

## CHAPTER V

### **Public Sale of the Empire to Didius Julianus by the Pretorian Guards—Clodius Albinus in Britain, Pescennius Niger in Syria, and Septimius Severus in Pannonia, declare against the Murderers of Pertinax—Civil Wars and Victory of Severus over his three Rivals—Relaxation of Discipline—New Maxims of Government**

#### *Proportion of the Military Force to the Number of People*

The power of the sword is more sensibly felt in an extensive monarchy than in a small community. It has been calculated by the ablest politicians that no state, without being soon exhausted, can maintain more than a hundredth part of its members in arms and idleness. But although this relative proportion may be uniform, the influence of the army over the rest of the society will vary according to the degree of its positive strength. The advantages of military science and discipline cannot be exerted, unless a proper number of soldiers are united into one body and actuated by one soul. With a handful of men such a union would be ineffectual; with an unwieldy host it would be impracticable. The powers of the machine would be alike destroyed by the extreme minuteness or the excessive weight of its springs. To illustrate this observation we need only reflect that there is no superiority of natural strength, artificial weapons, or acquired skill, which could enable one man to keep in constant subjection one hundred of his fellow-creatures. The tyrant of a single town or a small district would soon discover that a hundred armed followers were a weak defense against ten thousand peasants or citizens; but a hundred thousand well-disciplined soldiers will command, with despotic sway, ten million subjects. A body of ten or fifteen thousand guards will strike terror into the most numerous populace that ever crowded the streets of an immense capital.

#### *Pretorian Guards; Their Camp, Strength, Confidence*

The Pretorian bands, whose licentious fury was the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman Empire, scarcely amounted to the last mentioned number.<sup>1</sup> They derived their institution from Augustus. That crafty tyrant, knowing that laws might color, but arms alone could maintain his usurped dominion, gradually formed this powerful body of guards in constant readiness to protect his person, to awe the senate, and either to prevent or to crush the first motions of rebellion. He distinguished these favored troops by a double pay and superior privileges. But, as their formidable aspect would at once have alarmed and irritated the Roman people, only three cohorts were stationed in the capital, while the remainder was dispersed in the adjacent towns of Italy. (Sueton. in August. c. 49) After 50 years of peace and servitude, Tiberius ventured on a decisive measure, which forever riveted the fetters of his country. Under the fair pretenses of relieving Italy from the heavy burden of military quarters, and of introducing a stricter discipline among the guards, he assembled them at Rome, in a permanent camp,<sup>2</sup> which was fortified with skillful care<sup>3</sup> and placed on a commanding situation.<sup>4</sup>

Such formidable servants are always necessary but often fatal to the throne of despotism. By

<sup>1</sup> They were originally nine or ten thousand men (for Tacitus and Dion are not agreed upon the subject), divided into as many cohorts. Vitellius increased them to sixteen thousand, and, as far as we can learn from inscriptions, they never afterward sunk much below that number. Lipsius de magnitudine Romana, l. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Tacit. Annal. iv. 2. Sueton. in Tiber. C. 37. Dion Cassius, l. lvii. p. 867

<sup>3</sup> In the civil war between Vitellius and Vespasian the Pretorian camp was attacked and defended with all the machines used in the siege of the best fortified cities. Tacit. Hist. iii. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Close to the walls of the city, on the broad summit of the Quirinal and Virinal hills. Nardini Roma Antica, p. 174. Donatus de Roma Antiqua, p. 46.

introducing the Pretorian guards into the palace and the senate, the emperors taught them to perceive their own strength, the weakness of the civil government, and view their masters' vices with open contempt. They were to lay aside that reverential awe, which only distance and mystery can preserve toward an imaginary power. In the luxurious idleness of an opulent city, their pride was nourished by the sense of their irresistible weight. Nor was it possible to conceal from them that the person of the sovereign, the authority of the senate, the public treasure, and the seat of empire were all in their hands. To divert the Pretorian bands from these dangerous reflections, the firmest and best established princes had to mix compliments with commands, rewards with punishments, flatter their pride, indulge their pleasures, plot against their imperfections, and buy their precarious faith with plenty of money. Since the elevation of Claudius, this last issue was made into law with the accession of every new emperor.<sup>5</sup>

The advocates of the guards endeavored to justify by arguments the power which they asserted by arms, and to maintain that, according to the purest principles of the constitution, their consent was essentially necessary in the appointment of an emperor. The election of consuls, generals, and magistrates, however it had been recently usurped by the senate, was the ancient and undoubted right of the Roman people.<sup>6</sup> But where were the Roman people to be found? Surely not among the mixed multitude of slaves and strangers that filled the streets of Rome, a servile group, devoid of spirit and destitute of property. The defenders of the state, selected from the flower of the Italian youth,<sup>7</sup> and trained in the exercise of arms and virtue, were the genuine representatives of the people, and the best entitled to elect the military chief of the republic. These assertions, however defective in reason, became unanswerable, when the fierce Pretorians increased their weight by throwing their swords onto the scale like the barbarian conqueror of Rome.<sup>8</sup>

### *They Offer the Empire Up For Sale*

The Pretorians had violated the sanctity of the throne by the atrocious murder of Pertinax. They dishonored its majesty by their subsequent conduct. The camp was without a leader, for even the prefect Laetus, who had excited the tempest, prudently declined the public indignation. Amid the wild disorder, Sulpicianus—the emperor's father-in-law and governor of the city, who had been sent to the camp on the first alarm of mutiny—was trying to calm the multitude's fury. He was silenced by the clamorous return of the murderers, who were carrying Pertinax' head on the end of a spear. History has led us to observe every principle and passion yielding to the imperious dictates of ambition. However, it is scarcely credible that in these moments of horror, Sulpicianus would have aspired to ascend a throne polluted with the recent blood of so near a relation and so excellent a prince. He had already begun to use the only effectual argument, and to treat for the Imperial dignity. But the more prudent of the Pretorians were worried that they would not get a good price for so valuable a commodity in this private contract. They ran out upon the ramparts, and, with a loud voice, proclaimed that the Roman world was to be sold to the highest bidder by public auction.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Claudius, raised by the soldiers to the empire, was the first who gave a donation. He gave money (Sueton. in Claud. c. 10) when Marcus, with his colleague Lucius Verus, took quiet possession of the throne, he gave more money to each of the guards. Hist. August. p. 25 (Dion, L lxxiii. p. 1231). We may form some idea of the amount of these sums by Hadrian's complaint that the promotion of a Caesar had cost him two and-a half millions sterling.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero de Legibus, iii. 3. The first book of Livy and the second of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, show the authority of the people, even in the election of the kings.

