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**Dio's Rome, Volume 5, Books
61-76 (A.D. 54-211) An Historical
Narrative Originally Composed in
Greek During The Reigns of
Septimius Severus, Geta and
Caracalla, Macrinus, Elagabalus
and Alexander Severus: and Now
Presented in English Form By
Herbert Baldwin Foster**

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DIO'S ROMAN HISTORY

61

Nero seizes the sovereignty (chapters 1, 2).

At the beginning he is accustomed to yield to the influence of his mother, whom Seneca and Burrus thrust aside from control of affairs (chapters 3).

Nero's exhibitions of wantonness and his extravagance : the death of Silanus (chapters 4, 5, 6).

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How Nero's mind began to give way (chapter 9).

About the faults and immoralities of the philosopher Seneca (chapter 10).

Sabina an object of love : Agrippina murdered (chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16).

Domitia put to death : festivities : Nero sings to the accompaniment of his lyre (chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21).

DURATION OF TIME

M. Asinius Marcellus, Manius Acilius Aviola.

(A.D. 54 = a.u. 807 = First of Nero, from Oct. 13th).

Nero Caesar Aug., L. Antistius Vetus.

(A.D. 55 = a.u. 808 = Second of Nero).

Q. Volusius Saturninus, P. Cornelius Scipio.

(A.D. 56 = a.u. 809 = Third of Nero).

Nero Caesar Aug. (II), L. Calpurnius Piso.

(A.D. 57 = a.u. 810 = Fourth of Nero).

Nero Caesar Aug. (III), M. Valerius Messala.

(A.D. 58 = a.u. 811 = Fifth of Nero).

C. Vipsanius Apronianus, L. Fonteius Capito.

(A.D. 59 = a.u. 812 = Sixth of Nero).

Nero Caesar Aug. (IV), Cornelius Lentulus Cossus.

(A.D. 60 = a.u. 813 = Seventh of Nero).

A.D. 54 (a.u. 807)

1

At the death of Claudius the leadership on most just principles belonged to Britannicus, who had been born a legitimate son of Claudius and in physical development was beyond what would have been expected of his years. Yet by law the power passed to Nero on account of his adoption. No claim, indeed, is stronger than that of arms. Every one who possesses superior force has always the appearance of both saying and doing what is more just. So Nero, having first disposed of Claudius's will and having succeeded him as master of the whole empire, put Britannicus and his sisters out of the way. Why, then, should one stop to lament the misfortunes of other victims?

2

The following signs of dominion had been observed in his career. At his birth just before dawn rays not cast by any beam of sunlight yet visible surrounded his form. And a certain astrologer from this and from the motion of the stars at that time and their relation to one another divined two things in regard to him,--that he would rule and that he would murder his mother. Agrippina on hearing this became for the moment so beside herself as actually to cry out: "Let him kill me, if only he shall rule." Later she was destined to repent bitterly of her prayer. Some people become so steeped in folly that if they expect to obtain some blessing mingled with evil, they at once through their anxiety for the advantage pay no heed to the detriment. When the time for the latter also comes, they are cast down and would choose not to have secured even the greatest good thing. Yet Domitius, the father of Nero, had a sufficient previous intimation of his son's coming baseness and licentiousness, not by any oracle but through the nature of his own and Agrippina's characters. And he declared: "It is impossible for any good man to be born from me and from her." As time went on, the finding of a serpent skin around Nero's neck when he was but a boy caused the seers to say: "He shall acquire great power from the aged man." Serpents are thought to slough off their old age with their old skin, and so get power.

