. One of his doorkeepers [81] he intrusted with the government of the city. In the room of the Praetorian praefect, whom he put to death, Carinus substituted one of the ministers of his looser pleasures. Another, who possessed the same, or even a more infamous, title to favor, was invested with the consulship. A confidential secretary, who had acquired uncommon skill in the art of forgery, delivered the indolent emperor, with his own consent from the irksome duty of signing his name.

[Footnote 80: Nemesian. Cynegeticon, v 69. He was a contemporary, but a poet.]

[Footnote 81: Cancellarius. This word, so humble in its origin, has, by a singular fortune, risen into the title of the first great office of state in the monarchies of Europe. See Casaubon and Salmasius, ad Hist. August, p. 253.]

When the emperor Carus undertook the Persian war, he was induced, by motives of affection as well as policy, to secure the fortunes of his family, by leaving in the hands of his eldest son the armies and provinces of the West. The intelligence which he soon received of the conduct of Carinus filled him with shame and regret; nor had he concealed his resolution of satisfying the republic by a severe act of justice, and of adopting, in the place of an unworthy son, the brave and virtuous Constantius, who at that time was governor of Dalmatia. But the elevation of Constantius was for a while deferred; and as soon as the father's death had released Carinus from the control of fear or decency, he displayed to the Romans the extravagancies of Elagabalus, aggravated by the cruelty of Domitian. [82]

[Footnote 82: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 253, 254. Eutropius, x. 19. Vic to Junior. The reign of Diocletian indeed was so long and prosperous, that it must have been very unfavorable to the reputation of Carinus.]

The only merit of the administration of Carinus that history could record, or poetry celebrate, was the uncommon splendor with which, in

his own and his brother's name, he exhibited the Roman games of the theatre, the circus, and the amphitheatre. More than twenty years afterwards, when the courtiers of Diocletian represented to their frugal sovereign the fame and popularity of his munificent predecessor, he acknowledged that the reign of Carinus had indeed been a reign of pleasure. [83] But this vain prodigality, which the prudence of Diocletian might justly despise, was enjoyed with surprise and transport by the Roman people. The oldest of the citizens, recollecting the spectacles of former days, the triumphal pomp of Probus or Aurelian, and the secular games of the emperor Philip, acknowledged that they were all surpassed by the superior magnificence of Carinus. [84]

[Footnote 83: Vopiscus in *Hist. August.* p. 254. He calls him Carus, but the sense is sufficiently obvious, and the words were often confounded.]

[Footnote 84: See Calphurnius, *Eclog.* vii. 43. We may observe, that the spectacles of Probus were still recent, and that the poet is seconded by the historian.]

The spectacles of Carinus may therefore be best illustrated by the observation of some particulars, which history has condescended to relate concerning those of his predecessors. If we confine ourselves solely to the hunting of wild beasts, however we may censure the vanity of the design or the cruelty of the execution, we are obliged to confess that neither before nor since the time of the Romans so much art and

expense have ever been lavished for the amusement of the people. [85] By the order of Probus, a great quantity of large trees, torn up by the roots, were transplanted into the midst of the circus. The spacious and shady forest was immediately filled with a thousand ostriches, a thousand stags, a thousand fallow deer, and a thousand wild boars; and all this variety of game was abandoned to the riotous impetuosity of the multitude. The tragedy of the succeeding day consisted in the massacre of a hundred lions, an equal number of lionesses, two hundred leopards, and three hundred bears. [86] The collection prepared by the younger Gordian for his triumph, and which his successor exhibited in the secular games, was less remarkable by the number than by the singularity of the animals. Twenty zebras displayed their elegant forms and variegated beauty to the eyes of the Roman people. [87] Ten elks, and as many camelopards, the loftiest and most harmless creatures that wander over the plains of Sarmatia and Aethiopia, were contrasted with thirty African hyaenas and ten Indian tigers, the most implacable savages of the torrid zone. The unoffending strength with which Nature has endowed the greater quadrupeds was admired in the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus of the Nile, [88] and a majestic troop of thirty-two elephants. [89] While the populace gazed with stupid wonder on the splendid show, the naturalist might indeed observe the figure and properties of so many different species, transported from every part of the ancient world into the amphitheatre of Rome. But this accidental benefit, which science might derive from folly, is surely insufficient to justify such a wanton abuse of the public riches. There occurs, however, a single instance in the first Punic war, in which the senate wisely connected this amusement

of the multitude with the interest of the state. A considerable number of elephants, taken in the defeat of the Carthaginian army, were driven through the circus by a few slaves, armed only with blunt javelins. [90] The useful spectacle served to impress the Roman soldier with a just contempt for those unwieldy animals; and he no longer dreaded to encounter them in the ranks of war.

