CHAPTER XXXV

THE GROWTH OF PLUTOCRACY[1]

241–133 B.C.

I. Political and Social Conditions

444. Character of Roman Rule. — As long as a city-state, like Rome, remained so small that all the citizens could attend the assembly and take part in public affairs, the government worked well. But when the state outgrew these limits, the citizens who were near at hand managed the government in their own interest to the injury of those who were farther away. For this reason the more territory Rome acquired, the more unjust and oppressive became her government.

Her early supremacy in Italy was on the whole fair.[2] Some advantages came likewise to the provinces from Roman rule.[3] Usually they enjoyed peace. The cities of a province retained their own laws and self-government in local affairs. The less civilized subjects, too, profited greatly by adopting the customs and ideas of their masters.

In spite of these advantages, their condition was anything but happy. In regulating trade Rome favored her own citizens at the expense of the subjects. In place of native merchants accordingly a horde of greedy money-lenders, speculators, and traders poured from the capital over all the provinces; and while their citizenship[4] at Rome protected them, they unjustly acquired most of the property in the subject countries, and reduced the people to debt and misery. Driving the peasants from their farms, these speculators

[1] Government by the wealthy and for the wealthy; § 446.

[2] § 406 f. These two sections should now be carefully reviewed.

[3] Review carefully § 419.

[4] Roman citizens in the provinces enjoyed many privileges and rights not possessed by the provincials, and it was generally impossible to punish them for wrong-doing.

built up vast estates worked by slaves. The system, too, which Rome followed of letting out the collection of taxes to contractors[1] was full of evil. The knights,[2] whose wealth enabled them to take these contracts, compelled the provincials to pay many times their due. Occasionally we find a governor, like Cato, who was perfectly upright and just and who attempted to check these wrongs.[3] But generally the governor was himself cruel and oppressive. Not content with the wealth of his subjects, a greedy ruler seized their works of art, including the statues of the gods they worshipped, and even sold many freemen into slavery. The rapid change of officers increased the evil. In his short term the governor expected to make three fortunes: the first to pay the debts he had contracted in bribing his way to power; a second to satisfy his judges in case of prosecution on his return to Rome; and a third to enable him to live in luxury for the remainder of his days. Though a special court[4] was established for the trial of extortion committed in the provinces, it accomplished no good; for the judges were of like mind with the culprits. Thieves and plunderers sat in judgment on thieves and plunderers; a year or two would reverse the rôle of the two parties. Thus the provincials found no protection from injustice. To them the "peace of Rome" meant slavery, decay, and death.

445. The Decline of Italy: Commercial and Agrarian Conditions. — Italy was to experience a similar decline. As long as Rome treated the Italians justly, they were satisfied with her rule. At first they sided with her against Hannibal, but after the battle of Cannae many in the south of the peninsula deserted to him.[5] When Rome reconquered them, she treated them not as erring kinsmen, but as subjects and slaves. She seized large tracts of their land; she degraded many of them from the condition of allies to that of state serfs.

By monopolizing the trade of Italy Roman capitalists destroyed the prosperity of the towns. The great commercial cities of Capua and Tarentum disappeared; in the streets of the once prosperous Greek towns which still remained merchants gave place to beggars.

The farming class suffered equally with the traders; for as Rome

[1] § 419. [2] §§ 380, 446. [3] § 449. [4] § 459. [5] § 430.

now drew her food supply from the provinces, — cheap produce of slave labor, — the Italian peasants could find no market for their grain. Those who lost their little farms through poverty or by any other means usually flocked to Rome, to swell the numbers of a worthless, dangerous mob. The system of great estates worked by slaves spread itself over Italy. The large proprietors forcibly seized the farms of their poor neighbors. Although the peasants who did their own work failed, slave labor was as profitable in Italy as in the provinces. "Thus the nobles became enormously rich, and while the race of slaves multiplied throughout the country, the Italians dwindled in numbers and in strength, oppressed by penury, taxes, and military service."[1] Such was the condition of Italy at the close of the great period of foreign conquest (264–133 B.C.), treated in the preceding chapter.

Had the Italians been able to secure representation in the Roman senate, they might by this means have protected their property and their freedom. Such a measure was suggested, but the senate was too selfish and short-sighted to consider it. In fact, the Romans were reversing their former policy of liberality toward strangers. So highly did they esteem the privileges and honors they enjoyed as an imperial people, that henceforth they refused to bestow the citizenship upon others, except in the rarest cases. Exalted by conquest to the position of aristocrats, even the common people looked down upon the Italians as inferiors.