3

Nero was seventeen years of age when he began to rule. He first entered the camp, and, after reading to the soldiers all that Seneca had written, he promised them as much as Claudius had been accustomed to give. Before the senate he read such a considerable document,--this, too, written by Seneca,--that it was voted the statements should be inscribed on a silver tablet and should be read every time the new consuls took up the duties of their office. Consequently those who heard him made themselves ready to enjoy a good reign according to the letter of the compilation. At first Agrippina [in company with Pallas, a vulgar and tiresome man,] managed all affairs pertaining to the empire, and she and her son went

8

about together, often reclining in the same litter; usually, however, she would be carried and he would follow alongside. It was she who transacted business with embassies and sent letters to peoples and governors and kings. When this had gone on for a considerable time, it aroused the displeasure of Seneca and Burrus, who were both the most sensible and the most influential of the advisers of Nero. The one was his teacher and the other was prefect of the Pretorians. They took the following occasion to stop this method of procedure. An embassy of Armenians had arrived and Agrippina wished to ascend the platform from which Nero was talking with them. The two men, seeing her approach, persuaded the young man to go down before she could reach there and meet his mother, pretending some form of greeting. After that was done they did not return again, making some excuse to prevent the foreigners from seeing the flaw in the empire. Subsequently they labored to keep any public business from being again committed to her hands.

4

When they had accomplished this, they themselves took charge of the entire empire and gave it the very best and fairest management that they could. Nero was not in general fond of affairs and was glad to live at leisure. [The reason, indeed, that he had previously distrusted his mother and now was fond of her lay in the fact that now he was free to enjoy himself, and the government was being carried on no less well. And his advisers after consultation made many changes in existing customs, abolishing some things altogether and passing a number of new laws.] They let Nero sow his wild oats with the intention of bringing about in him through the satisfaction of all his desires a changed attitude of mind, while in the meantime no great damage should be done to public interests. Surely they must have known that a young and self-willed spirit, when reared in unreproved license and in absolute authority, so far from becoming satiated by the indulgence of its passions is ruined more and more by these very agencies. Indeed, Nero at first gave but simple dinners; his revels, his drunkenness, his amours were moderate. Afterward, as no one reproved him for them and public business was carried forward none the worse for all of it, he began to believe that what he did was right and that he could carry his prac-

tices to even greater lengths. [Consequently he began to indulge in each of these pursuits in a more open and precipitate fashion. And in case his guardians gave him any warning or his mother any rebuke, he would appear abashed while they were present and promise to reform; but as soon as they were gone, he would again become the slave of his desire and yield to those who were dragging him in the other direction,--a straight course down hill.] Next he came to despise instruction, inasmuch as he was always hearing from his associates, "Do *you* submit to this?" or "Do *you* fear these people?", "Don't you know that you are Caesar?", "Have not you the authority over them rather than they over you?" He was also animated by obstinacy, not wishing to acknowledge his mother as superior and himself as inferior, nor to admit the greater good sense of Seneca and Burrus.

5

Finally he passed the possibility of being shamed, dashed to the ground and trampled under foot all their suggestions, and began to follow in the steps of Gaius. When he had once felt a desire to emulate him, he quite outdid him, for he believed that the imperial power must manifest itself among other ways by allowing no one to surpass it even in the vilest deeds. [As he was praised for this by the crowds, and received many pleasant compliments from them, he gave himself no rest. His doings were at first confined to his home and associates, but were later on carried abroad. Thus he attached a mighty disgrace to the whole Roman race and committed many outrages upon the individuals composing it. Innumerable acts of violence and insult, of rape and murder, were committed both by the emperor himself and by those who at one time or another had influence with him. And, as certainly and inevitably follows in all such practices] , great sums of money naturally were spent, great sums unjustly procured, and great sums seized by force. For under no circumstances was Nero niggardly. Here is an illustration. He had ordered no less than two hundred and fifty myriads at one time to be given to Doryphorus, who attended to the state documents of his empire. Agrippina had it all piled in a heap, hoping by showing him the money all together to make him change his mind. Instead, he asked how much the mass before him amounted to, and when he

was informed he doubled it, saying: "I was not aware that I had allowed him so little." It can clearly be seen, then, that as a result of the magnitude of his expenditures he would quickly exhaust the treasures in the royal vaults and quickly need new revenues. Hence unusual taxes were imposed and the property of the well-to-do was not left intact. Some lost their possessions to spite him and others destroyed themselves with their livelihoods. Similarly he hated and made away with some others who had no considerable wealth; for, if they possessed any excellent trait or were of a good family, he became suspicious that they disliked him.

