

# Tacitus, Annals, 4.1-4, 7-12, 39-41/TRANSLATION

## BOOK IV

A.D. 23—28

**1.** THE year when Caius Asinius and Caius Antistius were consuls was the ninth of Tiberius's reign, a period of tranquillity for the State and prosperity for his own house, for he counted Germanicus's death a happy incident. Suddenly fortune deranged everything; the emperor became a cruel tyrant, as well as an abettor of cruelty in others. Of this the cause and origin was Ælius Sejanus, commander of the prætorian cohorts, of whose influence I have already spoken. I will now fully describe his extraction, his character, and the daring wickedness by which he grasped at power.

Born at Vulsinii, the son of Seius Strabo, a Roman knight, he attached himself in his early youth to Caius Cæsar, grandson of the Divine Augustus, and the story went that he had sold his person to Apicius, a rich debauchee. Soon afterwards he won the heart of Tiberius so effectually by various artifices that the emperor, ever dark and mysterious towards others, was with Sejanus alone careless and freespoken. It was not through his craft, for it was by this very weapon that he was overthrown; it was rather from heaven's wrath against Rome, to whose welfare his elevation and his fall were alike disastrous. He had a body which could endure hardships, and a daring spirit. He was one who screened himself, while he was attacking others; he was as cringing as he was imperious; before the world he affected humility; in his heart he lusted after supremacy, for the sake of which he was sometimes lavish and luxurious, but oftener energetic and watchful, qualities quite as mischievous when hypocritically assumed for the attainment of sovereignty.

## **2. SEJANUS' POSITION AND AMBITIONS**

He strengthened the hitherto moderate powers of his office by concentrating the cohorts scattered throughout the capital into one camp, so that they might all receive orders at the same moment, and that the sight of their numbers and strength might give confidence to themselves, while it would strike terror into the citizens. His pretexts were the demoralisation incident to a dispersed soldiery, the greater effectiveness of simultaneous action in the event of a sudden peril, and the stricter discipline which would be insured by the establishment of an encampment at a distance from the temptations of the city. As soon as the camp was completed, he crept gradually into the affections of the soldiers by mixing with them and addressing them by name, himself selecting the centurions and tribunes. With the Senate too he sought to ingratiate himself, distinguishing his partisans with offices and provinces, Tiberius readily yielding, and being so biassed that not only in private conversation but before the senators and the people he spoke highly of him as the partner of his toils, and allowed his statues to be honoured in theatres, in forums, and at the headquarters of our legions.

**3.** There were however obstacles to his ambition in the imperial house with its many princes, a son in youthful manhood and grown-up grandsons. As it would be unsafe to sweep off such a number at once by violence, while craft would necessitate successive intervals in crime, he chose, on the whole, the stealthier way, and to begin with Drusus, against whom he had the stimulus of a recent resentment. Drusus, who could not brook a rival and was somewhat irascible, had, in a casual dispute, raised his fist at Sejanus, and, when he defended himself, had struck him in the face. On considering every plan, Sejanus thought his easiest revenge was to turn his attention to Livia, Drusus's wife. She was a sister of Germanicus, and though she was not handsome as a girl, she became a woman of surpassing beauty. Pretending an ardent passion for her, he seduced her, and having won his first infamous triumph, and assured that a woman after having parted with her virtue will hesitate at nothing, he lured her on to thoughts of marriage, of a share in sovereignty, and of her husband's destruction. And she, the niece of Augustus, the daughter-in-law of Tiberius, the mother of children by Drusus, for a provincial paramour, foully disgraced herself, her ancestors, and her descendants, giving up honour and a sure position for prospects as base as they were uncertain. They took into their confidence Eudemus, Livia's friend and physician, whose

profession was a pretext for frequent secret interviews. Sejanus, to avert his mistress's jealousy, divorced his wife Apicata, by whom he had had three children. Still the magnitude of the crime caused fear and delay, and sometimes a conflict of plans.

