

## CHAPTER IV

### The Cruelty, Follies, and Murder of Commodus—Election of Pertinax—His Attempts to Reform the State—his Assassination by the Pretorian Guards

#### *Marcus' Indulgence To His Son, Commodus*

The mildness of Marcus, which the rigid discipline of the Stoics was unable to eradicate, formed, at the same time, the most amiable and defective part of his character. His excellent understanding was often deceived by the unsuspecting goodness of his heart. Artful men, who study the passions of princes and conceal their own, approached his person in the disguise of philosophic sanctity, and acquired riches and honors by affecting to despise them.<sup>1</sup> His excessive indulgence to his brother, his wife, and his son, exceeded the bounds of private virtue, and became a public injury by the example and consequences of their vices.

Faustina, the daughter of Pius and the wife of Marcus, has been as much celebrated for her gallantries as for her beauty. The grave simplicity of the philosopher was ill calculated to engage her wanton flippancy, or to fix that unbounded passion for variety which often discovered personal merit in the meanest of mankind. The Cupid of the ancients was, in general, a very sensual deity; and the amours of an empress, as they exact on her side the plainest advances, are seldom susceptible of much sentimental delicacy. Marcus was the only man in the empire who seemed ignorant or insensible of Faustina's irregularities, which, according to the prejudices of every age, reflected some disgrace on the injured husband. He promoted several of her lovers to posts of honor and profit (*Hist. August.* p. 34). During a connection of 30 years, he invariably gave her proofs of the confidence and respect which did not end with her life. In his *Meditations*, he thanks the gods, who had bestowed on him a wife so faithful, so gentle, and of such a wonderful simplicity of manners. The obsequious senate, at his earnest request, declared her a goddess. She was represented in her temples with the attributes of Juno, Venus, and Ceres. It was decreed on the day of their nuptials, that the youth of either sex should pay their vows before the altar of their chaste patroness.<sup>2</sup>

The monstrous vices of the son have cast a shade on the purity of the father's virtues. It has been objected to Marcus that he sacrificed the happiness of millions to a fond partiality for a worthless boy; that he chose a successor in his own family, rather than in the republic. Nothing, however, was neglected by the anxious father, and by the men of virtue and learning whom he summoned to his assistance, to expand the narrow mind of young Commodus, to correct his growing vices, and to render him worthy of the throne for which he was designed. But the power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy, except in those happy dispositions where it is almost superfluous. The distasteful lesson of a grave philosopher was, in a moment, obliterated by the whisper of a profligate favorite; and Marcus himself blasted the fruits of this labored education by admitting his son, at the age of 14 or 15, to a full participation of the Imperial power. He lived only 4 years afterward, but long enough to repent a rash measure, which raised the impetuous youth above the restraint of reason and authority.

<sup>1</sup> See the complaints of Avidius Cassius, *Hist. August.* p. 45. These are, it is true, the complaints of factions but even faction exaggerates rather than invents.

<sup>2</sup> Dion Cassius, 1. lxxi. p. 1195. *Hist. August.* p. 33. *Commentaire de Spanheim sur les Caesars de Julien*, p. 289. The deification of Faustina is the only defect which Julian's criticism is able to discover in the all-accomplished character of Marcus.

Most of the crimes which disturb the internal peace of society are produced by the restraints which the necessary, but unequal, laws of property have imposed on the appetites of mankind, by confining to a few the possession of those objects that are coveted by many. Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is of the most imperious and unsociable nature, since the pride of one man requires the submission of the multitude. In the tumult of civil discord, the laws of society lose their force, and their place is seldom supplied by those of humanity. The ardor of contention, the pride of victory, the despair of success, the memory of past injuries, and the fear of future dangers, all contribute to inflame the mind and to silence the voice of pity. From such motives almost every page of history has been stained with civil blood. But these motives will not account for the unprovoked cruelties of Commodus, who had nothing to wish and everything to enjoy. The beloved son of Marcus succeeded (AD 180) to his father, amid the acclamations of the senate and armies.<sup>3</sup> When he ascended the throne, the happy youth saw round him no competitor to remove, nor enemies to punish. In this calm, elevated station, it was surely natural that he should prefer the love of mankind to their hate, the mild glories of his five predecessors, to the ignominious fate of Nero and Domitian.

Yet Commodus was not, as he has been represented, a tiger born with an insatiate thirst of human blood, and capable, from his infancy, of the most inhuman actions. (Hist. August. p. 46) Nature had formed him of a weak, rather than a wicked, disposition. His simplicity and timidity rendered him the slave of his attendants, who gradually corrupted his mind. His cruelty, which at first obeyed the dictates of others, degenerated into habit, and at length became the ruling passion of his soul. (Dion Cassius, 1. lxxii. p. 1203)

Upon the death of his father, Commodus found himself embarrassed with the command of a great army, and the conduct of a difficult war against the Quadi and Marcomanni.<sup>4</sup> The servile and profligate youths whom Marcus had banished soon regained their station and influence about the new emperor. They exaggerated the hardships and dangers of a campaign in the wild countries beyond the Danube. They assured the indolent prince that the terror of his name and the arms of his lieutenants would be sufficient to complete the conquest of the dismayed barbarians, or to impose such conditions as were more advantageous than any conquest. By a dexterous application to his sensual appetites, they compared the tranquillity, splendor, and refined pleasures of Rome with the tumult of a Pannonian camp, which afforded neither leisure nor materials for luxury. (Herodian, 1. i. p. 12) Commodus listened to the pleasing advice; but while he hesitated between his own inclination, and the awe which he still retained for his father's counselors, summer passed, and his triumphal entry into the capital was deferred until autumn. His graceful person (Herodian, 1. i. p. 16), popular address, and imagined virtues, attracted the public favor. The honorable peace which he had recently granted to the barbarians diffused a universal joy.<sup>5</sup> His impatience to revisit Rome was fondly ascribed to the love of his country, and his dissolute course of amusements was faintly condemned in a prince of nineteen years of age.