<sup>7</sup> They were originally recruited in Latium, Etruria, and the old colonies (Tacit. Annal. iv. 5). The emperor Otho compliments their vanity with flattering titles. Tacit. Hist. I. 84.

<sup>8</sup> In the siege of Rome by the Gauls. See Livy, v. 48. Plutarch, in Camill, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Dion, l. lxxiii. p. 1234. Herodian, l. ii. p. 63. Hist. August. p. 60, Though the three historians agree that it was in fact an auction, Herodian alone affirms that it was proclaimed as such by the soldiers.

### *AD 193: The Empire Purchased by Julian*

This infamous offer, the most insolent excess of military license, diffused a universal grief, shame, and indignation throughout the city. It reached at length the ears of Didius Julianus, a wealthy senator, who, regardless of the public calamities, was indulging himself in the luxury of the table.<sup>10</sup> His wife and daughter, his freedmen and parasites, easily convinced him that he deserved the throne, and earnestly convinced him to embrace so fortunate an opportunity. The vain old man (A.D. 193, March 28th) hastened to the Pretorian camp, where Sulpicianus was still in treaty with the guards. He began to bid against him from the foot of the rampart. The unworthy negotiation was transacted by faithful emissaries, who passed alternately from one candidate to the other, and acquainted each of them with the offers of his rival. Sulpicianus had already promised a sum of five thousand drachms (more than £160) to each soldier; when Julian, eager for the prize, rose at once to the sum of 6,250 drachms (more than £200 sterling). The gates of the camp were instantly thrown open to the purchaser; he was declared emperor, and received an oath of allegiance from the soldiers, who retained enough humanity to stipulate that he should pardon and forget the competition of Sulpicianus.

### *Julian Acknowledged By the Senate*

It was now incumbent on the Pretorians to fulfill the conditions of the sale. They placed their new sovereign, whom they served and despised, in the center of their ranks, surrounded him on every side with their shields, and conducted him in close order of battle through the deserted streets of the city. The senate was commanded to assemble, and those who had been the distinguished friends of Pertinax or the personal enemies of Julian, found it necessary to affect a more than common share of satisfaction at this happy revolution.<sup>11</sup> After Julian had filled the senate house with armed soldiers, he expatiated on the freedom of his election, his own eminent virtues, and his full assurance of the affections of the senate. The obsequious assembly congratulated their own and the public pleasure, engaged their allegiance, and conferred on him all the several branches of the Imperial power.<sup>12</sup> From the senate Julian was conducted, by the same military procession, to take possession of the palace. The first objects that struck his eyes was the abandoned trunk of Pertinax and the frugal entertainment prepared for his supper. The former he viewed with indifference, the latter with contempt. A magnificent feast was prepared by his order, and he amused himself till a very late hour with dice and the performances of Pylades, a celebrated dancer. Later however, the crowd of flatterers dispersed, leaving him to darkness, solitude, and terrible reflection. He passed a sleepless night, most likely considering his own rash folly, the fate of his virtuous predecessor, and the doubtful and dangerous tenure of an empire, which had not been acquired by merit, but purchased by money.<sup>13</sup>

He had reason to tremble. On the throne of the world he found himself without friend or adherent. The guards themselves were ashamed of the prince whom their greed had persuaded them to accept. Nor was there a citizen who did not consider his elevation with horror, as the last insult on the Roman name. The nobility, whose conspicuous station and ample possessions exacted the strictest caution, hid their sentiments. They met the affected civility of the emperor with smiles of complacency and

<sup>10</sup> Spartianus softens the most odious parts of the character and elevation of Julian.

<sup>11</sup> Dion Cassius, at that time pretor, had been a personal enemy to Julian, l, lxxiii. p. 1235.

<sup>12</sup> Hist. August. p. 61. We learn from this one curious circumstance, that the new emperor, whatever had been his birth, was immediately aggregated to the number of Patrician families.

<sup>13</sup> Dion, l. lxxiii. p. 1235. Hist. August. p. 61. I have tried to blend into one consistent story the seeming contradictions of the two writers.

professions of duty. But the people, secure in their numbers and obscurity, gave a free vent to their passions. The streets and public places of Rome resounded with clamors and imprecations. The enraged multitude affronted the person of Julian, rejecting his liberality. Conscious of the impotence of their own resentment, they called aloud on the legions of the frontiers to assert the violated majesty of the Roman Empire.

The public discontent was soon diffused from the center to the frontiers of the empire. The armies of Britain, Syria, and Illyricum lamented the death of Pertinax, in whose company, or under whose command, they had so often fought and conquered. They received with surprise, indignation, and perhaps envy, the extraordinary intelligence that the Pretorians had disposed of the empire by public auction. They flatly refused to ratify the ignominious bargain. Their immediate and unanimous revolt was fatal to Julian, but it was fatal at the same time to the public peace. The generals of the respective armies, Olodius Albinus, Pescennius Niger, and Septimius Severus, were still more anxious to succeed than to revenge the murdered Pertinax. Their forces were exactly balanced. Each of them was at the head of three legions (Dion, 1. lxxiii. p. 1235), with a numerous train of auxiliaries. However different their characters, they were all soldiers of experience and capacity.

