

The Lives of the Caesars: Vitellius

Suetonius

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Translated by J. C. Rolfe.

I. OF the origin of the Vitellii different and widely varying accounts are given, some saying that the family was ancient and noble, others that it was new and obscure, if not of mean extraction. I should believe that these came respectively from the flatterers and detractors of the emperor, were it not for a difference of opinion about the standing of the family at a considerably earlier date. We have a book of Quintus Elogius addressed to Quintus Vitellius, quaestor of the Deified Augustus, in which it is written that the Vitellii were sprung from Faunus, king of the Aborigines, and Vitellia, who was worshipped as a goddess in many places; and that they ruled in all Latium. That the surviving members of the family moved from the Sabine district to Rome and were enrolled among the patricians. That traces of this stock endured long afterwards in the Vitellian Road, running from the Janiculum all the way to the sea, as well as in a colony of the same name, which in ancient days the family had asked the privilege of defending against the Aequicoli with troops raised from their own line. That when afterwards a force was sent into Apulia at the time of the Samnite war, some of the Vitellii settled at Nuceria, and that after a long time their descendants returned to the city and resumed their place in the Senatorial order.

II. On the other hand several have written that the founder of the family was a freedman, while Cassius Severus and others as well say further that he was a cobbler, and that his son, after making a considerable fortune from the sale of confiscated estates and the profession of informer, married a common strumpet, daughter of one Antiochos who kept a bakery, and became the father of a Roman eques. But this difference of opinion may be left unsettled. In any event Publius Vitellius of Nuceria, whether of ancient stock or of parents and forefathers in whom he could take no pride, unquestionably a Roman eques and a steward of Augustus' property, left four sons of high rank with the same name and differing only in their forenames: Aulus, Quintus, Publius and Lucius. Aulus, who was given to luxury and especially notorious for the magnificence of his feasts, died a consul, appointed to the office with Domitius [32 C.E.], father of the emperor Nero. Quintus lost his rank at the time when it was resolved, at the suggestion of Tiberius, to depose and get rid of undesirable Senators [20 A.D.]. Publius, a member of Germanicus' staff, arraigned Gnaeus Piso, the enemy and murderer of his commander, and secured his condemnation. Arrested among the accomplices of Seianus, after holding the praetorship, and handed over to his own brother to be kept in confinement, he opened his veins with a penknife, but allowed himself to be bandaged and restored, not so much from unwillingness to die, as because of the entreaties of his friends; and he met a natural death while still in confinement [35 C.E.]. Lucius attained the consulate and then was made governor of Syria, where with supreme diplomacy he not only induced Artabanus, King of the Parthians, to hold a conference with him, but even to do obeisance to the standards of the legion [34 C.E.]. Later he held, with the Emperor Claudius, two more regular consulships and the censorship [43, 47, and 50 C.E.]. He also bore the charge of the empire while Claudius was away on his expedition to Britain [44 C.E.]. He was an honest and active man, but of very ill repute because of his passion for a freedwoman, which went so far that he used her spittle mixed with honey to rub on his throat and jaws as a medicine, not secretly nor seldom, but openly and every day. He had also a wonderful gift for flattery and was the first to begin to worship Gaius Caesar as a god; for on his return from Syria he did not presume to approach the emperor except with veiled beads, turning himself about and then prostrating himself. To neglect no means of gaining the favor of Claudius, who was a slave to his wives and freedmen, he begged of Messalina, as the highest possible favor, that she would allow him to take off her shoes; and when he had taken off her right slippers he constantly carried it about between his toga and his tunic, and sometimes kissed it. Narcissus also and Pallas he honored by cherishing their images among his household gods.

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It was he who made the famous remark, "May you often do it," when he was congratulating Claudius at the celebration of the Secular games.