[Footnote 85: The philosopher Montaigne (*Essais*, l. iii. 6) gives a very just and lively view of Roman magnificence in these spectacles.]

[Footnote 86: Vopiscus in *Hist. August.* p. 240.]

[Footnote 87: They are called Onagri; but the number is too inconsiderable for mere wild asses. Cuper (*de Elephantis Exercitat.* ii. 7) has proved from Oppian, Dion, and an anonymous Greek, that zebras had been seen at Rome. They were brought from some island of the ocean, perhaps Madagascar.]

[Footnote 88: Carinus gave a hippopotamus, (see Calphurn. *Eclog.* vi. 66.) In the latter spectacles, I do not recollect any crocodiles, of which Augustus once exhibited thirty-six. Dion Cassius, l. lv. p. 781.]

[Footnote 89: Capitolin. in *Hist. August.* p. 164, 165. We are not acquainted with the animals which he calls archeleontes; some read argoleontes others agrioleontes: both corrections are very nugatory]

[Footnote 90: Plin. Hist. Natur. viii. 6, from the annals of Piso.]

The hunting or exhibition of wild beasts was conducted with a magnificence suitable to a people who styled themselves the masters of the world; nor was the edifice appropriated to that entertainment less expressive of Roman greatness. Posterity admires, and will long admire, the awful remains of the amphitheatre of Titus, which so well deserved the epithet of Colossal. [91] It was a building of an elliptic figure, five hundred and sixty-four feet in length, and four hundred and sixty-seven in breadth, founded on fourscore arches, and rising, with four successive orders of architecture, to the height of one hundred and forty feet. [92] The outside of the edifice was encrusted with marble, and decorated with statues. The slopes of the vast concave, which formed the inside, were filled and surrounded with sixty or eighty rows of seats of marble likewise, covered with cushions, and capable of receiving with ease about fourscore thousand spectators. [93] Sixty-four vomitories (for by that name the doors were very aptly distinguished) poured forth the immense multitude; and the entrances, passages, and staircases were contrived with such exquisite skill, that each person, whether of the senatorial, the equestrian, or the plebeian order, arrived at his destined place without trouble or confusion. [94] Nothing was omitted, which, in any respect, could be subservient to the convenience and pleasure of the spectators.

They were protected from the sun and rain by an ample canopy, occasionally drawn over their heads. The air was continually refreshed

by the playing of fountains, and profusely impregnated by the grateful scent of aromatics. In the centre of the edifice, the arena, or stage, was strewn with the finest sand, and successively assumed the most different forms. At one moment it seemed to rise out of the earth, like the garden of the Hesperides, and was afterwards broken into the rocks and caverns of Thrace. The subterraneous pipes conveyed an inexhaustible supply of water; and what had just before appeared a level plain, might be suddenly converted into a wide lake, covered with armed vessels, and replenished with the monsters of the deep. [95] In the decoration of these scenes, the Roman emperors displayed their wealth and liberality; and we read on various occasions that the whole furniture of the amphitheatre consisted either of silver, or of gold, or of amber. [96] The poet who describes the games of Carinus, in the character of a shepherd, attracted to the capital by the fame of their magnificence, affirms that the nets designed as a defence against the wild beasts, were of gold wire; that the porticos were gilded; and that the belt or circle which divided the several ranks of spectators from each other was studded with a precious mosaic of beautiful stones. [97]

[Footnote 91:

See Maffei, Verona Illustrata, p. iv. l. i. c. 2.]

