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Theodor Mommsen
Excerpt
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BOOK FIFTH.



THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MILITARY MONARCHY.

Wie er sich sieht so um und um,
Kehrt es ihm fast den Kopf herum,
Wie er wollt' Worte zu allem finden?
Wie er möcht' so viel Schwall verbinden?
Wie er möcht' immer muthig bleiben
So fort und weiter fort zu schreiben?—GOETHE.

CHAPTER I.

MARCUS LEPIDUS AND QUINTUS SERTORIUS.

WHEN Sulla died in the year 676, the oligarchy restored ^{78. The} by him ruled with absolute sway over the Roman state; but, ^{Opposition.} as it had been established by force, it still needed force to maintain its ground against its numerous secret and open foes. It was opposed not by any single party with objects clearly expressed and under leaders distinctly acknowledged, but by a mass of multifarious elements, ranging themselves doubtless under the general name of the popular party, but in reality opposing the Sullan organization of the commonwealth on very various grounds and with very different designs. There were the men of positive law, who neither mingled in ^{Jurists.} nor understood politics, but who detested the arbitrary procedure of Sulla in dealing with the lives and property of the burgesses. Even during the regent's lifetime, when all other opposition was silent, the strict jurists were refractory; the Cornelian laws, for example, which deprived various Italian communities of the Roman franchise, were treated in judicial decisions as null and void, and in like manner the courts held that, where a burgess had been made a prisoner of war and sold into slavery during the revolution, his franchise was not forfeited. There was, further, the ^{Aristocrats} remnant of the old liberal minority in the senate, which in ^{friendly} former times had sought a compromise with the reform party ^{to reform.} and the Italians, and was now in a similar spirit inclined to modify the rigidly oligarchic constitution of Sulla by concessions to the Populares. There were, moreover, the Popu- ^{Democrats.} lars strictly so called, the honestly-credulous narrow-minded radicals, who staked property and life for the watchwords

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of the party-programme, only to discover with painful surprise after the victory that they had been fighting not for a reality, but for a phrase. Their special aim was to re-establish the tribunician power, which Sulla had not abolished but had divested of its most essential prerogatives, and which exercised over the multitude a charm all the more mysterious because the institution had no obvious practical use and was in fact an empty phantom—the mere name of tribune of the people, more than a thousand years later, revolutionized Rome. There were, above all, the numerous and important classes whom the Sullan restoration had left unsatisfied, or whose political or private interests it had directly injured. Among those who for such reasons belonged to the opposition ranked the dense and prosperous population of the region between the Po and the Alps, which naturally regarded the bestowal of Latin rights in 665 (iii. 248) as merely an instalment of the full Roman franchise, and so afforded a ready soil for agitation. To this category belonged also the freedmen, influential in numbers and wealth and specially dangerous by their aggregation in the capital, who could not brook their having been reduced by the restoration to their earlier, practically useless, suffrage. In the same position stood, moreover, the great capitalists, who maintained a cautious silence, but still as before preserved their tenacity of resentment and their equal tenacity of power. The populace of the capital, which recognised true freedom in free bread-corn, was likewise discontented. Still deeper exasperation was felt by the class of burgesses affected by the Sullan confiscations—whether they, like those of Pompeii, lived on their property curtailed by the Sullan colonists, within the same ring-wall with the latter and at perpetual variance with them; or, like the Arretines and Volaterrans, retained actual possession of their territory, but had the Damocles' sword of confiscation suspended over them by the Roman people; or, as was the case in Etruria especially, were reduced to be beggars in their former abodes or robbers in the woods. Finally, the agitation extended to the whole family connections and freedmen of those democratic chiefs, who had lost their lives in consequence of the restoration, or who were wandering along the Mauretanian coasts, or sojourning at the court and in the army of Mithradates, in all the misery of emigrant exile; for, according to the strict family associations that governed the political feeling of this age, it was accounted a point of

Transpa-
danes.

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Freedmen.

Capitalists.

Proletarians
of the capi-
tal.

The dispos-
sessed.

The pro-
scribed and
their ad-
herents.

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honour* that those who were left behind should endeavour to procure for exiled relatives the privilege of returning to their native land, and, in the case of the dead, at least a removal of the stigma attaching to their memory and to their children, and a restitution to the latter of their paternal estate. More especially the immediate children of the proscribed, whom the regent had reduced in point of law to political Pariahs (iii. 351), had virtually received from the law itself a summons to rise in rebellion against the existing order of things.

