

CHAPTER XLI

A CENTURY OF REVOLUTION

THE SOLDIER EMPERORS

180-284 A.D.

531. Commodus; the Rule of the Pretorian Guard (180-193 A.D.).—Com'mo-dus, the son and successor of Aurelius, was a



ROMAN LEGIONARY

(Relief on Trajan's Column; from Schreiber, *Atlas of Classical Antiquities*)

weak-minded young man, easily misled by vile companions. While he pursued base pleasures and fought wild beasts in the amphitheatre, the empire visibly declined. The soldiers lost discipline along with their respect for their ruler. The provinces were misgoverned, and the capital was at the mercy of the pretorians, who were no longer under control. After twelve years of such government, at once weak and savage, Commodus was murdered. The pretorian guard, established for the security of the prince,¹ had now grown into a large standing army. Gradually discovering their own importance, these troops lost discipline, and became haughty and violent. They overawed the senate; they terrorized Rome; and the emperor was at their mercy. Pampered especially by Commodus, they murdered his successor, and then sold the vacant office to the highest bidder.

¹ § 502.

When news of this disgraceful event reached the soldiers on the frontier, it made them indignant, for the emperor was their general, and they were the primary source of his power. Accordingly the armies in Syria, on the Danube, and in Britain nominated their own commanders to the office of emperor, and each prepared to enforce its will by arms. Sep-tim'i-us Seve'rus, commander on the Danube and nearest to Rome, won the prize.

532. Septimius Severus (193-211); **Caracalla** (211-217 A.D.). — Severus was a firm, clear-headed man who knew well the needs of the empire. He restored order in Rome, conquered and killed his rivals for the throne, and humbled foreign enemies. As his authority rested upon the armies, he did not hesitate to slight the senate. Under him, therefore, this body lost much of the influence it had enjoyed



SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS
(Capitoline Museum, Rome)

in the preceding period; in fact, his reign marks an important step in the direction of absolute monarchy. His policy was supported by the lawyers who formed his council. Pa-pin'i-an, the ablest of Roman jurists, lived at this time, and held the office of pretorian prefect. Ul'pi-an was scarcely less eminent. Through them and their associates Roman law reached the height of development.

The legislation of these great jurists benefited the whole empire; for even before the death of Severus most of the provincials were Roman citizens under the protection of Roman law. This emperor aimed to place the provinces on a level with Italy. Julius Caesar

had begun the policy of granting the citizenship freely to the provincials; and though Augustus preferred to keep the provinces inferior to Italy, Claudius zealously followed in the footsteps of



TRIUMPHAL ARCH OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

(From a photograph)

Julius. The rulers after Claudius continued his liberal policy till, at the death of Severus, few non-citizens remained. Car-a-cal'la, son and successor of Severus, completed the work of centuries by making all the freemen of good standing in the empire Romans¹ (212 A.D.). Under Severus, however, military service and special taxes on citizens had grown oppressive; and the men whom Cara-

¹ Those excluded from the benefit were the inferior class termed *dediticii* (the "surrendered"), who consisted (1) of barbarians who having surrendered had been settled in the empire, (2) of freedmen who had committed crime.

calla made Romans had to take upon themselves the burdens of citizenship in addition to those they had borne as subjects. Thus the benefit was offset by disadvantages. In fact, the author of the reform cared only for his soldiers; toward all others he was recklessly brutal. He, too, was murdered.

533. Alexander Severus (222-235 A.D.); the New Persian Empire. — Passing by two emperors¹ of little importance, we come to Alexander Severus, an amiable youth and of excellent character. Not only in his respect for the senate, but also in his patronage of education, in his attention to the needs of the poor, and in his mildness and justice, Alexander was a faint imitation of the good emperors. He was too weak, however, to maintain discipline among the soldiers or to defend the empire.

In his reign a new danger to the Roman world arose in the East. From the time of Trajan the Parthian empire had declined. The Persians, still a vigorous race, asserted their independence, and in 227 A.D. Ar-tax-cr'és, their king, overthrew the Parthian monarch and made the empire Persian. He was eager for conquests, and his talent for organization gave him a military power which the East had not possessed for many generations. Ordered to give up his Asiatic provinces to this haughty king, Alexander Severus went to war, but was disgracefully beaten. Henceforth the Persian empire threatened Rome; it compelled her to weaken the northern defences in order to mass troops on the Euphrates, at a time when the German races were threatening invasion.

After his conflict with Persia, Alexander took the field against the Germans on the Rhine. There he was murdered by his soldiers. The pretorian guard had already killed Ulpian, their prefect, and were terrorizing the government as well as the residents of Rome. Thus a reign, in some respects happy, ended in failure, — a pleasant twilight before a period of gloom.

534. Drifting into Anarchy (235-284 A.D.). — During the half-century which followed the death of Alexander, the government suffered continual violence, as emperors rapidly rose and fell. Sometimes two colleagues shared in harmony the imperial office; more frequently, rivals for the throne involved the empire in civil

¹ Ma-cri'nus (217-218) and El-a-gab'a-lus (218-222 B.C.).

