Sallust

Bellum Catilinae

(‘The Conspiracy of Catiline’)
Chapter 7: The Republic’s Days of Glory

It was in this period that individuals were first able to distinguish themselves and display their talents to greater advantage; for kings are more suspicious of good men than of bad, and always fear men of merit. Indeed, it almost passes belief what rapid progress was made by the whole state when once it had gained its liberty; such was the desire for glory that had possessed men’s hearts. Young men no sooner reached the age when they were fit for military service than they went to camp and learnt the art of soldiering in the school of laborious experience, taking more delight in costly armour and chargers than in loose women or the pleasures of the table. To such men no toil came amiss, no ground was too steep or rugged, no armed foe formidable; courage had taught them to overcome all obstacles. To win honour they competed eagerly among themselves, each man seeking the first opportunity to cut down an enemy or scale a rampart before his comrades' eyes. It was by such exploits that they thought a man could win true wealth - good repute and high nobility. Their thirst for glory, and ever more glory, was insatiable; as for money, their only ambition was to come by it honourably and spend it openhandedly. I could mention places where vast enemy hosts were routed by a handful of Romans, and towns of great natural strength that they took by assault. But I must not digress too far from my proper theme.
Chapter 20: Catiline’s First Address

When Catiline had assembled the men whom I mentioned, although he had often had long conferences with each of them individually, he thought it advisable to address an exhortation to the whole company. Accordingly he made them withdraw into a remote part of the house and, after excluding all witnesses, spoke to the following effect:

‘Were I not assured of your courage and loyalty, I could not use this favourable opportunity that fortune has vouchsafed me. However high our hopes, however easy it might have seemed for us to seize power, all would have been in vain. For with only cowards or triflers to rely on, I for one would not throw away a certainty to grasp at a hazardous chance. It is because I have found you brave and faithful to me on many important occasions, that I venture to embark on a great and noble enterprise; also because I have observed that what seems good or bad to me seems so to you: for identity of likes and dislikes is the one solid foundation of friendship.

‘The projects which I have been turning over in my mind have already been explained to each of you separately. But for my own part, every passing day kindles my enthusiasm more and more when I think what will be our lot unless we ourselves assert our claim to liberty. Ever since the state came under the jurisdiction and control of a powerful oligarchy, it is always they who receive tribute from foreign kings and provinces and rake in taxes from every people and tribe. The rest of us, however energetic and virtuous we may be, whether our birth be noble or base, are but a crowd of nobodies without influence or authority, subservient to men who in a soundly governed state would stand in awe of us. Thus all influence, power, office, and wealth are in their hands or where they choose to bestow them; all they leave for us is danger, defeat, prosecutions, and poverty. How long, brave comrades, will you endure it? Is it not better to die courageously and have done with it, than to drag out lives of misery and dishonour as the playthings of other men’s insolence, until we lose them ignominiously in the end? But in truth - I call on gods and men to witness it - victory is within our grasp. We have the strength of youth and we have stout hearts; whereas our opponents are enfeebled by age and soft living. We have but to make a start; the rest will follow easily. Can anyone who has the spirit of a man endure that they should have a superfluity of riches to waste in building out into the sea and leveling mountains, while we lack means to buy necessities? They have two, three, or four houses joined together, when we have not a home to call our own. Though they buy pictures, statues, and vessels of chased metal, though they pull down new houses to build others, laying waste their wealth
and making inroads upon it in every imaginable way, yet all their extravagance cannot exhaust it. For us there is destitution at home and debts everywhere else; misery now, and a still worse future to look forward to; we have nothing left, in fact, save the breath we draw in our wretchedness.

‘Awake, then! Here, here before your eyes, is the liberty that you have often yearned for, and withal affluence, honour, and glory, all of which fortune offers as the prizes of victory. Consider your situation and your opportunity, the peril and want that beset you, and the rich spoils that may be won in war: these plead more strongly than any words of mine. Use me as your commander or as a soldier in the ranks: my heart and my hands shall be at your service. These are the objects I hope to help you achieve when I am your consul – unless indeed I deceive myself and you are content to be slaves instead of masters.’
Chapters 36-39: Party Strife at Rome

NEVER in its history - it seems to me - had the empire of Rome been in such a miserable plight. From east to west all the world had been vanquished by her armies and obeyed her will; at home there was profound peace and abundance of wealth, which mortal men esteem the chiepest of blessings. Yet there were Roman citizens obstinately determined to destroy both themselves and their country. In spite of two senatorial decrees, [ibid. 30.6 & 36.2] not one man among all the conspirators was induced by the promise of reward to betray their plans, and not one-deserted from Catiline's camp. A deadly moral contagion had infected all their minds. And this madness - was not confined to those actually implicated in the plot. The whole of the lower orders, impatient for a new regime, looked with favour on Catiline's enterprise1. In this they only did what might have been expected of them. In every country paupers envy respectable citizens and make heroes of unprincipled characters, hating the established order of things and hankering after innovation; discontented with their own lot, they are bent on general upheaval. Turmoil and rebellion bring them carefree profit, since poverty has nothing to lose.