To all these sections of the opposition there was added the whole body of men of ruined fortunes. All the rabble high and low, whose means and substance had been spent in refined or in vulgar debauchery; the aristocratic lords, who had no further mark of quality than their debts; the Sullan soldiers, whom the regent's fiat could transform into landholders but not into husbandmen, and who after squandering the first inheritance of the proscribed were longing to succeed to a second—all these waited only the unfolding of the banner which invited them to fight against the existing order of things, whatever else might be inscribed on it. From a like

necessity all the aspiring men of talent, in search of popularity, attached themselves to the opposition; not only those to whom the strictly close circle of the Optimates denied admission or at least opportunities for rapid promotion, and who therefore attempted to force their way into the phalanx and to break through the laws of oligarchic exclusiveness and seniority by means of popular favour, but also the more dangerous men, whose ambition aimed at something higher than helping to determine the destinies of the world within the sphere of collegiate intrigues. On the advocates' platform in particular—the only field of legal opposition left open by Sulla—even in the regent's lifetime such aspirants waged lively war against the restoration with the weapons of formal jurisprudence and clever oratory; for instance, the adroit speaker Marcus Tullius Cicero (born 3rd January, 648), son of a landholder of Arpinum, speedily made himself a name by the mingled caution and daring of his opposition to the dictator. Such efforts were not of much importance, if the opponent desired nothing further

Men of ruined fortunes.

Men of ambition.

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* It is a significant trait, that a distinguished teacher of literature, the freedman Staberius Eros, allowed the children of the proscribed to attend his course gratuitously.

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than by their means to procure for himself a curule chair, and then to sit in it contentedly for the rest of his life. No doubt, if this chair should not satisfy a popular man and Gaius Gracchus should find a successor, a struggle for life or death was inevitable; but for the present at least no name could be mentioned, the bearer of which had proposed to himself any such lofty aim.

Power of
the opposi-
tion.

Such was the sort of opposition with which the oligarchic government instituted by Sulla had to contend, when it had, earlier than Sulla himself probably expected, been thrown by his death on its own resources. The task was in itself far from easy, and it was further complicated by the other social and political evils of this age—especially by the extraordinary double difficulty of keeping the military chiefs in the provinces in subjection to the supreme civil magistracy, and of dealing with the masses of the Italian and extra-Italian populace accumulating in the capital and of the slaves living there to a great extent in *de facto* freedom, without having troops at disposal. The senate was placed, as it were, in a fortress exposed and threatened on all sides, and serious conflicts could not be avoided. But the means of resistance organized by Sulla were considerable and lasting; and, although the majority of the nation was manifestly disinclined to the government which Sulla had installed, and even animated by hostile feelings towards it, that government might very well maintain itself for a long time in its stronghold against the distracted and confused mass of an opposition, which was not agreed either as to end or means, was without head, and was broken up into a hundred fragments. Only it was necessary that it should be determined to maintain its position, and should bring at least a spark of that energy which had built the fortress to its defence; for in the case of a garrison which will not defend itself, the greatest master of fortification constructs his walls and moats in vain.

Want of
leaders.

Coterie-
system.

The more everything ultimately depended on the personal character of the leading men on both sides, it was the more unfortunate that both, strictly speaking, wanted leaders. The politics of this period were thoroughly under the sway of the coterie-system in its worst form. This, indeed, was nothing new; close unions of families and clubs were inseparable from an aristocratic organization of the state, and had for centuries prevailed in Rome. But it was not till this epoch that they became all-powerful, for it was only now (first