During the first 3 years of his reign, the forms, and even the spirit, of the old administration were maintained by those faithful counselors to whom Marcus had recommended to his son, and for whose wisdom and integrity Commodus still entertained a reluctant esteem. The young prince and his profligate favorites revelled in all the license of sovereign power; but his hands were yet unstained with

<sup>3</sup> Commodus was the first *Porphyrogenetus* (born since his father's accession to the throne). By a new strain of flattery the Egyptian medals date by the years of his life; as if they were synonymous to those of his reign. Tillemont, Hist. des Empereurs, tom. li. P 752

<sup>4</sup> According to Tertullian (Apolog. c. 25), he died at Sirmium. But the situation of Vindobona (Vienna), where both the Victors place his death, is better adapted to the operations of the war against the Marcomanni and Quadi.

<sup>5</sup> This universal joy is well described (from the medals as well as historians by Mr. Wotton, Hist. of Rome, pp. 192, 193.

blood. He had even displayed a generosity of sentiment which might perhaps have ripened into solid virtue.<sup>6</sup> A fatal incident decided his fluctuating character.

#### *AD 183: Commodus Wounded By An Assassin*

One evening in AD 183, as the emperor was returning to the palace through a dark and narrow portico in the amphitheater (*Maffei degli Amphitheatri*, p. 126), a waiting assassin rushed upon him with a drawn sword, loudly exclaiming, "The senate sends you this!" The menace prevented the deed. The assassin was seized by the guards and immediately revealed the authors of the conspiracy. It had been formed, not in the state, but within the walls of the palace. Lucilla, the emperor's sister, and widow of Lucius Verus, impatient of the second rank, and jealous of the reigning empress, had armed the murderer against her brother's life. She had not ventured to communicate the black design to her second husband, Claudius Pompeianus, a senator of distinguished merit and unshaken loyalty. Among the crowd of her lovers, however (for she imitated the manners of Faustina), she found men of desperate fortunes and wild ambition, who were prepared to serve her more violent as well as tender passions. The conspirators experienced the rigor of justice, and the abandoned princess was punished, first with exile, and afterward with death. (Dion, 1. lxxii. p. 1205; Herodian, 1. i. p. 16; Hist. August. p. 46)

#### *Commodus' Hatred of the Senate*

But the words of the assassin sunk deep into the mind of Commodus, and left an indelible impression of fear and hatred against the whole body of the senate. Those whom he had dreaded as determined ministers he now suspected as secret enemies. The Delators, a race of men discouraged, and almost extinguished under former reigns, again became formidable, as soon as they discovered that the emperor was desirous of finding disaffection and treason in the senate. That assembly, whom Marcus had ever considered as the great council of the nation, was composed of the most distinguished of Romans. Distinction of every kind soon became criminal. The possession of wealth stimulated the diligence of the informers. Rigid virtue implied a tacit censure of the irregularities of Commodus. Important services implied a dangerous superiority of merit, and the father's friendship always insured the son's aversion. Suspicion was equivalent to proof, trial to condemnation. The execution of a considerable senator was attended with the death of all who might lament or revenge his fate. And when Commodus once tasted human blood, he became incapable of pity or remorse.

Of these innocent victims of tyranny, none died more lamented than the two brothers of the Quintilian family, Maximus and Condius. Their brotherly love has saved their names from oblivion, and endeared their memory to posterity. Their studies and occupations, their pursuits and pleasures, were still the same. In the enjoyment of a great estate, they never admitted the idea of a separate interest. Some fragments are now extant of a treatise which they composed in common. In every action of life it was observed that their two bodies were animated by one soul. The Antonines, who valued their virtues, and delighted in their union, raised them, in the same year, to the consulship. Marcus afterward entrusted to their joint care the civil administration of Greece, and a great military command, in which they obtained a signal victory over the Germans. The kind cruelty of Commodus united them in death.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Manilius, the confidential secretary of Avidius Cassius, was discovered after he had lain concealed several years. The emperor nobly relieved the public anxiety by refusing to see him and burning his vapors without opening them. Dion Cassius, I lxxii. p. 1209.

