

**CICERO, CLODIUS AND MILO:
ROMAN POLITICAL LIFE IN THE
FIRST CENTURY, B.C. A LECTURE
DELIVERED BEFORE THE HARVARD
CLASSIC CLUB, APRIL 25, 1900**

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Cicero, Clodius and Milo: Roman Political Life in the First Century, B.C. A Lecture Delivered before the Harvard classic club, April 25, 1900 by Horace White

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CICERO, CLODIUS AND MILO.

Ladies and Gentlemen : I shall invite your attention to an episode in ancient history which brings into view the decline and fall of the Roman republic. This is, to my mind, the most instructive chapter in the annals of ancient times, since it shows how a great people became a prey to their own vices and follies, and after conquering the world surrendered their liberty to men whom they had armed to take away the liberty of others.

The historian Sallust dates the decline of the republic from the destruction of Carthage, "from which time," he says, "the manners of our forefathers degenerated, not as before, gradually, but with the downward rush of a torrent." Having no longer a rival that she need fear, Rome began to plunder the provinces, not merely by a tribute of fixed amount, but by military governors practically irresponsible, who were chiefly engaged in robbing the provincials and dividing the plunder with those who were able to shield them from punishment. The whole industrial system rested on slavery, which was robbery in a more aggravated form. Three or four hundred men ruled the world in this manner. Their appetites grew with what they fed on, and, since the amount of plunder was not unlimited, they fell to quarreling over it. The quarrels of the nobles gave opportunities to demagogues to rise by espousing the interests of the plebs. Such a condition was sure to produce the gang and the boss in due time. Factions, and street fighting to control the elections, came on apace, and these contests widened into civil wars, proscriptions, confiscation and government by error, until monarchy became the least evil of the

time. Beginning with the murder of Tiberius Gracchus, the Roman republic, like an uneasy volcano, began to spout fire and mud, and the eruptions continued until the whole mass fell inward. About one hundred years were filled with this long agony.

The republic was a government by great families bestriding a mass of inferiors who were yet free citizens possessed of intelligence, bravery and numbers, cruelly oppressed, smarting under the sense of inferiority, and ever struggling to get a greater share of the government, and the emoluments thereof. Cicero, in his *De Officiis* (ii, 21), quotes a saying of the tribune Marcius Philippus in the year 104, "that there were not two thousand Roman citizens who possessed any property." Cicero neither affirms nor denies this statement. He alludes to it merely to deprecate it as having a leveling tendency, leading to a demand for a division of property. An extract from a speech of Tiberius Gracchus, preserved for us by Plutarch, pictures the condition of the common soldiers of his time, about the year 133 B. C.:

"The wild beasts of Italy had their dens and holes and hiding-places, while the men who fought and died in defense of Italy enjoyed, indeed, the air and light, but nothing else. Houseless, and without a spot of ground to rest upon, they wander about with their wives and children, while their commanders, with a lie in their mouths, exhort the soldiers in battle to defend their tombs and temples against the enemy; but out of so many Romans not one has a family altar, or an ancestral tomb, and they fight to maintain the luxury and wealth of others, and they die, with the title of lords of the earth, but without possessing a single clod to call their own."

The office of tribune of the plebs was created in the year 494, B. C., to protect the plebeians against the tyranny and injustice of the higher magistrates and of the patricians. The word tribune means tribe man, or chief of the tribe. There had been military tribunes

or tribe men, from the earliest times. The new officers were tribe men with different functions. At first their powers were confined to the protection of the plebeians against the arbitrary acts of the patricians. In order that the tribunes might not be interfered with in these functions, their office and their persons were declared to be sacred, and inviolable. Only a plebeian could be elected a tribune of the plebs. The tribunician power grew by degrees till it became the greatest in the State, although not the highest dignity. A tribune could even imprison a consul in certain cases. There are some such instances recorded. The tribunes had authority to convene the *comitia tributa*, or general assembly of the people, and to propose laws for enactment by them. The influence of the tribunes was nearly omnipotent in passing any measure which they might bring forward. So great did the tribune's power become that patricians themselves sought the office. The only way they could obtain it was by procuring adoption into a plebeian family.

Let us imagine, if we can, the American Republic governed at New York by a popular assembly, meeting in Union Square and passing laws at the instigation of anybody who could command the hearing of a mob swayed by passion and restrained only by the social influence or the bribes of a few hundred rich but unprincipled men. This was the kind of government that Rome had in the time of the Gracchi. It went from bad to worse, and from one revolution to another. Battles were fought in the streets over laws for the settlement of colonies and for distributions of corn to the poor. On a measure of the former kind, proposed by the tribune Saturninus, two battles were fought in one day, and Saturninus perished as the Gracchi had perished before him.

We, looking backward, can see that Roman liberty

was perishing, although Sulla had not yet marched his legions into the city. The sabre, as Mommsen observes, had not yet interfered with the constitutional rule of the bludgeon, but it was sure to do so, as a superior tool always displaces an inferior one sooner or later. The republic was thoroughly corrupt. Uncontrollable forces had been let loose within it. The good men, upon whose united strength Cicero relied to save the state, were hurried along with the torrent. Their influence was slight except in the presence of some startling crime like the conspiracy of Catiline, or some overmastering peril like the approach of the Cimbri and Teutones from the North. As soon as the immediate danger was past, the oligarchy returned to their plundering and their unbridled vices, the mob to their gladiatorial shows, their street fights and the selling of their votes in the elections.

