

THE LIFE AND TIMES  
OF  
NERO

*By*  
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## CONTENTS

BOOK ONE.	THE MOTHER AND THE BOY	-	-	-	15
BOOK TWO.	THE YOUNG EMPEROR	-	-	-	51
BOOK THREE.	THE THEATRICAL PHASE	-	-	-	105
BOOK FOUR.	THE FIRE OF ROME	-	-	-	155
BOOK FIVE.	CONSPIRACIES	-	-	-	235
BOOK SIX.	THE LAST OF THE CAESARS	-	-	-	287
BIBLIOGRAPHY	-	-	-	-	320
INDEX	-	-	-	-	323

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- PLATE 1. NERO
- PLATE 2. AGRIPPINA
- PLATE 3. CLAUDIUS
- PLATE 4. NERO AS A YOUNG MAN
- PLATE 5. OCTAVIA
- PLATE 6. POPPAEA
- PLATE 7. THEATRE OF POMPEY
- PLATE 8. STAGE OF THE THEATRE OF POMPEY
- PLATE 9. THE NERONIAN CIRCUS
- PLATE 10. SENECA
- PLATE 11. PLAN OF THE GOLDEN HOUSE
- PLATE 12. THE COLOSSAL STATUE OF NERO

## PREFACE

IN my early days, when I was in Rome I often climbed the Palatine, the hill whose summit is perennially verdant with laurels, the sombre and short-leaved laurels that have the colour of ossidian and ancient bronze. My friend, the great Roman archæologist Giacomo Boni, once said to me that he believed those same laurels are the survivors of the ancient trees from whose sprigs were made the wreaths that crowned Nero's brow, as old as the wiry and grey-leaved olives that challenge the centuries upon the slopes of Tivoli, where Horace had his country residence. There, on the hill, I dreamed of Nero and Ancient Rome amid the very shades of the past.

It seems that all my life, in my innermost thoughts, I have carried a portrait of the strange, exotic being that was Nero, and whenever I have returned to Rome I have again climbed the hill, and each time my dreams have been stirred to life.

From the summit of the Palatine the Neronian Rome stood before my evoking mind. Away down the hills, by the side of St. Peter's, I could see Nero's private Circus where he had exhibited his prowess as a charioteer and his voice as a singer. Across the ruins of the Forum and the delightful Temple of the Goddess Vesta with the intriguing nunnery, my accustomed eyes could detect the stumps that mark the foundations of the Golden House that Nero built for his folly; and by the side of the Circus Maximus I could imagine his gigantic statue that, on the orders of Emperor Adrian, had been moved by a horde

of men and twenty-four elephants, and re-erected in front of the Temple of Venus and Rome in full view of the Circus, turning it into a statue of the Sun-God Helios, so that for centuries the populace did say, "Let's meet at the Colossus," and thus gave to the Circus the name of Colosseum. I could in my mind see the vast City as it was when Nero rebuilt it after the Great Fire; and I regretted the disappearance of the picturesqueness its ruins had displayed to me when I first looked at them in my younger days, the picturesqueness we can now only conjure from Piranesi's prints. And as I had one day stood in the great Argive plain at Mycenae and looked at Agamemnon's tomb where they had lifted the golden mask from the King's face, so I now stretched out my hands and touched the Ghosts. Agrippina the murderess and murdered; Seneca the hypocrite; Tigellinus lewd and evil; and Nero, the boy Emperor who was fond of writing poems and singing on the lyre.

And yet, what was he really like? It is an enigma that has always intrigued me. I have read in Latin, Italian, English, German and French the many books that have been written about him, scores and scores of them; and none has answered the riddle posed by my thoughts. He was barely dead when that sycophantic journalist Suetonius blackened him to posterity for the sake of adding more lustre to his patrons the Antonines. And the Church writers of the first centuries, who are called the Apologetic, made an absurd portrait of Nero the blood-thirsty assassin of the early Christian Martyrs.\* Was he only the matricide, the murderer of brother and wife and friends? He was that. But he was also a great and astute

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\* The most ferocious persecutions of Christians took place under Diocletian, whose reign (284-305) was memorable for vast and terrible persecutions.

