

The History of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

By

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HISTORY OF THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Chapter XXVII: Civil Wars, Reign Of Theodosius.--Part I.

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Death Of Theodosius.

The fame of Gratian, before he had accomplished the twentieth year of his age, was equal to that of the most celebrated princes. His gentle and amiable disposition endeared him to his private friends, the graceful affability of his manners engaged the affection of the people: the men of letters, who enjoyed the liberality, acknowledged the taste and eloquence, of their sovereign; his valor and dexterity in arms were equally applauded by the soldiers; and the clergy considered the humble piety of Gratian as the first and most useful of his virtues. The victory of Colmar had delivered the West from a formidable invasion; and the grateful provinces of the East ascribed the merits of Theodosius to the author of his greatness, and of the public safety. Gratian survived those memorable events only four or five years; but he survived his reputation; and, before he fell a victim to rebellion, he had lost, in a great measure, the respect and confidence of the Roman world.

The remarkable alteration of his character or conduct may not be imputed to the arts of flattery, which had besieged the son of Valentinian from his infancy; nor to the headstrong passions which the that gentle youth

appears to have escaped. A more attentive view of the life of Gratian may perhaps suggest the true cause of the disappointment of the public hopes. His apparent virtues, instead of being the hardy productions of experience and adversity, were the premature and artificial fruits of a royal education. The anxious tenderness of his father was continually employed to bestow on him those advantages, which he might perhaps esteem the more highly, as he himself had been deprived of them; and the most skilful masters of every science, and of every art, had labored to form the mind and body of the young prince. The knowledge which they painfully communicated was displayed with ostentation, and celebrated with lavish praise. His soft and tractable disposition received the fair impression of their judicious precepts, and the absence of passion might easily be mistaken for the strength of reason. His preceptors gradually rose to the rank and consequence of ministers of state: and, as they wisely dissembled their secret authority, he seemed to act with firmness, with propriety, and with judgment, on the most important occasions of his life and reign. But the influence of this elaborate instruction did not penetrate beyond the surface; and the skilful preceptors, who so accurately guided the steps of their royal pupil, could not infuse into his feeble and indolent character the vigorous and independent principle of action which renders the laborious pursuit of glory essentially necessary to the happiness, and almost to the existence, of the hero. As soon as time and accident had removed those faithful counsellors from the throne, the emperor of the West insensibly descended to the level of his natural genius; abandoned the reins of government to the ambitious hands which were stretched forwards to grasp

them; and amused his leisure with the most frivolous gratifications. A public sale of favor and injustice was instituted, both in the court and in the provinces, by the worthless delegates of his power, whose merit it was made sacrilege to question. The conscience of the credulous prince was directed by saints and bishops; who procured an Imperial edict to punish, as a capital offence, the violation, the neglect, or even the ignorance, of the divine law. Among the various arts which had exercised the youth of Gratian, he had applied himself, with singular inclination and success, to manage the horse, to draw the bow, and to dart the javelin; and these qualifications, which might be useful to a soldier, were prostituted to the viler purposes of hunting. Large parks were enclosed for the Imperial pleasures, and plentifully stocked with every species of wild beasts; and Gratian neglected the duties, and even the dignity, of his rank, to consume whole days in the vain display of his dexterity and boldness in the chase. The pride and wish of the Roman emperor to excel in an art, in which he might be surpassed by the meanest of his slaves, reminded the numerous spectators of the examples of Nero and Commodus, but the chaste and temperate Gratian was a stranger to their monstrous vices; and his hands were stained only with the blood of animals. The behavior of Gratian, which degraded his character in the eyes of mankind, could not have disturbed the security of his reign, if the army had not been provoked to resent their peculiar injuries. As long as the young emperor was guided by the instructions of his masters, he professed himself the friend and pupil of the soldiers; many of his hours were spent in the familiar conversation of the camp; and the health, the comforts, the rewards, the honors, of his faithful

troops, appeared to be the objects of his attentive concern. But, after Gratian more freely indulged his prevailing taste for hunting and shooting, he naturally connected himself with the most dexterous ministers of his favorite amusement. A body of the Alani was received into the military and domestic service of the palace; and the admirable skill, which they were accustomed to display in the unbounded plains of Scythia, was exercised, on a more narrow theatre, in the parks and enclosures of Gaul. Gratian admired the talents and customs of these favorite guards, to whom alone he intrusted the defence of his person; and, as if he meant to insult the public opinion, he frequently showed himself to the soldiers and people, with the dress and arms, the long bow, the sounding quiver, and the fur garments of a Scythian warrior. The unworthy spectacle of a Roman prince, who had renounced the dress and manners of his country, filled the minds of the legions with grief and indignation. Even the Germans, so strong and formidable in the armies of the empire, affected to disdain the strange and horrid appearance of the savages of the North, who, in the space of a few years, had wandered from the banks of the Volga to those of the Seine. A loud and licentious murmur was echoed through the camps and garrisons of the West; and as the mild indolence of Gratian neglected to extinguish the first symptoms of discontent, the want of love and respect was not supplied by the influence of fear. But the subversion of an established government is always a work of some real, and of much apparent, difficulty; and the throne of Gratian was protected by the sanctions of custom, law, religion, and the nice balance of the civil and military powers, which had been established by the policy of Constantine. It is

