

Chapter XXXVI: Total Extinction Of The Western Empire.--Part II.

The pressing solicitations of the senate and people persuaded the emperor Avitus to fix his residence at Rome, and to accept the consulship for the ensuing year. On the first day of January, his son-in-law, Sidonius Apollinaris, celebrated his praises in a panegyric of six hundred verses; but this composition, though it was rewarded with a brass statue, seems to contain a very moderate proportion, either of genius or of truth. The poet, if we may degrade that sacred name, exaggerates the merit of a sovereign and a father; and his prophecy of a long and glorious reign was soon contradicted by the event. Avitus, at a time when the Imperial dignity was reduced to a preeminence of toil and danger, indulged himself in the pleasures of Italian luxury: age had not extinguished his amorous inclinations; and he is accused of insulting, with indiscreet and ungenerous raillery, the husbands whose wives he had seduced or violated. But the Romans were not inclined either to excuse his faults or to acknowledge his virtues. The several parts of the empire became every day more alienated from each other; and the stranger of Gaul was the object of popular hatred and contempt. The senate asserted their legitimate claim in the election of an emperor; and their authority, which had been originally derived from the old constitution, was again fortified by the actual weakness of a declining monarchy. Yet even such a monarchy might have resisted the votes of an unarmed senate, if their discontent had not been supported, or perhaps inflamed, by the Count Ricimer, one of the principal commanders of the Barbarian troops, who formed the military defence of Italy. The daughter of Wallia, king

of the Visigoths, was the mother of Ricimer; but he was descended, on the father's side, from the nation of the Suevi; his pride or patriotism might be exasperated by the misfortunes of his countrymen; and he obeyed, with reluctance, an emperor in whose elevation he had not been consulted. His faithful and important services against the common enemy rendered him still more formidable; and, after destroying on the coast of Corsica a fleet of Vandals, which consisted of sixty galleys, Ricimer returned in triumph with the appellation of the Deliverer of Italy. He chose that moment to signify to Avitus, that his reign was at an end; and the feeble emperor, at a distance from his Gothic allies, was compelled, after a short and unavailing struggle to abdicate the purple. By the clemency, however, or the contempt, of Ricimer, he was permitted to descend from the throne to the more desirable station of bishop of Placentia: but the resentment of the senate was still unsatisfied; and their inflexible severity pronounced the sentence of his death. He fled towards the Alps, with the humble hope, not of arming the Visigoths in his cause, but of securing his person and treasures in the sanctuary of Julian, one of the tutelar saints of Auvergne. Disease, or the hand of the executioner, arrested him on the road; yet his remains were decently transported to Brivas, or Brioude, in his native province, and he reposed at the feet of his holy patron. Avitus left only one daughter, the wife of Sidonius Apollinaris, who inherited the patrimony of his father-in-law; lamenting, at the same time, the disappointment of his public and private expectations. His resentment prompted him to join, or at least to countenance, the measures of a rebellious faction in Gaul; and the poet had contracted some guilt, which it was incumbent on him to

expiate, by a new tribute of flattery to the succeeding emperor.

The successor of Avitus presents the welcome discovery of a great and heroic character, such as sometimes arise, in a degenerate age, to vindicate the honor of the human species. The emperor Majorian has deserved the praises of his contemporaries, and of posterity; and these praises may be strongly expressed in the words of a judicious and disinterested historian: "That he was gentle to his subjects; that he was terrible to his enemies; and that he excelled, in every virtue, all his predecessors who had reigned over the Romans." Such a testimony may justify at least the panegyric of Sidonius; and we may acquiesce in the assurance, that, although the obsequious orator would have flattered, with equal zeal, the most worthless of princes, the extraordinary merit of his object confined him, on this occasion, within the bounds of truth. Majorian derived his name from his maternal grandfather, who, in the reign of the great Theodosius, had commanded the troops of the Illyrian frontier. He gave his daughter in marriage to the father of Majorian, a respectable officer, who administered the revenues of Gaul with skill and integrity; and generously preferred the friendship of Ætius to the tempting offer of an insidious court. His son, the future emperor, who was educated in the profession of arms, displayed, from his early youth, intrepid courage, premature wisdom, and unbounded liberality in a scanty fortune. He followed the standard of Ætius, contributed to his success, shared, and sometimes eclipsed, his glory, and at last excited the jealousy of the patrician, or rather of his wife, who forced him to retire from the service. Majorian, after the