<sup>7</sup> In a note upon the Augustan History, p. 96, Casaubon has collected a number of particulars concerning these celebrated

### *AD 186: Perennis*

The tyrant's rage, after having shed the noblest blood of the senate, at length recoiled on the principal instrument of his cruelty. While Commodus was immersed in blood and luxury, he divulged details of some public business on Perennis, a servile and ambitious minister, who had obtained his post through his predecessor's murder, but who possessed a considerable share of vigor and ability. By acts of extortion, and the forfeited estates of the nobles sacrificed to his avarice, he had accumulated an immense treasure. The Praetorian guards were under his immediate command, and his son, who already discovered a military genius, was at the head of the Illyrian legions. Perennis aspired to the empire, or what, in the eyes of Commodus, amounted to treason and insurrection. Perennis was capable of gaining the throne, had he not been prevented, surprised, and put to death (AD 186). The fall of a minister is a very trifling incident in the general history of the empire. It was hastened, however, by an extraordinary circumstance, which proved how much the nerves of discipline were already relaxed. Britain's armies, discontented with Perennis' administration, formed a deputation of 1,500 select men, with instructions to march to Rome and lay their complaints before the emperor. These military petitioners, by their own determined behavior, by inflaming the divisions of the guards, by exaggerating the strength of the British army, and by alarming the fears of Commodus, exacted and obtained the minister's death as the only redress of their grievances.<sup>8</sup> This presumption of a distant army, and their discovery of the weakness of government, was a sure presage of the most dreadful convulsions.

### *Revolt of Maternus*

The negligence of the public administration was betrayed soon afterward by a new disorder which arose from the smallest beginnings. A spirit of desertion began to prevail among the troops, and the deserters, instead of seeking their safety in flight or concealment, infested the highways. Maternus, a private soldier of a daring boldness beyond his rank, collected these bands of robbers into a little army, set open the prisons, invited the slaves to assert their freedom, and plundered with impunity the rich and defenseless cities of Gaul and Spain. The governors of the provinces, who had long been the spectators, and perhaps the partners, of his depredations, were, at length, roused from their supine indolence by the threatening commands of the emperor. Maternus found that he was surrounded, and knew he would be overpowered. A great effort of despair was his last resource. He ordered his followers to disperse, to pass the Alps in small parties and various disguises, and to assemble at Rome during the licentious tumult of the festival of Cybele.<sup>9</sup> Murdering Commodus and taking the vacant throne was no ambition of a common robber. His measures were so ably concerted that his concealed troops already filled the streets of Rome. A co-conspirator's jealousy discovered and ruined this singular enterprise in the moment when it was ripe for execution. (Herodian, 1. i. pp. 23, 28)

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brothers.

<sup>8</sup> Dion, 1. lxxii. p. 1210. Herodian, 1. i. p. 22. Hist. August. p. 48. Dion gives a much less odious character of Perennis than the other historians. His moderation is almost a pledge of his veracity.

<sup>9</sup> During the second Punic war, the Romans imported from Asia the worship of the mother of the gods. Her festival, the *Megalesia*, began on April 4th, and lasted 6 days. The streets were crowded with mad processions, the theaters with spectators, and the public tables with unbidden guests. Order and police were suspended, and pleasure was the only serious business of the city. See Ovid. de Fastis, 1. iv. 189, etc.

## *Cleander—His Avarice and Cruelty*

Suspicious princes often promote the last of mankind from a vain persuasion that those who have no dependence, except on their favor, will have no attachment, except to the person of their benefactor. Cleander, the successor of Perennis, was a Phrygian by birth; of a nation over whose stubborn but servile temper blows only could prevail. (Cicero pro Flacco, c. 27) He had been sent from his native country to Rome in the capacity of a slave. As a slave he entered the Imperial palace, rendered himself useful to his master's passions, and rapidly ascended to the most exalted station which a subject could enjoy. His influence over Commodus was much greater than that of his predecessor, for Cleander was devoid of any ability or virtue which could inspire the emperor with envy or distrust. Avarice was the reigning passion of his soul, and the great principle of his administration. The ranks of Consul, Patrician and Senator, were exposed to public sale. It would have been considered as disaffection if any one had refused to purchase these empty and disgraceful honors with the greatest part of his fortune.<sup>10</sup> In the lucrative provincial jobs, the minister shared with the governor the spoils of the people. The execution of law was venal and arbitrary. A wealthy criminal might obtain, not only the reversal of the sentence by which he was justly condemned, but might likewise inflict whatever punishment he pleased on the accuser, witnesses, and judge.

By these means, Cleander, in the space of 3 years, had accumulated more wealth than had ever yet been possessed by any freedman.<sup>11</sup> Commodus was perfectly satisfied with the magnificent presents which the artful courtier laid at his feet in the most seasonable moments. To divert the public envy, Cleander, under the emperor's name, erected baths, porticoes, and places of exercise, for the people's use.<sup>12</sup> He flattered himself that the Romans, dazzled and amused by this apparent liberality, would be less affected by the bloody scenes which were daily exhibited. He assumed they would forget the death of Byrrhus, a senator to whose superior merit the late emperor had granted one of his daughters. He believed they would forgive the execution of Arrius Antoninus, the last representative of the name and virtues of the Antonines. The former, with more integrity than prudence, tried to tell his brother-in-law of Cleander's true character. A just sentence pronounced by the latter during his reign as proconsul of Asia, against a worthless creature of the favorite proved fatal to him. (Hist. August. p. 48) After the fall of Perennis, the terrors of Commodus had, for a short time, assumed the appearance of a return to virtue. He repealed the most odious of his acts, loaded his memory with the public's loathing, and ascribed to the pernicious counsels of that wicked minister all the errors of his inexperienced youth. But his repentance lasted only 30 days. Under Cleander's tyranny, the administration of Perennis was often regretted.