446. Roman Citizens: the Populares, Optimates, and Equites. — The competition of slave labor ruined the Roman peasants as well as the Italian. In the capital, too, skilled industry and business were in the hands of wealthy persons or of corporations of knights, who relied mainly on the labor of slaves and the business cleverness of freedmen.[2] The many peasants and tradesmen who lost their honest livelihood turned to begging and robbery or became clients of the great nobles. It is now easy to understand how it was that while in theory conquest was making the Roman citizens lords of the earth, it was really bringing most of them to misery and rendering them unfit even to govern themselves. In politics the masses of common citizens and their leaders were called *po-pu-la'res*.

[1] Appian, *Civil Wars*, i. 7.

[2] § 519.

From the end of the Second Punic War, we see the nobles, *op-ti-ma'tes*, rapidly declining in character and in ability. They became a hereditary caste, consisting of a few great houses, and rarely admitted new men to their privileged circle. They kept all the higher offices for themselves, and passed them in rotation among the members of their families.

A young noble, after service as an officer in the army, and perhaps after enriching himself as a provincial quaestor, secured election to a curule aedileship.[1] In this position it was his duty to entertain the people with costly religious festivals and shows, chiefly at his own expense; in this way he gained their favor and their votes for the higher offices. With this legal and pious system of corruption, he had little need of resorting to open bribery. Thence he advanced to the praetorship and to the consulship. As praetor, propraetor, or proconsul,[2] he governed a province, where he glutted himself with spoil, and where irresponsible power made him haughty and brutal. If he won distinction in this career of honors, the people showed their appreciation by electing him to the censorship — the crown of glory of the nobility. To complete our understanding of the nobles of this period, it is necessary to bear in mind that they were capitalists, who sought office not merely for honor, but also as a means of absorbing the riches of the world. The nobility of merit became a narrow, self-seeking plutocracy. In other words, the empire now had a government by the wealthy and for the wealthy.

The nobles and other wealthy men filled the eighteen centuries of knights, *eq'ui-tes*, in the comitia centuriata. Still other men of means who might be required to furnish their own horses for service in the cavalry were also called knights. The class so named, originally including the senators, were the capitalists, who took government contracts for collecting taxes and for building public works, and who had in hand most of the commerce and industry of the Roman world.

447. The Government: the Senate, Magistrates, and Assemblies. — The government still consisted, as in earlier time, of senate, magistrates, and assemblies. The senate, however, had gained

[1] § 392. [2] § 419.

power at the expense of both magistrates and assemblies. It was composed chiefly of men who had filled offices at home, had commanded armies, and had served on embassies to foreign states. The leading members were, therefore, trained executives, generals, and diplomatists; and having once been enrolled on the senate list by the censors, they usually held their positions for life. It is natural that in a period of conquest the senate, composed of such men, should become supreme. The magistrates, who were already senators or were looking forward to enrolment in that body, were with rare exceptions obedient to its commands. The higher magistrates have been named in the paragraph above in the order of their rank.

Constitutionally all citizens with full rights were permitted to attend the assemblies. In fact, these bodies were composed of those who lived in and near the city, as distance prevented most of the citizens from attending. Hence the city population, which was fast becoming a rabble, alone exercised the right to vote. Again, a member of an assembly could not propose a law or a candidate for office, or speak on any subject; he could merely vote for or against the candidates and the measures offered by the presiding officer, who rarely failed to enforce his will upon the comitia. In other words, the magistrates controlled the assemblies.

In this period, as earlier, there were two principal assemblies, the tribal and the centuriate. The tribal assembly elected the quaestors, aediles, and tribunes; it ratified treaties of peace; it received appeals from the judicial decisions of magistrates in cases involving fines; and it was the chief legislative power. The centuriate assembly elected the higher magistrates; it ratified declarations of war; it acted as the highest court of appeal in capital cases; and occasionally it passed a law. The two assemblies differed merely in organization.

