

# **The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus**

Suetonius



# Table of Contents

<u>The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus</u> .....	1
<u>Suetonius</u> .....	2

# The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

## Suetonius

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.  
<http://www.blackmask.com>

*Translated by J. C. Rolfe.*

**I.** DOMITIAN was born on the ninth day before the Kalends of November of the year when his father was Consul-elect and was about to enter on the office in the following month [*October 24, 51 C.E.*], in a street of the sixth region called "the Pomegranate," in a house which he afterwards converted into a temple of the Flavian family. He is said to have passed the period of his boyhood and his early youth in great poverty and infamy. For he did not possess a single piece of plate and it is a well known fact that Claudius Pollio, a man of praetorian rank, against whom Nero's poem entitled "The One-eyed Man" is directed, preserved a letter in Domitian's handwriting and sometimes exhibited it, in which the future emperor promised him an assignation; and there have not been wanting those who declared that Domitian was also debauched by Nerva, who succeeded him. In the war with Vitellius he took refuge in the Capitol with his paternal uncle Sabinus and a part of the forces under him. When the enemy forced an entrance and the temple was fired, he hid during the night with the guardian of the shrine, and in the morning, disguised in the garb of a follower of Isis and mingling with the priests of that fickle superstition, he went across the Tiber with a single companion to the mother of one of his school-fellows. There he was so effectually concealed, that though he was closely followed, he could not be found, in spite of a thorough search. It was only after the victory that he ventured forth and after being hailed as Caesar, he assumed the office of city praetor with consular powers, but only in name, turning over all the judicial business to his next colleague. But he exercised all the tyranny of his high position so lawlessly, that it was even then apparent what sort of a man he was going to be. Not to mention all details, after making free with the wives of many men, he went so far as to marry Domitia Longina, who was the wife of Aelius Lamia, and in a single day he assigned more than twenty positions in the city and abroad, which led Vespasian to say more than once that he was surprised that he did not appoint the emperor's successor with the rest.

**II.** He began an expedition against Gallia and the Germanies, which was uncalled for and from which his father's friends dissuaded him, merely that he might make himself equal to his brother in power and rank. For this he was reprimanded, and to give him a better realization of his youth [*He was but eighteen years old at the time*] and position, he had to live with his father, and when they appeared in public he followed the emperor's chair and that of his brother in a litter, while he also attended their triumph over Judaea riding on a white horse [*The usual procedure for a youthful son of the Princeps*]. Moreover, of his six consulships, only one was a regular one [*See Galba vi.1. The reference is to his consulships before he became emperor*], and he obtained that only because his brother gave place to him and recommended his appointment. He himself, too, made a remarkable pretense of modesty and especially of an interest in poetry, an art which had previously been as unfamiliar to him as it was later despised and rejected, and he even gave readings in public. Yet in spite of all this, when Vologaesius, King of the Parthians, had asked for auxiliaries against the Alani and for one of Vespasian's sons as their leader, Domitian used every effort to have himself sent rather than Titus; and because the affair came to nothing, he tried by gifts and promises to induce other eastern kings to make the same request. On the death of his father he hesitated for some time whether to offer a double largess [*That is, twice as large as his brother's*] to the soldiers, and he never had any compunction about saying that he had been left a partner in the imperial power, but that the will had been tampered with [*Titus had the ability to do this; cf., Tit. iii.2, at the end*]. And from that time on he never ceased to plot against his brother secretly and openly, until Titus was seized with a dangerous illness, when Domitian ordered that he be left for dead, before he had actually drawn his last breath. And after his death he bestowed no honor upon him, save that of deification, and he often assailed his memory in ambiguous phrases, both in his

## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

speeches and in his edicts.

**III.** At the beginning of his reign he used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catch flies and stab them with a keenly-sharpened stylus. Consequently, when someone once asked whether anyone was in there with Caesar, Vibius Crispus made the witty reply: "Not even a fly."

Then he saluted his wife Domitia as Augusta. He had had a son by her in his second consulship, whom he lost the next year; but he divorced her because of her infatuation for the actor Paris, though he could not bear the separation from her and took her back, alleging that the people demanded it.

In his administration of the government he for some time showed himself inconsistent, with about an equal number of virtues and vices, but finally he turned the virtues also into vices; for so far as one may guess, it was contrary to his natural disposition that he was made rapacious through need and cruel through fear.