not very important to inquire from what cause the revolt of Britain was produced. Accident is commonly the parent of disorder; the seeds of rebellion happened to fall on a soil which was supposed to be more fruitful than any other in tyrants and usurpers; the legions of that sequestered island had been long famous for a spirit of presumption and arrogance; and the name of Maximus was proclaimed, by the tumultuary, but unanimous voice, both of the soldiers and of the provincials. The emperor, or the rebel,--for this title was not yet ascertained by fortune,--was a native of Spain, the countryman, the fellow-soldier, and the rival of Theodosius whose elevation he had not seen without some emotions of envy and resentment: the events of his life had long since fixed him in Britain; and I should not be unwilling to find some evidence for the marriage, which he is said to have contracted with the daughter of a wealthy lord of Caernarvonshire. But this provincial rank might justly be considered as a state of exile and obscurity; and if Maximus had obtained any civil or military office, he was not invested with the authority either of governor or general. His abilities, and even his integrity, are acknowledged by the partial writers of the age; and the merit must indeed have been conspicuous that could extort such a confession in favor of the vanquished enemy of Theodosius. The discontent of Maximus might incline him to censure the conduct of his sovereign, and to encourage, perhaps, without any views of ambition, the murmurs of the troops. But in the midst of the tumult, he artfully, or modestly, refused to ascend the throne; and some credit appears to have been given to his own positive declaration, that he was compelled to accept the dangerous present of the Imperial purple.

But there was danger likewise in refusing the empire; and from the moment that Maximus had violated his allegiance to his lawful sovereign, he could not hope to reign, or even to live, if he confined his moderate ambition within the narrow limits of Britain. He boldly and wisely resolved to prevent the designs of Gratian; the youth of the island crowded to his standard, and he invaded Gaul with a fleet and army, which were long afterwards remembered, as the emigration of a considerable part of the British nation. The emperor, in his peaceful residence of Paris, was alarmed by their hostile approach; and the darts which he idly wasted on lions and bears, might have been employed more honorably against the rebels. But his feeble efforts announced his degenerate spirit and desperate situation; and deprived him of the resources, which he still might have found, in the support of his subjects and allies. The armies of Gaul, instead of opposing the march of Maximus, received him with joyful and loyal acclamations; and the shame of the desertion was transferred from the people to the prince. The troops, whose station more immediately attached them to the service of the palace, abandoned the standard of Gratian the first time that it was displayed in the neighborhood of Paris. The emperor of the West fled towards Lyons, with a train of only three hundred horse; and, in the cities along the road, where he hoped to find refuge, or at least a passage, he was taught, by cruel experience, that every gate is shut against the unfortunate. Yet he might still have reached, in safety, the dominions of his brother; and soon have returned with the forces of Italy and the East; if he had not suffered himself to be fatally

deceived by the perfidious governor of the Lyonnese province. Gratian was amused by protestations of doubtful fidelity, and the hopes of a support, which could not be effectual; till the arrival of Andragathius, the general of the cavalry of Maximus, put an end to his suspense. That resolute officer executed, without remorse, the orders or the intention of the usurper. Gratian, as he rose from supper, was delivered into the hands of the assassin: and his body was denied to the pious and pressing entreaties of his brother Valentinian. The death of the emperor was followed by that of his powerful general Mellobaudes, the king of the Franks; who maintained, to the last moment of his life, the ambiguous reputation, which is the just recompense of obscure and subtle policy. These executions might be necessary to the public safety: but the successful usurper, whose power was acknowledged by all the provinces of the West, had the merit, and the satisfaction, of boasting, that, except those who had perished by the chance of war, his triumph was not stained by the blood of the Romans.

The events of this revolution had passed in such rapid succession, that it would have been impossible for Theodosius to march to the relief of his benefactor, before he received the intelligence of his defeat and death. During the season of sincere grief, or ostentatious mourning, the Eastern emperor was interrupted by the arrival of the principal chamberlain of Maximus; and the choice of a venerable old man, for an office which was usually exercised by eunuchs, announced to the court of Constantinople the gravity and temperance of the British usurper. The ambassador condescended to justify, or excuse, the conduct of his

master; and to protest, in specious language, that the murder of Gratian had been perpetrated, without his knowledge or consent, by the precipitate zeal of the soldiers. But he proceeded, in a firm and equal tone, to offer Theodosius the alternative of peace, or war. The speech of the ambassador concluded with a spirited declaration, that although Maximus, as a Roman, and as the father of his people, would choose rather to employ his forces in the common defence of the republic, he was armed and prepared, if his friendship should be rejected, to dispute, in a field of battle, the empire of the world. An immediate and peremptory answer was required; but it was extremely difficult for Theodosius to satisfy, on this important occasion, either the feelings of his own mind, or the expectations of the public. The imperious voice of honor and gratitude called aloud for revenge. From the liberality of Gratian, he had received the Imperial diadem; his patience would encourage the odious suspicion, that he was more deeply sensible of former injuries, than of recent obligations; and if he accepted the friendship, he must seem to share the guilt, of the assassin. Even the principles of justice, and the interest of society, would receive a fatal blow from the impunity of Maximus; and the example of successful usurpation would tend to dissolve the artificial fabric of government, and once more to replunge the empire in the crimes and calamities of the preceding age. But, as the sentiments of gratitude and honor should invariably regulate the conduct of an individual, they may be overbalanced in the mind of a sovereign, by the sense of superior duties; and the maxims both of justice and humanity must permit the escape of an atrocious criminal, if an innocent people would be involved