#### *Clodius Albinus, Pescennius Niger, Pannonia, and Dalmatia Declare Against Julian*

Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain, surpassed both his competitors in the nobility of his extraction, which he derived from some of the most illustrious names of the old republic.<sup>14</sup> But the branch from whence he claimed his descent was sunk into common circumstances, and transplanted into a remote province. It is difficult to form a just idea of his true character. Under the philosophic cloak of austerity, he stands accused of concealing most of the vices which degrade human nature.<sup>15</sup> But his accusers are those venal writers who adored the fortune of Severus, and trampled on the ashes of an unsuccessful rival. Virtue, or the appearances of virtue, recommended Albinus to the confidence and good opinion of Marcus. His preserving with the son the same interest which he had acquired with the father, is a proof at least that he was possessed of a very flexible disposition. The favor of a tyrant does not always suppose a want of merit in the object of it. He may, without intending it, reward a man of worth and ability, or he may find such a man useful to his own service. It does not appear that Albinus served the son of Marcus, either as the minister of his cruelties or even as the associate of his pleasures. He was employed in a distant honorable command, when he received a confidential letter from the emperor, telling him of the treasonable designs of some discontented generals. This letter authorized him to declare himself the guardian and successor of the throne, by assuming the title and ensigns of Caesar. (Hist. August. pp. 80, 84) The governor of Britain wisely declined the dangerous honor, which would have marked him for the jealousy, or involved him in the approaching ruin, of Commodus. He courted power by nobler, or, at least, by more specious arts. On a premature report of the emperor's death, he assembled his troops. In an eloquent discourse, he denounced the inevitable harm of despotism, described the happiness and glory which their ancestors had enjoyed under the consular government, and declared his firm resolution to reinstate the senate and people in their legal authority. This popular harangue was answered by the loud acclamations of the British legions, and received at Rome with a secret murmur of applause. Safe in the possession of this little world, and in the command of an army less distinguished indeed for discipline than for numbers and valor,<sup>16</sup> Albinus

<sup>14</sup> The Posthumian and the Cejonian; the former of whom was raised to the consulship in the 5<sup>th</sup> year after its institution.

<sup>15</sup> Spartianus, in his undigested collections, mixes up all the virtues and all the vices that enter into the human composition, and bestows them on the same object. Such, indeed, are many of the characters in the Augustan History.

<sup>16</sup> Pertinax, who governed Britain a few years before, had been left for dead in a mutiny of the soldiers. Hist. August. p. 54. Yet they loved and regretted him.

braved the menaces of Commodus, maintained toward Pertinax a stately ambiguous reserve, and instantly declared against the usurpation of Julian. The convulsions of the capital added new weight to his sentiments, or rather to his professions of patriotism. A regard to decency induced him to decline the lofty titles of *Augustus* and *Emperor*. He imitated perhaps the example of Galba, who, on a similar occasion, had styled himself the Lieutenant of the senate and people. (Suetonius in Galba, c. 10.)

Personal merit alone had raised Pescennius Niger from an obscure birth and station to the government of Syria; a lucrative and important command, which in times of civil confusion gave him a near prospect of the throne. Yet his parts seem to have been better suited to second rather than first rank. He was an unequal rival, though he might have approved himself an excellent lieutenant, to Severus, who afterward displayed the greatness of his mind by adopting several useful institutions from a vanquished enemy. (Hist. August. p. 70) In his government, Niger acquired the esteem of the soldiers and the love of the provincials. His rigid discipline fortified the valor and confirmed the obedience of the former, while the voluptuous Syrians were less delighted with the mild firmness of his administration than with the affability of his manners and the apparent pleasure with which he attended their frequent and pompous festivals.<sup>17</sup> As soon as the intelligence of the atrocious murder of Pertinax had reached Antioch, the wishes of Asia invited Niger to assume the Imperial purple and revenge his death. The legions of the eastern frontier embraced his cause. The opulent but unarmed provinces from the frontiers of Ethiopia<sup>18</sup> to the Hadriatic cheerfully submitted to his power. The kings beyond the Tigris and the Euphrates congratulated his election, offering him their homage and services. The mind of Niger was not capable of receiving this sudden tide of fortune. He flattered himself that his accession would be undisturbed by competition and unstained by civil blood. While he enjoyed the vain pomp of triumph, he neglected to secure the means of victory. He did not consider entering into an effectual negotiation with the powerful armies of the west, whose resolution might decide, or at least must balance, the mighty contest. Instead of advancing without delay toward Rome and Italy, where his presence was impatiently expected,<sup>19</sup> Niger trifled away in the luxury of Antioch those irretrievable moments which were diligently improved by the decisive activity of Severus. (Herodian, I. ii. p. 71)

The country of Pannonia and Dalmatia, which occupied the space between the Danube and the Hadriatic, was one of the last and most difficult conquests of the Romans. In the defense of national freedom, 200,000 of these barbarians had once appeared in the field. They had alarmed the declining age of Augustus and exercised the vigilant prudence of Tiberius at the head of the collected force of the empire.<sup>20</sup> The Pannonians yielded at length to the arms and institutions of Rome. Their recent subjection, however, the neighborhood, mixture of the unconquered tribes, and perhaps the climate, contributed as it has been observed, to the production of great bodies and slow minds.<sup>21</sup> These elements all contributed to preserve some remains of their original ferocity, and under the tame and uniform countenance of Roman provincials the hardy features of the natives were still to be discerned. Their warlike youth afforded an inexhaustible supply of recruits to the legions stationed on the banks of the Danube, and which, from a perpetual warfare against the Germans and Sarmatians, were deservedly esteemed the best troops in the service.

<sup>17</sup> Herod. 1. ii. p. 68. The chronicle of John Malala, of Antioch, shows the zealous attachment of his countrymen to these festivals, which at once gratified their superstition and their love of pleasure.

<sup>18</sup> A king of Thebes, in Egypt, is mentioned in the Augustan History as an ally, and, indeed, as a personal friend, of Niger. If Spartianus is not, as I strongly suspect, mistaken, he has brought to light a dynasty of tributary princes totally unknown to history.

<sup>19</sup> Dion, 1. lxxiii. p. 1238. Herod. I. ii. p. 67. A verse in every one's mouth at that time seems to express the general opinion of the three rivals. (Latin text deleted)

<sup>20</sup> See an account of that memorable war in Velleius Paterculus, ii. 110, etc., who served in Tiberius' army.

<sup>21</sup> Such is the reflection of Herod. 1, ii, p. 74. Will the modern Austrians allow the influence?