The city populace were especially eager to fling themselves into a revolutionary adventure. There were several reasons, for this. To begin with, those who had made themselves conspicuous anywhere by vice and shameless audacity, those who had wasted their substance by disgraceful excesses, and those whom scandalous or criminal conduct had exiled from their homes - all these had poured into Rome till it was like a sewer. Many, remembering Sulla's victory, and seeing men who had served under him as common soldiers now risen to be senators, or so rich that they lived as luxuriously as kings, began to hope that they too, if they took up arms, might find victory a source of profit. Young men from the country, whose labour on the farms had barely kept them from starvation, had been attracted by the private and public doles available at Rome, and preferred an idle city life to such thankless toil. These, like all the rest, stood to gain by public calamities. It is no wonder, therefore, that these paupers, devoid of moral scruple and incited by ambitious hopes, should have held their country as cheap as they held themselves. Those also to whom Sulla's victory had brought disaster by the proscription of their parents, the confiscation of their property, and the curtailment of their civil rights, looked forward with no less sanguine expectations to what might result from the coming struggle. Moreover, all the factions opposed to the Senate would rather see the state embroiled than accept their own exclusion from political power.

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1 This surely cannot have been true. Sallust must be exaggerating the popular support for the conspiracy.
Such was the evil condition by which, after an interval of some years, Rome was once more afflicted. After the restoration of the power of the tribunes in the consulship of Pompey and Crassus [70BC], this very important office was obtained by certain men whose youth intensified their natural aggressiveness. These tribunes began to rouse the mob by inveighing against the Senate, and then inflamed popular passion still further by handing out bribes and promises, whereby they won renown and influence for themselves. They were strenuously opposed by most of the nobility, who posed as defenders of the Senate but were really concerned to maintain their own privileged position. The whole truth – to put it in a word – is that although all disturbers of the peace in this period put forward specious pretexts, claiming either to be protecting the rights of the people or to be strengthening the authority of the Senate, this was mere pretence: in reality, every one of them was fighting for his personal aggrandizement. Lacking all self-restraint, they stuck at nothing to gain their ends, and both sides made ruthless use of any successes they won.

After Pompey was sent to take command in the wars against the pirates and Mithridates², the popular party lost ground and the oligarchy became more powerful. They secured a virtual monopoly of public offices, provincial commands, and all other privileges. Living in security and prosperous ease, they had nothing to fear for themselves, and by threats of prosecution they could deter any opponents who were elected to office from rousing the people by violent agitation. But the moment an unsettled situation offered a hope of revolution, the old fighting spirit reanimated the hearts of the popular leaders. If the first engagement had ended in a victory for Catiline, or even in a drawn battle, a terrible catastrophe would certainly have overtaken the state, and the victors would not have been allowed to enjoy their success for long: worn out and enfeebled, they would soon have seen a stronger opponent³ wrest both power and freedom from their hands. Even as it was, a number of men who had no part in the plot set out to join Catiline at the start of the campaign. Among them was Pulvius, a senator’s son, who was dragged back when already on his way and put to death by his father’s command.

² 67-66BC
³ By ‘a stronger opponent’ Sallust means Pompey, who was in Asia Minor at the head of a large army. He had just completed the conquest of Mithridates and was now engaged in reorganizing and extending Rome’s eastern provinces.
Chapters 50-51: The Debate in the Senate