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in 690) that their influence was substantiated rather than checked by legal measures of repression. All persons of quality, those of popular leanings no less than the oligarchy proper, met in *Hetæriæ*; the mass of the burgesses likewise, so far as they took any regular part in political events at all, formed according to their voting-districts close unions with an almost military organization, which found their natural captains and agents in the "district-distributors" (*divisores tribuum*). Everything with these political clubs was bought and sold; the vote of the elector above all, but also the votes of the senator and the judge, the fists too which produced the street riot, and the ringleaders who directed it. The associations of the upper and of the lower classes were distinguished only in the matter of tariff. The *Hetæria* decided the elections, the *Hetæria* decreed the impeachments, the *Hetæria* conducted the defence; it secured the distinguished advocate, and it contracted in case of need respecting an acquittal with one of the speculators who prosecuted on a great scale the lucrative traffic in judges' votes. The *Hetæria* commanded by its compact bands the streets of the capital, and with the capital but too often the state. All these things were done in accordance with a certain rule and, so to speak, publicly; the system of *Hetæriæ* was better arranged and managed than any branch of state-administration; although there was, as is usual among civilized swindlers, a tacit understanding that there should be no direct mention of the nefarious proceedings, nobody made a secret of them, and advocates of repute were not ashamed to give open and intelligible hints of their relation to the *Hetæriæ* of their clients. If an individual was to be found here or there who kept aloof from such practices and yet mingled in public life, he was assuredly, like Marcus Cato, a political Don Quixote. Parties and party-strife were superseded by the clubs and their rivalry; government was superseded by intrigue. A more than equivocal character, Publius Cethegus, formerly one of the most zealous Marians, afterwards as a deserter received into favour by Sulla (iii. 332), acted a most influential part in the political proceedings of this period—unrivalled as a cunning tale-bearer and mediator between the sections of the senate and as having a statesman's acquaintance with the secrets of all cabals: at times the appointment to the most important posts of command was decided by a word from his mistress Præcia. Such a

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plight was only possible, where none of the men taking part in politics rose above mediocrity: any man of more than ordinary talent would have swept away this system of factions like cobwebs; but there was indeed a sad lack of men of political or military capacity. Of the older generation the civil wars had left not a single man of repute except the old shrewd and eloquent Lucius Philippus, consul in 663, who, formerly of popular leanings (iii. 138), thereafter leader of the capitalist party against the senate (iii. 221) and closely associated with the Marians (iii. 325), and lastly passing over to the victorious oligarchy in sufficient time to earn thanks and commendation (iii. 331), had managed to escape between the parties. Among the men of the following generation the most notable chiefs of the pure aristocracy were Quintus Metellus Pius, consul in 674, Sulla's comrade in dangers and victories; Quintus Lutatius Catulus, consul in the year of Sulla's death, 676, the son of the victor of Vercellæ; and two younger officers, the brothers Lucius and Marcus Lucullus, of whom the former had fought with distinction under Sulla in Asia, the latter in Italy; not to mention Optimates like Quintus Hortensius (640-704), who had importance only as a pleader, or men like Decimus Junius Brutus consul in 677, Mamercus Æmilius Lepidus Livianus consul in 677, and other such nullities, whose best quality was a euphonious aristocratic name. But even those four men rose little above the average calibre of the Optimates of this age. Catulus was like his father a man of refined culture and an honest aristocrat, but of moderate talents and no soldier. Metellus was not merely estimable in his personal character, but an able and experienced officer; and it was not so much on account of his close relations as a kinsman and colleague with the regent as because of his recognised ability that he was sent in 675, after resigning the consulship, to Spain, when the Lusitanians and the Roman emigrants under Quintus Sertorius had begun fresh movements there. The two Luculli were also able officers—particularly the elder, who combined very respectable military talents with thorough literary culture and a liking for authorship, and appeared honourable also as a man. But, as statesmen, even these better aristocrats were not much less remiss and shortsighted than the average senators of the time. In presence of an outward foe the more eminent among them, doubtless, proved themselves useful and brave;

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but no one of them evinced the desire or the skill to solve the problems of politics proper, and to guide the vessel of the state through the stormy seas of intrigue and faction with the hand of a true pilot. Their political wisdom was limited to a sincere belief in the oligarchy as the sole means of salvation, and to a cordial hatred and courageous execration of demagogism as well as of every individual authority seeking to emancipate itself. Their petty ambition was contented with little. The stories told of Metellus in Spain—that he not only allowed himself to be delighted with the far from harmonious lyre of the Spanish occasional poets, but even wherever he went had himself received like a god with libations of wine and odours of incense, and at table had his head crowned by descending Victories amidst theatrical thunder with the golden laurel of the conqueror—are no better attested than most historical anecdotes; but such gossip reflects the degenerate ambition of the race of Epigoni. Even the better men were content when they had gained not power and influence, but the consulship and a triumph and a place of honour in the senate; and at the very time when with right ambition they would have first begun to be truly useful to their country and their party, they retired from the political stage to spend their days in princely luxury. Men like Metellus and Lucius Lucullus were, even as generals, not more attentive to the enlargement of the Roman dominion by fresh conquests of kings and peoples than to the enlargement of the endless game, poultry, and dessert lists of Roman gastronomy by new delicacies from Africa and Asia Minor, and they wasted the best part of their lives in more or less intellectual idleness. The traditional aptitude and the individual self-denial, on which all oligarchic government is based, were lost in the decayed and artificially restored Roman aristocracy of this age; in its judgment universally the spirit of clique was accounted as patriotism, vanity as ambition, and narrow-mindedness as consistency. Had the Sullan constitution passed into the guardianship of such men as have sat in the Roman College of Cardinals or the Venetian Council of Ten, we cannot tell whether the opposition would have been able to shake it so soon; with such defenders every attack involved, at all events, a serious peril.