### *Septimius Severus Declared Emperor By the Pannonian Legions*

The Pannonian army was at this time commanded by Septimius Severus, a native of Africa. In the gradual ascent of private honors, he had concealed his daring ambition, which was never diverted from its steady course by the allurements of pleasure, the apprehension of danger, or the feelings of humanity.<sup>22</sup> Upon receiving news of Pertinax' murder, he assembled his troops, painted the crime in the most lively colors, the insolence, and the weakness of the Pretorian guards, and animated the legions to arms and to revenge. He concluded (and the peroration was thought extremely eloquent) with promising every soldier about £400, an honorable sum, double in value to the infamous bribe with which Julian had purchased the empire.<sup>23</sup> The acclamations of the army immediately saluted Severus with the names of Augustus, Pertinax, and Emperor. In AD 193, April 13<sup>th</sup>, Severus thus attained the lofty station to which he was invited, and by conscious merit and a long train of dreams and omens, the fruitful offspring either of his superstition or policy.<sup>24</sup>

### *Severus' March Into Italy*

The empire's new candidate saw and improved the peculiar advantage of his situation. His province extended to the Julian Alps, which gave an easy access into Italy. He remembered Augustus, who said that a Pannonian army might appear in sight of Rome in 10 days time.<sup>25</sup> By a swiftness proportioned to the greatness of the occasion, he might reasonably hope to revenge Pertinax, punish Julian, and receive the homage of the senate and people, as their lawful emperor, before his competitors, separated from Italy by an immense tract of sea and land, were apprised of his success, or even of his election. During the whole expedition he scarcely allowed himself any moments for sleep or food. Marching on foot, and in complete armor, at the head of his columns, he insinuated himself into the confidence and affection of his troops. He pressed their diligence, revived their spirits, animated their hopes, and was well satisfied to share the hardships of the lowest ranking soldier, while he kept in view the infinite superiority of his reward.

### *Julian's Distress; His Execution By Senate Order*

The wretched Julian had expected, and thought himself prepared, to dispute the empire with the governor of Syria; but in the invincible and rapid approach of the Pannonian legions he saw his inevitable ruin. The hasty arrival of every messenger increased his just apprehensions. He was successively informed that Severus had passed the Alps. The Italian cities, unwilling or unable to oppose his progress, had received him with the warmest professions of joy and duty. He was also told that the important place of Ravenna had surrendered without resistance, and that the Hadriatic fleet was in the hands of the conqueror. The enemy was now within 250 miles of Rome; every moment diminished the narrow life span and empire allotted to Julian.

<sup>22</sup> In the letter to Albinus, already mentioned, Commodus accuses Severus as one of the ambitious generals who censured his conduct and wished to occupy his place. Hist. August. p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Pannonia was too poor to supply such a sum. It was probably promised in the camp, and paid at Rome, after the victory. In fixing the sum, I have adopted the conjecture of Casaubon. Hist. August. p. 66. Comment. p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> Herodian, 1. ii. p. 78. Severus was declared emperor on the banks of the Danube, either at Carnuntum, according to Spartianus (Hist. August. p. 65), or else at Sabaria, according to Victor. Mr. Hume, in supposing that the birth and dignity of Severus were too much inferior to the imperial crown, and that he marched in Italy as general only, has not considered this transaction with his usual accuracy (Essay on the original contract).

<sup>25</sup> Velleius Paterculus, 1. ii. c. 3. We must reckon the march from the nearest verge of Pannonia, and extend the sight of the city as far as two hundred miles. Vol. 1-7

He attempted, however, to prevent, or at least to protract, his ruin. He implored the venal faith of the Pretorians, filled the city with unavailing preparations for war, and drew lines round the suburbs. He even strengthened the palace fortifications, as if this last fortification could be defended without hope of relief against a victorious invader. Fear and shame prevented the guards from deserting his standard. However, they trembled at the name of the Pannonian legions, commanded by an experienced general, and accustomed to vanquish the barbarians on the frozen Danube.<sup>26</sup> With a sigh, they quit the pleasures of the baths and theaters to put on arms whose use they had almost forgotten and beneath the weight of which they were oppressed. The unpracticed elephants, whose uncouth appearance, it was hoped, would strike terror into the army of the north, threw their unskillful riders. The awkward evolutions of the marines, drawn from the fleet of Misenum, were an object of ridicule to the populace, while the senate enjoyed, with secret pleasure, the distress and weakness of the usurper.<sup>27</sup>

Every motion of Julian betrayed his trembling perplexity. He insisted that Severus be declared a public enemy by the senate. He entreated that the Pannonian general might be associated to the empire. He sent public ambassadors of consular rank to negotiate with his rival. He dispatched private assassins to kill him. He decreed that the Vestal virgins, and all the colleges of priests, in their sacerdotal habits, bearing before them the sacred pledges of the Roman religion, should advance, in solemn procession, to meet the Pannonian legions. At the same time, he vainly tried to interrogate or appease the fates by magic ceremonies and unlawful sacrifices. (Hist. August. pp. 62, 63.)

Severus, who dreaded neither his arms nor enchantments, guarded himself from the only danger of secret conspiracy by the faithful attendance of 600 chosen men, who never left his person or their weapons and armor, either by night or by day, during the whole march. Advancing with a steady and rapid course, he passed the defiles of the Apennine without difficulty, received into his party the troops and ambassadors sent to retard his progress, and made a short halt at Interamnia, about 70 miles from Rome. His victory was already secure, but the despair of the Pretorians might have rendered it bloody. Severus had the laudable ambition of ascending the throne without drawing the sword.<sup>28</sup> His emissaries, dispersed in the capital, assured the guards that, if they abandoned their worthless prince and the perpetrators of the murder of Pertinax, to the justice of the conqueror, he would no longer consider that melancholy event as the act of the whole body. The faithless Pretorians, whose resistance was supported only by sullen obstinacy, gladly complied with the easy conditions, seized the greatest part of the assassins, and signified to the senate that they no longer defended the cause of Julian. That assembly, convoked by the consul, unanimously acknowledged Severus as lawful emperor, decreed divine honors to Pertinax, and pronounced a sentence of deposition and death against his unfortunate successor. On June 2, AD 193, Julian was led into a private apartment of the baths of the palace and beheaded as a common criminal. With an immense treasure, he had paid for an anxious and precarious reign of only 66 days.<sup>29</sup> The almost incredible expedition of Severus, who, in so short a space of time, conducted a numerous army from the banks of the Danube to those of the Tiber. This proves at once the plenty of provisions produced by agriculture and commerce, the goodness of the roads, the discipline of the legions, and the indolent subdued temper of the provinces.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> This is not a puerile figure of rhetoric, but an allusion to a real fact recorded by Dion, 1. Lxxi. p. 1121. It probably happened more than once.