**IV.** He constantly gave grand and costly entertainments, both in the amphitheatre, and in the Circus, where in addition to the usual races between two-horse and four-horse chariots, he also exhibited two battles, one between forces of infantry and the other by horsemen; and he even gave a naval battle in the amphitheatre. Besides, he gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and not only combats between men but between women as well. He was always present, too, at the games given by the quaestors, which he revived after they had been abandoned for some time, and invariably granted the people the privilege of calling for two pairs of gladiators from his own school, and brought them in last in all the splendor of the court. During the whole of every gladiatorial show there always stood at his feet a small boy clad in scarlet, with an abnormally small head, with whom he used to talk a great deal, and sometimes seriously. At any rate, he was overheard to ask him if he knew why he had decided at the last appointment day to make Mettius Rufus prefect of Egypt. He often gave sea-fights almost with regular fleets, having dug a pool near the Tiber and surrounded it with seats; and he continued to witness the contests amid heavy rains. He also celebrated Secular games, reckoning the time, not according to the year when Claudius had last given them, but by the previous calculation of Augustus. In the course of these, to make it possible to finish a hundred races on the day of the contests in the Circus, he diminished the number of laps from seven to five. He also established a quinquennial contest in honor of Jupiter Capitolinus of a threefold character, comprising music, riding, and gymnastics, and with considerably more prizes than are awarded nowadays. For there were competitions in prose declamations both in Greek and in Latin; and in addition to those of the lyre-players, between choruses of such players and in the lyre alone, without singing; while in the stadium there were races even between maidens. He presided at the competitions in half-boots clad in a purple toga in the Greek fashion, and wearing upon his head a golden crown with figures of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, while by his side sat the priest of Jupiter and the college of the Flaviales [*Established for the worship of the deified Flavian emperors, after the manner of the Augustales*], similarly dressed, except that their crowns bore his image as well. He celebrated the Quinquatria too every year in honor of Minerva at his Alban villa, and established for her a college of priests, from which men were chosen by lot to act as officers and give splendid shows of wild beasts and stage plays, besides holding contests in oratory and poetry. He made a present to the people of three hundred sesterces each on three occasions, and in the course of one of his shows in celebration of the feast of the Seven Hills gave plentiful banquets, distributing large baskets of victuals to the Senate and equites, and smaller ones to the plebeians, and he himself was the first to begin to eat. On the following day, he scattered gifts of all sorts of things to be scrambled for, and since the greater part of these fell where the people sat, he had five hundred tickets thrown into each section occupied by the senatorial and equestrian orders.

**V.** He restored many splendid buildings which had been destroyed by fire [82 C.E.], among them the Capitolium, which had again been burned [*In 80 C.E.; it had previously been destroyed by fire in 69; see Vit. xv.3*], but in all cases with the inscription of his own name only, and with no mention of the original builder. Furthermore, he built a new temple on the Capitoline hill in honor of Jupiter Custos and the forum which now bears the name of Nerva; likewise a temple to the Flavian family, a stadium, an Odeum, and a pool for sea-fights. From the stone used in this last the Circus Maximus was afterwards rebuilt, when both sides of it had been destroyed by fire.

**VI.** His campaigns he undertook partly without provocation and partly of necessity. That against the Chatti was uncalled for [84 C.E.], while the one against the Sarmatians was justified by the destruction of a legion with its commander. He made two against the Dacians, the first when Oppius Sabinus, an ex-consul, was defeated, and the second on the overthrow of Cornelius Fuscus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard, to whom he had entrusted the

## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

conduct of the war [86 C.E.]. After several battles of varying success, he celebrated a double triumph over the Chatti and the Dacians. His victories over the Sarmatians he commemorated merely by the offering of a laurel crown to Jupiter of the Capitol. A civil war which was set on foot by Lucius Antonius, governor of Upper Germania, was put down in the emperor's absence by a remarkable stroke of good fortune; for at the very hour of the battle the Rhine suddenly thawed and prevented his barbarian allies from crossing over to Antonius. Domitian learned of this victory through omens before he actually had news of it, for on the very day when the decisive battle was fought, a magnificent eagle enfolded his statue at Rome with its wings, uttering exultant shrieks; and soon afterwards the report of Antonius' death became so current, that several went so far as to assert positively that they had seen his head brought to Rome.