‘Whoever, gentlemen, is deliberating upon a difficult question ought to clear his mind of hatred and affection and of anger and compassion. It is not easy to discern the truth when one’s view is obstructed by such emotions, and all experience proves that those who yield to passion never make political decisions. If you concentrate your mind on a problem, it can exert its full powers; once let passion come in it will take control of you and reduce your mind to impotence. There are plenty of examples that I could cite of kings and peoples who have allowed anger or pity to lead them into error. But I would rather mention some cases in which our own ancestors by controlling their emotions acted wisely and properly. In the war which Rome fought against King Perseus of Macedon⁴ the powerful and wealthy state of Rhodes, which our support had made what it was, proved disloyal and turned against us. At the end of the war, when the matter came up for discussion, the Romans feared that if they annexed the island it might be said that they had gone to war to enrich themselves rather than to punish King Perseus for his wrongful conduct; so they let the Rhodians go unpunished⁵. Similarly, in the whole series of wars with Carthage, in spite of many outrages committed by the Carthaginians in time of peace or during a truce, they never retaliated in kind, even when they had the chance. Such conduct they regarded as unworthy of Romans, even if it might be justifiable as a reprisal. You also, gentlemen, must take care that the guilt of Publius Lentulus and the others does not outweigh your sense of what is fitting, and that you do not indulge your resentment at the expense of your reputation. If a punishment can be found that is really adequate to their crimes, I am willing to support a departure from precedent; but if the enormity of their wickedness is such that no one could devise a fitting penalty, then I think we should content ourselves with those provided by the laws.

‘Most of the previous speakers have delivered elaborate and impressive speeches in which they deplored the miserable condition of our country. They have dwelt upon the horrors of war and the fate that awaits the vanquished: how girls and boys are ravished, children torn from their parents’ arms, wives subjected to the lusts of conquerors, temples and homes pillaged; how amid fire and slaughter, with weapons, corpses, and blood on every side, a cry of universal mourning goes up. But what in God’s name, was the purpose of all this eloquence? Was it to make you detest the conspiracy? As if a man whom the grisly reality has failed to move could be roused by an eloquent speech! That can never be: no mortal man minimizes his own

⁴ In 171-168 B.C.
⁵ Not entirely so: they were deprived of Lyda and Carla, their provinces on the mainland.
wrongs; many, indeed, resent them more than they ought. But not everyone, gentlemen, is equally free to show his resentment. If humble men, who pass their lives in obscurity, are provoked by anger to do wrong, few know of it, because few know anything about such unimportant people. But men in positions of great power live, as it were, on an eminence, and their actions are known to all the world. The higher our station, the less is our freedom of action. We must avoid partiality and hatred, and above all anger; for what in others would be called merely an outburst of temper, in those who bear rule is called arrogance and cruelty.

‘For my own part, gentlemen, I think that any torture would be less than these men’s crimes deserve. But most people remember only what happens last: when criminals are brought to justice, they forget their guilt and talk only of their punishment, if it is of unusual severity. I am sure that Decimus Silanus spoke on this serious matter with the best interests of his country at heart, and not from a desire to please anyone or to gratify feelings of personal enmity; for I know him as both a gallant patriot and a man of wise discretion. Yet his proposal strikes me - I will not say, as harsh, for in dealing with such men nothing could properly be described as harsh - but as out of keeping with the traditions of our Republic.

‘Surely, Silanus; it must have been either fear or a sense of outrage that impelled you, a consul elect, to suggest a form of punishment that is without precedent. Fear can be left out of the question, especially as, thanks to the precautions taken by our distinguished consul, we have such strong guards under arms. As regards the penalty you proposed, it would be relevant to observe that, to men in grief and wretchedness death comes as a release from suffering, not as a punishment to be endured, because it puts an end to all the ills that flesh is heir to, and beyond it there is no place for either tears or rejoicing. But what I want to ask is Why in heaven’s name did you not also propose that the prisoners should be flogged before being executed? Was it because the Porcian law forbids it? But there are other laws which provide that convicted citizens shall not be put to death, but shall be permitted to go into exile. Was it, then, because flogging is a severer punishment than death? But what penalty can be regarded as harsh or excessive for men found guilty of such a crime? If however it was because you thought flogging a lighter punishment, how can it be logical to respect the law in a comparatively small matter when you have disregarded it in a more important point?