### *AD 189: Cleander's Sedition and Death*

Pestilence and famine contributed to fill up the measure of Rome's calamities.<sup>13</sup> The first could be only imputed to the just indignation of the gods. But in AD 189, however, a monopoly of corn, supported by the riches and power of the minister, was considered as the immediate cause of the second. The popular discontent, after it had long circulated in whispers, broke out in the assembled

<sup>10</sup> One of these dearly bought promotions occasioned a popular saying that Julius Solon was banished into the senate.

<sup>11</sup> Dion (I. lxxii. pp. 12, 13) observes that no freedman had possessed riches equal to those of Cleander. The fortune of Pallas amounted, however, to upward of £205,000; *Ter miules*

<sup>12</sup> Dion, I. lxxii. pp. 12, 13. Herodian, I. i. p. 29. Hist. August. p. 52. These baths were situated near the *Porta Capena*. Nordini Roma Antica, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Herodian, I. i. p. 28. Dion, I. lxxii. p. 1215. The latter says that 2,000 persons died every day at Rome during a considerable length of time.

circus. The people forsook their favorite pastimes for the more delicious pleasure of revenge. The crowds rushed toward a palace in the suburbs, one of the emperor's retirements, and demanded, with angry clamors, the head of the public enemy. Cleander, who commanded the Pertinax guards,<sup>14</sup> ordered a body of cavalry to sally forth and disperse the seditious multitude. The multitude fled carelessly toward the city, where several were slain and many more trampled to death. When the cavalry entered the streets, their pursuit was stopped by a shower of stones and darts from the roofs and windows of the houses. The foot guards,<sup>15</sup> who had been long jealous of the prerogatives and insolence of the Pretorian cavalry, joined the people's party. The tumult became a regular engagement, and threatened a general massacre. The Pretorians at length gave way, oppressed with numbers; and the tide of popular fury returned with redoubled violence against the gates of the palace, where Commodus lay, dissolved in luxury, and alone unconscious of the civil war. It was death to approach his person with the unwelcome news. He would have perished in this supine security had not two women, his elder sister Fadilla, and Marcia, the most favored of his concubines, ventured to break into his presence. Bathed in tears, and with disheveled hair, they threw themselves at his feet. With all the pressing eloquence of fear, told the frightened emperor the minister's crimes, the rage of the people, and the impending ruin which, in moments, would burst over his palace and person. Commodus started from his dream of pleasure, and commanded that Cleander's head be thrown out to the people. The desired spectacle instantly appeased the tumult. The son of Marcus might even yet have regained the affection and confidence of his outraged subjects.<sup>16</sup>

### *Commodus' Evil Pleasures*

Yet every sentiment of virtue and humanity was extinct in the mind of Commodus. While he thus abandoned the reins of empire to these unworthy favorites, he valued nothing in sovereign power, except the unbounded license of indulging his sensual appetites. His hours were spent in a harem of 300 beautiful women, and as many boys, of every rank and of every province. Wherever the arts of seduction proved ineffectual, the brutal lover had recourse to violence. The ancient historians have expatiated on these abandoned scenes of prostitution, which scorned every restraint of nature or modesty. However, it would be difficult translating their vivid descriptions into the decency of modern language. The intervals of lust were filled up with the basest amusements. The influence of a polite age, and the labor of an attentive education, had never been able to infuse into his rude and brutish mind the least tincture of learning. He was the first of the Roman emperors totally devoid of taste for the pleasures of the understanding. Nero himself excelled, or affected to excel, in the elegant arts of music and poetry. Nor should we despise his pursuits, had he not converted the pleasing relaxation of a leisure hour into the serious business and ambition of his life. But Commodus, from his earliest infancy, discovered an aversion to whatever was rational or liberal, and a fond attachment to the amusements of the populace. These included the sports of the circus and amphitheater, gladiator combats, and hunting wild beasts. The masters in every branch of learning, whom Marcus provided for his son, were received with inattention and disgust. The Moors and Parthians, who taught him to throw the javelin and shoot the bow, found a disciple who delighted in his application, and soon equaled the most skillful of his instructors in the steadiness of the eye and the dexterity of the hand.

<sup>14</sup> From some remains of modesty, Cleander declined the title of Pretorian prefect, while assuming its powers. While other freedmen became accountants and writers, Cleander called himself a fighter, entrusted with his master's defense. Salmasius and Casaubon seem to have talked very idly upon this passage.

<sup>15</sup> It is doubtful whether he means the Pretorian infantry or the *urban troops*. It was a body of 6,000 men, whose rank and discipline were unequal to their numbers. Neither Tillémont nor Wotton chooses to decide this question.

<sup>16</sup> Dion Cassius, l. lxxii. p. 1215. Herodian, l. I. p. 32. Hist. August. p. 48.

### *Commodus' Sordid Sports; Hunting of Wild Beasts*

The servile crowd, whose fortune depended on their master's vices, applauded these ignoble pursuits. The deceitful voice of flattery reminded him that Hercules had acquired a place among the gods and an immortal memory among men by exploits of the same nature; by the defeat of the *Nemaen* lion, and the slaughter of the wild boar of *Erymanthus*. They only forgot to observe that, in the first ages of society, when fiercer animals often disputed with man over possession of an unsettled country, a successful war against those savages is one of the most innocent and beneficial labors of heroism. In the civilized state of the Roman Empire, the wild beasts had long since retired from the face of man and the neighborhood of populous cities. To surprise them in their solitary haunts, and transport them to Rome that they might be slain by a pompous emperor, was an enterprise equally ridiculous for the prince, and oppressive for the people<sup>17</sup> ignorant of these distinctions. Commodus eagerly embraced the glorious resemblance, and styled himself *the Roman Hercules* (As we still read on his medals—Spanheim de Numismat. Dissertat. xii. tom. ii. p. 493) The club and the lion's hide were placed alongside the throne, among the ensigns of sovereignty. Statues were erected in which Commodus was represented in the character, and with the attributes, of the god whose valor and dexterity he endeavored to emulate in the daily course of his ferocious amusements. (Dion, I. lxxii. p. 1216. Hist. August. p. 49)