4. Meanwhile, at the beginning of this year, Drusus, one of the children of Germanicus, assumed the dress of manhood, with a repetition of the honours decreed by the Senate to his brother Nero. The emperor added a speech, with warm praise of his son for sharing a father's affection to his brother's children. Drusus indeed, difficult as it is for power and mutual harmony to exist side by side, had the character of being kindly disposed or at least not unfriendly towards the lads. And now the old plan, so often insincerely broached, of a progress through the provinces, was again discussed. The emperor's pretext was the number of veterans on the eve of discharge and the necessity of fresh levies for the army. Volunteers were not forthcoming, and even if they were sufficiently numerous, they had not the same bravery and discipline, as it is chiefly the needy and the homeless who adopt by their own choice a soldier's life. Tiberius also rapidly enumerated the legions and the provinces which they had to garrison. I too ought, I think, to go through these details, and thus show what forces Rome then had under arms, what kings were our allies, and how much narrower then were the limits of our empire.

5-6

*Tac. reviews the state of the empire and Tib.'s management of it; it's currently good but in s7, ff the death of Drusus (covered in s8), the rot starts to set in...*

## 7. CIVIL ADMINISTRATION

All this, not indeed with any graciousness, but in a blunt fashion which often alarmed, he still kept up, until the death of Drusus changed everything. While he lived, the system continued, because Sejanus, as yet only in the beginning of his power, wished to be known as an upright counsellor, and there was one whose vengeance he dreaded, who did not conceal his hatred and incessantly complained "that a stranger was invited to assist in the government while the emperor's son was alive. How near was the step of declaring the stranger a colleague? Ambition at first had a steep path before it; when once the way had been entered, zealous adherents were forthcoming. Already, at the pleasure of the commander of the guards, a camp had been established; the soldiers were given into his hands; his statues were to be seen among the monuments of Cneius Pompeius; his grandsons would be of the same blood as the family of the Drusi. Henceforth they must pray that he might have self-control, and so be contented." So would Drusus talk, not unfrequently, or only in the hearing of a few persons. Even his confidences, now that his wife had been corrupted, were betrayed.

## 8. DRUSUS POISONED

Sejanus accordingly thought that he must be prompt, and chose a poison the gradual working of which might be mistaken for a natural disorder. It was given to Drusus by Lygdus, a eunuch, as was ascertained eight years later. As for Tiberius, he went to the Senate house during the whole time of the prince's illness, either because he was not afraid, or to show his strength of mind, and even in the interval between his death and funeral. Seeing the consuls, in token of their grief, sitting on the ordinary benches, he reminded them of their high office and of their proper place; and when the Senate burst into tears, suppressing a groan, he revived their spirits with a fluent speech. "He knew indeed that he might be reproached for thus encountering the gaze of the Senate after so recent an affliction. Most mourners could hardly bear even the soothing words of kinsfolk or to look on the light of day. And such were not to be condemned as weak. But he had sought a more manly consolation in the bosom of the commonwealth."

Then deploring the extreme age of Augusta, the childhood of his grandsons, and his own declining years, he begged the Senate to summon Germanicus's children, the only comfort under their present misery. The consuls went out, and having encouraged the young princes with kind words, brought them in and presented them to the emperor. Taking them by the hand he said: "Senators, when these boys lost their father, I committed them to their uncle, and begged him, though he had children of his own, to cherish and rear them as his own

offspring, and train them for himself and for posterity. Drusus is now lost to us, and I turn my prayers to you, and before heaven and your country I adjure you to receive into your care and guidance the great-grandsons of Augustus, descendants of a most noble ancestry. So fulfil your duty and mine. To you, Nero and Drusus, these senators are as fathers. Such is your birth that your prosperity and adversity must alike affect the State."

**9.** There was great weeping at these words, and then many a benediction. Had the emperor set bounds to his speech, he must have filled the hearts of his hearers with sympathy and admiration. But he now fell back on those idle and often ridiculed professions about restoring the republic, and the wish that the consuls or some one else might undertake the government, and thus destroyed belief even in what was genuine and noble.

The same honours were decreed to the memory of Drusus as to that of Germanicus, and many more were added. Such is the way with flattery, when repeated. The funeral with its procession of statues was singularly grand. Aeneas, the father of the Julian house, all the Alban kings, Romulus, Rome's founder, then the Sabine nobility, Attus Clausus, and the busts of all the other Claudii were displayed in a long train.