<sup>27</sup> Dion, 1. lxxiii. p. 1233. Herodian, 1. ii. p. 81. There is no surer proof of the military skill of the Romans than their first surmounting the idle terror, and afterward disdaining the dangerous use of elephants in war.

<sup>28</sup> Victor and Eurtropius, viii 17, mention a combat near the Milvian bridge, the Ponte Molle, unknown to the better and more ancient writers.

<sup>29</sup> Dion. 1. lxxiii. p. 1240. Herodian, 1. ii. p. 83. Hist. August. p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> From these 66 days we must first deduct 16, as Pertinax was murdered on the 28th of March, and Severus most probably elected on the 13th of April (see Hist. August. p. 65. and Tillemont, Hist. des Empereurs, torn. iii. p. 393. Note 7). We cannot allow less than 10 days after his election to put a numerous army in motion. Forty days remain for this

### *Disgrace of the Pretorian Guards*

Severus' first priorities were bestowed on two measures, one dictated by policy, the other by decency. They were the revenge and honors due to Pertinax' memory. Before the new emperor entered Rome he issued his commands to the Pretorian guards, directing them to wait his arrival on a large plain near the city, without arms, but in the habits of ceremony in which they were accustomed to attend their sovereign. He was obeyed by those haughty troops, whose contrition was the effect of their just terrors. A chosen part of the Illyrian army encompassed them with leveled spears. Incapable of flight or resistance, they expected their fate in silent consternation. Severus mounted the tribunal, sternly reproached their dishonesty and cowardice, dismissed them with ignominy from the trust which they had betrayed, despoiled them of their splendid ornaments, and banished them, on pain of death, to the distance of 100 miles from the capital. During the transaction, another detachment had been sent to seize their arms, occupy their camp, and prevent the hasty consequences of their despair. (Dion, 1. lxxiv. p. 1241. Herodian, 1. ii. p. 84)

### *Glorification of Pertinax*

The funeral and consecration of Pertinax was next solemnized with every circumstance of sad magnificence.<sup>31</sup> The senate, with a melancholy pleasure, performed the last rites to that excellent prince, whom they had loved and still regretted. The concern of his successor was probably less sincere. He esteemed the virtues of Pertinax, but those virtues would forever have confined his ambition to a private station. Severus pronounced his funeral oration with studied eloquence, inward satisfaction, and well-acted sorrow. By this pious regard to his memory convinced the credulous multitude that he alone was worthy to supply his place. Sensible, however, that arms, not ceremonies, must assert his claim to the empire, he left Rome at the end of 30 days, and, without suffering himself to be elated by this easy victory, prepared to encounter his more formidable rivals.

### *AD 193—197: Severus' Success Against Niger and Albinus*

The uncommon abilities and fortune of Severus have induced an elegant historian to compare him with the first and greatest of the Caesars. (Herodian, 1. iii. p. 112) The parallel is, at least, imperfect. Where shall we find, in the character of Severus, the commanding superiority of soul, generous clemency, and various genius, which could reconcile and unite the love of pleasure, thirst of knowledge, and fire of ambition?<sup>32</sup> In one instance only they may be compared with some degree of propriety, in the speed of their motions and their civil victories. In less than 4 years<sup>33</sup> (AD 193—197), Severus subdued the riches of the east and the valor of the west. He vanquished two competitors of reputation and ability, and defeated numerous armies that were as armed and disciplined as his own. In that age, the art of fortification and the principles of tactics were well understood by all the Roman generals. The constant superiority of Severus was that of an artist who uses the same instruments with

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rapid march. As we may compute about 800 miles from Rome to the neighborhood of Vienna, the army of Severus marched 20 miles a-day, without halt or intermission.

<sup>31</sup> Dion (1. lxxiv. p. 1244), who assisted at the ceremony as a senator, gives a most pompous description of it.

<sup>32</sup> It is not, most assuredly, Lucan's intention to exalt Caesar's character. Yet in the tenth book of the *Pharsalia*, he describes him as simultaneously making love to Cleopatra, sustaining a siege against the power of Egypt, and conversing with the sages of the country. This is, in reality, the noblest praise.

<sup>33</sup> Reckoning from his election, April 13, 193, to the death of Albinus, February 19, 197. Tiflemont's *Chronology*.

more skill and industry than his rivals. I shall not, however, enter into a minute narrative of these military operations. However, as the two civil wars against Niger and against Albinus were almost the same in their conduct, event and consequences, I shall collect into one point of view the most striking circumstances tending to develop the character of the conqueror and the state of the empire.

Falsehood and insincerity, unsuitable as they seem to the dignity of public transactions, offend us with a less degrading idea of meanness than when they are found in the intercourse of private life. In the latter, they discover a want of courage; in the other, only a defect of power. As it is impossible for the most able statesmen to subdue millions of followers and enemies by their own personal strength, the world, under the name of policy, seems to have granted them a very liberal indulgence of craft and pretence. Yet the arts of Severus cannot be justified by the most ample privileges of state reason. He promised only to betray; he flattered only to ruin. However he might occasionally bind himself by oaths and treaties, his conscience, obsequious to his interest, always released him from the inconvenient obligation. (Herodian, 1. ii. p. 85)

### *Severus' Cunning Toward Niger and Albinus*

If his two competitors, reconciled by their common danger, had advanced upon him without delay, perhaps Severus would have sunk under their united effort. Had they even attacked him at the same time with separate views and separate armies, the contest might have been long and doubtful. But they fell, singly and successively, an easy prey to the arts as well as arms of their subtle enemy, lulled into security by the moderation of his professions, and overwhelmed by the rapidity of his action. He first marched against Niger, whose reputation and power he dreaded most. However, he declined any hostile declarations, suppressed the name of his antagonist, and only signified to the senate and people his intention of regulating the eastern provinces. In private he spoke of Niger, his old friend and intended successor,<sup>34</sup> with the most affectionate regard, and highly applauded his generous design of revenging the murder of Pertinax. To punish the vile usurper of the throne was the duty of every Roman general. To persevere in arms, and to resist a lawful emperor, acknowledged by the senate, would alone render him criminal. (Hist. August. p. 65) The sons of Niger had fallen into his hands among the children of the provincial governors, detained at Rome as pledges for the loyalty of their parents.<sup>35</sup> As long as the power of Niger inspired terror or even respect, they were educated with the most tender care, with the children of Severus himself. But they were soon involved in their father's ruin, and removed, first by exile and afterward by death, from the eye of public compassion. (Herodian, 1. iii p. 96. Hist. August. pp. 67, 68)