Of the men, who were neither unconditional adherents **Pompeius.** nor open opponents of the Sullan constitution, no one

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attracted more the eyes of the multitude than the young Gneus Pompeius, who was at the time of Sulla's death twenty-eight years of age (born 29th September, 648). The fact was a misfortune for the admired as well as for the admirers; but it was natural. Sound in body and spirit, an excellent athlete, who even when a superior officer vied with his soldiers in leaping, running, and lifting, a vigorous and skilled rider and fencer, a bold leader of volunteer bands, the youth had become emperor and triumphator at an age which excluded him from every magistracy and from the senate, and had acquired the first place next to Sulla in public opinion; nay, had obtained from the indulgent regent himself—half in recognition, half in irony—the surname of the Great. Unhappily, his mental endowments by no means corresponded with these unprecedented successes. He was neither a bad nor an incapable man, but a man thoroughly ordinary, created by nature to be a good sergeant, called by circumstances to be a general and a statesman. An intelligent, brave and experienced, thoroughly excellent soldier, he was still, even in his military capacity, without trace of any higher gifts. It was characteristic of him as a general, as well as in other respects, to set to work with a caution bordering on timidity, and, if possible, to give the decisive blow only when he had established an immense superiority over his opponent. His culture was the average culture of the time; although entirely a soldier, he did not neglect, when he went to Rhodes, dutifully to admire and to make presents to the rhetoricians there. His integrity was that of a rich man who manages with judgment his considerable property inherited and acquired. He disdained not to make money in the usual senatorial way, but he was too cold and too rich to incur special risks, or draw down on himself conspicuous disgrace, on that account. The vice so much in vogue among his contemporaries, rather than any virtue of his own, procured for him the reputation—comparatively, no doubt, well warranted—of integrity and disinterestedness. His “honest countenance” became almost proverbial, and even after his death he was esteemed as a worthy and moral man; he was really a good neighbour, who did not join in the revolting custom by which the grandees of that age extended the bounds of their domains through forced sales or measures still worse at the expense of their humbler neighbours, and in domestic life

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he displayed attachment to his wife and children: it redounds moreover to his credit that he was the first to depart from the barbarous custom of putting to death the captive kings and generals of the enemy after they had been exhibited in triumph. But this did not prevent him from separating from his beloved wife at the command of his lord and master Sulla, because she belonged to an outlawed family, nor from ordering with great composure that men who had stood by him and helped him in times of difficulty should be executed before his eyes at the nod of the same master (iii. 344): he was not cruel as he was reproached with being, but, what perhaps was worse, he was cold and, in good as in evil, unimpassioned. In the tumult of battle he faced the enemy fearlessly; in civil life he was a shy man, whose cheek flushed on the slightest occasion; he spoke in public not without embarrassment, and generally was angular, stiff, and awkward in intercourse. With all his haughty obstinacy he was—as indeed those ordinarily are, who make a display of their independence—a pliant tool in the hand of men who knew how to manage him, especially of his freedmen and clients, by whom he had no fear of being controlled. For nothing was he less qualified than for a statesman. Uncertain as to his aims, unskilful in the choice of his means, alike in little and great matters shortsighted and helpless, he was wont to conceal his irresolution and indecision under a solemn silence and, when he thought to play a subtle game, simply to deceive himself with the belief that he was deceiving others. By his military position and his territorial connections he acquired almost without any action of his own a considerable party personally devoted to him, with which the greatest things might have been accomplished; but Pompeius was in every respect incapable of leading and keeping together a party, and, if it still kept together, it did so—in like manner without his action—through the sheer force of circumstances. In this, as in other things, he reminds us of Marius; but Marius, with his nature of boorish roughness and sensual passion, was still less intolerable than this most tiresome and most starched of all artificial great men. His political position was utterly awry. He was a Sullan officer and under obligation to serve the restored constitution, and yet again in opposition to Sulla personally as well as to the whole senatorial government. The *gens* of