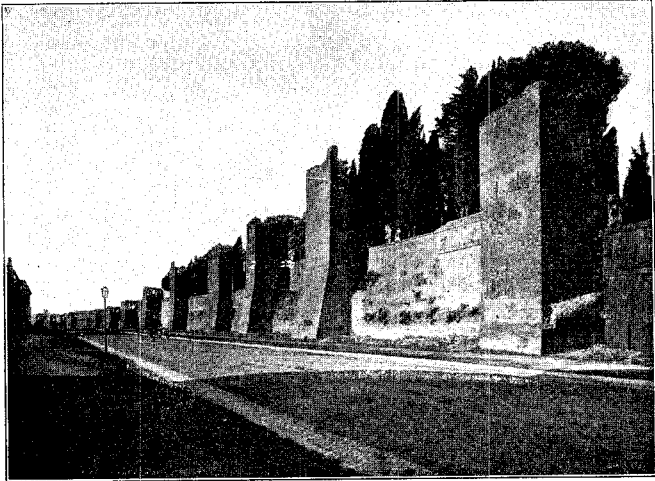
war; rarely did a wearer of the purple die a natural death. About the middle of this period of confusion the empire seemed to be falling to fragments; each army nominated its commander to the highest office, and these rival pretenders, wrongly numbered and misnamed the "Thirty Tyrants," brought the Roman world to anarchy.

While civil war wasted the empire and drew the armies from the frontier, the enemies of Rome met with their first real success in assailing her. On the north the Goths, a German race, after plundering Moe'si-a and Macedonia, defeated and killed the emperor Decius (268 A.D.). At nearly the same time their western kinsmen, the Franks on the lower Rhine, pushed across the boundary and desolated Gaul and Spain. Soon afterward, King Sa'por, the energetic son of Artaxerxes, took the emperor Va-le'ri-an captive. The civilized world seemed defenceless. The Al-e-man'ni, of Germanic race, flung themselves upon northern Italy, and in combination with them a vast horde of Goths, including women and children, crossed the Danube to seek homes within the provinces. Fortunately at this crisis Rome found an able ruler in Marcus Aurelius Claudius (268-270 A.D.), who drove back the Alemanni and destroyed the invading host of Goths.

535. Aurelian Emperor (270-275 A.D.).—His successor, Au-re'/li-an, withdrew the last garrisons from Dacia, — which he gave over to the Vis'i-goths¹ — and brought the boundary once more to the Danube. This was the first territory lost to the empire. As the barbarians began to threaten the capital itself, he surrounded it with a wall, which is still standing, — a magnificent work, yet a monument of the weakness and decay of Rome. Two great fragments had recently broken from the empire: in the East, Queen Ze-no'bi-a, from her splendid court in Pal-my'ra, ruled Syria, Egypt, and a large part of Asia Minor. In the West, the senator Tet'ri-cus was emperor of Gaul, Britain, and northern Spain. Aurelian conquered and destroyed Palmyra, and took Zenobia captive. Afterward he received the surrender of Tetricus. Thus he restored the unity of the empire; and by wars with the Germans he reëstablished the Rhine and the Danube as the northern boundary.

¹ § 556.

Probably no other Roman general ever accomplished so much in so short a time. He is the best example of the soldier emperors of the half-century which followed the death of Alexander Severus. Most of them were natives of Illyricum and its neighborhood, and hence are called Illyrian emperors. As the people of that region were now largely German, they showed a more intense military



THE WALL OF AURELIAN

(From a photograph)

spirit than could be found anywhere else in the empire. Growing up in this environment, the Illyrian emperors were men of military spirit and ability, who passed their time in camp, on the march, and on the field of battle. Their reigns were short; most of them were killed either by the enemy or by their own troops.

Aurelian showed great energy, not only in war, but in government. Simple and frugal in his personal habits, in public he appeared like an Oriental despot, surrounded with grand ceremony and requiring his subjects to worship him as a "Lord and God," who brooked no interference from his senate. But before he could reform the government according to these new ideas, his life was cut short by

an assassin. The army and people honored him after his death as one who had been a worthy ruler. His death was followed by several short reigns, which require no special notice here.

Summary

(1) The hidden weakness of the empire under Marcus Aurelius came to light during the reign of his son. (2) Septimius Severus attempted to restore order chiefly by strengthening the army; (3) but the weakness of the imperial office, together with the enlistment of barbarians in the army, brought the empire into anarchy. (4) The confusion was increased by German invasions. (5) Aurelian reestablished the unity of the empire, and pointed the way to reform.

Suggestive Questions

1. What new causes of decline were added in the period covered by this chapter?
2. Write a brief history of the extension of Roman citizenship from the earliest times to the edict of Caracalla.
3. What was the real power at Rome in the period of the Good Emperors? What came to be in this period?
4. Compare the century of revolution treated of in this chapter with the century of revolution from republic to principate, explaining the tendencies, methods, and results of each.
5. Give an account of the relations between the prince, or emperor, and the senate from Augustus to Aurelian.
6. Compare the portrait of Septimius Severus with that of Hadrian.
7. Describe the equipment of the Roman legionary of this period (p. 500).
8. Compare the Wall of Aurelian (p. 505) with the so-called Servian Wall (p. 354).

Note-book Topics

I. **Septimius Severus.** — Jones, *Roman Empire*, 236-254; Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, i. ch. v; Duruy, *History of Rome*, vi. 476-577; see Indices of other histories.

II. **Zenobia.** — See Indices of the larger histories of Rome.

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