**10.** In relating the death of Drusus I have followed the narrative of most of the best historians. But I would not pass over a rumour of the time, the strength of which is not even yet exhausted. Sejanus, it is said, having seduced Livia into crime, next secured, by the foulest means, the consent of Lygdus, the eunuch, as from his youth and beauty he was his master's favourite, and one of his principal attendants. When those who were in the secret had decided on the time and place of the poisoning, Sejanus, with the most consummate daring, reversed his plan, and, whispering an accusation against Drusus of intending to poison his father, warned Tiberius to avoid the first draught offered him as he was dining at his son's house. Thus deceived, the old emperor, on sitting down to the banquet, took the cup and handed it to Drusus. His suspicions were increased when Drusus, in perfect unconsciousness, drank it off with youthful eagerness, apparently, out of fear and shame, bringing on himself the death which he had plotted against his father.

#### **11. RUMORS REGARDING DRUSUS**

These popular rumours, over and above the fact that they are not vouched for by any good writer, may be instantly refuted. For who, with moderate prudence, far less Tiberius with his great experience, would have thrust destruction on a son, without even hearing him, with his own hand too, and with an impossibility of returning to better thoughts. Surely he would rather have had the slave who handed the poison, tortured, have sought to discover the traitor, in short, would have been as hesitating and tardy in the case of an only son hitherto unconvicted of any crime, as he was naturally even with strangers. But as Sejanus had the credit of contriving every sort of wickedness, the fact that he was the emperor's special favourite, and that both were hated by the rest of the world, procured belief for any monstrous fiction, and rumour too always has a dreadful side in regard to the deaths of men in power. Besides, the whole process of the crime was betrayed by Apicata, Sejanus's wife, and fully divulged, under torture, by Eudemus and Lygdus. No writer has been found sufficiently malignant to fix the guilt on Tiberius, though every circumstance was scrutinized and exaggerated. My object in mentioning and refuting this story is, by a conspicuous example, to put down hearsay, and to request all into whose hands my work shall come, not to catch eagerly at wild and improbable rumours in preference to genuine history which has not been perverted into romance.

**12.** Tiberius pronounced a panegyric on his son before the Rostra, during which the Senate and people, in appearance rather than in heart, put on the expression and accents of sorrow, while they inwardly rejoiced at the brightening future of the family of Germanicus. This beginning of popularity and the ill-concealed ambition of their mother Agrippina, hastened its downfall. Sejanus when he saw that the death of Drusus was not avenged on the murderers and was no grief to the people, grew bold in wickedness, and, now that his first attempt had succeeded, speculated on the possibility of destroying the children of Germanicus, whose succession to the throne was a certainty. There were three, and poison could not be distributed among them, because of the singular fidelity of their guardians and

the unassailable virtue of Agrippina. So Sejanus inveighed against Agrippina's arrogance, and worked powerfully on Augusta's old hatred of her and on Livia's consciousness of recent guilt, and urged both these women to represent to the emperor that her pride as a mother and her reliance on popular enthusiasm were leading her to dream of empire. Livia availed herself of the cunning of accusers, among whom she had selected Julius Postumus, a man well suited to her purpose, as he had an intrigue with Mutilia Prisca, and was consequently in the confidence of Augusta, over whose mind Prisca had great influence. She thus made her aged grandmother, whose nature it was to tremble for her power, irreconcilably hostile to her grandson's widow. Agrippina's friends too were induced to be always inciting her proud spirit by mischievous talk.

### 13.38

*Not much happens; an earthquake; a war abroad; Nero and Drusus Caesar continue to win the hearts and minds of the people; Tib. not best pleased (he never liked Germanicus or his children); a slave-revolt crushed; informer-trials increase but little-by-little; Sejanus continues to exert his influence over Rome and Tiberius; no-one in Rome is pleased about this but what can anyone do?*

### 39. SEJANUS SEEKS MARRIAGE WITH LIVIA

Sejanus meanwhile, dazed by his extravagant prosperity and urged on too by a woman's passion, Livia now insisting on his promise of marriage, addressed a memorial to the emperor. For it was then the custom to apply to him by writing, even though he was at Rome. This petition was to the following effect:—The kindness of Augustus, the father, and then the many favourable testimonies of Tiberius, the son, had engendered the habit of confiding his hopes and wishes to the ears of emperors as readily as to those of the gods. The splendor of high distinctions he had never craved; he had rather chosen watchings and hardships, like one of the common soldiers, for the emperor's safety. But there was one most glorious honour he had won, the reputation of being worthy of an alliance with a Cæsar. This was the first motive of his ambition. As he had heard that Augustus, in marrying his daughter, had even entertained some thoughts of Roman knights, so if a husband were sought for Livia, he hoped Tiberius would bear in mind a friend who would find his reward simply in the glory of the alliance. He did not wish to rid himself of the duties imposed on him; he thought it enough for his family to be secured against the unjust displeasure of Agrippina, and this for the sake of his children. For, as for himself, enough and more than enough for him would be a life completed while such a sovereign still reigned.