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6 This lex Porcia, forbidding the scourging of Roman citizens without allowing an appeal to the people, was proposed, probably in 198 B.C., by the famous censor Marcus Porcius Cato, great-grandfather of the Cato whose speech is recorded in section 52.
'It may be asked: Who will take exception to any sentence that is passed upon traitors? The lapse of time and the caprice of fortune, which controls the destinies of all men, will one day produce a change of feeling. These particular men will have richly deserved whatever happens to them. But you, gentlemen, must consider the precedent that you establish for others. All bad precedents originate from measures good in themselves. When power passes into the hands of ignorant or unworthy men, the precedent which you establish by inflicting an extraordinary penalty on guilty men who deserve it will be used against innocent men who do not deserve it. The Spartans, for example, set up in Athens, when they had conquered it, an oligarchy of thirty members. These men began by executing without trial notorious malefactors whom everyone loathed, and the people rejoiced and said it was well done. After a time they began to act more and more irresponsibly, killing good and bad alike as the whim took them, and intimidating all the rest. Thus Athens was oppressed and enslaved, and paid a heavy price for its foolish rejoicing. In, our own times, when the victorious Sulla ordered the execution of Damasippus and other adventurers whom national calamities had raised to high positions, who did not approve his action? The men were criminals and trouble-makers, whose revolutionary intrigues had harassed the state, and it was agreed that they deserved to die. But those executions were the first step that led to a ghastly calamity. For before long, if anyone coveted a man's mansion or villa - or in the end merely his household plate or wearing apparel - he found means to have him put on the list of proscribed persons. So those who rejoiced at the death of Damasippus were soon hailed off to execution themselves, and the killing did not stop till Sulla had glutted all his followers with riches. I am not afraid that any such action will be taken by Cicero, or in this present age. But in a great nation like ours there are many men, with many different characters. It may be that on some future occasion, when another consul has, like him, an armed force at his disposal, some false report will be accepted as true; and when with this precedent before him, a consul draws the sword in obedience to a senatorial decree, who will there be to restrain him or to stay his hand?

'Our ancestors, gentlemen, never lacked wisdom or courage, and they were never too proud to take over a sound institution from another country. They borrowed most-of their armour and weapons from the Samnites, and most of their magisterial insignia from the Etruscans. In short, if they thought anything that an ally or an enemy had was likely to suit them. they enthusiastically adopted it at Rome; for they would rather copy a good thing than be consumed-with envy because they had not got it. In this period of imitation they followed the Greek cus-

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2 The cognomen of Lucius Junius Brutus, praetor 82 B.C.; one of the worst killers among the supporters of Sulla's enemy Marius, he was himself killed by Sulla.
tom of flogging citizens and executing convicted criminals. However, with the growth of the state and the development of party strife resulting from the increase of population, innocent people were victimized, and other similar abuses grew up. To check them the Porcian law was enacted, and other laws which allowed condemned persons the alternative of going into exile. This seems to me, gentlemen, a particularly strong argument against our making any innovation. For I cannot but think that there was greater virtue and wisdom in our predecessors, who with such small resources created such a vast empire, than there is in us, who find it as much as we can do to keep what they so nobly won.

‘Am I suggesting, you will ask, that the prisoners be released to go and swell Catiline’s army? By no means. My advice is that their goods be confiscated, and that they be imprisoned in such towns as are best provided to undertake their custody. Further that their case shall not thereafter be debated in the Senate or brought before a public assembly; if anyone contravenes this prohibition, the Senate should. I suggest, register its opinion that his action will he treasonable and contrary to the public interest.’

After Caesar’s speech most of the other senators contented themselves with a formal expression of agreement with one proposal or the other. But Marcus Porcius Cato, when asked his opinion spoke to the following effect:

‘When I turn, gentlemen, from contemplating the dangerous situation in which we stand to reflect upon the opinions of some of the previous speakers, the impression made on my mind is very different. If I understood them rightly they were discussing the punishment to be meted out to these men who have planned to make war on their country, parents, altars, and hearths. But the situation warns us rather to take precautions against them than to deliberate what sentence we shall pass on them. Other crimes can be punished when they have been committed; but with a crime like this, unless you take measures to prevent its being committed, it is too late: once it has been done, it is useless to invoke the law. When a city is captured, its defeated inhabitants lose everything.

‘I will address myself for a moment to those of you who have always been more concerned for your houses, villas, statues, and pictures, than you have for your country. In heaven’s name, men, if you want to keep those cherished possessions, whatever they may be, if you want to have peace and quiet for the enjoyment of your pleasures, wake up while there is still time and lend a hand to defend the Republic. It is not a matter of misappropriated taxes, or wrongs done to subject peoples; it is our liberty and lives that are at stake.'
'Many a time, gentlemen, have I spoken at length in this House; many a time have I reproached our fellow citizens for their self-indulgence and greed – and by so doing have made many enemies; for as I had never, in my own conscience, excused myself for any wrongdoing, I found it hard to pardon the sins which other men’s passions led them to commit. You took little notice of my remonstrances; but the stability of the state was not impaired by your indifference, because of its great prosperity. Now, however, it is not the question whether our morals are good or bad, nor is it the size and grandeur of the Roman empire that we have to consider. The issue is whether that empire, whatever we may think of it, is going to remain ours, or whether we and it together are to fall into the hands of enemies. In such a crisis does anyone talk to me of clemency and compassion? For a long time now we have ceased to call things by their proper names. To give away other people’s property is called generosity; criminal daring goes by the name of courage. That is why our affairs have come to such a pass. However, since such is our standard of morality, let Romans be liberal, if they want to, at the expense of our subjects, let them be merciful to plunderers of the exchequer. But let them not make a present of our life-blood, and by sparing a handful of criminals go the way to destroy all honest men.