6

Such were the general characteristics of Nero. I shall now proceed to details.

In the matter of horse-races Nero grew so enthusiastic that he adorned famous race-horses that had passed their prime with the regular street costume for men and honored them with money for their fodder. The horsebreeders and charioteers, elated at this enthusiasm of his, proceeded to abuse unjustifiably even the praetors and consuls. But Aulus Fabricius, when praetor, finding that they refused to hold contests on fair terms, dispensed with them entirely. He trained dogs to draw chariots and introduced them in place of horses. When this was done, the wearers of the white and of the red immediately entered their chariots: but, as the Greens and the Blues would not even then participate, Nero at his own cost gave the prizes to the horses, and the regular program of the circus was carried out.

Agrippina showed readiness to attack the greatest undertakings, as is evidenced by her causing the death of Marcus Julius Silanus, to whom she sent some of the poison with which she had treacherously murdered her husband.

Silanus was governor of Asia, and was in no respect inferior to the general character of his family. It was for this, more than for anything else, she said, that she killed him, not wishing to have him preferred before Nero, by reason of the latter's manner of life.

Moreover, she turned everything into trade and gathered money from the most insignificant and basest sources.

Laelianus, who was despatched to Armenia in place of Pollio, had been assigned to the command of the night watch. And he was no better than Pollio, for, while surpassing him in reputation, he was all the more insatiable in respect to gain.

A.D. 55 (a.u. 808)

7

Agrippina found a grievance in the fact that she was no longer supreme in affairs of the palace. It was chiefly because of Acte. Acte had been brought as a slave from Asia. She caught the fancy of Nero, was adopted into the family of Attalus, and was cherished much more carefully than was Nero's wife Octavia. Agrippina, indignant at this and at other matters, first attempted to rebuke him, and set herself to humiliating his associates, some by beatings and by getting rid of others. But when she accomplished nothing, she took it greatly to heart and remarked to him: "It was I who made you emperor," just as if she had the power to take away the authority from him again. She did not comprehend that every form of independent power given to any one by a private citizen immediately ceases to be the property of the giver and belongs to the one who receives it to use against his benefactor.

Britannicus Nero murdered treacherously by poison, and then, as the skin was turned livid by the action of the drug, he smeared the body with gypsum. But as it was being carried through the Forum a heavy rain falling while the gypsum was still damp washed it all away, so that the horror was exposed not only to comment but to view. [After Britannicus was dead Seneca and Burrus ceased to give careful attention to public interests and were satisfied if they might manage them conservatively and still preserve their lives. Consequently Nero now made himself conspicuous by giving free rein to all his desires without fear of retribution. His behavior began to be

absolutely insensate, as is shown, for instance, by his punishing a certain knight, Antonius, as a seller of poisons and by further burning the poisons publicly. He took great credit for this action as well as for prosecuting some persons who had tampered with wills; but other people only laughed to see him punishing his own acts in the persons of others.]

8

His secret acts of licentiousness were many, both at home and throughout the City, by night and by day. He used to frequent the taverns and wandered about everywhere like a private person. Any number of beatings and insults took place in this connection and the evil spread to the theatres, so that those who worked as dancers and who had charge of the horses paid no attention either to praetors or to consuls. They were disorderly themselves and led others to be the same, while Nero not only did not restrain them even by words, but stirred them up all the more. He delighted in their actions and used to be secretly conveyed in a litter into the theatres, where unseen by the rest he watched the proceedings. Indeed, he forbade the soldiers who had usually been in attendance at all public gatherings to appear there any longer. The reason he assigned was that they ought not to superintend anything but strictly military affairs, but his true purpose was to afford those who wished to raise a disturbance the amplest scope. He made use of the same excuse in reference to his not allowing any soldier to attend his mother, saying that no one except the emperor ought to be guarded by them. In this way he displayed his enmity toward the masses, and as for his mother he was already openly at variance with her. Everything that they said to each other, or that the imperial pair did each day, was reported outside the palace, yet it did not all reach the public and hence conjectures were made to supply missing details and different versions arose. What was conceivable as happening, in view of the baseness and lewdness of the pair, was noised abroad as having already taken place, and reports possessing some credibility were believed as true. The populace, seeing Agrippina now for the first time without Pretorians, took care not to fall in with her even by accident; and if any one did chance to meet her he would hastily get out of the way without saying a word.