40. Tiberius, in reply, after praising the loyal sentiments of Sejanus and briefly enumerating the favours he had bestowed on him, asked time for impartial consideration, adding that while other men's plans depended on their ideas of their own interest, princes, who had to regulate their chief actions by public opinion, were in a different position. "Hence," he said, "I do not take refuge in an answer which it would be easy to return, that Livia can herself decide whether she considers that, after Drusus, she ought again to marry or rather to endure life in the same home, and that she has in her mother and grandmother counsellors nearer and dearer to her. I will deal more frankly. First, as to the enmity of Agrippina, I maintain that it will blaze out more fiercely if Livia's marriage rends, so to say, the house of the Cæsars into two factions. Even as it is, feminine jealousies break out, and my grandsons are torn asunder by the strife. What will happen if the rivalry is rendered more intense by such a marriage? For you are mistaken, Sejanus, if you think that you will then remain in the same position, and that Livia, who has been the wife of Caius Cæsar and afterwards of Drusus, will have the inclination to pass her old age with a mere Roman knight. Though I might allow it, do you imagine it would be tolerated by those who have seen her brother, her father, and our ancestors in the highest offices of state? You indeed desire to keep within your station; but those magistrates and nobles who intrude on you against your wishes and consult you on all matters, openly give out that you have long overstepped the rank of a knight and gone far beyond my father's friendships, and from their dislike of you they also condemn me. But, you say, Augustus had thoughts of giving his daughter to a Roman knight. Is it surprising that, with so many distracting cares, foreseeing too the immense elevation to which a man would be raised above others by such an alliance, he talked of Caius Proculeius

and certain persons of singularly quiet life, wholly free from political entanglements? Still, if the hesitation of Augustus is to influence us, how much stronger is the fact that he bestowed his daughter on Marcus Agrippa, then on myself. All this, as a friend, I have stated without reserve, but I will not oppose your plans or those of Livia. My own earnest thoughts and the ties with which I am still purposing to unite you to myself, I shall for the present forbear to explain. This only I will declare, that nothing is too grand to be deserved by your merits and your goodwill towards me. When an opportunity presents itself, either in the Senate, or in a popular assembly, I shall not be silent."

#### **41. PRESSURE ON TIBERIUS TO LEAVE ROME**

Sejanus, no longer thinking of his marriage but filled with a deeper alarm, rejoined by deprecating the whispers of suspicion, popular rumour and the gathering storm of odium. That he might not impair his influence by closing his doors on the throngs of his many visitors or strengthen the hands of accusers by admitting them, he made it his aim to induce Tiberius to live in some charming spot at a distance from Rome. In this he foresaw several advantages. Access to the emperor would be under his own control, and letters, for the most part being conveyed by soldiers, would pass through his hands. Cæsar too, who was already in the decline of life, would soon, when enervated by retirement, more readily transfer to him the functions of empire; envy towards himself would be lessened when there was an end to his crowded levées and the reality of power would be increased by the removal of its empty show. So he began to declaim against the laborious life of the capital, the bustling crowds and streaming multitudes, while he praised repose and solitude, with their freedom from vexations and misunderstandings, and their special opportunities for the study of the highest questions.

#### **42-56**

*Tacitus turns his attention to what was going on in the rest of the empire in these sections; and that need not concern us; he does, however, return to Rome to tell us that one of Agrippina's (Germanicus' wife) close friends was accused of adultery and attempting to poison the emperor by witchcraft and poison; Agrippina went impetuously to Tib. and begged to be allowed to marry again (Tib., as emperor, was the head of the whole household, and therefore Ag. Needed his permission); Tib. said nothing; finally, Sejanus sent his agents to Ag. with false warnings that Tib. was trying to poison her; she was then invited to dinner by Tib.; naturally Ag. refused all dishes; Tib. noticed and offered her some fruit with his own hand; she refused it; Tib. turned to his mother and whispered rather loudly 'it's not surprising I'm a bit harsh with someone who makes it this clear that they think I'm a poisoner.' There's then a bit of argy-bargy concerning Smyrna, a Roman province, and we return, in s57, to Sejanus' plan to persuade Tib. to decamp from Rome.*