

Chapter XVIII: Character Of Constantine And His Sons.--Part I.

Character Of Constantine.--Gothic War.--Death Of Constantine.--Division Of The Empire Among His Three Sons.--Persian War.--Tragic Deaths Of Constantine The Younger And Constans.--Usurpation Of Magnentius.--Civil War.--Victory Of Constantius.

The character of the prince who removed the seat of empire, and introduced such important changes into the civil and religious constitution of his country, has fixed the attention, and divided the opinions, of mankind. By the grateful zeal of the Christians, the deliverer of the church has been decorated with every attribute of a hero, and even of a saint; while the discontent of the vanquished party has compared Constantine to the most abhorred of those tyrants, who, by their vice and weakness, dishonored the Imperial purple. The same passions have in some degree been perpetuated to succeeding generations, and the character of Constantine is considered, even in the present age, as an object either of satire or of panegyric. By the impartial union of those defects which are confessed by his warmest admirers, and of those virtues which are acknowledged by his most-implacable enemies, we might hope to delineate a just portrait of that extraordinary man, which the truth and candor of history should adopt without a blush. [1] But it would soon appear, that the vain attempt to blend such discordant colors, and to reconcile such inconsistent qualities, must produce a figure monstrous rather than human, unless it is viewed in its proper and distinct lights, by a careful separation of the different periods of

the reign of Constantine.

[Footnote 1: On ne se trompera point sur Constantin, en croyant tout le mal ru'en dit Eusebe, et tout le bien qu'en dit Zosime. Fleury, Hist. Ecclesiastique, tom. iii. p. 233. Eusebius and Zosimus form indeed the two extremes of flattery and invective. The intermediate shades are expressed by those writers, whose character or situation variously tempered the influence of their religious zeal.]

The person, as well as the mind, of Constantine, had been enriched by nature with her choicest endowments. His stature was lofty, his countenance majestic, his deportment graceful; his strength and activity were displayed in every manly exercise, and from his earliest youth, to a very advanced season of life, he preserved the vigor of his constitution by a strict adherence to the domestic virtues of chastity and temperance. He delighted in the social intercourse of familiar conversation; and though he might sometimes indulge his disposition to raillery with less reserve than was required by the severe dignity of his station, the courtesy and liberality of his manners gained the hearts of all who approached him. The sincerity of his friendship has been suspected; yet he showed, on some occasions, that he was not incapable of a warm and lasting attachment. The disadvantage of an illiterate education had not prevented him from forming a just estimate of the value of learning; and the arts and sciences derived some encouragement from the munificent protection of Constantine. In the despatch of business, his diligence was indefatigable; and the active

powers of his mind were almost continually exercised in reading, writing, or meditating, in giving audiences to ambassadors, and in examining the complaints of his subjects. Even those who censured the propriety of his measures were compelled to acknowledge, that he possessed magnanimity to conceive, and patience to execute, the most arduous designs, without being checked either by the prejudices of education, or by the clamors of the multitude. In the field, he infused his own intrepid spirit into the troops, whom he conducted with the talents of a consummate general; and to his abilities, rather than to his fortune, we may ascribe the signal victories which he obtained over the foreign and domestic foes of the republic. He loved glory as the reward, perhaps as the motive, of his labors. The boundless ambition, which, from the moment of his accepting the purple at York, appears as the ruling passion of his soul, may be justified by the dangers of his own situation, by the character of his rivals, by the consciousness of superior merit, and by the prospect that his success would enable him to restore peace and order to the distracted empire. In his civil wars against Maxentius and Licinius, he had engaged on his side the inclinations of the people, who compared the undissembled vices of those tyrants with the spirit of wisdom and justice which seemed to direct the general tenor of the administration of Constantine. [2]

[Footnote 2: The virtues of Constantine are collected for the most part from Eutropius and the younger Victor, two sincere pagans, who wrote after the extinction of his family. Even Zosimus, and the Emperor Julian, acknowledge his personal courage and military achievements.]

