

## Chapter VI

SENECA'S letter, "On Master and Slave," refers to a period when slaves "were permitted to converse not only in their master's presence, but actually with him." Then they "were ready to bare their necks for their master, to bring upon their own heads any danger that threatened him." That time was long past when Seneca wrote his letter. His descriptions of the duties of the household slave of his day leave little to the imagination:

The master eats more than he can hold and with monstrous greed loads his belly until it is stretched and ceases to do the work of a belly; so that he is at greater pains to discharge all the food than he was to stuff it down. All this time the poor slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; even a chance sound—a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup—is visited with the lash. There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb.

They were maltreated as if they were beasts of burden, and slaves advanced in years were kept beardless by having their hair plucked out by the roots. The letter does not touch the state of affairs on the farms and in the mines, nor does it mention the horrors of the slave market. But it does suggest a picture of society in Rome. Elsewhere must the student look in Seneca's writings for a commentary on social affairs which is no mere suggestion. In "De Ira" he describes the conditions which prevailed in his day:

When you see the Forum packed with a multitude and the Barriers filled with a moving and teeming mass of every kind of

numbers, and that Circus in which the people displays the greatest part of itself: know this, that there are as many faults as there are human beings. And among those whom you see attired in the garb of Roman gentlemen, there is no peace: one is drawn to the destruction of the other by a slight profit. None has income but from a wrong done to his neighbour. The prosperous one they hate, the luckless one they despise. The one greater than themselves they feel a burden, to their inferior they are a burden. They are goaded by different appetites. They desire universal wrack and ruin on account of some frivolous pleasure or booty.

This commentary coming from one born a few years before Jesus gives the student an interesting picture of the conditions at the centre of the Roman world and turns a strong light on the city that sent procurators to Palestine. What could be expected in the way of pacifying conquered peoples from such folk? Imperialism stripped of the purple, shown in all its nakedness, is out for booty. Its aim is exploitation, no matter how well disposed the administrators may be towards the exploited. The central government can subsist only on tribute, and its wealthy supporters can subsist only on slave labour. Wanting a slice of a neighbour's land was the real desire of the Roman imperialist, and pretexts of any and every plausible kind were easily found, once the objective was left to military authorities; for their job was patriotic, and their glory in arms covered the dreadful policies of the politicians with the garish flags of imperial loyalty and military courage.

Rome began its reign of splendour and woe with a system similar to those early systems of China, India, Babylon, and Greece. Landmarks divided the allotments of the tillers of the soil. Indeed, the god Terminus presided over boundaries. Plutarch says: "Terminus signifies boundary, and to the god they make public and private sacrifices where their fields are

set off by boundaries. . . . Numa reasoned that the god of boundaries was a god of peace and a witness of just dealing . . . he knew that a boundary, if observed, fetters lawless power; and if not observed, convicts of injustice." The land Romulus took with the spear was distributed by Numa among the indigent citizens. "He wished to remove the destitution which drives men to wrong-doing and to turn the people to agriculture . . . for there is no other occupation which produces so keen and quick a relish for peace as that of a farmer's life."

Not a few historians have imagined that Terminus was the god of property, not knowing his particular office. Because the word property has been misapplied in recent years, it seems to have lost its real meaning. Property in land is a stupid phrase and is responsible for innumerable confusions, leading lawyers, legislators, and historians astray—sometimes when they were quite willing to be confused and led in the direction of removing landmarks by law. Property in an economic sense refers to what is produced by labour; that which can be owned, giving its producer right to its use and its enjoyment. Terminus was a god before private ownership of land was legalized; he was the landmark god. In the old time land was common, even arable land was tilled in common. Old Roman law put to death the man who removed a boundary-stone. So Terminus did not function as a bailiff of property either of land or of produce. His sole duty was concerned in the stones which marked the division of plots of land; the guard who took care no one added field to field. Any extension of area undertaken by the Roman authority of that time would be in the direction of enemy territory, beyond the jurisdiction of Terminus, where there were no Roman boundary-stones. For generations before the Licinian law was enacted, debt had

done more to remove the landmarks of Roman freemen than all the alien enemies of the state. As in Greece before the time of Solon, debt pillars rose where boundary stones had stood, field was laid to field, and freemen in debt were reduced to slavery. The Licinian law restricted the possession of land to three hundred acres, and employers of labour were compelled by the law to reduce the number of their slaves in favour of freemen. Then Rome enjoyed a long period of prosperous agriculture. It was conquest, external wars, which brought about the awful decline in agriculture, and, with the influx of booty and slaves taken in the wars, the Licinian laws were forgotten or ignored. Again freemen were ousted by slaves, for labour was so cheap that the freemen, unable to compete with slaves, soon found it hard to get a job. Moreover, slaves were then exempt from military service; freemen were obliged to fight for the honour and glory of Rome.