II. Prominent Romans; Civilization

448. Scipio Africanus. — We are helped to an appreciation of Roman character by a study of prominent men. Especially worthy of attention is Scipio Africanus. The conquest of Spain

and the victory at Zama made him the greatest man in Rome. For fifteen years he was foreman of the senate; he was consul twice, and censor. It was his firm conviction that Rome should not organize the conquered countries into provinces, but should hold them as dependent allies; for he saw that the need of garrisoning the provinces would soon exhaust the strength of Italy. In keeping with this principle, he planted in Italy several colonies whose military strength was to be reserved for the defence of the peninsula. Thus the chief of the nobles carried on the colonial policy of Flaminius.[1]

PUBLIUS CORNELIUS SCIPIO AFRICANUS
(Made third century A.D., doubtless from an early original; National Museum, Naples)

But he had many enemies. Accustomed to absolute command in the field, at Rome he acted the king. He used his immense influence for the political advancement of his family, and trampled upon the law to protect a brother from trial for embezzlement. Finally the tribunes of the plebs prosecuted him on the ground that he had received bribes, and that he had been extravagant and tyrannical. Without replying to the charges, he is said to have spoken as follows: "Tribunes of the people, and you, Romans, on the anniversary of this day, with good fortune and success, I fought a pitched battle in Africa, with Hannibal and the Carthaginians. As, therefore, it is but decent that a stop be put for this day to wrangling and litigation, I will immediately go to the Capitol, there to return my acknowledgments to Jupiter, supremely good and great, to Juno, Minerva, and other deities presiding over the Capitol and Citadel; and will give them thanks for having, on this day and

[1] § 421.

at many other times, endowed me both with the will and with the ability to perform extraordinary services to the state. Such of you also, Romans, as it suits, come with me and beseech the gods that you may have commanders like myself."[1] The whole assembly followed him with enthusiasm. But though he was a man of culture, fond of literature and of luxury, his talents were chiefly military. Unable to cope with his political enemies, he retired into the country to private life.

449. **Marcus Porcius Cato.** — Marcus Porcius Cato, his chief antagonist, was narrow, unsympathetic, and close-fisted, but strictly moral — a model of the older Roman virtue. He was a peasant by birth, and drew the inspiration of his life from the memories of Manius Curius Dentatus,[2] the great peasant-statesman of the good old time, whose modest cottage stood near his father's farm. Accordingly "he worked with his slaves, in winter wearing a coarse coat without sleeves, in summer nothing but his tunic; and he used to sit at meals with them, eating the same loaf and drinking the same wine."[3]

By the patronage of a rich neighbor, but more by ability and honesty, this thrifty peasant rose to the highest offices of the state.

"When he was governor of Sardinia, where former rulers had been in the habit of charging their tents, bedding, and wearing apparel to the province, and likewise making it pay large sums for their entertainment and that of their friends, he introduced an unheard-of system of economy. He charged nothing to the province, and visited the various cities without a carriage, on foot and alone, attended by one public servant, who carried his robe of state and the vessel for making libations at a sacrifice. With all this, he showed himself so affable and simple to those under his rule, so severe and inexorable in the administration of justice, and so vigilant and careful in seeing that his orders were executed, that the government of Rome was never more feared or more loved in Sardinia than when he ruled that island."[4]

In his home policy he assailed with untiring energy the luxury, the refinement, and the culture represented by the Scipios; it was

[1] Livy, xxxviii. 51.
[2] § 403.
[3] Plutarch, *M. Cato*, 3.
[4] Plutarch, *M. Cato*, 6.

chiefly his influence which overthrew this powerful family. The nobles feared and hated the red-haired, gray-eyed, savage-tusked "new man," who rebuked their follies and their sins. Chosen censor in spite of their opposition, he expelled from the senate a number of disreputable members, taxed luxuries unmercifully, administered the public works and let out the public contracts without favoritism.

450. **Civilization: Literature, Religion, and Morals.** — In this period education became more general. As in the preceding age, the children of the wealthy studied under the instruction of educated Greek slaves owned by the family. For the poorer classes, however, private schools were established in which small fees were charged for instruction. Both Greek and Latin were taught. A Latin literature was now coming into existence. The Romans began to compose poetry, history, and oratory. The first history of Rome in Latin was written by Cato. This work no longer exists. We have remaining a few comedies of Plau'tus and Ter'ence, who lived in this period, and mere fragments of the remaining Roman literature.[1]

The Romans were attracted to the useful more than to the beautiful. Their public works, as sewers, bridges, roads, and aqueducts, were the best in the world. They produced little sculpture and painting, but preferred to import shiploads of art as plunder from the cities of Sicily and Greece. With little appreciation of real beauty, the nobles took pleasure in adorning their houses and villas with stolen statues.