Into this kind of society Marcus Tullius Cicero was born in the year 106 B. C., and Julius Cæsar was born four years later. We shall see with what different eyes these two men looked upon the world in which their lot was cast. When they had arrived at years of responsibility Sulla was Dictator of Rome and monarch of the world. He had reached this place without the motive of personal ambition. An aristocrat, a dilettante, a voluptuary, not naturally cruel, but a man without scruples and of iron will, Sulla found himself in this weltering mass. He came to the front because he was the ablest soldier of his day.

The Roman army was no longer composed of Roman burgesses having homes to return to at the end of a campaign. It consisted of the proletariat of Italy and of recruits from Gaul, Spain, Africa and other provinces, men whose sole motive in fighting was pay and plunder. On the first occasion when a hostile Roman army took possession of Rome itself the question in dis-

pute was whether Marius or Sulla should have command of the war against Mithridates. The command had been given in the regular way to Sulla, and he was preparing to march from Capua when Marius attempted to snatch it from him in an irregular way by a popular vote. Sulla called his army together and told them what had taken place in the city. "They were eager for the war against Mithridates," says Appian, "because it promised much plunder and they feared that Marius would enlist other soldiers instead of themselves." They demanded that Sulla should lead them to Rome, which he did without delay. The Marian faction had not expected such a movement. Sulla entered the city as a conqueror and killed his opponents, or put them to flight. He then marched against Mithridates and overthrew him at the end of a three years' war. His enemies in Rome had meanwhile recovered their lost ground, obtained possession of the city and the whole of Italy, had put the friends of Sulla to death, or sent them into banishment, and had sought to murder his wife and children. He returned with a veteran army which was wholly devoted to him and cared nothing for Rome, or for Italy, except for the plunder they contained. Sulla destroyed or dispersed the forces opposed to him, entered the city, massacred the leaders of the Marian faction, confiscated their property and made himself Dictator with legislative and executive powers for an indefinite term.

While this blood was flowing Cicero made his first speech in the Forum. He was twenty-six years of age. About the same time Sulla ordered Cæsar, then twenty-two years old, to divorce his wife, Cornelia, whose father, Cinna, had been a consul in the Marian faction. Cæsar refused to do so, and became for a short time a fugitive from the vengeance of the tyrant. He was saved, however, by the intercession of friends, who

were members of the Sullan faction. It is said that when Sulla yielded to their intercession he predicted that this young man would one day overthrow the party of the nobles. Suetonius refers to this tale, not as a rumor, but as a fact well known (*satis constat*). I take leave to doubt it, however, for if Sulla had really believed this, Cæsar's head would have adorned the forum along with those of the proscribed senators.

Until Sulla brought his legions into the city anybody who could command the proletariat could govern Rome. This rabble consisted in part of Roman citizens and in part of foreigners and slaves. The latter classes could not vote, but as they could swell the crowd, and add to the tumult, and join in the fighting, they were by no means a negligible quantity. The rabble required bread which it had not the opportunity to earn, even if it had the willingness. It demanded amusements for its idle time, and these were supplied by the rich in the form of chariot races, and combats of wild beasts and of gladiators. This proletariat was the creation of the upper classes, and I do not see how, in the time of Cicero, it could have been any better than it was. It was bound to give its favor and support to those who gave their support and favor to it, to such men as Gaius Gracchus, Saturninus, Sulpicius, Cinna, Catiline and Clodius. These men were political bosses. They commanded the proletariat by turns. Their several careers, together with that of Sulla, taught the lesson that anybody who could command both the rabble inside the walls, and a victorious army outside, could be the ruler of the world. A little later it became plain that the commander of the army could dispense with the favor of the rabble, and later still the army found out that it could make and unmake its commanders.

The conspiracy of Catiline was overthrown by Cicero in the year 63. He was then forty-three years old.

He had executed the leaders of the plot, except Catiline himself, who fell in battle a month later. Among the rising politicians of the time was Publius Clodius Pulcher, a young patrician of dissolute habits, but of engaging manners, energy of character and an eloquent tongue. Like most of the gilded youth of his time he was overwhelmed with debt, and he looked to a political career as a means of obtaining office and money. Lucullus was his brother-in-law, and he had accompanied the latter in his campaign against Mithridates, but had not distinguished himself except by stirring up mutiny in the army. Another brother-in-law was Q. Marcius Rex, who had been consul in the year 68, and who was at this time in command of Cilicia. Clodius left Lucullus and joined Rex. While commanding a fleet under the latter he was captured by pirates, and he applied to Ptolemy, king of Cyprus, for money to procure his ransom. This penurious prince advanced only two talents for the purpose, and Clodius remembered it against him and a little later "got even with him" by promoting the passage of a law at Rome to depose him and confiscate his treasures. He returned to Rome, and we next hear of him as prosecuting Catiline for extortion and embezzlement in Africa, but he withdrew the accusation for a bribe. Shortly afterward he obtained an office in Gallia Narbonensis 64 B. C., where he, too, was accused of plundering the provincials. He was back in Rome again in the year 63, and he co-operated with Cicero in putting down the conspiracy of Catiline. When next we hear of him he was detected in violating the mysteries of the Bona Dea, to which only women were admitted. Cicero writes to Atticus in the year 62:

"I imagine you have heard that P. Clodius, the son of Appius, was caught in women's clothes at the house of Gaius Cæsar while the religious ceremonies of the