### *Exhibits His Skill In the Amphitheater*

Elated with these praises, which gradually extinguished the innate sense of shame, Commodus resolved to exhibit before the eyes of the Roman people, those exercises, which till then he had decently confined within the walls of his palace, and to the presence of a few favorites. On the appointed day, the various motives of flattery, fear and curiosity attracted to the amphitheater an innumerable multitude of spectators. Some degree of applause was deservedly bestowed on the uncommon skill of the Imperial performer. Whether he aimed at the head or heart of the animal, the wound was alike certain and mortal. With arrows, whose point was shaped into the form of a crescent, Commodus often intercepted the rapid career and cut asunder the long bony neck of the ostrich.<sup>18</sup> A panther was let loose, and the archer waited till he had leaped upon a trembling malefactor. In the same instant the shaft flew, the beast dropped dead, and the man remained unhurt. The dens of the amphitheater disgorged at once a hundred lions. A hundred darts from the unerring hand of Commodus laid them dead as they ran raging round the Arena. Neither the huge bulk of the elephant, nor the scaly hide of the rhinoceros, could defend them from his stroke. Ethiopia and India yielded their most extraordinary productions. Several animals were slain in the amphitheater which had been seen only in the representations of art, or perhaps of fancy.<sup>19</sup> In all these exhibitions, the securest precautions were used to protect the person of the Roman Hercules from the desperate spring of any savage, who might possibly disregard the dignity of the emperor and the sanctity of the god. (Herodian, I. i. p. 37. Hist. August. p. 50.)

<sup>17</sup> The African lions, when pressed by hunger, infested open villages and cultivated country with impunity. The royal beast was thus reserved for the pleasures of the emperor and the capital. The unfortunate peasant who killed one of them, though in his own defense, incurred a very heavy penalty. This extraordinary game law was mitigated by Honorius, and finally repealed by Justinian. Codex Theodos. tom. v. p. 92, ci Comment Gethofred.

<sup>18</sup> The ostrich's neck is 3 feet long, and composed of 17 vertebrae. Isuffon, Hist. Naturelle.

<sup>19</sup> Commodus killed a *Camelopardalis* (giraffe) (Dion, I. Ltxii. p. 1211), the tallest, the most gentle, and the most useless of the large quadrupeds. This singular animal, a native only of the interior parts of Africa, has not been seen in Europe since the revival of letters; and though M. de Buffon (Hist. Naturelle, tom. xiii.) has endeavored to describe, he has not ventured to delineate, the giraffe.

## *His Infamy*

Even the commonest Romans felt shame and indignation when they saw their leader enter the lists as a gladiator, glorying in a profession which the laws and manners of the Romans had branded with the just note of infamy.<sup>20</sup> He chose the apparel and weapons of the *Secutor*, whose combat with the *Retiarius* formed one of the liveliest scenes in the bloody sports of the amphitheater. The *Secutor* was armed with a helmet, sword and buckler. His naked antagonist had only a large net and a trident. With one he endeavored to entangle, with the other to dispatch his enemy. If he missed the first throw, he was obliged to fly from the pursuit of the *Secutor*, till he had prepared his net for a second cast.<sup>21</sup> The emperor fought in this character 735 times. These glorious achievements were carefully recorded in the public acts of the empire. So that he might omit no circumstance of infamy, he received, from the common fund of gladiators, a stipend so exorbitant that it became a new and most ignominious tax upon the Roman people.<sup>22</sup> It may be easily supposed, that in these engagements the master of the world was always successful. In the amphitheater his victories were not often confident. But when he exercised his skill in the school of gladiators, or his own palace, his wretched antagonists were frequently honored with a mortal wound from the hand of Commodus, and obliged to seal their flattery with their blood.<sup>23</sup> He now disdained the label of Hercules. The name of Paulus, a celebrated *Secutor*, was the only one which delighted his ear. It was inscribed on his colossal statues, and repeated in the redoubled acclamations<sup>24</sup> of the mournful and applauding senate.<sup>25</sup> Claudius Pompeianus, the virtuous husband of Lucilla, was the only senator who asserted the honor of his rank. As a father, he permitted his sons to consult their safety by attending the amphitheater. As a Roman, he declared that his own life was in the emperor's hands, but that he would never behold the son of Marcus prostituting his person and dignity. Notwithstanding his manly resolution, Pompeianus escaped the resentment of the tyrant, and, with his honor, had the good fortune to preserve his life.<sup>26</sup>

## *AD 192: Conspiracy of His Domestics; Commodus' Death*

Commodus had now attained the summit of vice and infamy. Amid the acclamations of a flattering court, he was unable to disguise from himself that he had deserved the contempt and hatred of every man of sense and virtue in his empire. His ferocious spirit was irritated by the consciousness of that hatred, by the envy of every kind of merit, by the just apprehension of danger, and by the habit of slaughter, which he contracted in his daily amusements. History has preserved a long list of consular senators sacrificed to his wanton suspicion, which sought out, with peculiar anxiety, those unfortunate

<sup>20</sup> The virtuous and even the wise princes forbade the senators and knights to embrace this scandalous profession, under pain of infamy, or, what was more dreaded by those profligate wretches, of exile. The tyrants allured them to dishonor by threats and rewards. Nero once produced, in the Arena, 40 senators and 60 knights. Lipsius, *Saturnalia*, 1. ii. c. 2. He has happily corrected a passage of Suetonius, in *Nerone*, c. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Lipsius, 1. ii. c. 7, 8. Juvenal. in the eighth satire, gives a picturesque description of this combat.