At one spectacle men on horseback overcame bulls while riding along beside them, and the knights who served as Nero's personal guard brought down with their javelins four hundred bears and three hundred lions. On the same occasion thirty knights belonging to the military fought in the arena. The emperor sanctioned such proceedings openly. Secretly, however, he carried on nocturnal revels throughout the length and breadth of the city, insulting the women, practicing lewdness on boys, stripping those whom he encountered, striking, wounding, murdering. He had an idea that his incognito was impenetrable, for he used all sorts of different costumes and false hair at different times: but he would be recognized by his retinue and by his deeds. No one else would have dared to commit so many and such gross outrages so recklessly. A.D. 56 (a.u. 809)

It was becoming unsafe even for a person to stay at home, since he would break into shops and houses. It came about that a certain Julius Montanus, [1] a senator, enraged on his wife's account, fell upon this reveler and inflicted many blows upon him, so that he had to remain several days in concealment by reason of the black eyes he had received. Montanus did not suffer for it, since Nero thought the violence had been all an accident and was for showing no anger at the occurrence, had not the other sent him a letter begging his pardon. Nero on reading the epistle remarked: "So he knew that he was striking Nero." The suicide of Montanus followed hard after.

A.D. 57 (a.u. 810)

In the course of producing a spectacle at one of the theatres, he suddenly filled the place with sea-water so that the fishes and sea-monsters [2] swam in it, and had a naval battle between "Persians" and "Athenians." At the close of it he suddenly withdrew the water, dried the subsoil, and continued land contests, not only between two men at a time but with crowds pitted against other crowds.

A.D. 58 (a.u. 811)

10

Subsequent to this, oratorical contests took place, and as a result even of these numbers were exiled and put to death.--Seneca also was held to account, one of the charges against him being that he was intimate with Agrippina. [It had not been enough for him to debauch Julia, nor had he become better as a result of exile, but he went on to make advances to such a woman as Agrippina, with such a son.] Not only in this instance but in others he was convicted of doing precisely the opposite of what he taught in his philosophical doctrines. He brought accusations against tyranny, yet he made himself a teacher of tyrants: he denounced such of his associates as were powerful, yet he did not hold aloof from the palace himself: he had nothing good to say of flatterers, yet he had so fawned upon Messalina and Claudius's freedmen [that he had sent them from the island a book containing eulogies upon them; this latter caused him such mortification that he erased the passage.] While finding fault with the rich, he himself possessed a property of seven thousand five hundred myriads; and though he censured the extravagances of others, he kept five hundred three-legged tables of cedar wood, every one of them with identical ivory feet, and he gave banquets on them. In mentioning these details I have at least given a hint of their inevitable adjuncts,--the licentiousness in which he indulged at the very time that he made a most brilliant marriage, and the delight that he took in boys past their prime (a practice which he also taught Nero to follow). Nevertheless, his austerity of life had earlier been so severe that he had asked his pupil neither to kiss him nor to eat at the same table with him. [For the latter request he had a good reason, namely, that Nero's absence would enable him to conduct his philosophical studies at leisure without being hindered by the young man's dinners. But as for the kiss, I can not conceive how that tradition came about. The only explanation which one could imagine, namely, his unwillingness to kiss that sort of mouth, is proved to be false by the facts concerning his favorites. For this and for his adultery some complaints were lodged against him, but at this time he was himself released without formal accusations and succeeded in begging off Pallas and Burrus. Later on he did not come out so well.]