III. He died of a paralytic stroke on the second day after he was seized, leaving two sons, begotten of Sestilia, a most worthy woman and of no mean family, and having lived to see them consuls both in the same year, and for the whole year, since the younger succeeded the elder for six months. On his decease the Senate honored him with a public funeral and with a statue on the rostra with this inscription: "Of unwavering loyalty to his emperor." The Emperor Aulus Vitellius, son of Lucius, was born on the eight day before the Kalends of October, or according to some, on the seventh day before the Ides of September, in the consulship of Drusus Caesar and Norbanus Flaccus [September 24, 15 C.E.]. His parents were so aghast at his horoscope as announced by the astrologers, that his father tried his utmost, while he lived, to prevent the assignment of any province to his son; and when he was sent to the legions and hailed as emperor, his mother immediately mourned over him as lost. He spent his boyhood and early youth at Capreae among the wantons of Tiberius, being branded for all time with the nickname Spintria [See Tib. xliii. 1] and suspected of having been the cause of his father's first advancement at the expense of his own chastity.

IV. Stained by every sort of baseness as he advanced in years, he held a prominent place at court, winning the intimacy of Gaius [Caligula] by his devotion to driving and of Claudius by his passion for dice. But he was still dearer to Nero, not only because of these same qualities, but because of a special service besides; for when he was presiding at the contests of the Neronia, and Nero wished to compete among the lyre-players, but did not venture to do so although there was a general demand for him and [he] accordingly left the theater, Vitellius called him back, alleging that he came as an envoy from the insistent people, and thus gave Nero a chance to yield to their entreaties.

V. Having in this way through the favor of three emperors been honored not only with political positions but with distinguished priesthoods as well, he afterwards governed Africa as proconsul [60 C.E.] and served as curator of public works, but with varying purpose and reputation. In his province he showed exceptional integrity for two successive years, for he served as deputy to his brother, who succeeded him; but in his city offices he was said to have stolen some of the offerings and ornaments from the temples and changed others, substituting tin and brass for gold and silver.

VI. He had to wife Petronia, daughter of an ex-consul, and by her a son Petronianus, who was blind in one eye. Since this son was named as his mother's heir on condition of being freed from his father's authority, he manumitted him, but shortly afterwards killed him, according to the general belief, charging him besides with attempted parricide, and alleging that his guilty conscience had led him to drink the poison which he had mixed for his intended crime. Soon afterwards he married Galeria Fundana, daughter of an ex-praetor, and from her too he had a son and a daughter, but the former stammered so, that he was all but dumb and tongue-tied.

VII. Galba surprised everyone by sending him to Lower Germania. Some think that it was due to Titus Vinius, who had great influence at the time, and whose friendship Vitellius had long since won through their common support of the Greens [A faction in the Circus]. But since Galba openly declared that no men were less to be feared than those who thought of nothing but eating, and that Vitellius' bottomless gullet might be filled from the resources of the province, it is clear to anyone that he was chosen rather through contempt than favor. It is notorious that when he was about to start, he lacked means for his traveling expenses, and that his need of funds was such, that after consigning his wife and children, whom he left in Rome, to a hired garret, he let his house for the rest of the year; and that he took a valuable pearl from his mother's ear and pawned it, to defray the expenses of his journey. He had to resort to false accusation to get rid of the throng of creditors that lay in wait for him and tried to detain him, including the people of Sinuessia and of Formiae, whose public revenues he had embezzled; for he brought an action for damages against a freedman who was somewhat persistent in demanding what was due to him, alleging that he had been kicked by him, and would not let him off until he had squeezed him to the tune of fifty thousand sesterces. On his arrival the army, which was disaffected towards the emperor and inclined to mutiny, received him gladly with open arms, as if he had come to them as a gift from the gods; since he was the son of a man who had thrice been consul, in the prime of life, and of an easy-going and lavish disposition. This earlier good opinion Vitellius had also strengthened by recent acts, for throughout the march he kissed even the common soldiers whom he met, and at the post houses and inns he was unusually affable to the mule drivers and travelers, asking each of them in the morning whether they had breakfasted and even showing by belching that he

had done so.