death of Ætius, was recalled and promoted; and his intimate connection with Count Ricimer was the immediate step by which he ascended the throne of the Western empire. During the vacancy that succeeded the abdication of Avitus, the ambitious Barbarian, whose birth excluded him from the Imperial dignity, governed Italy with the title of Patrician; resigned to his friend the conspicuous station of master-general of the cavalry and infantry; and, after an interval of some months, consented to the unanimous wish of the Romans, whose favor Majorian had solicited by a recent victory over the Alemanni. He was invested with the purple at Ravenna: and the epistle which he addressed to the senate, will best describe his situation and his sentiments. "Your election, Conscript Fathers! and the ordinance of the most valiant army, have made me your emperor. May the propitious Deity direct and prosper the counsels and events of my administration, to your advantage and to the public welfare! For my own part, I did not aspire, I have submitted to reign; nor should I have discharged the obligations of a citizen if I had refused, with base and selfish ingratitude, to support the weight of those labors, which were imposed by the republic. Assist, therefore, the prince whom you have made; partake the duties which you have enjoined; and may our common endeavors promote the happiness of an empire, which I have accepted from your hands. Be assured, that, in our times, justice shall resume her ancient vigor, and that virtue shall become, not only innocent, but meritorious. Let none, except the authors themselves, be apprehensive of delations, which, as a subject, I have always condemned, and, as a prince, will severely punish. Our own vigilance, and that of our father, the patrician Ricimer, shall regulate all

military affairs, and provide for the safety of the Roman world, which we have saved from foreign and domestic enemies. You now understand the maxims of my government; you may confide in the faithful love and sincere assurances of a prince who has formerly been the companion of your life and dangers; who still glories in the name of senator, and who is anxious that you should never repent the judgment which you have pronounced in his favor." The emperor, who, amidst the ruins of the Roman world, revived the ancient language of law and liberty, which Trajan would not have disclaimed, must have derived those generous sentiments from his own heart; since they were not suggested to his imitation by the customs of his age, or the example of his predecessors.

The private and public actions of Majorian are very imperfectly known: but his laws, remarkable for an original cast of thought and expression, faithfully represent the character of a sovereign who loved his people, who sympathized in their distress, who had studied the causes of the decline of the empire, and who was capable of applying (as far as such reformation was practicable) judicious and effectual remedies to the public disorders. His regulations concerning the finances manifestly tended to remove, or at least to mitigate, the most intolerable grievances. I. From the first hour of his reign, he was solicitous (I translate his own words) to relieve the weary fortunes of the provincials, oppressed by the accumulated weight of indictions and superindictions. With this view he granted a universal amnesty, a final and absolute discharge of all arrears of tribute, of all debts, which, under any pretence, the fiscal officers might demand from the people.

This wise dereliction of obsolete, vexatious, and unprofitable claims, improved and purified the sources of the public revenue; and the subject who could now look back without despair, might labor with hope and gratitude for himself and for his country. II. In the assessment and collection of taxes, Majorian restored the ordinary jurisdiction of the provincial magistrates; and suppressed the extraordinary commissions which had been introduced, in the name of the emperor himself, or of the Prætorian præfects. The favorite servants, who obtained such irregular powers, were insolent in their behavior, and arbitrary in their demands: they affected to despise the subordinate tribunals, and they were discontented, if their fees and profits did not twice exceed the sum which they condescended to pay into the treasury. One instance of their extortion would appear incredible, were it not authenticated by the legislator himself. They exacted the whole payment in gold: but they refused the current coin of the empire, and would accept only such ancient pieces as were stamped with the names of Faustina or the Antonines. The subject, who was unprovided with these curious medals, had recourse to the expedient of compounding with their rapacious demands; or if he succeeded in the research, his imposition was doubled, according to the weight and value of the money of former times. III. "The municipal corporations, (says the emperor,) the lesser senates, (so antiquity has justly styled them,) deserve to be considered as the heart of the cities, and the sinews of the republic. And yet so low are they now reduced, by the injustice of magistrates and the venality of collectors, that many of their members, renouncing their dignity and their country, have taken refuge in distant and obscure exile." He

