

CHAPTER XLIII

CAUSES OF THE DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE

546. The Decline in Mental Energy. — Even in the great age of prosperity described in the chapter on the Good Emperors, the life of the Mediterranean people showed signs of weakening. There had already set in a decay which was to bring the world back to semi-barbarism. The decline was primarily in mental strength. This loss of mentality was due in great part to the decline of the Greek city-states and the building up of an empire. If the city-states, acting upon one another, and influenced by the surrounding world, produced the strong, brilliant minds of the Greeks, the decay of this political and social system must have had the opposite effect. Imperial government repressed freedom and discouraged thought. The Roman empire completed the ruin which the empire of Alexander had begun. The long, profound peace secured by Rome for the Mediterranean world promoted the soft, gentle virtues of mercy and love; but it repressed the heroic virtues, such as bravery, will power, physical and mental strength, and ambition. The inhabitants of the empire felt that there was but one state on earth; they called it “the world.” There was no international competition in war or diplomacy or in trade — nothing from the outside to stimulate. The result was sluggishness. During the imperial period little progress was made in literature, art, or science. The knowledge which the world possessed stored up in books was gradually lost, and mankind lapsed therefore into ignorance and semi-barbarism.

547. Depopulation; Slavery. — Another cause of decline was depopulation. The reason why the people continually became fewer is to be found chiefly in the growth of city life already mentioned. It is well known that city people as a rule have less vitality

than those of the country, that the population of a city tends to die out unless it is constantly recruited from the country.¹ Generally city people, too, insist on more comforts and luxuries — that is, they have a higher standard of living — than those of the country. Again in the country it costs little to rear children, and at an early age they are put to work, so that they actually become profitable; whereas in the city the cost of bringing them up is far greater, and there is little opportunity for them to work. For these reasons city people are less inclined to marry and to bring up large families than those of the country. To the inhabitants of the Roman empire this cause proved more destructive even than pestilence.

The depopulation was hastened by slavery. During the great conquests captives were sold as slaves, so that they came to be very cheap. Senators and knights bought up vast tracts of land (Latin *lat-i-fund'i-a*, "broad estates"), which they worked by slave labor. The peasant proprietors, unable to compete, sold their small farms or were forcibly ejected by wealthy neighbors. Coming into the cities, these country people could find little work, for the skilled industries, too, were carried on mostly by slaves. The mercantile and other business was largely in the hands of knights and freedmen. Being, therefore, without a livelihood, the poor could not support families to supply the state with soldiers and citizens. In the later empire, as we shall soon learn in more detail, oppressive taxation reduced the masses to misery and despair. There is evidence that in the first two centuries of our era the population of the city of Rome fell off more than one half. Doubtless for the empire as a whole the decrease was considerably greater.

548. The Collapse of the Money System. — Under the principate there was little mining of precious metals, so that the amount of gold and silver in the empire was not materially increased. On the other hand the precious metals were constantly being used in the arts, stored up as offerings in temples, and hoarded by private persons. A greater drain on the currency was caused by the constant exportation of vast sums to Arabia, India, and China in ex-

¹Through recent sanitary improvements, however, cities are now generally free from this law of decay.

change for silks, spices, perfumes, and other luxuries. Little of the gold and silver sent to the Far East ever returned. As a result the amount of money in circulation became smaller every year. The princes could think of no other remedy than that of making the coins lighter, and of debasing the silver pieces by mixing copper with that metal. The amount of alloy was increased so rapidly that in the middle of the third century A.D. the pieces which had once been silver, and were still so in name, had come to be nearly all copper. A piece which in the time of Augustus was worth forty cents came to be worth about one cent. It is a well-known fact that a baser metal, when coined in unlimited quantities, and at a lower value than that of the market, drives all other metals from circulation; for a man will not pay a debt in good gold when the law allows the use of cheap copper for the purpose. The result was that the issue of pale-copper coins stopped the circulation of all gold and silver money. But coins of the value of one cent will not alone suffice for the business of an empire.

549. Taxation under Diocletian and Constantine. — The effect of this want of money on the government, and through it on society, is still more remarkable. We must notice first that the cost of maintaining the government had become many times as great under Diocletian as it had been under Augustus: (1) because of an increase in the number of soldiers and in their pay; and more especially (2) because of the enormous increase in the number of magistrates; and (3) because of the increased splendor and extravagance of the emperors and their higher officials. But as the coinage depreciated, the taxes in money came to be almost worthless. The government had to resort therefore to taxes in kind — grain, meat, cloth, leather, iron, and other products. The heavy poll tax, thereafter imposed on laborers, both men and women, discouraged the poor from rearing children. The unjust land tax forced many peasant proprietors to give up their good fields and settle on sterile mountain land in order to lighten their burden. Hence the soil of the empire constantly became less productive; and this decline further hastened the depopulation.

The great lord still derived profit from his land, (1) because his tax was proportionately lighter; (2) because he was powerful enough

to shirk the payment of taxes. But the field of the peasant became worse than worthless to the owner.