<sup>22</sup> Hist. August. p. 50. Dion, 1. lxxii. p. 1220. He received for each time, *decies*, about £8,000 sterling.

<sup>23</sup> Victor tells us that Commodus only allowed his antagonists a leaden weapon, dreading most probably the consequences of their despair.

<sup>24</sup> They were obliged to repeat 626 times, *Paulus first of the Secutors*, etc.

<sup>25</sup> Dion, 1. lxxii. p. 1221. He speaks of his own baseness and danger.

<sup>26</sup> He mixed, however, some prudence with his courage, and passed the greatest part of his time in a country retirement, alleging his advanced age and the weakness of his eyes. "I never saw him in the senate," says Dion, "except during the short reign of Pertinax." All his infirmities had suddenly left him, and they returned as suddenly upon the murder of that excellent prince. Dion, 1. lxxiii. P. 1227.

persons connected, however remotely, with the family of the Antonines, without sparing even the ministers of his crimes or pleasures.<sup>27</sup> His cruelty proved at last fatal to himself. He had shed with impunity the noblest blood of Rome. He perished as soon as he was dreaded by his own domestics. Marcia his favorite concubine, Eclectus his chamberlain, and Laetus his Pretorian prefect, alarmed by the fate of their companions and predecessors, resolved to prevent the destruction which every hour hung over their heads, either from the mad caprice of the tyrant or the sudden indignation of the people. Marcia seized the occasion of presenting a draught of wine to her lover, after he had fatigued himself with hunting some wild beasts. Commodus retired to sleep, but while he was laboring with the effects of poison and drunkenness, a robust youth, by profession a wrestler, entered his chamber, and strangled him without resistance. The body was secretly conveyed out of the palace, before the least suspicion was entertained in the city, or even in the court, of the emperor's death. Such was the fate of the son of Marcus. So easy was it to destroy a hated tyrant who, by the artificial powers of government, had oppressed, during 13 years, so many millions of subjects, each of whom was equal to their master in personal strength and personal abilities. (Dion, 1. lxxii. p. 1222. Herodian, 1. i. p. 43. Hist. August. p. 52.)

### *Pertinax Made Emperor*

The measures of the conspirators were conducted with the deliberate coolness and celerity which the greatness of the occasion required. They resolved instantly to fill the vacant throne with an emperor whose character would justify and maintain the action that had been committed. They fixed on Pertinax, prefect of the city, an ancient senator of consular rank, whose conspicuous merit had broke through the obscurity of his birth, and raised him to the first honors of the state. He had successively governed most of the provinces of the empire; and in all his great callings, military as well as civil, he had uniformly distinguished himself by the firmness, prudence, and integrity of his conduct.<sup>28</sup> He now remained almost bereft of the friends and ministers of Marcus. At a late hour of the night, when he was awakened with the news that the chamberlain and the prefect were at his door, he received them with intrepid resignation, and desired they would execute their master's orders. Instead of death, they offered him the throne of the Roman world. During some moments he doubted their intentions and assurances. Convinced at length of the death of Commodus, he accepted the purple with a sincere reluctance, the natural effect of his knowledge both of the duties and of the dangers of the supreme rank.<sup>29</sup>

Laetus conducted without delay his new emperor to the camp of the Pretorians, diffusing at the same time through the city a seasonable report that Commodus died suddenly of an apoplexy; and that

<sup>27</sup> The prefects were changed almost hourly or daily; and the caprice of Commodus was often fatal to his most favorite chamberlains. Hist. August. pp. 46, 51.

<sup>28</sup> Pertinax was a native of Alba Pompeia, in Piedmont, and son of a timber-merchant. The order of his job history (marked by Capitolinus) well deserves to be set down, as expressive of the form of government and manners of the age. 1. He was a centurion. 2. Prefect of a cohort in Syria, in the Parthian war, and in Britain. 3. He obtained an *Ala*, or horse squadron, in Massia. 4. He was commissary of provisions on the Aemilian way. 5. He commanded the fleet upon the Rhine. 6. He was procurator of Dada, with a salary of about £1,600 a year. 7. He commanded the Teterans of a legion. 8. He obtained the rank of senator. 9. Of praetor. 10. With the command of the first legion in Rhaetia and Noricum. 11. He was consul about the year 175. 12. He attended Marcus into the east. 13. He commanded an army on the Danube. 14. He was consular legate of Maesia. 15. Of Dada. 16. Of Syria. 17. Of Britain. 18. He had the care of the public provisions at Rome. 19. He was proconsul of Africa. 20. Prefect of the city. Herodian (L 1. p. 48) does justice to his disinterested spirit; but Capitolinus, who collected every popular rumor, charges him with a great fortune acquired by bribery and corruption.