**VII.** He made many innovations also in common customs. He did away with the distribution of food to the people, and revived that of formal dinners. He added two factions of drivers in the Circus, with gold and purple as their colors, to the four former ones. He forbade the appearance of actors on the stage, but allowed the practice of their art in private houses. He prohibited the castration of males, and kept down the price of the eunuchs that remained in the hands of the slave dealers. Once upon the occasion of a plentiful wine crop, attended with a scarcity of grain, thinking that the fields were neglected through too much attention to the vineyards, he made an edict forbidding anyone to plant more vines in Italy and ordering that the vineyards in the provinces be cut down, or but half of them at most be left standing; but he did not persist in carrying out the measure. He opened some of the most important offices of the court to freedmen and Roman equites. He prohibited the uniting of two legions in one camp and the deposit of more than a thousand sesterces by any one soldier at headquarters because it was clear that Lucius Antonius had been especially led to attempt a revolution by the amount of such deposits in the combined winter quarters of two legions. He increased the pay of the soldiers one fourth, by the addition of three gold pieces each year.

**VIII.** He administered justice scrupulously and conscientiously, frequently holding special sittings on the tribunal in the Forum. He rescinded such decisions of the Hundred Judges as were made from interested motives. He often warned the arbiters not to grant claims for freedom made under false pretenses. He degraded jurors who accepted bribes, together with all their associates. He also induced the tribunes of the commons to prosecute a corrupt aedile for extortion, and to ask the Senate to appoint jurors in the case. He took such care to exercise restraint over the city officials and the governors of the provinces, that at no time were they more honest or just, whereas after his time we have seen many of them charged with all manner of offences. Having undertaken the correction of public morals, he put an end to the licence at the theaters, where the general public occupied the seats reserved for the equites; did away with the prevailing publication of scurrilous lampoons, in which distinguished men and women were attacked, and imposed ignominious penalties on their authors; expelled an ex-quaestor from the Senates because he was given to acting and dancing; deprived notorious women of the use of litters, as well as of the right to receive inheritances and legacies; struck the name of a Roman eques from the list of jurors, because he had taken back his wife after divorcing her and charging her with adultery; condemned several men of both orders, offenders against the Scantinian law [*De nefanda Venere*]; and the incest of Vestal Virgins, condoned even by his father and his brother, he punished severely in divers ways, at first by capital punishment, and afterwards in the ancient fashion. For while he allowed the sisters Oculata and also Varronilla free choice of the manner of their death, and banished their paramours, he later ordered that Cornelia, a chief-vestal who had been acquitted once but after a long interval again arraigned and found guilty, be buried alive; and her lovers were beaten to death with rods in the Comitium, with the exception of an ex-praetor, whom he allowed to go into exile, because he admitted his guilt while the case was still unsettled and the examination and torture of the witnesses had led to no result. To protect the gods from being dishonored with impunity by any sacrilege, he caused a tomb which one of his freedmen had built for his son from stones intended for the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus to be destroyed by the soldiers, and the bones and ashes contained in it thrown into the sea.

**IX.** In the earlier part of his reign he so shrank from any form of bloodshed, that while his father was still absent from the city, he planned to issue an edict that no oxen should be offered up, recalling the line of Vergil, "E'er yet an impious race did slay and feast upon bullocks" [*Verg. Georg. 2.537*]. He was equally free from any suspicion of love of gain or of avarice, both in private life and for some time after becoming emperor; on the contrary, he often gave strong proofs not merely of integrity, but even of liberality. He treated all his intimates most generously, and there was nothing which he urged them more frequently, or with greater insistence, than that

## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

they should be niggardly in none of their acts. He would not accept inheritances left him by those who had children. He even annulled a legacy in the will of Rustus Caepio, who had provided that his heir should yearly pay a specified sum to each of the senators on his entrance into the *Curia*. He canceled the suits against those who had been posted as debtors to the public treasury for more than five years, and would not allow a renewal except within a year and on the condition that an accuser who did not win his suit should be punished with exile. Scribes of the quaestors who carried on business, which had become usual, although contrary to the Clodian law, he pardoned for past offences. Parcels of land which were left unoccupied here and there after the assignment of lands to the veterans, he granted to their former owners as by right of possession. He checked false accusations designed for the profit of the privy purses and inflicted severe penalties on offenders; and a saying of his was current, that an emperor who does not punish informers hounds them on.