550. Hereditary Social Classes.— We are now in a position to understand how it was that in the late empire society came to be organized in a system of hereditary classes, which enslaved the minds and bodies of the multitude and thus completed the wreck of ancient civilization. One of the chief tasks of the government had long been to supply Rome, afterward Constantinople as well, with food. The people who attended to this work were chiefly the grain-merchants, bakers, cattle-dealers, and swine-dealers. They were organized in guilds, which were given privileges to attract as many as possible. There were plenty of merchants till Diocletian ordered them to take upon themselves without pay the transportation of all government property, including the taxes in kind. As this new burden seemed too great to bear, many tried to forsake their occupation, whereupon he ordered them to continue in it, and their sons after them. For similar reasons all the guilds became hereditary that their members might be compelled to do their duty to the state. Nothing could be more destructive to liberty than such an arrangement. The jealous eyes of the association were always upon each member to see that he bore without shirking his part of the common burden. The tyranny of guild rule was more galling than that of the most despotic king.

551. The Curiales; Military and Civil Service.—How the system of taxation made membership of the curia hereditary must next be explained. The curiales, as stated above,¹ were wealthy men. To insure the collection of taxes the emperor made them responsible for the amount due from their city. In case they failed to collect any part of the tax imposed, they had to make good the deficiency from their own estates. But their burden in providing for the needs of their own community was heavy enough. When, therefore, this additional load was placed on their shoulders, many wished to retire into private life. The emperor then made the position hereditary, and required all who owned above twenty-five acres to accept and retain the place for life. If a man went to another city, he was liable to curial service in both. The office

¹ § 515.

lost all honor, for no inquiry was now made as to the character or occupation of proposed members; and when once a man had entered, nothing short of bankruptcy could relieve his family of the oppressive load. The condition of the curiales was even more unenviable than that of the tradesmen.

Naturally those engaged in the military or civil service of the emperor were free from liability to enrollment among the curiales. Their sons were liable, however, till Constantine declared that sons had a right to the offices of their fathers. This edict made the civil and military posts hereditary, for no one was so self-sacrificing as to exchange an easy, honorable place under the emperor for a life of drudgery as a curialis. The same consideration induced the sons of soldiers to follow the vocations of their fathers.

552. Freeholders, Tenants, and Slaves become Serfs. — Lastly let us consider how the condition of tenants and of peasant proprietors was made hereditary by law, and how these two classes, together with the rural slaves, were merged in one great class of serfs. The more the population dwindled, the more important it became that every one, slave or free, should do his part in supporting the government. Hence it was that the government watched more and more carefully over each individual. It had often happened that slaves escaped taxation by being sold from one estate to another. That the government might keep a stricter account of rural slaves, Constantine ordered that they should not be sold off the estate on which they were born or given their liberty. By this act they ceased to be slaves and became serfs, so attached to the soil as to be bought and sold along with it. The tenants — *co-lo'ni* — were once free to move about as they wished, and to rent land of any lord with whom they could make satisfactory terms. But when heavy taxes rendered their lot hard, many deserted the farms they had taken in rental, either to seek more indulgent lords or to swarm into the cities. To put a stop to this evil, which would soon have destroyed the population, Constantine bound the tenant and his descendants forever to the soil. Thus the tenants, too, became serfs. In like manner the small freeholders, finding their taxes too heavy, tried to escape, whereupon they also with their descendants were bound forever to the soil by

order of the emperor. The work of converting the greater part of the rural laborers to serfs was thus completed.

553. The Large Landowners; the Beginning of Feudalism. — Mention has been made of the large landowners. Most of them throughout the empire were senators. Though many were military or civil officers, on actual duty or retired, few ever sat in the senate either at Rome or at Constantinople. The word senator had come to denote rank rather than a post or function. Men of the class were under no obligation to become curiales, and had few burdens in addition to the tax on their lands and field laborers. The lord was in a position not only to shirk much of his duty to the state, but also to screen his tenants from injustice, and sometimes even from just obligations. It was soon discovered that the tenant's condition was happier, therefore, than that of the freeholder. Many freeholders accordingly made haste to give up their lands to a lord, and become his tenants on condition of receiving his protection. The lord was as a rule glad to receive such persons, as every increase in the number of his dependents gave him greater power to defy the tax collectors and other imperial officials. Those who thus sought his favor were required to swear that they would always remain faithful. The act of putting one's self under the protection of another with a vow of fidelity is termed commendation. The candidate for protection commended himself to his future lord. As there was much land lying everywhere idle through lack of cultivators, the noble was ready to grant a field to any one who was willing to work it and to make the vow of fidelity. Such a grant of land is called a benefit or benefice (Latin *ben-e-fic'i-um*). The government tried in vain to check commendations and the bestowal of benefices. Through them the lords became more and more powerful, till they were almost sovereigns, ruling over estates so extensive as to seem like little kingdoms. This was the beginning of feudalism, which was to reach its full development in the Middle Ages.

Suggestive Questions

1. Write a summary of this chapter like that on p. 444.
2. Why did the city-states of the ancient world decline?
3. Why did the Roman empire offer less encouragement to mental and artistic effort than had the Greek

city-states? 4. Which produces the greater physical strength and endurance, agricultural life or factory life? 5. Would the civilization of the ancient world probably have declined, had it not become united in one empire? 6. Would the empire probably have declined if all the inhabitants had been free? 7. Would a representative government have retarded or prevented the decline? 8. Mention all the causes of decline which were in any way economic. 9. Why was so much land lying uncultivated? 10. How far were the emperors responsible for the wretched condition of the late empire? To what extent was the evil beyond their power to control?

Note-book Topic

Causes of Decline. — Davis, *Roman Empire*, 142-150; Duruy, *History of Rome*, viii. 364-377; Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire*, bk. iii; Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, i. ch. iii. The histories of the Middle Ages usually begin with a study of the decline.

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