in the consequences of his punishment. The assassin of Gratian had usurped, but he actually possessed, the most warlike provinces of the empire: the East was exhausted by the misfortunes, and even by the success, of the Gothic war; and it was seriously to be apprehended, that, after the vital strength of the republic had been wasted in a doubtful and destructive contest, the feeble conqueror would remain an easy prey to the Barbarians of the North. These weighty considerations engaged Theodosius to dissemble his resentment, and to accept the alliance of the tyrant. But he stipulated, that Maximus should content himself with the possession of the countries beyond the Alps. The brother of Gratian was confirmed and secured in the sovereignty of Italy, Africa, and the Western Illyricum; and some honorable conditions were inserted in the treaty, to protect the memory, and the laws, of the deceased emperor. According to the custom of the age, the images of the three Imperial colleagues were exhibited to the veneration of the people; nor should it be lightly supposed, that, in the moment of a solemn reconciliation, Theodosius secretly cherished the intention of perfidy and revenge.

The contempt of Gratian for the Roman soldiers had exposed him to the fatal effects of their resentment. His profound veneration for the Christian clergy was rewarded by the applause and gratitude of a powerful order, which has claimed, in every age, the privilege of dispensing honors, both on earth and in heaven. The orthodox bishops bewailed his death, and their own irreparable loss; but they were soon comforted by the discovery, that Gratian had committed the sceptre of

the East to the hands of a prince, whose humble faith and fervent zeal, were supported by the spirit and abilities of a more vigorous character. Among the benefactors of the church, the fame of Constantine has been rivalled by the glory of Theodosius. If Constantine had the advantage of erecting the standard of the cross, the emulation of his successor assumed the merit of subduing the Arian heresy, and of abolishing the worship of idols in the Roman world. Theodosius was the first of the emperors baptized in the true faith of the Trinity. Although he was born of a Christian family, the maxims, or at least the practice, of the age, encouraged him to delay the ceremony of his initiation; till he was admonished of the danger of delay, by the serious illness which threatened his life, towards the end of the first year of his reign. Before he again took the field against the Goths, he received the sacrament of baptism from Acholius, the orthodox bishop of Thessalonica: and, as the emperor ascended from the holy font, still glowing with the warm feelings of regeneration, he dictated a solemn edict, which proclaimed his own faith, and prescribed the religion of his subjects. "It is our pleasure (such is the Imperial style) that all the nations, which are governed by our clemency and moderation, should steadfastly adhere to the religion which was taught by St. Peter to the Romans; which faithful tradition has preserved; and which is now professed by the pontiff Damasus, and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the discipline of the apostles, and the doctrine of the gospel, let us believe the sole deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; under an equal majesty, and a pious Trinity. We authorize the followers of this doctrine to assume the title of Catholic

Christians; and as we judge, that all others are extravagant madmen, we brand them with the infamous name of Heretics; and declare that their conventicles shall no longer usurp the respectable appellation of churches. Besides the condemnation of divine justice, they must expect to suffer the severe penalties, which our authority, guided by heavenly wisdom, shall think proper to inflict upon them." The faith of a soldier is commonly the fruit of instruction, rather than of inquiry; but as the emperor always fixed his eyes on the visible landmarks of orthodoxy, which he had so prudently constituted, his religious opinions were never affected by the specious texts, the subtle arguments, and the ambiguous creeds of the Arian doctors. Once indeed he expressed a faint inclination to converse with the eloquent and learned Eunomius, who lived in retirement at a small distance from Constantinople. But the dangerous interview was prevented by the prayers of the empress Flaccilla, who trembled for the salvation of her husband; and the mind of Theodosius was confirmed by a theological argument, adapted to the rudest capacity. He had lately bestowed on his eldest son, Arcadius, the name and honors of Augustus, and the two princes were seated on a stately throne to receive the homage of their subjects. A bishop, Amphilochius of Iconium, approached the throne, and after saluting, with due reverence, the person of his sovereign, he accosted the royal youth with the same familiar tenderness which he might have used towards a plebeian child. Provoked by this insolent behavior, the monarch gave orders, that the rustic priest should be instantly driven from his presence. But while the guards were forcing him to the door, the dexterous polemic had time to execute his design, by exclaiming, with a

loud voice, "Such is the treatment, O emperor! which the King of heaven has prepared for those impious men, who affect to worship the Father, but refuse to acknowledge the equal majesty of his divine Son."
Theodosius immediately embraced the bishop of Iconium, and never forgot the important lesson, which he had received from this dramatic parable.