VIII. As soon as he entered the camp, he granted every request that anyone made and even of his own accord freed those in disgrace from their penalties, defendants of suits from their mourning, and the convicted from punishment. Therefore hardly a month had passed, when the soldiers, regardless of the hour, for it was already evening, hastily took him from his bedroom, just as he was, in his common house clothes, and hailed him as emperor. Then he was carried about the most populous villages, holding a drawn sword of the Deified Julius, which someone had taken from a shrine of Mars and handed him during the first congratulations. He did not return to headquarters until the dining-room caught fire from the stove and was ablaze; and then, when all were shocked and troubled at what seemed a bad omen, he said: "Be of good cheer; to us light is given"; and this was his only address to the soldiers. When he presently received the support of the army of the upper province too, which had previously transferred its allegiance from Galba to the Senate, he eagerly accepted the surname of Germanicus, which was unanimously offered him, put off accepting the title of Augustus, and forever refused that of Caesar.

IX. Then hearing of the murder of Galba, he settled affairs in Germania and made two divisions of his forces, one to send on against Otho, and the other to lead in person. The former was greeted with a lucky omen at the start, for an eagle suddenly flew towards them from the right and after hovering about the standards, slowly preceded their line of march. But, on the contrary, when he himself began his advance, the equestrian statues which were being set up everywhere in his honor on a sudden all collapsed with broken legs, and the laurel crown which he had put on with due ceremony fell into a running stream. Later, as he was sitting in judgment on the tribunal at Vienna [*Modern Vienne, on the Rhone River*], a cock perched on his shoulder and then on his head. And the outcome corresponded with these omens, for he was not by his own efforts able to retain the power which his lieutenants secured for him.

X. He heard of the victory at Betriacum and of the death of Otho when he was still in Gaul, and without delay by a single edict he disbanded all the Praetorian cohorts, as having set a pernicious example and bade them hand over their arms to their tribunes. Furthermore, he gave orders that one hundred and twenty of them should be hunted up and punished, having found petitions which they had written to Otho, asking for a reward for services rendered in connection with Galba's murder. These acts were altogether admirable and noble, and such as to give hope that he would be a great princeps, had it not been that the rest of his conduct was more in harmony with his natural disposition and his former habits of life than with imperial dignity. For when he had begun his march, he rode through the middle of the cities like a triumphing general, and on the rivers he sailed in most exquisite craft wreathed with various kinds of garlands, amid lavish entertainments with no discipline among his household or the soldiers, making a jest of the pillage and wantonness of all his followers. For not content with the banquets which were furnished them everywhere at public expense, they set free whatever slaves they pleased, promptly paying those who remonstrated with blows and stripes, often with wounds, and sometimes with death. When he came to the plains where the battle was fought and some shuddered with horror at the moldering corpses, he had the audacity to encourage them by the abominable saying, that the odor of a dead enemy was sweet and that of a fellow-citizen sweeter still. But nevertheless, the better to bear the awful stench, he openly drained a great draught of unmixed wine and distributed some among the troops. With equal bad taste and arrogance, gazing upon the stone inscribed to the memory of Otho, he declared that he deserved such a Mausoleum, and sent the dagger with which his rival had killed himself to the Colony of Agrippina [*Modern Cologne*], to be dedicated to Mars. He also held an all night festival [*Rather, an orgy*] on the heights of the Apennines.

XI. Finally he entered the city to the sound of the trumpet, wearing a general's mantle and a sword at his side, amid standards and banners, with his staff in military cloaks and his troops with drawn swords. Then showing greater and greater disregard for the laws of gods and men, he assumed the office of high priest on the day of Allia [*A day of especially ill omen, because of the defeat by the Gauls in 390 B.C.E.*], held elections for ten years to come, and made himself consul for life. And to leave no doubt in anyone's mind what model he chose for the government of the State, he made funerary offerings to Nero in the middle of the Campus Martius, attended by a great throng of the official priests; and when at the accompanying banquet a flute-player was received with applause, he openly urged him "to render something from the Master's Book [*That is, the Dominicus Liber, a collection of Nero's composition*] as well"; and when he began the songs of Nero, Vitellius was the first to applaud him and even jumped for joy.