## PREFACE

ruler who knew the art of courting popularity to perfection. He was the forerunner of the Princes of the Renaissance; a strange mixture of cruelty, grandeur and dilettantism. History is crowded with virtuous bores! Nero was a young mad Emperor, the last of the Caesars; the mirror and image of the Rome that held all the World in her sway and already was surfeited with her unsurpassed power. And the people of Rome adored him.

C. M. F.

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## Book One

### THE MOTHER AND THE BOY

#### I

IN the autumn of the year 37 Agrippina found herself six months gone with child. She consulted a Persian magician who enjoyed a great reputation in Rome, and the astrologer gave her this terrible horoscope: "You will give birth to a son, who shall be Emperor but will assassinate his mother." Agrippina replied: "Let him murder his mother but be Emperor!"—*Necet me dum regnet!*\*

From that day the life of Agrippina's child was written. "*Fastigium tuum affixum est,*" he will be told one day by his tutor, the philosopher Seneca; "Your destiny is written in the skies and nothing can change it."

The boy was born at Anzio, on the 15th of December. It was the eve of the Saturnalian holidays: what an omen for his life! Agrippina had an agonizing time. The child was born feet first. The midwives at Agrippina's bed shuddered.

#### II

THE father, Domitius Aenobarbus, was a man of execrable character, and the mother was a thoroughly bad woman. The cruel character of Domitius was a byword in Rome. He had killed a freedman of his at a banquet merely for failing to drink as much as he commanded. One day, in the Forum, Domitius had struck out the eye of a Knight for some heated words in a dis-

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\* Dio Cassius—*Historias*, LXI, Ch. II.

pute. He was so crafty and greedy that during his Praetorship he defrauded the chariot-owners at the Circus of their prizes in the races. There were other evil facets to his character: a short time before the death of Emperor Tiberius he was impeached for incest with his sister Lepida. The best that could be said of Domitius Aenobarbus was that he was an aristocrat to his fingertips; the Aenobarbi could indeed boast of seven Consulships, one Triumph and two Censorships. So illustrious were they as a family that on being admitted into the Patrician Order they continued to use the same cognomen, with no other prenomens than those of Gneus or Lucius. And they all had red beards.\*

Agrippina, born in the year 16, was the eldest daughter of the great General Germanicus whom Augustus had at one time cherished as his successor. Agrippina was, therefore, a niece of Emperor Tiberius. With her two sisters, Drusilla and Julia, as well as their brother Gaius whom the people had nicknamed Caligula, Agrippina was brought up in the house of their paternal grandmother Antonia, herself a sister of Mark Antony and a niece of Augustus. But Caligula had incestuous relations with all his three sisters, who were girls of extreme beauty. Their aunt surprised him in Drusilla's arms. Old Tiberius was told, but the family honour had to be protected against the lampoons of the populace and even more from the contempt of the aristocracy; and silence was kept. The fact was that Tiberius, tired of proscriptions, profoundly disillusioned by the treachery of his friend and councillor Sejanus, disappointed by the futility of absolute power, and disenchanted by the never-ending need to punish, thought it better to shut his eyes to the peccadilloes of his

\* Suetonius - *Nero Claudius Caesar*, I.

nieces, and married them off as quickly as possible and as well as he could.

Tiberius therefore gave Agrippina for wife to Domitius Aenobarbus, and ordered them to celebrate their marriage in Rome.\* Everybody knew that the Emperor had chosen such a bad man as husband for his niece only because Domitius was related to the Caesars and was a grandnephew of Augustus through his grandmother Octavia.

At the time of her marriage Agrippina was barely twelve years old. The newly married couple did not keep house together for long—they had too many grounds for detesting each other. So it happened that the boy was born nine years after the marriage. After Tiberius's death Domitius considered it wiser to effect a reconciliation with his wife, who was a sister of the new Emperor Caligula; and the result was the birth of the boy. The peace between husband and wife was made the same night that Tiberius breathed his last and nine months later, exactly to the day, the boy was born.