Along with foreign art came the ideas, the religion, and the morals of strangers. They began to worship the Greek Di-o-ny'sus, or Bac'chus, god of the vine and of life, including future life, and the Phrygian Cyb'e-le, Mother of the Gods, whom noisy processions honored in the streets with drums, trumpets, and cymbals. As the native worship was cold and formal, the Romans found satisfaction in the excitement of these Eastern religions.

[1] The most famous poets were Nae'vi-us and En'ni-us. The earliest Roman historian was Fabius Pictor, a member of the senate during the war with Hannibal. His *Annals* of Rome was written in Greek. Polybius, a Greek statesman of the age, wrote an able history on the expansion of the Roman power. Considerable parts of his work have come down to us, and are very valuable.

Morals, already declining, were corrupted by Eastern influence. The unimaginative Roman saw little beauty in Greek mythology and art, but welcomed the baser pleasures of an advanced civilization. At the same time Greek scepticism [1] unsettled his religious faith, the foundation of his moral conduct. It is not to be assumed that all the Romans were now vicious. The peasant who escaped economic ruin was still sound at heart; and even the circle of aristocrats produced the pure-minded Scipio Aemilianus and the noble, self-sacrificing spirit of the two Grac'chi, who were to be the leaders of the coming age of revolution. But in the city corruption was almost universal. Crowds of beggar clients attended the noble, and voted for him in return for the loaves he doled out to them, or for the shows of buffoons, beasts, and gladiators [2] with which he amused them from time to time. The rending of flesh and the flow of blood gave this rabble its keenest delight. As to the higher ranks, the greed of the capitalist and the insolence of the noble, already described, were surpassed only by the impurity of their lives, while among all classes in the state and empire mutual fear and hatred lurked. This condition of affairs called loudly for reform.

451. Summary of the Growth of Plutocracy. — (1) The political organization of Italy under Roman rule was on the whole fair and just, as it assured to the allied states protection and local self-government. (2) The provincials, on the other hand, were subjects. They were generally protected from foreign enemies, and the more barbarous peoples among them were benefited by contact with Roman civilization. But they were oppressed by restrictions on their commerce, by Roman traders and speculators, by the tax-collectors, and by rapacious governors. (3) Because of the provincial system Italy, too, declined. Rome began to oppress the allies. They could not compete in trade with the Roman capitalists, or in agriculture with the slave-worked estates in the provinces. (4) The common citizens of Rome suffered in the same way as the Italians, but to a greater extent. (5) The only persons benefited by the empire were a few great capitalists, who monopolized its business or held its lucrative offices. (6) These new conditions changed the old aristocratic republic into a plutocracy. (7) Mean-

[1] Cf. § 274. [2] § 473.

while Hellenic culture, coming into Rome, was aiding the development of great and noble characters like those of the Gracchi and Scipio Aemilianus, and on the other side was fostering scepticism and vice. (8) In all its parts the empire was beginning to show symptoms of decay.

Suggestive Questions

1. Why did not the Romans extend their federal policy to all territory acquired outside of Italy? 2. What were the defects of the provincial system? 3. Compare the expansion of the Roman power with that of England or of the United States. 4. To what extent was the deterioration of Roman morals due to conquest? 5. Define "populares," "optimates," and "equites." 6. What privileges and what degree of political influence did each of the following classes enjoy toward the end of this period: nobles, knights, city plebs, country plebs, Latins, and Italians? In what way were the nobles and the city poor attached to each other?

Note-book Topics

I. **Scipio Aemilianus.** — Botsford, *Story of Rome*, 144–150; see also indices of the various histories.

II. **Government of Rome during the Punic Wars.** — Botsford, 127–136; Munro, *Source Book of Roman History*, 47–52; Abbott, *Roman Political Institutions*, 63–80; Greenidge, *Roman Public Life*, chs. iii–vi.

III. **Manners, Morals, and Religion.** — Botsford, 136–140; Munro, 93–100; Carter, *Religion of Numa*, 104–145; Duruy, *History of Rome*, i. ch. xx; ii. ch. xxxv.

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