<sup>29</sup> Julian in the Caesars taxes him with being accessory to the death of Commodus.

the virtuous Pertinax had already succeeded to the throne. The guards were rather surprised than pleased with the suspicious death of a prince whose indulgence and liberality they alone had experienced. But the emergency of the occasion, the authority of their prefect, the reputation of Pertinax, and the clamors of the people, obliged them to stifle their secret discontents. They accepted money promised by the new emperor, swore allegiance to him, and with joyful acclamations and laurels in their hands, conducted him to the senate-house, that the military consent might be ratified by the civil authority.

### *Acknowledged*

This important night was now far spent. With the dawn of day, and the commencement of the New Year (January 1<sup>st</sup> AD 193), the senators expected a summons to attend an ignominious ceremony. In spite of all protest, even of those of his creatures who yet preserved any regard for prudence or decency, Commodus had resolved to pass the night in the gladiators' school. From there, he would take possession of the consulship, in the dress and with the attendance of that infamous crew. Suddenly, before daybreak, the senate was called together in the temple of Concord to meet the guards and to ratify the election of a new emperor. For a few minutes they sat in silent suspense, doubtful of their unexpected deliverance, and suspicious of the cruel artifices of Commodus. But when at length they were assured that the tyrant was no more, they resigned themselves to all the transports of joy and indignation. Pertinax, who modestly represented the plainness of his background, and pointed out several noble senators more deserving than himself of the empire, was constrained by their dutiful violence to ascend the throne, and received all the titles of imperial power, confirmed by the most sincere vows of fidelity. The memory of Commodus was branded with eternal infamy. The names of tyrant, gladiator, and public enemy, resounded in every corner of the house. They decreed in tumultuous votes that his honors should be reversed, his titles erased from the public monuments, his statues thrown down, his body dragged with a hook into the stripping room of the gladiators, to satiate the public fury. They expressed some indignation against those officious servants who had already presumed to screen his remains from the justice of the senate. But Pertinax could not refuse those last rites to the memory of Marcus, and the tears of his first protector Claudius Pompeianus, who lamented the cruel fate of his brother-in-law, and lamented still more that he had deserved it.<sup>30</sup>

### *Legal Jurisdiction of the Senate Over the Emperor*

These effusions of impotent rage against a dead emperor, whom the senate had flattered when alive with the most abject servility, betrayed a just but ungenerous spirit of revenge. The legality of these decrees was, however, supported by the principles of the Imperial constitution. To censure, depose, or punish with death, the first magistrate of the republic, who had abused his delegated trust, was the ancient and undoubted prerogative of the Roman senate.<sup>31</sup> But that feeble assembly was obliged to content itself with inflicting on a fallen tyrant that public justice, from which, during his life and reign, he had been shielded by the strong arm of military despotism.

### *Virtues of Pertinax*

Pertinax found a nobler way of condemning his predecessor's memory, by contrast of his own

<sup>30</sup> Capitolinus gives us the particulars of these chaotic votes, which were moved by one senator, and repeated, or rather chanted, by the whole body. Hist. August. p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> The senate condemned Nero to be put to death by overwhelming majority. Sueton. C. 49

virtues with the vices of Commodus. On the day of his accession, he resigned over to his wife and son his whole private fortune, that they might have no pretense to solicit favors at the expense of the state. He refused to flatter the vanity of the former with the title of Augusta, or to corrupt the inexperienced youth of the latter by the rank of Caesar. Accurately distinguishing between the duties of a parent and those of a sovereign, he educated his son with a severe simplicity, which, while it gave him no assured prospect of the throne, might in time have rendered him worthy of it. In public, the behavior of Pertinax was grave and affable. He lived with the virtuous part of the senate (and in a private station he had been acquainted with the true character of each individual), without either pride or jealousy. He considered them as friends and companions, with whom he had shared the dangers of the tyranny, and with whom he wished to enjoy the security of the present time. He very frequently invited them to familiar amusement, the frugality of which was ridiculed by those who remembered and regretted the luxurious prodigality of Commodus.<sup>32</sup>

### *His Endeavors To Reform the State*

To heal, as far as it was possible, the wounds inflicted by the hand of tyranny, was the pleasing, but melancholy, task of Pertinax. The innocent victims who yet survived were recalled from exile, released from prison, and restored to the full possession of their honors and fortunes. The unburied bodies of murdered senators (for the cruelty of Commodus endeavored to extend itself beyond death) were deposited in the sepulchers of their ancestors; their memory was justified; every consolation was bestowed on their ruined and afflicted families. Among these consolations, one of the most grateful was the punishment of the Delators, the common enemies of their master, virtue, and country. Yet even in the inquisition of these legal assassins, Pertinax proceeded with a steady temper, giving everything to justice, and nothing to popular prejudice and resentment.