Domitius was away when his son was born; impatient of Caligula's vagaries he was spending most of his time at his villa at Pyrges in Tuscany. To his friends who offered him their congratulations, he replied: "Of myself and Agrippina only a monster can be born."

Agrippina asked her husband to choose a name for the child. Domitius mockingly suggested calling him Claudius, in honour of uncle Claudius, the Prince who enjoyed the reputation of being a fool. This Claudius was not, although it was quite true that he stuttered so much that it was impossible to listen to him and keep a straight face. Agrippina, however, declined her husband's suggestion and the boy, according to usage, was

\* Tacitus — *Annales*, IV.

called Lucius and entered in the rolls as Lucius Domitius Aenobarbus.

When the baby was three years old, his uncle Emperor Caligula banished him with his mother to the island of Ponza, on a charge of conspiracy. The accusation was in a way quite true, for Agrippina had been senseless enough to conspire with her lover Lepidus, who was also a minion of her brother the Emperor. Caligula was so angry that he compelled Agrippina to travel to her place of exile carrying upon her knees the ashes of her executed lover.

Caligula was then at the peak of his madness. He had threatened to banish Jupiter to the island of Crete and had announced that he was taking the Moon as his mistress. He openly carried on incestuous relations with his sisters and opened in the Palace a public brothel from which he collected the fees.

While Agrippina was in exile, her husband Domitius died of dropsy in his retreat at Pyrges. Caligula tried to confiscate his large estate, and ordered that the boy should be taken from his mother and entrusted to his paternal aunt Lepida.

Little Lucius Domitius was thus brought into the house of Domitia Lepida, who, not wanting the boy, placed him under the care of two rather unusual tutors—a dancer and a coiffeur.\*

### III

WHEN the boy was four years old, Emperor Caligula was assassinated in the Circus during the annual Games in honour of Augustus's memory. It was the month of February of the year 41. The mad Emperor's body was left on the spot where it was butchered by Cassius Cherea,

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, VI.

a Tribune of the Praetorian Cohort. His wife Cesonia—an abandoned woman who used to give Caligula love philtres to inflame his passion for her—was killed with her own daughter upon the Emperor's body, on the flagged floor of the high-vaulted gallery of the Circus.

The Senate wanted to restore the Republic, for after Tiberius and Caligula the House of the Caesars had no other pretender but old Claudius, about whom nobody bothered. But while in the Senate House the greybeards chattered about the great speech with which their President would on the morrow announce to the sovereign people the restoration of the Roman Republic—the Speech, the great dada of democratic politicians of all times!—some soldiers of the Praetorian Guards wandered about the Palace, and on the upper floor they came upon a foot protruding from behind a tapestry. The soldiers pulled the foot and out with it came Prince Claudius, the butt of all jokes, hiding in fright behind the tapestry. The soldiers led Claudius to a terrace, and calling to a group of comrades below, they hailed him the new Emperor.\* Claudius thought it another joke, in his absurd life of scholar and Court buffoon. That night the Jewish King Agrippa, who lived in Rome and knew the value of being a friend of the Caesars, went to the Guards' barracks where Claudius had been taken by the Praetorians and had a talk with him. What was there to be afraid of in the Senate? The Senators would only quarrel among themselves, and the Magistrates, each appointed by the late Emperor, would not oppose Caligula's uncle. As for the people, well, the people of Rome would applaud the winner, whoever it might be.

The Jewish King Agrippa was right. The Praetorian

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\* Suetonius—*Tiberius Claudius Drusus Caesar*, X.