Had Constantine fallen on the banks of the Tyber, or even in the plains of Hadrianople, such is the character which, with a few exceptions, he might have transmitted to posterity. But the conclusion of his reign (according to the moderate and indeed tender sentence of a writer of the same age) degraded him from the rank which he had acquired among the most deserving of the Roman princes. [3] In the life of Augustus, we behold the tyrant of the republic, converted, almost by imperceptible degrees, into the father of his country, and of human kind. In that of Constantine, we may contemplate a hero, who had so long inspired his subjects with love, and his enemies with terror, degenerating into a cruel and dissolute monarch, corrupted by his fortune, or raised by conquest above the necessity of dissimulation. The general peace which he maintained during the last fourteen years of his reign, was a period of apparent splendor rather than of real prosperity; and the old age of Constantine was disgraced by the opposite yet reconcilable vices of rapaciousness and prodigality. The accumulated treasures found in the palaces of Maxentius and Licinius, were lavishly consumed; the various innovations introduced by the conqueror, were attended with an increasing expense; the cost of his buildings, his court, and his festivals, required an immediate and plentiful supply; and the oppression of the people was the only fund which could support the magnificence of the sovereign. [4] His unworthy favorites, enriched by the boundless liberality of their master, usurped with impunity the privilege of rapine and corruption. [5] A secret but universal decay was felt in every part of the public administration, and the emperor

himself, though he still retained the obedience, gradually lost the esteem, of his subjects. The dress and manners, which, towards the decline of life, he chose to affect, served only to degrade him in the eyes of mankind. The Asiatic pomp, which had been adopted by the pride of Diocletian, assumed an air of softness and effeminacy in the person of Constantine. He is represented with false hair of various colors, laboriously arranged by the skilful artists to the times; a diadem of a new and more expensive fashion; a profusion of gems and pearls, of collars and bracelets, and a variegated flowing robe of silk, most curiously embroidered with flowers of gold. In such apparel, scarcely to be excused by the youth and folly of Elagabalus, we are at a loss to discover the wisdom of an aged monarch, and the simplicity of a Roman veteran. [6] A mind thus relaxed by prosperity and indulgence, was incapable of rising to that magnanimity which disdains suspicion, and dares to forgive. The deaths of Maximian and Licinius may perhaps be justified by the maxims of policy, as they are taught in the schools of tyrants; but an impartial narrative of the executions, or rather murders, which sullied the declining age of Constantine, will suggest to our most candid thoughts the idea of a prince who could sacrifice without reluctance the laws of justice, and the feelings of nature, to the dictates either of his passions or of his interest.

[Footnote 3: See Eutropius, x. 6. *In primo Imperii tempore optimis principibus, ultimo mediis comparandus.* From the ancient Greek version of Poeanus, (edit. Havercamp. p. 697,) I am inclined to suspect that Eutropius had originally written *vix mediis*; and that the offensive

monosyllable was dropped by the wilful inadvertency of transcribers. Aurelius Victor expresses the general opinion by a vulgar and indeed obscure proverb. *Trachala decem annis praestantissimds; duodecim sequentibus latro; decem novissimis pupillus ob immouicas profusiones.*]

[Footnote 4: Julian, *Orat. i. p. 8*, in a flattering discourse pronounced before the son of Constantine; and *Caesares, p. 336*. Zosimus, *p. 114, 115*. The stately buildings of Constantinople, &c., may be quoted as a lasting and unexceptionable proof of the profuseness of their founder.]

[Footnote 5: The impartial Ammianus deserves all our confidence. *Proximorum fauces aperuit primus omnium Constantinus. L. xvi. c. 8*. Eusebius himself confesses the abuse, (*Vit. Constantin. 1. iv. c. 29, 54*;) and some of the Imperial laws feebly point out the remedy. See above, *p. 146* of this volume.]

[Footnote 6: Julian, in the *Caesars*, attempts to ridicule his uncle. His suspicious testimony is confirmed, however, by the learned Spanheim, with the authority of medals, (see *Commentaire, p. 156, 299, 397, 459*.) Eusebius (*Orat. c. 5*) alleges, that Constantine dressed for the public, not for himself. Were this admitted, the vainest coxcomb could never want an excuse.]