While Severus was engaged in his eastern war, he had reason to assume that the governor of Britain might pass the sea and the Alps, occupy the vacant seat of empire, and oppose his return with the authority of the senate and the forces of the west. The ambiguous conduct of Albinus, in not assuming the Imperial title, left room for negotiation. Forgetting at once his professions of patriotism, and the jealousy of sovereign power, he accepted the precarious rank of Caesar as a reward for his fatal neutrality. Till the first contest was decided, Severus treated the man whom he had doomed to destruction with every mark of esteem and regard. Even in the letter in which he announced his victory over Niger he styles Albinus the brother of his soul and empire, sending him the affectionate salutations of his wife Julia, and his young family, and entreats him to preserve the armies and the republic faithful

<sup>34</sup> While Severus was very dangerously ill, it was industriously given out that he intended to appoint Niger and Albinus his successors. As he could not be sincere with respect to both, he might not be so with regard to either. Yet Severus carried his hypocrisy so far as to profess that intention in the memoirs of his own life.

<sup>35</sup> This practice, invented by Commodus, proved very useful to Severus. He found at Rome, the children of many principal adherents of his rivals. He employed them more than once to intimidate or seduce the parents.

to their common interest. The messengers charged with this letter were instructed to accost the Caesar with respect, to desire a private audience, and to plunge their daggers into his heart.<sup>36</sup> The conspiracy was discovered, and the shocked Albinus passed over to the continent at length, and prepared for an unequal contest with his rival, who rushed upon him at the head of a veteran and victorious army.

The military labors of Severus seem inadequate to the importance of his conquests. Two engagements, the one near the Hellespont, the other in the narrow defiles of Cilicia, decided the fate of his Syrian competitor. The troops of Europe asserted their usual ascendant over the effeminate natives of Asia.<sup>37</sup> The battle of Lyons, where 150,000 (Dion. 1. lxxv. p. 1260) Romans were engaged, was equally fatal to Albinus. The valor of the British army maintained, indeed, a sharp and doubtful contest with the hardy discipline of the Illyrian legions. The fame and person of Severus appeared, during a few moments, irrecoverably lost, till that warlike prince rallied his fainting troops and led them on to a decisive victory.<sup>38</sup> The war was finished by that memorable day.

The civil wars of modern Europe have been distinguished, not only by the fierce animosity, but likewise by the obstinate perseverance of the contending factions. They have generally been justified by some principle, or, at least, colored by some pretext, religion, freedom, or loyalty. The leaders were nobles of independent property and hereditary influence. The troops fought like men interested in the decision of the quarrel. As military spirit and party zeal were strongly diffused throughout the whole community, a vanquished chief was immediately supplied with new adherents, eager to shed their blood in the same cause. But the Romans, after the fall of the republic, fought only for the choice of masters. Under the standard of a popular candidate for empire, a few enlisted from affection, some from fear, many from interest, none from principle. The legions, unenthusiastic towards party zeal, were allured into civil war by liberal sums of money and still more liberal promises. A defeat, by disabling the chief from the performance of his engagements, dissolved the mercenary allegiance of his followers, and left them to consult their own safety by a timely desertion of an unsuccessful cause. It was of little moment to the provinces under whose name they were oppressed or governed. They were driven by the impulsion of the present power, and as soon as that power yielded to a superior force they hastened to implore the clemency of the conqueror. Since he had an immense debt to discharge, the victor was obliged to sacrifice the guiltiest countries to the greed of his soldiers. In the vast extent of the Roman empire, there were few fortified cities capable of protecting a routed army; nor was there any person, family, or order of men, whose natural interest, unsupported by the powers of government, was capable of restoring the cause of a sinking party.<sup>39</sup>

### *Siege of Byzantium*

Yet, in the contest between Niger and Severus, a single city deserves an honorable exception. Byzantium was one of the greatest passages from Europe into Asia. It had been provided with a strong garrison, and a fleet of 500 vessels was anchored in the harbor.<sup>40</sup> The impetuosity of Severus disappointed this prudent scheme of defense. He left the siege of Byzantium to his generals, while forcing the less guarded passage of the Hellespont. The impatience of a meaner enemy pressed forward to encounter his rival. Byzantium, attacked by a numerous and increasing army, and afterward by the

<sup>36</sup> Hist. August. p. 84. Spartianus has inserted this curious letter at full length.

<sup>37</sup> Consult the 3<sup>rd</sup> book of Herodian and the 74<sup>th</sup> book of Dion Cassius.

<sup>38</sup> Dion, 1. lxxv. p. 1261. Herodian, 1. iii. p. 110. Hist. August. p. 68. The battle was fought in the plain of Trevoux, three or four leagues from Lyons. Tillemont, torn. iii. p. 406. Note 18.

<sup>39</sup> Montesquieu, Considerations sur la Grandeur et la Decadence des Romains, C. Xii.

<sup>40</sup> Most of these, as may be supposed, were small open vessels. Some however, were galleys of two, and few of three ranks of oars.

whole naval power of the empire, endured a 3-year siege, yet remained faithful to the name and memory of Niger. The citizens and soldiers (we know not from what cause) were animated with equal fury. Several of Niger's principal officers, who despaired of, or who disdained a pardon, had thrown themselves into this last refuge. The fortifications were esteemed impregnable, and, in the defense of the place, a celebrated engineer displayed all the mechanical powers known to the ancients.<sup>41</sup> Byzantium, at length, surrendered to famine. The magistrates and soldiers were put to the sword, the walls demolished, the privileges suppressed, and the destined capital of the east subsisted only as an open village, subject to the insulting jurisdiction of Perinthus. The historian Dion, who had admired the flourishing, and lamented the desolate, state of Byzantium, accused the revenge of Severus for depriving the Roman people of the strongest bulwark against the barbarians of Pontus and Asia.<sup>42</sup> The truth of this observation was but too well justified in the succeeding age, when the Gothic fleets covered the Euxine, and passed through the undefended Bosphorus into the center of the Mediterranean.