'It was an eloquent and polished lecture that Gaius Caesar delivered to you a few minutes ago on the subject of life and death. Evidently he disbelieves the account men give of the next world - how the wicked go a different way from the good, and inhabit a place of horror, fear, and noisome desolation. Therefore he recommended that the property of the accused should be confiscated and that they should be imprisoned in various towns. No doubt he feared that if they remained in Rome, either the adherents of the conspiracy or a hired mob might rescue them by force. What does he think? Are there bad characters and criminals only at Rome, and not all over Italy? Is reckless violence not more likely to succeed where there is less strength to resist it? His proposals are useless if he apprehends danger from the conspirators; and if amid such universal fear he alone is not afraid, I have the more reason to be afraid for myself and for you*. In making your decision about Publius Lentulus and the other prisoners, you must realize that you will also be determining the fate of Catiline’s army and of the whole body of conspirators. The more energetically you act, the more will their courage be shaken. Show the slightest weakness and you will soon have the whole pack of them here barking defiance at you.

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* A plain hint that Cato believed Caesar to have been privy to Catiline’s schemes.
'Do not imagine that it was by force of arms that your ancestors transformed a petty state into this great Republic, if it were so, it would now be at the height of its glory, since we have more subjects and citizens, more arms and horses, than they had. It was something quite different that made them great - something that we are entirely lacking in. They were hard workers at home, just rulers abroad; and to the council-chamber they brought untrammelled minds, neither racked by consciousness of guilt nor enslaved by passion. We have lost these virtues. We pile up riches for ourselves while the state is bankrupt. We sing the praises of prosperity - and idle away our lives. Good men or bad - it is all one: all the prizes that merit ought to win are carried off by ambitious intriguers. And no wonder, when each one of you schemes only for himself, when in your private lives you are slaves to pleasure, and here in the Senate House the tools of money or influence. The result is that when an assault is made upon the Republic, there is no one there to defend it.

'I will say no more on that subject. A plot has been hatched by citizens of the highest rank to set fire to their native City. Gauls, the deadliest foes of everything Roman, have been called to arms. The hostile army and its leader are ready to descend upon us. And are you still hesitating and unable to decide how to treat public enemies taken within your walls? I suggest you take pity on them - they are young men led astray by ambition; armed though they are, let them go. But mind what you are doing with your clemency and compassion: if they unsheathe the sword, you may have reason to regret your attitude. Oh yes, you say, the situation is certainly ugly, but you are not afraid of it. On the contrary, you are shaking in your shoes; but you are so indolent and weak that you stand irresolute, each waiting for someone else to act trusting, doubtless, to the gods, who have often preserved our Republic in times of deadly peril. I tell you that vows and womanish supplications will not secure divine aid; it is by vigilance, action, and wise counsel, that all success is achieved. If you give way to sloth and cowardice, the gods turn a deaf ear to your entreaties: their wrath makes them your enemies.

'In bygone days, during a war with the Gauls, Aulus Manlius Torquatus had his son put to death for fighting the enemy against orders. That noble youth paid with his life for an excess of valour; and do you, who are trying a set of ruthless traitors to their country, hesitate about the appropriate sentence to pass? If their past lives are urged in extenuation of their crime, by their past lives let them be judged. Spare Lentulus for his high rank - if he ever spared his own chastity and good name, or showed any respect for god or man. Pardon the youth Cethegus - if this is not already the second time he has made war on his country. As for Gabinius, Statilius, and Caeparius, if they had not been
utterly unscrupulous, they would never have plotted as they did against the state.

'To conclude, gentlemen: if we could afford to risk the consequences of making a mistake, I should be quite willing to let experience convince you of your folly, since you scorn advice. But we are completely encircled. Catiline and his army are ready to grip us by the throat, and there are other foes within the walls, in the very heart of our city. We can make no plans or preparations without its being known - an additional reason for acting quickly. This therefore is my recommendation. Whereas by the criminal designs of wicked citizens the Republic has been subjected to serious danger; and whereas, by the testimony of Titus Volturcius and the envoys of the Allobroges, confirmed by the prisoners' own confession, they stand convicted of having planned massacre, arson, and other foul atrocities against their fellow citizens and their country: that having admitted their criminal intention, they should be put to death as if they had been caught in the actual commission of capital offences, in accordance with ancient custom.'