Guards and the Roman crowd hailed the new Emperor Claudius. Soon afterwards the Senate came in a body to the Palace to make obeisance. Claudius was not such an idiot after all. He offered the Senators protection against the indignant Praetorians, and soon the dotard appeared for what he really was—an old erudite but full of commonsense; fundamentally a good man; deferential towards the Senate and paternal towards the people. The medal had its reverse, for the old man had an incredible weakness for wine and women. He ate and drank till he could no longer stand, and he indulged with women to great excess. Day after day episodes occurred only too reminiscent of the jokes that had been current at the Palace under the previous Court; the Emperor fell asleep after his meals, and did not mind when some of the guests shot olive stones at him, or a courtier poked him in the ribs with his ivory stick to awaken him. And he often snored during an audience. He was tall and well built, but his foibles made him look absurd. He laughed immoderately and could be ignoble in his rage. When he walked he dragged the right leg, and his knees were always weak. And his voice, when he held forth on some pet subject—a practice of which, like many other scholarly men, he was only too fond—his voice sounded like a fog-horn.

But he was good at heart and one of the first things he did was to sign a decree allowing Agrippina to return from exile. She took back her son, and married again, this time Crispus Passienus the orator, after inducing him to divorce his wife, who was another Domitia, sister of the late Aenobarbus. Her boy Lucius lost the coiffeur and the dancer as tutors and Agrippina entrusted him to a new tutor, the freedman Anicetus. Of this Anicetus—

who was to play such an important part in his future life—Nero used to say in later years: “He was a freedman, which means that he knew the difference from being a slave; he was a decent scholar, and he had no morals.”

## IV

A FEW years later Agrippina's second husband died. Passienus had been a quiet and peaceful man, with only one great passion. Near Tusculum, where he had a villa, there was an ancient grove of beeches, consecrated since olden times to Diana. Passienus was romantically and strangely fond of one of the beeches and used to spend hours near the tree; embracing it, kissing it, sleeping with its shadow within his arms.\* Agrippina took no notice of such whims and indeed she induced Passienus to make her boy Lucius his sole heir. Thus little Lucius inherited a huge estate.

But Agrippina had higher aims, and she turned to the freedman Narcissus, who acted as Prime Minister to Emperor Claudius. Through Narcissus she ingratiated herself with the Emperor, who was readily susceptible to the wiles of scheming women. It did not take Claudius long to fall in love with Agrippina, particularly as he was more than tired of his dreadful wife Messalina. Not a good word could have been said about the Empress, and Agrippina had one great advantage over Messalina, the advantage of having been born in the House of the Caesars and having grown up amidst the intrigues and dangers of the Imperial Court. Clever and cunning, she pushed the wantonness of Messalina to the limit—and took good care to make it public.

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\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XVI.

And there were two boys: Agrippina's son Lucius Domitius, who was now ten years old, with good features and a clever mind justifying his mother's fondest hopes. He was the only grandchild of Germanicus and all the heritage of glory left by the popular hero stood behind him. Wherever he appeared the crowd hailed him with sympathy. The other boy, Messalina's child, was Britannicus, a frail and delicate boy suffering from palsy, and looked upon in wonder by the people as the child of an old dotard and a dissolute mother.

It came into Claudius's head to celebrate the Secular Games before the century ended. It was a drunkard's whim but it kept the Court agog for months. Vitellius had returned from the Governorship of Palestine. He was so adoring a favourite of the Empress Messalina that he begged to be allowed to carry one of her slippers for ever next to his heart. On going to an audience at the Palace he saluted Claudius in oriental fashion, and felicitating with him on the resolution about the Secular Games, he added: "May you, O Divine, celebrate these Games very often!"

During the Secular Games the young sons of the most illustrious families performed in the Circus an ancient play, which was called the Trojan Game. Virgil has described this performance of noble youths in Book V of the *Aeneid*: "The young men, riding caparisoned horses, appear splendid, advancing *en masse* under the eyes of their delighted parents. Their well-dressed hair is decked by a garland, in the right hand they carry a long sharp javelin, a light quiver is suspended upon their back, and from their neck dangles upon their chest a chain of gold. The boys advance in three squadrons, commanded by three seniors. They make the tour of the Circus, amidst

the applause, and many of them are recognized and hailed by name, for the people see in them the images of their glorious ancestors, *Veterumque adgnoscent ora parentum.*" It was an occasion in which the people showed to the children of the great families the affection or the indifference that their parents inspired.