urges, and even compels, their return to their respective cities; but he removes the grievance which had forced them to desert the exercise of their municipal functions. They are directed, under the authority of the provincial magistrates, to resume their office of levying the tribute; but, instead of being made responsible for the whole sum assessed on their district, they are only required to produce a regular account of the payments which they have actually received, and of the defaulters who are still indebted to the public. IV. But Majorian was not ignorant that these corporate bodies were too much inclined to retaliate the injustice and oppression which they had suffered; and he therefore revives the useful office of the defenders of cities. He exhorts the people to elect, in a full and free assembly, some man of discretion and integrity, who would dare to assert their privileges, to represent their grievances, to protect the poor from the tyranny of the rich, and to inform the emperor of the abuses that were committed under the sanction of his name and authority.

The spectator who casts a mournful view over the ruins of ancient Rome, is tempted to accuse the memory of the Goths and Vandals, for the mischief which they had neither leisure, nor power, nor perhaps inclination, to perpetrate. The tempest of war might strike some lofty turrets to the ground; but the destruction which undermined the foundations of those massy fabrics was prosecuted, slowly and silently, during a period of ten centuries; and the motives of interest, that afterwards operated without shame or control, were severely checked by the taste and spirit of the emperor Majorian. The decay of the city

had gradually impaired the value of the public works. The circus and theatres might still excite, but they seldom gratified, the desires of the people: the temples, which had escaped the zeal of the Christians, were no longer inhabited, either by gods or men; the diminished crowds of the Romans were lost in the immense space of their baths and porticos; and the stately libraries and halls of justice became useless to an indolent generation, whose repose was seldom disturbed, either by study or business. The monuments of consular, or Imperial, greatness were no longer revered, as the immortal glory of the capital: they were only esteemed as an inexhaustible mine of materials, cheaper, and more convenient than the distant quarry. Specious petitions were continually addressed to the easy magistrates of Rome, which stated the want of stones or bricks, for some necessary service: the fairest forms of architecture were rudely defaced, for the sake of some paltry, or pretended, repairs; and the degenerate Romans, who converted the spoil to their own emolument, demolished, with sacrilegious hands, the labors of their ancestors. Majorian, who had often sighed over the desolation of the city, applied a severe remedy to the growing evil. He reserved to the prince and senate the sole cognizance of the extreme cases which might justify the destruction of an ancient edifice; imposed a fine of fifty pounds of gold (two thousand pounds sterling) on every magistrate who should presume to grant such illegal and scandalous license, and threatened to chastise the criminal obedience of their subordinate officers, by a severe whipping, and the amputation of both their hands. In the last instance, the legislator might seem to forget the proportion of guilt and punishment; but his zeal arose from a generous principle,



and Majorian was anxious to protect the monuments of those ages, in which he would have desired and deserved to live. The emperor conceived, that it was his interest to increase the number of his subjects; and that it was his duty to guard the purity of the marriage-bed: but the means which he employed to accomplish these salutary purposes are of an ambiguous, and perhaps exceptionable, kind. The pious maids, who consecrated their virginity to Christ, were restrained from taking the veil till they had reached their fortieth year. Widows under that age were compelled to form a second alliance within the term of five years, by the forfeiture of half their wealth to their nearest relations, or to the state. Unequal marriages were condemned or annulled. The punishment of confiscation and exile was deemed so inadequate to the guilt of adultery, that, if the criminal returned to Italy, he might, by the express declaration of Majorian, be slain with impunity.