XII. Beginning in this way, he regulated the greater part of his rule wholly according to the advice and whims of the commonest of actors and chariot-drivers, and in particular of his freedman Asiaticus. This fellow had immoral relations with Vitellius in his youth, but later grew weary of him and ran away. When Vitellius came upon him selling *posca* [*A drink made of sour wine or vinegar mixed with water*] at Puteoli, he put him in irons, but at once freed him again and made him his favorite. His vexation was renewed by the man's excessive insolence and thievishness, and he sold him to an itinerant keeper of gladiators. When, however, he was once reserved for the end of a gladiatorial show, Vitellius suddenly spirited him away, and finally on getting his province set him free. On the first day of his reign he presented him with the golden ring at a banquet, although in the morning, when there was a general demand that Asiaticus be given that honor, he had deprecated in the strongest terms such a blot on the equestrian order.

XIII. But his besetting sins were luxury and cruelty. He divided his feasts into three, sometimes into four a day, breakfast, luncheon, dinner, and a drinking bout; and he was readily able to do justice to all of them through his habit of taking emetics. Moreover, he had himself invited to each of these meals by different men on the same day, and the materials for any one of them never cost less than four hundred thousand sesterces. Most notorious of all was the dinner given by his brother to celebrate the emperor's arrival in Rome, at which two thousand of the choicest fishes and seven thousand birds are said to have been served. He himself eclipsed even this at the dedication of a platter, which on account of its enormous size he called the "Shield of Minerva, Defender of the City" [*Probably referring to the colossal statue of Athena Promachos on the Acropolis at Athens. Pliny, Nat. Hist. 35.163ff. says that the platter cost a million sesterces, and that to make it a special furnace was built in the open fields*]. In this he mingled the livers of pike, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the tongues of flamingoes and the milt of lampreys, brought by his captains and triremes from the whole empire, from Parthia to the Hispanic straits. Being besides a man of an appetite that was not only boundless, but also regardless of time or decency, he could never refrain, even when he was sacrificing or making a journey, from snatching bits of meat and cakes amid the altars, almost from the very fire, and devouring them on the spot; and in the cook shops along the road, viands smoking hot or even those left over from the day before and partly consumed.

XIV. He delighted in inflicting death and torture on anyone whatsoever and for any cause whatever, putting to death several men of rank, fellow students and comrades of his, whom he had solicited to come to court by every kind of deception, all but offering them a share in the rule. This he did in various treacherous ways, even giving poison to one of them with his own hand in a glass of cold water, for which the man had called when ill of a fever. Besides, he spared hardly one of the moneylenders, contractors, and tax-gatherers who had ever demanded of him the payment of a debt at Rome or of a toll on a journey. When one of these had been handed over for execution just as he was paying his morning call and at once recalled, as all were praising the emperor's mercy, Vitellius gave orders to have him killed in his presence, saying that he wished to feast his eyes. In another case he had two sons who attempted to intercede for their father put to death with him. A Roman eques also, who cried as he was being taken off to execution, "You are my heir," he compelled to show his will; and reading that one of the man's freedmen was put down as joint-heir with himself, he ordered the death both of the eques and the freedman. He even killed some of the common people, merely because they had openly spoken ill of the Blue factions, thinking that they had ventured to do this from contempt of himself and the anticipation of a change of rulers. But he was especially hostile to writers of lampoons and to astrologers, and whenever any one of them was accused he put him to death without trial, particularly incensed because after a proclamation of his in which he ordered the astrologers to leave the city and Italia before the Kalends of October, a placard was at once posted, reading: "By proclamation of the Chaldeans [*That is, the astrologers, for whom "Chaldaei" became a general term*], God bless the State! Before the same day and date let Vitellius Germanicus have ceased to live." Moreover, when his mother died, he was suspected of having forbidden her being given food when she was ill, because a woman of the Chatti, in whom he believed as he would in an oracle, prophesied that he would rule securely and for a long time, but only if he should survive his parent. Others say that through weariness of present evils and fear of those which threatened, she asked poison of her son, and obtained it with no great difficulty.