X. But he did not continue this course of mercy or integrity, although he turned to cruelty somewhat more speedily than to avarice. He put to death a pupil of the pantomimic actor Paris, who was still a beardless boy and ill at the time, because in his skill and his appearance he seemed not unlike his master; also Hermogenes of Tarsus because of some allusions in his *History*, besides crucifying even the slaves who had written it out. A householder who said that a Thracian gladiator was a match for the *murmillo*, but not for the giver of the games, he caused to be dragged from his seat and thrown into the arena to dogs, with this placard: "A favorer of the Thracians who spoke impiously." He put to death many senators, among them several ex-consuls, including Civica Cerealis, at the very time when he was proconsul in Asia; Salvidienus Orfitus; Acilius Glabrio, while he was in exile—these on the ground of plotting revolution, the rest on any charge, however trivial. He slew Aelius Lamia for joking remarks, which were reflections on him, it is true, but made long before and harmless. For when Domitian had taken away Lamia's wife, the latter replied to someone who praised his voice: "I practice continence"; and when Titus urged him to marry again, he replied: "Are you too looking for a wife?" He put to death Salvius Cocceianus, because he had kept the birthday of the emperor Otho, his paternal uncle; Mettius Pompusianus, because it was commonly reported that he had an imperial nativity and carried about a map of the world on parchment and speeches of the kings and generals from Titus Livius, besides giving two of his slaves the names of Mago and Hannibal; Sallustius Lucullus, governor of Britannia, for allowing some lances of a new pattern to be called "Lucullean," after his own name; Junius Rusticus, because he had published eulogies of Paetus Thrasea and Helvidius Priscus and called them the most upright of men; and on the occasion of this charge he banished all the philosophers from the city and from Italia. He also executed the younger Helvidius, alleging that in a farce composed for the stage he had under the characters of Paris and Oenone censured Domitian's divorce from his wife; Flavinus Sabinus too, one of his cousins, because on the day of the consular elections the crier had inadvertently announced him to the people as emperor-elect, instead of consul. After his victory in the civil war he became even more cruel, and to discover any conspirators who were in hiding, tortured many of the opposite party by a new form of inquisition, inserting fire in their privates; and he cut off the hands of some of them. It is certain that of the more conspicuous only two were pardoned, a tribune of senatorial rank and a centurion, who the more clearly to prove their freedom from guilt, showed that they were of shameless unchastity and voted therefore have had no influence with the general or with the soldiers.

XI. His savage cruelty was not only excessive, but also cunning and sudden. He invited one of his stewards to his bed-chamber the day before crucifying him, made him sit beside him on his couch, and dismissed him in a secure and gay frame of mind, even deigning to send him a share of his dinner. When he was on the point of condemning the ex-consul Arrecinius Clemens, one of his intimates and tools, he treated him with as great favor as before, if not greater, and finally, as he was taking a drive with him, catching sight of his accuser, he said: "Pray, shall we hear this base slave tomorrow?" To abuse men's patience the more insolently, he never pronounced an unusually dreadful sentence without a preliminary declaration of clemency, so that there came to be no more certain indication of a cruel death than the leniency of his preamble. He had brought some men charged with treason into the Senate, and when he had introduced the matter by saying that he would find out that day how dear he was to the members, he had no difficulty in causing them to be condemned to suffer the ancient method of punishments. Then, appalled at the cruelty of the penalty, he interposed a veto, to lessen the odium, in these words (for it will be of interest to know his exact language): "Allow me, Fathers of the Senate, to prevail on you by your love for me to grant a favor which I know I shall obtain with difficulty, namely that you grant the condemned free choice of the manner of their death; for thus you will spare your own eyes and all men will know



## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

that I was present at the meeting of the Senate."