[Footnote 92: Maffei,

l. ii. c. 2. The height was very much exaggerated by the ancients. It reached almost to the heavens, according to Calphurnius, (Eclog. vii. 23,) and surpassed the ken of human sight, according to Ammianus

Marcellinus (xvi. 10.) Yet how trifling to the great pyramid of Egypt, which rises 500 feet perpendicular]

[Footnote 93: According to different copies of Victor, we read 77,000, or 87,000 spectators; but Maffei (l. ii. c. 12) finds room on the open seats for no more than 34,000. The remainder were contained in the upper covered galleries.]

[Footnote 94: See Maffei, l. ii. c. 5--12. He treats the very difficult subject with all possible clearness, and like an architect, as well as an antiquarian.]

[Footnote 95: Calphurn. Eclog vii. 64, 73. These lines are curious, and the whole eclogue has been of infinite use to Maffei. Calphurnius, as well as Martial, (see his first book,) was a poet; but when they described the amphitheatre, they both wrote from their own senses, and to those of the Romans.]

[Footnote 96: Consult Plin. Hist. Natur. xxxiii. 16, xxxvii. 11.]

[Footnote 97: Balteus en gemmis, en inlita porticus auro Certatim radiant, &c. Calphurn. vii.]

In the midst of this glittering pageantry, the emperor Carinus, secure of his fortune, enjoyed the acclamations of the people, the flattery of his courtiers, and the songs of the poets, who, for want of a more

essential merit, were reduced to celebrate the divine graces of his person. [98] In the same hour, but at the distance of nine hundred miles from Rome, his brother expired; and a sudden revolution transferred into the hands of a stranger the sceptre of the house of Carus. [99]

[Footnote 98: *Et Martis vultus et Apollinis esse putavi*, says Calphurnius; but John Malala, who had perhaps seen pictures of Carinus, describes him as thick, short, and white, tom. i. p. 403.]

[Footnote 99: With regard to the time when these Roman games were celebrated, Scaliger, Salmasius, and Cuper have given themselves a great deal of trouble to perplex a very clear subject.]

The sons of Carus never saw each other after their father's death. The arrangements which their new situation required were probably deferred till the return of the younger brother to Rome, where a triumph was decreed to the young emperors for the glorious success of the Persian war. [100] It is uncertain whether they intended to divide between them the administration, or the provinces, of the empire; but it is very unlikely that their union would have proved of any long duration. The jealousy of power must have been inflamed by the opposition of characters. In the most corrupt of times, Carinus was unworthy to live: Numerian deserved to reign in a happier period. His affable manners and gentle virtues secured him, as soon as they became known, the regard and affections of the public. He possessed the elegant accomplishments of a poet and orator, which dignify as well as adorn the humblest and the

most exalted station. His eloquence, however it was applauded by the senate, was formed not so much on the model of Cicero, as on that of the modern declaimers; but in an age very far from being destitute of poetical merit, he contended for the prize with the most celebrated of his contemporaries, and still remained the friend of his rivals; a circumstance which evinces either the goodness of his heart, or the superiority of his genius. [101] But the talents of Numerian were rather of the contemplative than of the active kind. When his father's elevation reluctantly forced him from the shade of retirement, neither his temper nor his pursuits had qualified him for the command of armies. His constitution was destroyed by the hardships of the Persian war; and he had contracted, from the heat of the climate, [102] such a weakness in his eyes, as obliged him, in the course of a long retreat, to confine himself to the solitude and darkness of a tent or litter.

The administration of all affairs, civil as well as military, was devolved on Arrius Aper, the Praetorian praefect, who to the power of his important office added the honor of being father-in-law to Numerian. The Imperial pavilion was strictly guarded by his most trusty adherents; and during many days, Aper delivered to the army the supposed mandates of their invisible sovereign. [103]

[Footnote 100: Nemesianus (in the *Cynegeticon*) seems to anticipate in his fancy that auspicious day.]

[Footnote 101: He won all the crowns from Nemesianus, with whom he vied

in didactic poetry. The senate erected a statue to the son of Carus, with a very ambiguous inscription, "To the most powerful of orators." See Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 251.]

[Footnote 102: A more natural cause, at least, than that assigned by Vopiscus, (Hist. August. p. 251,) incessantly weeping for his father's death.]

[Footnote 103: In the Persian war, Aper was suspected of a design to betray Carus. Hist. August. p. 250.]