### *Death of Niger and Albinus*

Both Niger and Albinus were discovered and put to death in their flight from the field of battle. Their fate excited neither surprise nor compassion. They had staked their lives against the chance of empire, and suffered what they would have inflicted. Nor did Severus claim the arrogant superiority of suffering his rivals to live in a private station. But his unforgiving temper, stimulated by avarice, indulged a spirit of revenge where there was no room for apprehension. The most considerable of the provincials, who, without any dislike to the fortunate candidate, had obeyed the governor under whose authority they were accidentally placed, were punished by death, exile, and especially by the confiscation of their estates. Many cities of the east were stripped of their ancient honors, and obliged to pay, into the treasury of Severus, four times the amount of the sums contributed by them for the service of Niger. (Dion, l. lxxiv. p. 1250)

### *Cruel Consequences of the Civil Wars*

Till the final decision of the war, the cruelty of Severus was, in some measure, restrained by the uncertainty of the event and his pretended reverence for the senate. The head of Albinus, accompanied with a menacing letter, announced to the Romans that he was resolved to spare none of the adherents of his unfortunate competitors. He was irritated by the just suspicion that he had never possessed the affections of the senate, and he concealed his old malevolence under the recent discovery of some treasonable correspondences. However, he freely pardoned 35 senators accused of having favored Albinus' party. Subsequently, he endeavored to convince them that he had forgotten, as well as forgiven, their supposed offenses. At the same time, he condemned 41 other senators,<sup>43</sup> whose names history has recorded. Their wives, children, and clients, attended them in death, and the noblest provincials of Spain and Gaul were involved in the same ruin. In Severus' opinion, such rigid justice—for so he termed it—was the only conduct capable of insuring peace to the people, or stability to the

<sup>41</sup> The engineer's name was Priscus. His skill saved his life, and he was taken into the service of the conqueror. For the particular facts of the siege consult Dion Cassius (l. lxxv. p. 1251), and Herodian (l. iii. p. 95): for the theory of it, the fanciful chevalier de Folard may be looked into. Polybe, tom. i. p. 76.

<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding the authority of Spartianus and some modern Greeks, we may be assured from Dion and Herodian that Byzantium, many years after the death of Severus, lay in ruins.

<sup>43</sup> Dion (l. lxxv. p. 1264); only 29 senators are mentioned by him, but 41 are named in the Augustan History, p. 69, among whom were six by the name of Pescennius. Herodian (l. iii. p. 115) speaks in general of the cruelties of Severus.

prince. He condescended slightly to lament that, to be mild, it was necessary that he should first be cruel. (Aurelius Victor)

### *Severus' Animosity Against the Senate*

The true interest of an absolute monarch generally coincides with that of his people. Their numbers, wealth, order, and security are the best and only foundations of his real greatness. Were he totally devoid of virtue, prudence might supply its place, and would dictate the same rule of conduct. Severus considered the Roman Empire as his property, and had no sooner secured the possession than he bestowed his care on the cultivation and improvement of so valuable an acquisition. Salutary laws, executed with inflexible firmness, soon corrected most of the abuses with which, since the death of Marcus, every part of the government had been infected. In the administration of justice the judgments of the emperor were characterized by attention, discernment, and impartiality. Whenever he deviated from the strict line of equity, it was generally in favor of the poor and oppressed. Yet this was done not so much from any sense of humanity as from the natural propensity of a despot to humble the pride of greatness and to sink all his subjects to the same common level of absolute dependence.

### *The Wisdom and Justice of His Government*

His expensive taste for building, sponsoring magnificent shows, and above all a constant and liberal distribution of corn and provisions, were the surest means of captivating the affection of the Roman people.<sup>44</sup> The misfortunes of civil discord were obliterated. The calm of peace and prosperity was once more experienced in the provinces. Many cities, restored by Severus' generosity, assumed the title of his colonies, and attested by public monuments their gratitude and pleasure.<sup>45</sup> The fame of the Roman arms was revived by that warlike and successful emperor,<sup>46</sup> and he boasted with a just pride that, having received the empire oppressed with foreign and domestic wars, he left it established in profound, universal, and honorable peace.<sup>47</sup>

### *Relaxation of Military Discipline*

Although the wounds of civil war appeared completely healed, its mortal poison still lurked in the vitals of the constitution. Severus possessed a considerable share of vigor and ability. But the daring soul of the first Caesar, or the deep policy of Augustus, were scarcely equal to the task of curbing the insolence of the victorious legions. By gratitude, misguided policy, and seeming necessity, Severus was induced to relax the nerves of discipline. (Herodian, l. iii. p. 115. Hist. August. p. 68.) The vanity of his soldiers was flattered with the honor of wearing gold rings. Their ease was indulged in the permission of living with their wives in the idleness of quarters. He increased their pay beyond the example of former times, and taught them to expect, and soon to claim, extraordinary bonuses on every public

<sup>44</sup> Dion, l. lxxvi. p. 1272. Hist. August. p. 67. Severus celebrated the secular games with extraordinary magnificence, and he left in the public granaries a provision of corn for 7 years at the rate of 75,000 modii, or about 2, 500 quarters per day. I am persuaded that the granaries of Severus were supplied for a long term; but I am not less persuaded that policy on one hand, and admiration on the other, magnified the hoard far beyond its true contents.

<sup>45</sup> See Spanheim's treatise of ancient medals, the inscriptions, and our learned travelers Spon and Wheeler, Shaw, Pocock, etc. , who, in Africa, Greece, and Asia, have found more monuments of Severus than of any other Roman emperor whatsoever.

<sup>46</sup> He carried his victorious arms to Seleucia and Otesiphon, the capitals of the Parthian monarchy. I shall have occasion to mention this war in its proper place.