**XII.** Reduced to financial straits by the cost of his buildings and shows, as well as by the additions which he had made to the pay of the soldiers, he tried to lighten the military expenses by diminishing the number of his troops; but perceiving that in this way he exposed himself to the attacks of the barbarians, and nevertheless had difficulty in easing his burdens, he had no hesitation in resorting to every sort of robbery. The property of the living and the dead was seized everywhere on any charge brought by any accuser. It was enough to allege any action or word derogatory to the majesty of the *princeps*. Estates of those in no way connected with him were confiscated, if but one man came forward to declare that he had heard from the deceased during his lifetime that Caesar was his heir. Besides other taxes, that on the Jews [A tax of two drachmas a head, imposed by Titus in return for free permission to practice their religion; see Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* 7.6.6] was levied with the utmost rigor, and those were prosecuted who, without publicly acknowledging that faith, yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people [These may have been Christians, whom the Romans commonly assumed were Jews]. I recall being present in my youth when the person of a man ninety years old was examined before the procurator and a very crowded court, to see whether he was circumcised. From his youth he was far from being of an affable disposition, but was on the contrary presumptuous and unbridled both in act and in word. When his father's concubine Caenis returned from Histria and offered to kiss him as usual, he held out his hand to her. He was vexed that his brother's son-in-law had attendants clad in white, as well as he, and uttered the words "Not good is a number of rulers" [*Iliad*, 2.204].

**XIII.** When he became emperor, he did not hesitate to boast in the Senate that he had conferred their power on both his father and his brother, and that they had but returned him his own; nor on taking back his wife after their divorce, that he had "recalled her to his divine couch" ["*Pulvinar*" here means the couch for the images of the gods; cf., *Aug. xlv. 1*]. He delighted to hear the people in the amphitheatre shout on his feast day: "Good Fortune attend out Lord and Mistress." Even more, in the Capitoline competition, when all the people begged him with great unanimity to restore Palfurius Sura, who had been banished some time before from the Senate, and on that occasion received the prize for oratory, he deigned no reply, but merely had a crier bid them be silent. With no less arrogance he began as follows in dictating a circular letter in the name of his procurators, "Our Master and our God bids that this be done." And so the custom arose of henceforth addressing him in no other way, even in writing or in conversation. He suffered no statues to be set up in his honor in the Capitol, except of gold and silver and of a fixed weight. He erected so many and such huge vaulted passageways and arches in the various regions of the city, adorned with chariots and triumphal emblems, that on one of them someone wrote in Greek: "It is enough." He held the consulship seventeen times [71–72, 77, 80, 82–88, 90, 92, 95 C.E.], more often than any of his predecessors. Of these, the seven middle ones were in successive years, but all of them he filled in name only, continuing none beyond the first of May, and few after the Ides of January. Having assumed the surname Germanicus after his two triumphs, he renamed the months of September and October from his own names, calling them "Germanicus" and "Domitianus," because in the former he had come to the throne and was born in the latter.

**XIV.** In this way he became an object of terror and hatred to all, but he was overthrown at last by a conspiracy of his friends and favorite freedmen, to which his wife was also privy. He had long since had a premonition of the last year and day of his life, and even of the very hour and manner of his death. In his youth astrologers had predicted all this to him, and his father once even openly ridiculed him at dinner for refusing mushrooms, saying that he showed himself unaware of his destiny in not rather fearing the sword. Therefore he was at all times timorous and worried, and was disquieted beyond measure by even the slightest suspicions. It is thought that nothing had more effect in inducing him to ignore his proclamation about cutting down the vineyards than the circulation of notes containing the following lines: "Gnaw at my root, an you will; even then shall I have juice in plenty To pour upon thee, O goat, when at the altar you stand" [Cf., *Ovid, Fasti*, 1.357]. It was because of this same timorousness that although he was most eager for all such honors, he refused a new one which the Senate had devised and offered to him, a decree, namely, that whenever he held the consulship, Roman equites selected by lot should precede him among his lictors and attendants, clad in the *trabea* and bearing lances. As the time when he anticipated danger drew near, becoming still more anxious every day, he lined the walls of the colonnades in which he used to walk with phengite stone [According to Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, a hard, white, translucent stone discovered in Cappadocia in the reign of Nero. Pliny also mentions similar mirrors of black

## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

*obsidian*; see *Nat. Hist. xl.2*], to be able to see in its brilliant surface the reflection of all that went on behind his back. And he did not give a hearing to any prisoners except in private and alone, even holding their chains in his hands. Further, to convince his household that one must not venture to kill a patron even on good grounds, he condemned Epaphroditus, his confidential secretary, to death, because it was believed that after Nero was abandoned the freedman's hand had aided him in taking his life.