It was not till eight months after the death of Carus, that the Roman army, returning by slow marches from the banks of the Tigris, arrived on those of the Thracian Bosphorus. The legions halted at Chalcedon in Asia, while the court passed over to Heraclea, on the European side of the Propontis. [104] But a report soon circulated through the camp, at first in secret whispers, and at length in loud clamors, of the emperor's death, and of the presumption of his ambitious minister, who still exercised the sovereign power in the name of a prince who was no more. The impatience of the soldiers could not long support a state of suspense. With rude curiosity they broke into the Imperial tent, and discovered only the corpse of Numerian. [105] The gradual decline of his health might have induced them to believe that his death was natural; but the concealment was interpreted as an evidence of guilt, and the measures which Aper had taken to secure his election became the immediate occasion of his ruin Yet, even in the transport of their rage

and grief, the troops observed a regular proceeding, which proves how firmly discipline had been reestablished by the martial successors of Gallienus. A general assembly of the army was appointed to be held at Chalcedon, whither Aper was transported in chains, as a prisoner and a criminal. A vacant tribunal was erected in the midst of the camp, and the generals and tribunes formed a great military council. They soon announced to the multitude that their choice had fallen on Diocletian, commander of the domestics or body-guards, as the person the most capable of revenging and succeeding their beloved emperor. The future fortunes of the candidate depended on the chance or conduct of the present hour. Conscious that the station which he had filled exposed him to some suspicions, Diocletian ascended the tribunal, and raising his eyes towards the Sun, made a solemn profession of his own innocence, in the presence of that all-seeing Deity. [106] Then, assuming the tone of a sovereign and a judge, he commanded that Aper should be brought in chains to the foot of the tribunal. "This man," said he, "is the murderer of Numerian;" and without giving him time to enter on a dangerous justification, drew his sword, and buried it in the breast of the unfortunate praefect. A charge supported by such decisive proof was admitted without contradiction, and the legions, with repeated acclamations, acknowledged the justice and authority of the emperor Diocletian. [107]

[Footnote 104: We are obliged to the Alexandrian Chronicle, p. 274, for the knowledge of the time and place where Diocletian was elected emperor.]

[Footnote 105: Hist. August. p. 251. Eutrop. ix. 88. Hieronym. in Chron. According to these judicious writers, the death of Numerian was discovered by the stench of his dead body. Could no aromatics be found in the Imperial household?]

[Footnote 106: Aurel. Victor. Eutropius, ix. 20. Hieronym. in Chron.]

[Footnote 107: Vopiscus in Hist. August. p. 252. The reason why Diocletian killed Aper, (a wild boar,) was founded on a prophecy and a pun, as foolish as they are well known.]

Before we enter upon the memorable reign of that prince, it will be proper to punish and dismiss the unworthy brother of Numerian. Carinus possessed arms and treasures sufficient to support his legal title to the empire. But his personal vices overbalanced every advantage of birth and situation. The most faithful servants of the father despised the incapacity, and dreaded the cruel arrogance, of the son. The hearts of the people were engaged in favor of his rival, and even the senate was inclined to prefer a usurper to a tyrant. The arts of Diocletian inflamed the general discontent; and the winter was employed in secret intrigues, and open preparations for a civil war. In the spring, the forces of the East and of the West encountered each other in the plains of Margus, a small city of Maesia, in the neighborhood of the Danube. [108] The troops, so lately returned from the Persian war, had acquired their glory at the expense of health and numbers; nor were they in a

condition to contend with the unexhausted strength of the legions of Europe. Their ranks were broken, and, for a moment, Diocletian despaired of the purple and of life. But the advantage which Carinus had obtained by the valor of his soldiers, he quickly lost by the infidelity of his officers. A tribune, whose wife he had seduced, seized the opportunity of revenge, and, by a single blow, extinguished civil discord in the blood of the adulterer. [109]

[Footnote 108: Eutropius marks its situation very accurately; it was between the Mons Aureus and Viminiacum. M. d'Anville (Geographic Ancienne, tom. i. p. 304) places Margus at Kastolatz in Servia, a little below Belgrade and Semendria. * Note: Kullieza--Eton Atlas--M.]

[Footnote 109: Hist. August. p. 254. Eutropius, ix. 20. Aurelius Victor et Epitome]