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# **XI.15 How in the flourishing state of the republic, Rome suddenly lost her freedom**

- The Spirit of Law - Book XI. On the laws that constitute political freedom in their relation to the constitution -

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In the heat of the disputes between patricians and plebeians, the latter asked that fixed laws be made so that judgments would no longer be the effect of a capricious will or an arbitrary power. After lengthy resistance, the senate acquiesced. Decemvirs were named to draw up these laws. It was thought they should be granted broad power, because they had to give laws to parties that were all but incompatible. The nomination of all magistrates was suspended, and in the comitia they were elected the sole administrators of the republic. They found themselves invested with the authority of both consuls and tribunes. One of these gave them the right to assemble the senate, the other the right to assemble the people. But they convoked neither the senate nor the people. Ten men alone in the republic had the entire legislative authority, the entire executive authority, and the entire judgmental authority. Rome found herself subjected to a tyranny as cruel as Tarquin's. When Tarquin practiced his harassments, Rome was indignant at the power he had usurped ; when the decemvirs practiced theirs, Rome was dumbfounded at the power she had conferred.

But what was this system of tyranny, produced by men who had obtained political and military power only by their knowledge of civil affairs, and who in the circumstances of those times needed the cowardice of citizens internally, to let themselves be governed, and their courage externally to defend them ?

The spectacle of the death of Virginia, sacrificed by her father to modesty and freedom, made the authority of the decemvirs evaporate. Everyone found himself free, because everyone was offended ; everybody became a citizen, because everybody became a father. The senate and the people recovered a freedom that had been entrusted to foolish tyrants.

More than others, the Roman people got aroused by spectacles. The spectacle of Lucretia's bloody body put an end to royalty. [1] The debtor who appeared in the square covered with sores changed the form of the republic. [2] The sight of Virginia forced out the decemvirs. In order to condemn Manlius, the capitol had to be hidden from the people's view. [3] Cæsar's bloody robe returned Rome to servitude. [4]

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[1] [This story of Virginia (451 BCE) is told by Livy in *Ab urba condita*, Book III, ch. 44-58 ; the comparison with the death of Lucretia (circa 509 BCE) is Livy's.]

[2] [Livy, II, 23]

[3] [Because Manlius had saved the capitol (Livy, *ibid.*, VI, 20).]

[4] [I.e., it precipitated the end of the republic, because of the violence unleashed at his funeral.]