The same fortune which so invariably followed the standard of Constantine, seemed to secure the hopes and comforts of his domestic life. Those among his predecessors who had enjoyed the longest and

most prosperous reigns, Augustus Trajan, and Diocletian, had been disappointed of posterity; and the frequent revolutions had never allowed sufficient time for any Imperial family to grow up and multiply under the shade of the purple. But the royalty of the Flavian line, which had been first ennobled by the Gothic Claudius, descended through several generations; and Constantine himself derived from his royal father the hereditary honors which he transmitted to his children. The emperor had been twice married. Minervina, the obscure but lawful object of his youthful attachment, [7] had left him only one son, who was called Crispus. By Fausta, the daughter of Maximian, he had three daughters, and three sons known by the kindred names of Constantine, Constantius, and Constans. The unambitious brothers of the great Constantine, Julius Constantius, Dalmatius, and Hannibalianus, [8] were permitted to enjoy the most honorable rank, and the most affluent fortune, that could be consistent with a private station. The youngest of the three lived without a name, and died without posterity. His two elder brothers obtained in marriage the daughters of wealthy senators, and propagated new branches of the Imperial race. Gallus and Julian afterwards became the most illustrious of the children of Julius Constantius, the Patrician.

The two sons of Dalmatius, who had been decorated with the vain title of Censor, were named Dalmatius and Hannibalianus. The two sisters of the great Constantine, Anastasia and Eutropia, were bestowed on Optatus and Nepotianus, two senators of noble birth and of consular dignity. His third sister, Constantia, was distinguished by her preeminence of

greatness and of misery. She remained the widow of the vanquished Licinius; and it was by her entreaties, that an innocent boy, the offspring of their marriage, preserved, for some time, his life, the title of Caesar, and a precarious hope of the succession. Besides the females, and the allies of the Flavian house, ten or twelve males, to whom the language of modern courts would apply the title of princes of the blood, seemed, according to the order of their birth, to be destined either to inherit or to support the throne of Constantine. But in less than thirty years, this numerous and increasing family was reduced to the persons of Constantius and Julian, who alone had survived a series of crimes and calamities, such as the tragic poets have deplored in the devoted lines of Pelops and of Cadmus.

[Footnote 7: Zosimus and Zonaras agree in representing Minervina as the concubine of Constantine; but Ducange has very gallantly rescued her character, by producing a decisive passage from one of the panegyrics: "Ab ipso fine pueritiae te matrimonii legibus dedisti."]

[Footnote 8: Ducange (*Familiae Byzantinae*, p. 44) bestows on him, after Zosimus, the name of Constantine; a name somewhat unlikely, as it was already occupied by the elder brother. That of Hannibalianus is mentioned in the Paschal Chronicle, and is approved by Tillemont. *Hist. des Empereurs*, tom. iv. p. 527.]

Crispus, the eldest son of Constantine, and the presumptive heir of the empire, is represented by impartial historians as an amiable and

accomplished youth. The care of his education, or at least of his studies, was intrusted to Lactantius, the most eloquent of the Christians; a preceptor admirably qualified to form the taste, and to excite the virtues, of his illustrious disciple. [9] At the age of seventeen, Crispus was invested with the title of Caesar, and the administration of the Gallic provinces, where the inroads of the Germans gave him an early occasion of signaling his military prowess. In the civil war which broke out soon afterwards, the father and son divided their powers; and this history has already celebrated the valor as well as conduct displayed by the latter, in forcing the straits of the Hellespont, so obstinately defended by the superior fleet of Lacinus. This naval victory contributed to determine the event of the war; and the names of Constantine and of Crispus were united in the joyful acclamations of their eastern subjects; who loudly proclaimed, that the world had been subdued, and was now governed, by an emperor endowed with every virtue; and by his illustrious son, a prince beloved of Heaven, and the lively image of his father's perfections. The public favor, which seldom accompanies old age, diffused its lustre over the youth of Crispus. He deserved the esteem, and he engaged the affections, of the court, the army, and the people. The experienced merit of a reigning monarch is acknowledged by his subjects with reluctance, and frequently denied with partial and discontented murmurs; while, from the opening virtues of his successor, they fondly conceive the most unbounded hopes of private as well as public felicity. [10]

[Footnote 9: Jerom. in Chron. The poverty of Lactantius may be applied

either to the praise of the disinterested philosopher, or to the shame of the unfeeling patron. See Tillemont, Mem. Ecclesiast. tom. vi. part 1. p. 345. Dupin, Bibliothéque Ecclesiast. tom. i. p. 205. Lardner's Credibility of the Gospel History, part ii. vol. vii. p. 66.]