It is not necessary to enter at length into the reasons for the decay of the state which took so long to die. The unlimited authority of the father over the son, the severity of the laws of debt, the wholesale removal of boundary-stones after the wars of conquest, which brought slaves to Rome until the home market was overstocked; these and many other such reasons are dealt with in histories easily acquired by the student. About forty years after the Licinian laws were enacted, it was necessary to pass a law making the property, not the person, of a citizen debtor liable to seizure, but this new law, *Lex Poetelia*, came too late to effect a beneficent purpose, for whole families were in debt. Poverty engulfed the best husbandmen of the state, and juries regulated the methods by which a debtor was enabled to liquidate the debt and obtain his discharge.

There has been much nonsense written about the Roman

love of the state, the Roman sense of justice, the perfection of her administrative system. The romance historians of the nineteenth century could not see Rome for the Forum. The splendour school of writers seemed deliberately to ignore the sordid and corrupt influence at work, no matter what type of political power held sway. Which one pieced together the story of how her men were crushed under the burdens of taxes, military service, and poverty? It is not necessary to quote Ferrara to show what a vast field of squalor lay beneath "the glory that was Rome." Dr. Sihler, in *Testimonium Animæ*, says: "The battles of Rome were won, her administration determined, her children begotten, and her blood shed, for the interests of a small number of great families." Cicero refers to the statement made by Marcius Philippus in advocating a bill for agrarian reform in 104, that there were not two thousand persons in the commonwealth who possessed property.

The price paid by Rome for her civilization of glory and splendour must be reckoned in debt pillars, hungry freemen, slaves (native and foreign), branding irons, and chains. There are passages in the satires of Juvenal which throw a fierce light on the rapacity and gluttony of Hadrian's time, which are remembered long after the glowing periods of modern historians fade away. Rome, according to the memoirs of her most observant writers, seems like a huge symbol of Cato's fat knight, "everything between its gullet and its groins is devoted to belly." It is not necessary to read Petronius and such authors, who describe the orgies of plutocrats and their sycophants, for the purpose of forming an estimate of the causes of decay. The student may be well content to take Cicero and Seneca as guides. The great mystery of her history

is the duration of her decline. Only in a world worn out by war and Roman ravage could a state linger on for centuries, dying by inches. It took six hundred years to find an undertaker: Alaric. Polybius, who was a witness of the last days of the destruction of Carthage, says that the younger Scipio was reminded of the lines of the Iliad:

The day will come when sacred Troy will cease to be,  
And Priam, too, and people of Priam, (once) good with ashen  
spear.

Scipio was heard to murmur these lines, as he looked on fallen Carthage, a premonition, perhaps, of the fate reserved for Rome.

Paterson's epitome of the economic history of Rome in *The Nemesis of Nations*, is the only stimulating short review of fundamentals by an English scholar. In it, there is scarcely one fault unearthed from the remains of Roman authors which is missing in the civilization of this time. Save for the misunderstanding of such terms as capital and capitalist, individualism, wealth, and property, Paterson is so far in advance of the professorial historian, that he stands aloof and quite alone. But his faults are those of nine out of ten schools of economics. Not yet are economic terms strictly defined. The absurd confusions survive: capital includes land; land is included in wealth; a capitalist is an all-embracing term for landlord, landowner, and landuser; property is land, and wealth, and capital. Individualism is a term covering the greed of a few plutocrats or landlords in a society of millions of slaves and impoverished freemen. Monopoly is never applied to landownership; hence monopolist is a term rarely found in the books issued from modern schools of economics;

the term capitalist takes its place instead. Still, Paterson does succeed in presenting a physiognomic review of the fundamental causes which brought Rome to sack and ruin. He says:

According to Tacitus, Rome suffered from perpetual anxiety in case of a revolution among the slaves. But how feeble their resistance was when it was measured against the might of the Roman people is proved by the six thousand crosses (and on every cross a slave) which marked the termination of the revolt of the gladiators. If Rome was, on the whole, seldom troubled by that dangerous rolling of the ballast of the state, which perturbs the modern world, the reason was that her labouring population, isolated and disorganized, were kept in chains. If we study ancient nations from within, and penetrate behind the mere foreground of their glory, we discover a society governed by intimidation. If we had a telescope to bring them near, we should find all of them resting on impossible foundations. Their combined rivalries, like the rivalries of modern states, pressed most heavily on the poorest class, and involved an immense but futile activity.