In the same squadron were Lucius Domitius, aged eleven, and Prince Britannicus, two years younger, son of Claudius and Messalina, and Domitius's cousin. Young Britannicus played his part with all the advantage that his birth and position of Heir Apparent gave him; yet, the greatest applause went to Lucius Domitius and the names of Agrippina and of Germanicus sounded loudly when Lucius was hailed.

Soon afterwards a rumour went round the wineshops of Rome that Messalina had tried to have Lucius Domitius assassinated. Who had spread the rumour? Was it Agrippina herself? Voices said that Messalina saw in this young boy a potential rival to her own son. But the Gods had protected Domitius, for at the moment when the hired murderers advanced into his room to kill him in his sleep a dragon had jumped out from the bed and chased the assassins away. Young Lucius swore to everyone that in his bedroom he had never seen anything bigger than a playful and harmless Egyptian snake of the kind that were kept to keep away mice. But Agrippina knew only too well the value of a properly presented story and she immediately instructed her jeweller to make for Lucius a golden bracelet interlaced with the skin of the dragon found near his bed, a bracelet that her son wore constantly throughout his life as a talisman and a token of gratitude to his thoughtful mother.\*

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, VI.

At last Messalina understood that she had in Agrippina a rival more redoubtable than the boy, who by now was openly considered by Agrippina's clique as another Heir Presumptive next to Britannicus. Messalina decided to dispose of, at any price, both mother and son; but her own dissolute life proved her undoing. Blinded by amorous passion, she took the opportunity when Claudius was absent from Rome of having a marriage performed between herself and her latest lover, the handsome Silius. That the people were not shocked by such a sacrilegious scandal only emphasized the general standard of morals. Indeed, the populace laughed about it, and the Mother Superior of the Vestal Virgins spoke in Messalina's defence. Amidst the general indifference and with the Court undecided, the Prime Minister Narcissus took the final decision. He brought the Emperor back to Rome, made Messalina depart, chased away the Mother Superior of the Vestal Virgins and endeavoured to rouse some indignation in Claudius. When he found that the old man was totally indifferent to the misdeeds of the Empress, Narcissus ordered Messalina to be killed, which was done at the very moment when Claudius was suggesting that the Empress should appear before him to explain her conduct. They let Claudius grumble and placed him at table for dinner. The old glutton reclined with a sigh upon his couch, and proceeded with his food. Later, when the Emperor was gorged with his meal, Narcissus informed him that the Empress was dead. Claudius glanced at his Minister with quizzical eyes; then he took the glass that the cup-bearer was proffering, and lay back on his cushions with a sigh—no one could tell whether it was of resignation or relief. As he appeared to be completely drunk, the proper slave came and tickled the

Imperial throat with a peacock feather dipped into perfumed oil, and Claudius relieved his stomach in the approved fashion. Two Nubian giants lifted him up, sound asleep, and carried him to his apartments. A few days later, when Messalina's name was already banished from general conversation, the Emperor seating himself at the table would still ask why the Empress was late for dinner.

Some months afterwards the Emperor was officially told that it was advisable that he should remarry. Claudius was now well over sixty and looked considerably older. He was by no means a desirable husband. Pallas, the Imperial Treasurer, had been charged by Agrippina with the task of settling the wedding. Pallas was not new to the intrigues of the Imperial House for it was he who, years previously, had been sent by Antonia, Agrippina's grandmother, to reveal to Tiberius the treachery of Sejanus. As for Agrippina, she felt that it would be wrong to use the influence and good services of Narcissus, as it would be placing her future in his hands. Therefore, she had accepted Pallas's courtship, and granted him her favours. All things considered, it was less of a weakness on her part than an honour to the freedman; and so Claudius found himself urged to the marriage from all sides.