A.D. 59 (a.u. 811)

11

There was a certain Marcus Salvius Otho, who through similarity of character and sharing in wrongdoing had become so intimate with Nero that he was not even punished for saying one day to the latter: "Then I hope you may see me Caesar." All that came of it was the response: "I sha'n't see you even consul." It was to him that the emperor gave Sabina, of patrician family, after separating her from her husband, and they both enjoyed her together. Agrippina, therefore, fearing that Nero would marry the woman (for he was now beginning to entertain a mad passion for her), ventured upon a most unholy course. As if it were not enough for her story that she had attracted her uncle Claudius into love for her by her blandishments and uncontrolled looks and kisses, she undertook to enslave Nero also in similar fashion. However, I am not sure whether this actually occurred, or whether it was invented to fit their characters: but I state here what is admitted by all, that Nero had a mistress resembling Agrippina of whom he was especially fond because of this very resemblance. And when he toyed with the girl herself or threw out hints about it to others, he would say that he was having intercourse with his mother.

A.D. 59 (a.u. 812)

12

Sabina on hearing about this began to persuade Nero to get rid of his mother in order to forestall her alleged plots against him. He was likewise incited,-- so many trustworthy men have stated,--by Seneca, whether it was to obscure the complaint against his own name that the latter was anxious or to lead Nero on to a career of unholy bloodguiltiness that should bring about most speedily his destruction by gods and men. But they shrank from doing the deed openly and were not able to put her out of the way secretly by means of poison, for she took extreme precautions against all such things. One day they saw in the theatre a ship that automatically separated in two, let out some beasts, and came together again so as to be once more seaworthy; and they at once had another one built

like it. By the time the ship was finished Agrippina had been quite won over by Nero's attentions, for he exhibited devotion to her in every way to make sure that she should suspect nothing and be off her guard. He dared, however, do nothing in Rome for fear the crime should become widely known. Hence he went some distance into Campania accompanied by his mother, and took a sail on the fatal ship itself, which was adorned in the most brilliant fashion to the end that she might feel a desire to use the vessel continually.

13

When they reached Bauli, he gave for several days most costly dinners at which he showed great solicitude in entertaining his mother. If she were absent he feigned to miss her sorely, and if she were present he was lavish of caresses. He bade her ask whatever she desired and bestowed many gifts without her asking. When he had shaped the situation to this extent [3], then rising from dinner about midnight he embraced her, and straining her to his breast kissed her eyes and hands, exclaiming: "Mother, farewell, and happiness attend you! For you I live and because of you I rule." He then gave her in charge of Anicetus, a freedman, supposedly to convey her home on the ship that he had prepared.

But the sea would not endure the tragedy about to be enacted on it nor would it submit to assume responsibility for the deception wrought by the monstrous contrivance: therefore, though the ship parted asunder and Agrippina fell into the water, she did not perish. In spite of the fact that it was dark and she was full of strong drink and that the sailors used their oar blades on her, so much so that they killed Acerronia Polla, her fellow voyager, she nevertheless saved her life and reached home. Thereupon she affected not to realize that it was a plot and let not a word of it be known, but sent speedily to her son an account of the occurrence with the implication that it had happened by accident, and conveyed to him the good news (as she assumed it to be) that she was safe. Nero hearing this could not endure the unexpected outcome but punished the messenger as savagely as if he had come to assassinate him, and at once despatched Anicetus with the sailors to make an end of his mother. He would not entrust the killing of her to the Pretorians.

When she saw them, she knew for what they had come, and leaping from her bed tore open her clothing; exposing her abdomen, and cried out: "Strike here, Anicetus, strike here, for this bore Nero!"

14

Thus was Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus, grandchild of Agrippa, descendant of Augustus, slain by the very son to whom she had given the sovereignty and for whose sake she had killed her uncle and others. Nero when informed that she was dead would not believe it, for the monstrousness of his bold deed plunged him in doubts; therefore he desired to behold the victim with his own eyes. So he laid bare her body, looked her all over and inspected her wounds, finally uttering a remark far more abominable even than the crime. What he said was: "I did not know I had so beautiful a mother."