<sup>47</sup> *Etiam in Britannis* (even for Britain), was his own just and emphatic expression. Hist. August. 72.

occasion of danger or festivity. Elated by success, enervated by luxury, and raised above the level of subjects by their dangerous privileges,<sup>48</sup> they soon became incapable of military fatigue, oppressive to the country, and impatient of a just subordination. Their officers asserted the superiority of rank by a more profuse and elegant luxury. There is still extant a letter of Severus, lamenting the licentious state of the army, and exhorting one of his generals to begin the necessary reformation from the tribunes themselves; since, as he justly observes, the officer who has forfeited the esteem will never command the obedience of his soldiers. (Hist. August. p. 73) Had the emperor pursued the train of reflection, he would have discovered that the primary cause of this general corruption might be ascribed, not indeed to the example, but to the destructive indulgence, however, of the commander-in-chief.

The Pretorians, who murdered their emperor and sold the empire, had received the just punishment of their treason. But the necessary, though dangerous, institution of guards was soon restored on a new model by Severus, and increased to four times the ancient number. (Herodian, 1. iii. p. 131) Formerly these troops had been recruited in Italy. As the adjacent provinces gradually imbibed the softer manners of Rome, the levies were extended to Macedonia, Noricum, and Spain. In the room of these elegant troops, better adapted to the pomp of courts than to the uses of war, it was established by Severus that, from all the legions of the frontiers, the soldiers most distinguished for strength, valor and fidelity should be occasionally drafted and promoted, as an honor and reward, into the more eligible service of the guards. (Dion, 1. lxxiv. p. 1243) By this new institution, the Italian youth were diverted from the exercise of arms, and the capital was terrified by the strange aspect and manners of a multitude of barbarians. But Severus flattered himself that the legions would consider these chosen Pretorians as the representatives of the whole military order. He reasoned that the present aid of 50,000 men, superior in arms and appointments to any force that could be brought into the field against them, would forever crush the hopes of rebellion, and secure the empire to himself and his posterity.

### *The Office of Pretorian Prefect*

The command of these favored and formidable troops soon became the first office of the empire. As the government degenerated into military despotism, the Pretorian Prefect, who in his origin had been a simple captain of the guards, was placed not only at the head of the army, but of the finances, and even of the law. In every department of administration, he represented the person and exercised the authority of the emperor. The first Prefect who enjoyed and abused this immense power was Plautianus, Severus' favorite minister. His reign lasted more than 10 years, till the marriage of his daughter with the eldest son of the emperor. This seemed to assure his fortune, and proved the occasion of his ruin.<sup>49</sup> The animosities of the palace, by initiating the ambition and alarming the fears of Plautianus, threatened to start a revolution, and obliged the emperor, who still loved him, to consent with reluctance to his death.<sup>50</sup> After the fall of Plautianus, an eminent lawyer, the celebrated Papinian, was appointed to execute the motley office of Pretorian Prefect.

Till the reign of Severus, the virtue and even the good sense of the emperors had been distinguished by their zeal or affected reverence for the senate, and by a tender regard to the nice frame of civil policy

<sup>48</sup> Upon the insolence and privileges of the soldiers, the 16th Satire, falsely ascribed to Juvenal, may be consulted; the style and circumstances of it would induce me to believe that it was composed under the reign of Severus, or that of his son.

<sup>49</sup> One of his most daring and wanton acts of power was the castration of a hundred free Romans, some of them married men, and fathers of families. This was done merely so that his daughter, on her marriage with the young emperor, might be attended by a train of eunuchs worthy of an eastern queen. Dion, L lxxvi. p. 1271.

<sup>50</sup> Dion, 1. lxxvi. p. 1274. Herodian, 1. iii. pp. 122, 129. The grammarian of Alexandria seems, as is not unusual, much better acquainted with this mysterious transaction, and more assured of the guilt of Plautianus, than the Roman senator ventures to be.

instituted by Augustus. But the youth of Severus had been trained in the implicit obedience of camps, and his riper years spent in the despotism of military command. His haughty and inflexible spirit could not discover, or would not acknowledge, the advantage of preserving an intermediate power, however imaginary, between the emperor and the army. He disdained to profess himself the servant of an assembly that detested his person and trembled at his frown. He issued his commands where his request would have proved as effectual. He assumed the conduct and style of a sovereign and a conqueror, and exercised, without disguise, the whole legislative as well as the executive power.

*The Senate Oppressed By Military Despotism; The Imperial Prerogative*

The victory over the senate was easy and inglorious. Every eye and every passion were directed to the supreme magistrate, who possessed the arms and treasure of the state. The senate, neither elected by the people, guarded by military force, nor animated by public spirit, rested its declining authority on the frail and crumbling basis of ancient opinion. The fine theory of a republic insensibly vanished and made way for the more natural and substantial feelings of monarchy. As the freedom and honors of Rome were successively communicated to the provinces, in which the old government had been either unknown or was remembered with abhorrence, the tradition of republican maxims was gradually obliterated. The Greek historians of the age of the Antonines (Appian in Proem.) observe with a malicious pleasure, that although the sovereign of Rome, in compliance with an obsolete prejudice, abstained from the title 'king,' he possessed the full measure of regal power. In the reign of Severus, the senate was filled with polished and eloquent slaves from the eastern provinces, who justified personal flattery by speculative principles of servitude. These new advocates of prerogative were heard with pleasure by the court and with patience by the people, when they inculcated the duty of passive obedience and remarked on the inevitable harm of freedom. The lawyers and the historians concurred in teaching, that the Imperial authority was held, not by the delegated commission, but by the irrevocable resignation of the senate. The emperor was free of the restraint of civil laws, and could command by his arbitrary will the lives and fortunes of his subjects, disposing of the empire as his private patrimony.<sup>51</sup> The most eminent of the civil lawyers, and particularly Papinian, Paulus, and Ulpian, flourished under the house of Severus. Roman law, having closely united itself with the system of monarchy, was supposed to have attained its full maturity and perfection.

The contemporaries of Severus, in the enjoyment of the peace and glory of his reign, forgave the cruelties by which it had been introduced. Posterity, who experienced the fatal effects of his maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal author of the decline of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>51</sup> Dion Cassius seems to have written with no other view than to form these opinions into a historical system. The Pandects will show how assiduously the lawyers, on their side, labored in the cause of prerogative.