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## [The greco-roman world - suite]

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followed the Stoic command, "Live in harmony with Nature", so in his faith in divine providence, based on Stoic determinism, he felt that he had no right to deprive his son of the claim to the succession arising from his birth. In any case, owing to his action he is not free from blame for the collapse of the empire. We can only say that even a man who is morally supreme, when called upon to deal with practical affairs, may become involved in guilt—it is the tragic point we reached once before, when we followed the career of Plato's friend Dion.\*

Shortly before the emperor raised his son Commodus to be joint ruler with himself, his general Avidius Cassius, a Syrian by birth, whom he had rewarded for his victory over the Parthians by appointing him governor of Syria, committed high treason. He made himself emperor in Antiochia (A.D. 175), and led mutinous troops against Marcus with the war-cry, "Against the philosophic old woman", until in the end he was lynched by his soldiers; they sent the traitor's head to the emperor. Faustina, his wife, daughter of Antoninus Pius, urged him to take vengeance on the accomplices of Cassius: "Spare not", she wrote to him, "men who have not spared you, and would have spared neither me nor your children had they succeeded." This he declined to do, giving these reasons: "For there is nothing that can commend an emperor to the world more than clemency. It was clemency that made Cæsar into a god, that deified Augustus, that honoured your father with the distinctive title of Pius. Finally, if my wishes had been followed in respect to the war, not even Cassius would have been slain."<sup>90</sup>

This was a succession of events such as might steel and deepen the character. But Marcus, who was a capable ruler, and who had also been active in social legislation,<sup>†</sup> stood at the loom of history as a philosophic observer. He says so himself: he exhorts himself to regard the tragedy of world history in the same spirit as a spectacle on the stage, and he also says how he would have that regarded:

\* See above, Vol. I, pp. 114, 137, 599.

<sup>†</sup> The question of Marcus Aurelius' capacity as a ruler, so important to the assessment of the man and of the virtue of his philosophy, may be given, according to Mommsen, an affirmative answer. Of importance is the judgment of another eminent German historian, who declares that the emperor Marcus' foreign policy was that of Cæsar, Augustus, Tiberius, the Flavians, and Trajan, and sums up: "He would have become the consummator and one of the greatest of Romans if death had not summoned him a year too soon. His son Commodus abandoned his father's work." Wilhelm Weber, "Das Römische Kaiserreich", etc., in *Knaurs Weltgeschichte* (Berlin, 1935), p. 246.

First of all tragedies were put on the stage to remind you of what comes to pass and that it is Nature's law for things to happen like that and that you are not to make what charmed you on the stage a heavy burden on the world's greater stage. For you see that those events are bound to have that ending, and that even those endure them who have cried aloud "Alas! alas! Cithæron" (XI, 6).\*

Moreover, he regarded all historical greatness not only sceptically, but with incredulity; he reminded himself by means of one simile after another of the ephemeral nature shared by all, pointing out to himself how the various great rulers and courts and also the philosophically and ethically great of the past had their day and became as dust. "The court of Augustus, his wife, daughter, grandsons, stepsons, sister; Agrippa, his kinsmen, his familiar friends, Arius,<sup>†</sup> Mæcenas, doctors, sacrificial ministers,—a whole court dead. Next pass on to other courts . . ." He thinks of Pompey, Cæsar's rival, whose immediate descendants all came to their end in the civil wars, and continues in this Meditation (VIII, 31): "Then the familiar inscription upon tombs: The Last of His Line. Calculate all the anxiety of those who preceded them in order to leave behind an heir, and then it was ordained that one should be the last; here again a whole family dead." With reference to the great army commanders among the rulers, he carries his thought still further: "Alexander, Pompey, and Julius Cæsar, after so often utterly destroying whole towns and slaying in the field many myriads of horse and foot, themselves also one day departed from life" (III, 3). Above the men of action he places the philosophers:

Alexander, Julius Cæsar, and Pompey, what are they by comparison with Diogenes, Heraclitus, and Socrates? For these men saw things as they are and their causal and material aspects, and their own governing parts were self-determined; but as for the former, how much there was to provide for, and of how many things they were the servants (VIII, 3).

But this essential merit of the spirit in comparison with power does not prevent him from continuing his observation in regard to Death the Leveller: "Heraclitus, after many speculations about the fire which should consume the Universe, was waterlogged by dropsy, poulticed himself with cow-dung, and died. Vermin killed Democritus; another kind of vermin Socrates . . .

\* In Sophocles' *Œdipus* the hero, pursued by fate, utters this cry. At his birth Œdipus had been exposed on Mount Cithæron, in Boeotia, and in his grief he laments that he had then been rescued.

<sup>†</sup> Arius of Alexandria, a Stoic who was the philosophic guide of Augustus.