[Footnote 10: Euseb. Hist. Ecclesiast. l. x. c. 9. Eutropius (x. 6) styles him "egregium virum;" and Julian (Orat. i.) very plainly alludes to the exploits of Crispus in the civil war. See Spanheim, Comment. p. 92.]

This dangerous popularity soon excited the attention of Constantine, who, both as a father and as a king, was impatient of an equal. Instead of attempting to secure the allegiance of his son by the generous ties of confidence and gratitude, he resolved to prevent the mischiefs which might be apprehended from dissatisfied ambition. Crispus soon had reason to complain, that while his infant brother Constantius was sent, with the title of Caesar, to reign over his peculiar department of the Gallic provinces, [11] he, a prince of mature years, who had performed such recent and signal services, instead of being raised to the superior rank of Augustus, was confined almost a prisoner to his father's court; and exposed, without power or defence, to every calumny which the malice of his enemies could suggest. Under such painful circumstances, the royal youth might not always be able to compose his behavior, or suppress his discontent; and we may be assured, that he was encompassed by a train of indiscreet or perfidious followers, who assiduously studied to inflame, and who were perhaps instructed to betray, the unguarded warmth of

his resentment. An edict of Constantine, published about this time, manifestly indicates his real or affected suspicions, that a secret conspiracy had been formed against his person and government. By all the allurements of honors and rewards, he invites informers of every degree to accuse without exception his magistrates or ministers, his friends or his most intimate favorites, protesting, with a solemn asseveration, that he himself will listen to the charge, that he himself will revenge his injuries; and concluding with a prayer, which discovers some apprehension of danger, that the providence of the Supreme Being may still continue to protect the safety of the emperor and of the empire.

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[Footnote 11: Compare Idatius and the Paschal Chronicle, with Ammianus, (l. xiv. c. 5.) The year in which Constantius was created Caesar seems to be more accurately fixed by the two chronologists; but the historian who lived in his court could not be ignorant of the day of the anniversary. For the appointment of the new Caesar to the provinces of Gaul, see Julian, Orat. i. p. 12, Godefroy, Chronol. Legum, p. 26. and Blondel, de Primaute de l'Eglise, p. 1183.]

[Footnote 12: Cod. Theod. l. ix. tit. iv. Godefroy suspected the secret motives of this law. Comment. tom. iii. p. 9.]

The informers, who complied with so liberal an invitation, were sufficiently versed in the arts of courts to select the friends and adherents of Crispus as the guilty persons; nor is there any reason to

distrust the veracity of the emperor, who had promised an ample measure of revenge and punishment. The policy of Constantine maintained, however, the same appearances of regard and confidence towards a son, whom he began to consider as his most irreconcilable enemy. Medals were struck with the customary vows for the long and auspicious reign of the young Caesar; [13] and as the people, who were not admitted into the secrets of the palace, still loved his virtues, and respected his dignity, a poet who solicits his recall from exile, adores with equal devotion the majesty of the father and that of the son. [14] The time was now arrived for celebrating the august ceremony of the twentieth year of the reign of Constantine; and the emperor, for that purpose, removed his court from Nicomedia to Rome, where the most splendid preparations had been made for his reception. Every eye, and every tongue, affected to express their sense of the general happiness, and the veil of ceremony and dissimulation was drawn for a while over the darkest designs of revenge and murder. [15] In the midst of the festival, the unfortunate Crispus was apprehended by order of the emperor, who laid aside the tenderness of a father, without assuming the equity of a judge. The examination was short and private; [16] and as it was thought decent to conceal the fate of the young prince from the eyes of the Roman people, he was sent under a strong guard to Pola, in Istria, where, soon afterwards, he was put to death, either by the hand of the executioner, or by the more gentle operations of poison. [17] The Caesar Licinius, a youth of amiable manners, was involved in the ruin of Crispus: [18] and the stern jealousy of Constantine was unmoved by the prayers and tears of his favorite sister, pleading for the life of a