**XV.** Finally, he put to death his own cousin Flavius Clemens, suddenly and on a very slight suspicion, almost before the end of his consulship; and yet Flavius was a man of most contemptible laziness and Domitian had besides openly named his sons, who were then very young, as his successors, changing their former names and calling the one Vespasian and the other Domitian. And it was by this deed in particular that he hastened his own destruction. For eight successive months so many strokes of lightning occurred and were reported, that at last he cried: "Well, let him now strike whom he will." The Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was struck and that of the Flavian family, as well as the Palace and the emperor's own bedroom. The inscription, too, on the base of a triumphal statue of his was torn off in a violent tempest and fell upon a neighboring tomb. The tree which had been overthrown when Vespasian was still a private citizen but had sprung up anew, then on a sudden fell down again. Fortuna of Praeneste had throughout his whole reign, when he commended the new year to her protection, given him a favorable omen and always in the same words. Now at last she returned a most direful one, not without the mention of bloodshed. He dreamed that Minerva, whom he worshipped with superstitious veneration, came forth from her shrine and declared that she could no longer protect him, since she had been disarmed by Jupiter. Yet there was nothing by which he was so much disturbed as a prediction of the astrologer Ascleparion and what befell him. When this man was accused before the emperor and did not deny that he had spoken of certain things which he had foreseen through his art, he was asked what his own end could be. When he replied that he would shortly be rent by dogs, Domitian ordered him killed at once; but to prove the fallibility of his art, he ordered besides that his funeral be attended to with the greatest care. While this was being done, it chanced that the pyre was overset by a sudden storm and that the dogs mangled the corpse, which was only partly consumed; and that an actor of farces called Latinus, who happened to pass by and see the incident, told it to Domitian at the dinner table, with the rest of the day's gossip.

**XVI.** The day before he was killed he gave orders to have some apples which were offered him kept until the following day, and added: "If only I am spared to eat them"; then turning to his companions, he declared that on the following day the moon would be stained with blood in Aquarius, and that a deed would be done of which men would talk all over the world. At about midnight he was so terrified that he leaped from his bed. The next morning he conducted the trial of a soothsayer sent from Germania, who when consulted about the lightning strokes had foretold a change of rulers, and condemned him to death. While he was vigorously scratching a festering wart on his forehead, and had drawn blood, he said: "May this be all." Then he asked the time, and by pre-arrangement the sixth hour was announced to him, instead of the fifth, which he feared. Filled with joy at this, and believing all danger now past, he was hastening to the bath, when his chamberlain Parthenius changed his purpose by announcing that someone had called about a matter of great moment and would not be put off. Then he dismissed all his attendants and went to his bedroom, where he was slain.

**XVII.** Concerning the nature of the plot and the manner of his death, this is about all that became known. As the conspirators were deliberating when and how to attack him, whether at the bath or at dinner, Stephanus, Domitilla's steward, at the time under accusation for embezzlement, offered his aid and counsel. To avoid suspicion, he wrapped up his left arm in woollen bandages for some days, pretending that he had injured it, and concealed in them a dagger. Then pretending to betray a conspiracy and for that reason being given an audience, he stabbed the emperor in the groin as he was reading a paper which the assassin handed him, and stood in a state of amazement. As the wounded *princeps* attempted to resist, he was slain with seven wounds by Clodianus, a servant, Maximus, a freedman of Parthenius, Satur, decurion of the chamberlains, and a gladiator from the imperial school. A boy who was engaged in his usual duty of attending to the Lares in the bedroom, and so was a witness of the murder, gave this additional information. He was bidden by Domitian, immediately after he was dealt the first blow, to hand him the dagger hidden under his pillow and to call the servants; but he found nothing at the head of the bed save the hilt, and besides all the doors were closed. Meanwhile the emperor grappled with Stephanus and bore him to the ground, where they struggled for a long time, Domitian trying now to wrest the dagger from his assailant's hands and now to gouge out his eyes with his lacerated fingers. He was slain on the

## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

fourteenth day before the Kalends of October in the forty–fifth year of his age and the fifteenth of his reign [September 18, 96 C.E.]. His corpse was carried out on a common bier by those who bury the poor, and his nurse Phyllis cremated it at her suburban estate on the Via Patina; but his ashes she secretly carried to the temple of the Flavian family and mingled them with those of Julia, daughter of Titus, whom she had also reared.