The finances of the state demanded the most vigilant care of the emperor. Every measure of injustice and extortion had been adopted to collect the property of the subject into the coffers of the prince. Commodus' rapaciousness, however, had been so very inadequate to his extravagance that, upon his death, no more than £8,000 was found in the exhausted treasury.<sup>33</sup> This was supposed to maintain current government expenses and pay the large bonus, which the new emperor had promised the Pretorian guards. Yet under these distressed circumstances, Pertinax had the generous firmness to remit all the oppressive taxes invented by Commodus, and to cancel all the unjust claims of the treasury. In a decree of the senate, he declared "I would rather administer a poor republic with innocence than get rich by tyranny and dishonor." Economy and industry he considered as the pure and genuine sources of wealth. From them he soon derived a copious supply for the public necessities. The expense of the household was immediately reduced to one half. All the instruments of luxury Pertinax exposed to public auction:<sup>34</sup> gold and silver plates, chariots of a singular construction, a superfluous wardrobe of silk and embroidery, and a great number of beautiful slaves of both sexes. With attentive humanity, the only exceptions were those born in a state of freedom, and had been ravished from the arms of their weeping parents. At the same time that he obliged the worthless favorites of the tyrant to resign a part of their ill-gotten wealth, he satisfied the just creditors of the state, and unexpectedly

<sup>32</sup> Dion (1. lxxiii. p. 1223) speaks of these amusements as a senator who had supped with the emperor. Capitolinus (Hist. August. p. 58), like a slave, who had received his intelligence from one of the common workers.

<sup>33</sup> *Decies*. The blameless economy of Pius left his successors a treasure of about 22 million sterling. Dion, 1. lxxiii. p. 1231

<sup>34</sup> Besides the design of converting these useless ornaments into money, Dion (I. lxxiii. p. 1229) assigns two secret motives of Pertinax. He wished to expose the vices of Commodus and to discover by the purchasers those who most resembled him.

discharged the long arrears of honest services. He removed the oppressive restrictions which had been laid upon commerce, and granted all the uncultivated lands in Italy and provinces to those who would improve them. The only exception was a tribute covering a 10 year period.<sup>35</sup> Such a uniform conduct had already secured to Pertinax the noblest reward of a sovereign, the love and esteem of his people. Those who remembered the virtues of Marcus were happy to contemplate in their new emperor the features of that bright original, flattering themselves that they should long enjoy the benign influence of his administration. A hasty zeal to reform the corrupted state, accompanied with less prudence than might have been expected from the years and experience of Pertinax, proved fatal to him and his country. His honest indiscretion united against him the servile crowd, who found their private benefit in the public disorders, and who preferred the favor of a tyrant to the inexorable equality of the laws.

### *Murder of Pertinax By the Pretorians*

Amid the general joy, the sullen and angry countenance of the Pretorian guards betrayed their inward dissatisfaction. They had reluctantly submitted to Pertinax, dreading the strictness of the ancient discipline that he was preparing to restore. They also regretted the license of the former reign. Their discontents were secretly fomented by Laitus their prefect, who found, when it was too late, that his new emperor would reward a servant, but not be ruled by a favorite. On the third day of his reign the soldiers seized a noble senator, intending to carry him to the camp and invest him with the Imperial purple. Instead of being dazzled by the dangerous honor, the frightened victim escaped from their violence and took refuge at the feet of Pertinax. A short time afterward Sosius Falco—one of the consuls of the year, a rash youth,<sup>36</sup> but of an old and wealthy family—listened to the voice of ambition. A conspiracy was formed during a short absence of Pertinax, which was crushed by his sudden return to Rome and his resolute behavior. Falco was on the point of being justly condemned to death as a public enemy. He was saved by the earnest and sincere entreaties of the injured emperor; who convinced the senate that the purity of his reign might not be stained by the blood even of a guilty senator.

These disappointments served only to irritate the rage of the Pretorian guards. On March 28, just 86 days after Commodus' death, a general sedition broke out in the camp, which the officers wanted either power or inclination to suppress. Two or three hundred of the most desperate soldiers marched at noonday, with arms in their hands and fury in their looks, toward the Imperial palace. The gates were thrown open by their guard companions, and by the domestics of the old court, who had already formed a secret conspiracy against the life of the too virtuous emperor. On the news of their approach, Pertinax, disdaining either flight or concealment, advanced to meet his assassins; and recalled to their minds his own innocence, and the sanctity of their recent oath. For a few moments they stood in silent suspense, ashamed of their atrocious design, and awed by the venerable aspect and majestic firmness of their sovereign. At length, the despair of pardon revived their fury, and a barbarian from Tongres<sup>37</sup> leveled the first blow against Pertinax, who was instantly dispatched with a multitude of wounds. His head separated from his body, placed on a lance, and carried in triumph to the Pretorian camp, in the sight of a mournful and indignant people. The citizens lamented the unworthy fate of that excellent prince and

<sup>35</sup> Though Capitolinus has picked up many idle tales of the private life of Pertinax, he joins with Dion and Herodian in admiring his public conduct.

<sup>36</sup> If we credit Capitolinus (which is rather difficult), Falco behaved with the most petulant indecency to Pertinax on the day of his accession. The wise emperor only admonished him of his youth and lack of experience. Hist. August. p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> The modern bishop of Liege. This soldier probably belonged to the Batavian horse guards, who were mostly raised in the duchy of Gueldres and the neighborhood, and were distinguished by their valor, and boldness with which they swam their horses across the broadest and most rapid rivers. Tacit. Hist. iv. 12. Dion, 1. lv. p. 797. Lipsius de magnitudine Romana, 1. i. c. 4.

the transient blessings of a reign, the memory of which could serve only to aggravate their approaching misfortunes.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Dion, 1. lxxiii. p. 1232. Herodian, 1. ii. p. 60. Hist. August. p. 58. Victor in *Epitom et in Cassarib.* Eutropius, viii. 16.