XV. In the eighth month of his reign the armies of the Moesian provinces and Pannonia revolted from him, and also in the provinces beyond the seas those of Judaea and Syria, the former swearing allegiance to Vespasian in his absence and the latter in his presence. Therefore, to retain the devotion and favor of the rest of the people, there was nothing that he did not lavish publicly and privately, without any limit whatever. He also held a levy in

the city, promising those who volunteered not only their discharge upon his victory but also the rewards and privileges given to veterans after their regular term of service. Later, when his enemies were pressing him hard by land and sea, he opposed to them in one quarter his brother with a fleet manned by raw recruits and a band of gladiators, and in another the forces and leaders who had fought at Betriacum. And after he was everywhere either worsted or betrayed he made a bargain with Flavius Sabinus, the brother of Vespasian, that he should have his own life and a hundred million sesterces. Thereupon he immediately declared from the steps of the Palace before his assembled soldiers, that he withdrew from the rule which had been given him against his will; but when all cried out against this, he postponed the matter, and after a night had passed, went at daybreak to the Rostra in mourning garb and with many tears made the same declaration, but from a written document. When the people and soldiers again interrupted him and besought him not to lose heart, vying with one another in promising him all their efforts in his behalf; he again took courage and by a sudden onslaught drove Sabinus and the rest of the Flavians, who no longer feared an attack, into the Capitol. Then he set fire to the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and destroyed them, viewing the battle and the fire from the house of Tiberius, where he was feasting. Not long afterwards he repented of his action, and throwing the blame upon others, called an assembly and took oath, compelling the rest to do the same, that there was nothing for which he would strive more earnestly than for the public peace. Then he took a dagger from his side and offered it first to the consul, and when he refused it, to the magistrates, and then to the Senators, one by one [*As a sign that he was willing to renounce the power of life and death over the people*]. When no one would take it, he went off as if he would place it in the Temple of Concord; but when some cried out that he himself was Concord, he returned and declared that he would not only retain the steel but would also adopt the surname Concordia.

XVI. He also persuaded the Senate to send envoys with the Vestal Virgins, to sue for peace or at least to gain time for conference. The following day, as he was waiting for a reply, word was brought by a scout that the enemy were drawing near. Then he was at once hurried into a litter with only two companions, a baker and a cook, and secretly went to his father's house on the Aventine, intending to flee from there to Campania. Presently, on a slight and dubious rumor that peace had been granted, he allowed himself to be taken back to the Palace. Finding everything abandoned there, and that even those who were with him were making off, he put on a belt filled with gold pieces and took refuge in the lodge of the doorkeeper, tying a dog before the door and putting a couch and a mattress against it.

XVII. The foremost of the army had now forced their way in, and since no one opposed them, were ransacking everything in the usual way. They dragged Vitellius from his hiding-place and when they asked him his name (for they did not know him) and if he knew where Vitellius was, he attempted to escape them by a lie. Being soon recognized, he did not cease to beg that he be confined for a time, even in the prison, alleging that he had something to say of importance to the safety of Vespasian. But they bound his arms behind his back, put a noose about his neck, and dragged him with rent garments and half-naked to the Forum. All along the Sacred Way he was greeted with mockery and abuse, his head held back by the hair, as is common with criminals, and even the point of a sword placed under his chin, so that he could not look down but must let his face be seen. Some pelted him with dung and ordure, others called him incendiary and glutton, and some of the mob even taunted him with his bodily defects. He was in fact abnormally tall, with a face usually flushed from hard drinking, a huge belly, and one thigh crippled from being struck once upon a time by a four-horse chariot, when he was in attendance on Gaius [*Caligula*] as he was driving. At last on the Stairs of Wailing he was tortured for a long time and then despatched and dragged off with a hook to the Tiber.

XVIII. He met his death, along with his brother and his son, in the fifty-seventh year of his age, fulfilling the prediction of those who had declared from an omen which befell him at Vienna, as we have stated that he was destined to fall into the power of some man of Gaul. For he was slain by Antonius Primus, a leader of the opposing faction, who was born at Tolosa and in his youth bore the surname Becco, which means a rooster's beak [*"Gallus" means "a cock," as well as "a Gaul."*].