**XVIII.** He was tall of stature, with a modest expression and a high color. His eyes were large, but his sight was somewhat dim. He was handsome and graceful too, especially when a young man, and indeed in his whole body with the exception of his feet, the toes of which were somewhat cramped. In later life he had the further disfigurement of baldness, a protruding belly, and spindling legs, though the latter had become thin from a long illness. He was so conscious that the modesty of his expression was in his favor, that he once made this boast in the Senate: "So far, at any rate, you have approved my heart and my countenance." He was so sensitive about his baldness, that he regarded it as a personal insult if anyone else was twitted with that defect in jest or in earnest; though in a book "On the Care of the Hair," which he published and dedicated to a friend, he wrote the following by way of consolation to the man and himself: "Do you not see that I too am tall and comely to look on? And yet the same fate awaits my hair, and I bear with resignation the ageing of my locks in youth. Be assured that nothing is more pleasing than beauty, but nothing shorter–lived."

**XIX.** He was incapable of exertion and seldom went about the city on foot, while on his campaigns and journeys he rarely rode on horseback, but was regularly carried in a litter. He took no interest in arms, but was particularly devoted to archery. There are many who have more than once seen him slay a hundred wild beasts of different kinds on his Alban estate, and purposely kill some of them with two successive shots in such a way that the arrows gave the effect of horns. Sometimes he would have a slave stand at a distance and hold out the palm of his right hand for a mark, with the fingers spread; then he directed his arrows with such accuracy that they passed harmlessly between the fingers.

**XX.** At the beginning of his rule he neglected liberal studies, although he provided for having the libraries, which were destroyed by fire, renewed at very great expense, seeking everywhere for copies of the lost works, and sending scribes to Alexandria to transcribe and correct them. Yet he never took any pains to become acquainted with history or poetry, or even to acquiring an ordinarily good style. He read nothing except the memoirs and transactions of Tiberius Caesar; for his letters, speeches and proclamations he relied on others' talents. Yet his conversation was not inelegant, and some of his sayings were even noteworthy, "How I wish," said he "that I were as fine looking as Maecius thinks he is." He declared too that the head of a certain man, whose hair had changed color in such a way that it was partly reddish and partly grey, was like "snow on which mead had been poured."

**XXI.** He used to say that the lot of princes was most unhappy, since when they discovered a conspiracy, no one believed them unless they had been killed. Whenever he had leisure he amused himself with playing at dice, even on working days and in the morning hours. He went to the bath before the end of the forenoon and lunched to the point of satiety, so that at dinner he rarely took anything except a Matian apple and a moderate amount of wine from a jug. He gave numerous and generous banquets, but usually ended them early; in no case did he protract them beyond sunset, or follow them by a drinking bout. In fact, he did nothing until the hour for retiring except walk alone in a retired place.

**XXII.** He was excessively lustful. His constant sexual intercourse he called bed–wrestling, as if it were a kind of exercise. It was reported that he depilated his concubines with his own hand and swam with common prostitutes. After persistently refusing his niece, who was offered him in marriage when she was still a maid, because he was entangled in an intrigue with Domitia, he seduced her shortly afterwards when she became the wife of another, and that too during the lifetime of Titus. Later, when she was bereft of father and husband, he loved her ardently and without disguise, and even became the cause of her death by compelling her to get rid of a child of his by abortions.

**XXIII.** The people received the news of his death with indifference, but the soldiers were greatly grieved and at once attempted to call him the Deified Domitian; while they were prepared also to avenge him, had they not lacked leaders. This, however, they did accomplish a little later by most insistently demanding the execution of his murderers. The senators, on the contrary, were so overjoyed that they raced to fill the *Curia*, where they did not refrain from assailing the dead emperor with the most insulting and stinging kind of outcries. They even had ladders brought and his shields and images torn down before their eyes and dashed upon the ground; finally they

## The Lives of the Caesars: Domitianus

passed a decree that his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated. A few months before he was killed, a raven perched on the Capitolium and cried "All will be well," an omen which some interpreted as follows: "High on the gable Tarpeian a raven but lately alighting, Could not say 'It is well,' only declared 'It will be.'" Domitian himself, it is said, dreamed that a golden hump grew out on his back, and he regarded this as an infallible sign that the condition of the empire would be happier and more prosperous after his time; and this was shortly shown to be true through the uprightness and moderate rule of the succeeding emperors.

---