To the Pretorians he gave money evidently to secure their prayers for many such occurrences, and he sent to the senate a message in which he enumerated the offences of which he knew she was guilty, stating also that she had plotted against him and on being detected had committed suicide. Yet for all this calm explanation to the governing body he was frequently subject to agitation at night, so that he would even leap suddenly from his bed. And by day terror seized him at the sound of trumpets that seemed to blare forth some horrid din of war from the spot where lay Agrippina's bones. Therefore he went elsewhere. And when in his new abode he had again the same experience, he distractedly transferred his residence to some other place.

Nero, not having a word of truth from any one and seeing that all approved what he had been doing, thought that either his actions had escaped notice or that he had conducted himself correctly. Hence he became much worse also in other respects. He came to think that all that it was in his power to do was right and gave heed to those whose speech was prompted by fear or flattery as if they told absolute truth. For a time he was subject to fears and questionings, but, after the ambassadors had made him a number of pleasing speeches, he regained courage.

15

The population of Rome, on hearing the report, though horrified were nevertheless joyful, because they thought that now he would surely come to ruin. Nearly all of the senators pretended to rejoice at what had taken place, participated in Nero's pleasure, and voted many measures of which they thought he would be glad. Publius Thrasea Paetus had also come to the senate-house and listened to the letter. When, however, the reading was done, he at once rose without making any comment and went out. Thus what he would have said he could not, and what he could have said he would not. He behaved in the same way under all other conditions. For he used to say: "If it were a matter of Nero's putting only me to death, I could easily pardon the rest who load him with flatteries. But since among those even who praise him so excessively he has gotten rid of some and will yet destroy others, why should one stoop to indecent behavior and perish like a slave, when like a freeman one may pay the debt to nature? There shall be talk of me hereafter, but of these men not a word save for the single fact that they were killed." Such was the kind of man Thrasea showed himself, and he would always encourage himself by saying: "Nero can kill me, but he can not harm me."

16

When Nero after his mother's murder reentered Rome, people paid him reverence in public, but in private so long as any one could speak frankly with safety they tore his character to very tatters. And first they hung by night a piece of hide on one of his statues to signify that he himself ought to have a hiding. Second, they threw down in the Forum a baby to which was fastened a board, saying: "I will not take you up for fear you may slay your mother."

At Nero's entrance into Rome they took down the statues of Agrippina. But there was one which they did not cut loose soon enough, and so they threw over it a cloth which gave it the appearance of

being veiled. Thereupon somebody at once affixed to the statue the following inscription: "I am abashed and thou art unashamed."

In many quarters at once, also, might be read the inscription:

"Nero, Orestes, Alemeon, matricides."

Persons could actually be heard saying in so many words: "Nero put his mother out of the way." Not a few lodged information that certain persons had spoken in this way, their object being not so much to destroy those whom they accused as to bring reproach, on Nero. Hence he would admit no suit of that kind, either not wishing that the rumor should become more widespread by such means, or out of utter contempt for what was said. However, in the midst of the sacrifices offered in memory of Agrippina according to decree, the sun suffered a total eclipse and the stars could be seen. Also, the elephants drawing the chariot of Augustus entered the hippodrome and went as far as the senators' seats, but at that point they stopped and refused to proceed farther. And the event which one might most readily conjecture to have taken place through divine means was that a thunderbolt descended upon his dinner and consumed it all as it was being brought to him, like some tremendous harpy snatching away his food.

17

[In spite of this he killed by poison also his aunt Domitia, whom likewise he used to say he revered like a mother. He would not even wait a few days for her to die a natural death of old age, but was eager to destroy her also. His haste to do this was inspired by her possessions at Baiae and Ravenna, which included magnificent amusement pavilions that she had erected and] are in fine condition even now. In honor of his mother he celebrated a very great and costly festival, events taking place for several days in five or six theatres at once. It was then that an elephant was led to the very top of the vault of the theatre and walked down from that point on ropes, carrying a rider. There was another exhibition at once most disgraceful and shocking. Men and women not only of equestrian