son, whose rank was his only crime, and whose loss she did not long survive. The story of these unhappy princes, the nature and evidence of their guilt, the forms of their trial, and the circumstances of their death, were buried in mysterious obscurity; and the courtly bishop, who has celebrated in an elaborate work the virtues and piety of his hero, observes a prudent silence on the subject of these tragic events. [19] Such haughty contempt for the opinion of mankind, whilst it imprints an indelible stain on the memory of Constantine, must remind us of the very different behavior of one of the greatest monarchs of the present age. The Czar Peter, in the full possession of despotic power, submitted to the judgment of Russia, of Europe, and of posterity, the reasons which had compelled him to subscribe the condemnation of a criminal, or at least of a degenerate son. [20]

[Footnote 13: Ducange, *Fam. Byzant.* p. 28. Tillemont, tom. iv. p. 610.]

[Footnote 14: His name was Porphyrius Optatianus. The date of his panegyric, written, according to the taste of the age, in vile acrostics, is settled by Scaliger ad Euseb. p. 250, Tillemont, tom. iv. p. 607, and Fabricius, *Biblioth. Latin.* l. iv. c. 1.]

[Footnote 15: Zosim. l. ii. p. 103. Godefroy, *Chronol. Legum*, p. 28.]

[Footnote 16: The elder Victor, who wrote under the next reign, speaks with becoming caution. "Natu grandior incertum qua causa, patris judicio occidisset." If we consult the succeeding writers, Eutropius, the

younger Victor, Orosius, Jerom, Zosimus, Philostorgius, and Gregory of Tours, their knowledge will appear gradually to increase, as their means of information must have diminished--a circumstance which frequently occurs in historical disquisition.]

[Footnote 17: Ammianus (l. xiv. c. 11) uses the general expression of *peremptum Codinus* (p. 34) beheads the young prince; but Sidonius Apollinaris (Epistol. v. 8,) for the sake perhaps of an antithesis to Fausta's warm bath, chooses to administer a draught of cold poison.]

[Footnote 18: *Sororis filium, commodae indolis juvenem.* Eutropius, x. 6
May I not be permitted to conjecture that Crispus had married Helena the daughter of the emperor Licinius, and that on the happy delivery of the princess, in the year 322, a general pardon was granted by Constantine? See Ducange, *Fam. Byzant.* p. 47, and the law (l. ix. tit. xxxvii.) of the Theodosian code, which has so much embarrassed the interpreters. Godefroy, tom. iii. p. 267 * Note: This conjecture is very doubtful. The obscurity of the law quoted from the Theodosian code scarcely allows any inference, and there is extant but one meda which can be attributed to a Helena, wife of Crispus.]

[Footnote 19: See the life of Constantine, particularly l. ii. c. 19, 20. Two hundred and fifty years afterwards Evagrius (l. iii. c. 41) deduced from the silence of Eusebius a vain argument against the reality of the fact.]

[Footnote 20: Histoire de Pierre le Grand, par Voltaire, part ii. c.
10.]

The innocence of Crispus was so universally acknowledged, that the modern Greeks, who adore the memory of their founder, are reduced to palliate the guilt of a parricide, which the common feelings of human nature forbade them to justify. They pretend, that as soon as the afflicted father discovered the falsehood of the accusation by which his credulity had been so fatally misled, he published to the world his repentance and remorse; that he mourned forty days, during which he abstained from the use of the bath, and all the ordinary comforts of life; and that, for the lasting instruction of posterity, he erected a golden statue of Crispus, with this memorable inscription: To my son, whom I unjustly condemned. [21] A tale so moral and so interesting would deserve to be supported by less exceptionable authority; but if we consult the more ancient and authentic writers, they will inform us, that the repentance of Constantine was manifested only in acts of blood and revenge; and that he atoned for the murder of an innocent son, by the execution, perhaps, of a guilty wife. They ascribe the misfortunes of Crispus to the arts of his step-mother Fausta, whose implacable hatred, or whose disappointed love, renewed in the palace of Constantine the ancient tragedy of Hippolitus and of Phaedra. [22] Like the daughter of Minos, the daughter of Maximian accused her son-in-law of an incestuous attempt on the chastity of his father's wife; and easily obtained, from the jealousy of the emperor, a sentence of death against a young prince, whom she considered with reason as the most formidable