While the emperor Majorian assiduously labored to restore the happiness and virtue of the Romans, he encountered the arms of Genseric, from his character and situation their most formidable enemy. A fleet of Vandals and Moors landed at the mouth of the Liris, or Garigliano; but the Imperial troops surprised and attacked the disorderly Barbarians, who were encumbered with the spoils of Campania; they were chased with slaughter to their ships, and their leader, the king's brother-in-law, was found in the number of the slain. Such vigilance might announce the character of the new reign; but the strictest vigilance, and the most numerous forces, were insufficient to protect the long-extended coast of Italy from the depredations of a naval war. The public opinion had

imposed a nobler and more arduous task on the genius of Majorian. Rome expected from him alone the restitution of Africa; and the design, which he formed, of attacking the Vandals in their new settlements, was the result of bold and judicious policy. If the intrepid emperor could have infused his own spirit into the youth of Italy; if he could have revived in the field of Mars, the manly exercises in which he had always surpassed his equals; he might have marched against Genseric at the head of a Roman army. Such a reformation of national manners might be embraced by the rising generation; but it is the misfortune of those princes who laboriously sustain a declining monarchy, that, to obtain some immediate advantage, or to avert some impending danger, they are forced to countenance, and even to multiply, the most pernicious abuses. Majorian, like the weakest of his predecessors, was reduced to the disgraceful expedient of substituting Barbarian auxiliaries in the place of his unwarlike subjects: and his superior abilities could only be displayed in the vigor and dexterity with which he wielded a dangerous instrument, so apt to recoil on the hand that used it. Besides the confederates, who were already engaged in the service of the empire, the fame of his liberality and valor attracted the nations of the Danube, the Borysthenes, and perhaps of the Tanais. Many thousands of the bravest subjects of Attila, the Gepidæ, the Ostrogoths, the Rugians, the Burgundians, the Suevi, the Alani, assembled in the plains of Liguria; and their formidable strength was balanced by their mutual animosities. They passed the Alps in a severe winter. The emperor led the way, on foot, and in complete armor; sounding, with his long staff, the depth of the ice, or snow, and encouraging the Scythians, who complained of the

extreme cold, by the cheerful assurance, that they should be satisfied with the heat of Africa. The citizens of Lyons had presumed to shut their gates; they soon implored, and experienced, the clemency of Majorian. He vanquished Theodoric in the field; and admitted to his friendship and alliance a king whom he had found not unworthy of his arms. The beneficial, though precarious, reunion of the greater part of Gaul and Spain, was the effect of persuasion, as well as of force; and the independent Bagaudæ, who had escaped, or resisted, the oppression, of former reigns, were disposed to confide in the virtues of Majorian. His camp was filled with Barbarian allies; his throne was supported by the zeal of an affectionate people; but the emperor had foreseen, that it was impossible, without a maritime power, to achieve the conquest of Africa. In the first Punic war, the republic had exerted such incredible diligence, that, within sixty days after the first stroke of the axe had been given in the forest, a fleet of one hundred and sixty galleys proudly rode at anchor in the sea. Under circumstances much less favorable, Majorian equalled the spirit and perseverance of the ancient Romans. The woods of the Apennine were felled; the arsenals and manufactures of Ravenna and Misenum were restored; Italy and Gaul vied with each other in liberal contributions to the public service; and the Imperial navy of three hundred large galleys, with an adequate proportion of transports and smaller vessels, was collected in the secure and capacious harbor of Carthagera in Spain. The intrepid countenance of Majorian animated his troops with a confidence of victory; and, if we might credit the historian Procopius, his courage sometimes hurried him beyond the bounds of prudence. Anxious to

explore, with his own eyes, the state of the Vandals, he ventured, after disguising the color of his hair, to visit Carthage, in the character of his own ambassador: and Genseric was afterwards mortified by the discovery, that he had entertained and dismissed the emperor of the Romans. Such an anecdote may be rejected as an improbable fiction; but it is a fiction which would not have been imagined, unless in the life of a hero.