rival of her own children. But Helena, the aged mother of Constantine, lamented and revenged the untimely fate of her grandson Crispus; nor was it long before a real or pretended discovery was made, that Fausta herself entertained a criminal connection with a slave belonging to the Imperial stables. [23] Her condemnation and punishment were the instant consequences of the charge; and the adulteress was suffocated by the steam of a bath, which, for that purpose, had been heated to an extraordinary degree. [24] By some it will perhaps be thought, that the remembrance of a conjugal union of twenty years, and the honor of their common offspring, the destined heirs of the throne, might have softened the obdurate heart of Constantine, and persuaded him to suffer his wife, however guilty she might appear, to expiate her offences in a solitary prison. But it seems a superfluous labor to weigh the propriety, unless we could ascertain the truth, of this singular event, which is attended with some circumstances of doubt and perplexity. Those who have attacked, and those who have defended, the character of Constantine, have alike disregarded two very remarkable passages of two orations pronounced under the succeeding reign. The former celebrates the virtues, the beauty, and the fortune of the empress Fausta, the daughter, wife, sister, and mother of so many princes. [25] The latter asserts, in explicit terms, that the mother of the younger Constantine, who was slain three years after his father's death, survived to weep over the fate of her son. [26] Notwithstanding the positive testimony of several writers of the Pagan as well as of the Christian religion, there may still remain some reason to believe, or at least to suspect, that Fausta escaped the blind and suspicious cruelty of her husband. [26a]

The deaths of a son and a nephew, with the execution of a great number of respectable, and perhaps innocent friends, [27] who were involved in their fall, may be sufficient, however, to justify the discontent of the Roman people, and to explain the satirical verses affixed to the palace gate, comparing the splendid and bloody reigns of Constantine and Nero. [28]

[Footnote 21: In order to prove that the statue was erected by Constantine, and afterwards concealed by the malice of the Arians, Codinus very readily creates (p. 34) two witnesses, Hippolitus, and the younger Herodotus, to whose imaginary histories he appeals with unblushing confidence.]

[Footnote 22: Zosimus (l. ii. p. 103) may be considered as our original. The ingenuity of the moderns, assisted by a few hints from the ancients, has illustrated and improved his obscure and imperfect narrative.]

[Footnote 23: Philostorgius, l. ii. c. 4. Zosimus (l. ii. p. 104, 116) imputes to Constantine the death of two wives, of the innocent Fausta, and of an adulteress, who was the mother of his three successors. According to Jerom, three or four years elapsed between the death of Crispus and that of Fausta. The elder Victor is prudently silent.]

[Footnote 24: If Fausta was put to death, it is reasonable to believe that the private apartments of the palace were the scene of her execution. The orator Chrysostom indulges his fancy by exposing the

naked desert mountain to be devoured by wild beasts.]

[Footnote 25: Julian. Orat. i. He seems to call her the mother of Crispus. She might assume that title by adoption. At least, she was not considered as his mortal enemy. Julian compares the fortune of Fausta with that of Parysatis, the Persian queen. A Roman would have more naturally recollected the second Agrippina:

Et moi, qui sur le trone ai suivi mes ancetres:

Moi, fille, femme,soeur, et mere de vos maitres.]

[Footnote 26: Monod. in Constantin. Jun. c. 4, ad Calcem Eutrop. edit. Havercamp. The orator styles her the most divine and pious of queens.]

[Footnote 26a: Manso (Leben Constantins, p. 65) treats this inference o: Gibbon, and the authorities to which he appeals, with too much contempt, considering the general scantiness of proof on this curious question.--M.]

[Footnote 27: Interfecit numerosos amicos. Eutrop. xx. 6.]

[Footnote 28: Saturni aurea saecula quis requirat? Sunt haec gemmea, sed Neroniana. Sidon. Apollinar. v. 8. ----It is somewhat singular that these satirical lines should be attributed, not to an obscure libeller, or a disappointed patriot, but to Ablavius, prime minister and favorite of the emperor. We may now perceive that the imprecations of the Roman

people were dictated by humanity, as well as by superstition. Zosim. 1.
ii. p. 105.]