## V

IN his dotage, Claudius had long since left the conduct of all public and Court affairs to his three favourites: Pallas, who acted as Treasurer; Narcissus, First Secretary of State, and Callistus, whose duty it was to deal with the petitions addressed to the Emperor. Callistus had exercised the same office under Caligula, his title of favour

was that having received from Caligula orders to kill Uncle Claudius, he had the courage, so he said, to disobey the orders. Narcissus was an efficient and loyal Secretary of State. As for Pallas, who claimed descent from the Kings of Arcadia, he kept everybody at a distance with his haughty airs. It was indeed whispered that the proud Pallas never spoke to his servants, but passed his orders to them in writing.

As for having surrendered all the affairs to those three freedmen, Claudius was telling his most trusted friend Burrus, Commander of the Praetorian Guard: "You are always railing against the freedmen who fill high positions at Court. I didn't start this habit! It was my great-uncle Augustus who preferred to entrust the highest offices at Court to his most faithful freedmen. Perhaps he knew that slavery generates those virtues that freeborn men so seldom possess, gratitude and loyalty."

When it came to recommending a new wife for the Emperor, Callistus supported the candidature of Lollia Paulina on the ground that she had no children and so would love the three children that Claudius already had from his previous marriages, Britannicus and Octavia, born of Messalina, and Antonia, born of Claudius's second wife, Aelia Petina. Narcissus advised Claudius to take back his first wife Aelia Petina, whom he had repudiated for Messalina. Pallas sponsored Agrippina.

Yet, there was a great obstacle to the success of Agrippina. She was Claudius's niece, and both Divine and Roman laws forbade the marriage.

But Agrippina was not discouraged. She knew that Claudius was very amorous. And she was beautiful. Hers was a beauty that was both sensual and pure. At thirty-two, Agrippina retained all the attractions of youth,

together with an ardent ripeness; and she possessed a science of voluptuousness that was an irresistible invitation to an old and declining sensualist. When Claudius tasted Agrippina's kisses he felt that he was for the first time savouring the pleasures of real love. He sighed, he moaned, he panted within her soft white arms, but when he tried to lie with her, she drew away: "What would her ancestors think of Germanicus's daughter openly becoming the mistress of the Emperor who was her uncle? Of course she loved him, but there was no hope! Did not the Emperor feel that no other woman had suffered so much longing in his arms?"

Behind the scenes, whenever his duties closeted him with the Emperor, Pallas pointed out to Claudius the immense advantages of such an alliance: "Bring into your family a first daughter of Germanicus, whose memory is still revered by the Army and by the people . . . Agrippina is young and beautiful and she comes from the line of the Caesars. She will give you an heir—a new Augustus."

Yet still Claudius hesitated, and grumbled, "It would be incest. What would the Senate say? And the Priests?" But all the Court was now on Agrippina's side and one of the loudest was Vitellius, who no longer carried Messalina's slipper against his heart. A popular demonstration in favour of Agrippina was staged and the Senate passed a decree exempting the Emperor from the Law that prevented a marriage between uncle and niece. The Roman populace marched to the Palatine clamouring that Claudius should marry his own niece. Old Claudius desired nothing better.

## VI

CLAUDIUS wore himself out, or what was left of him after his bouts of eating and drinking, in the white arms of Agrippina, strange creature that she was. Her body was her weapon. She could be haughty and frigid, but when she thought it advantageous she could lend her body to contacts and caresses that would have disgusted a prostitute of the Suburra. Yet she came out of those debaucheries almost untouched. It was as if the Gods had endowed her with a capacity to be reborn afresh; night after night.

Barely eighteen months later, in the month of October of the year 50, Claudius informed the Senate that he proposed to adopt his wife's son, Lucius Domitius. Gneus Domitius's sardonic suggestion, when he told his wife to call the child Claudius in mockery of his uncle, had now come true. After the adoption, Lucius was named Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus. Claudius after his new father, Germanicus in memory of his maternal grandfather, Nero in memory of a paternal uncle. And Nero meant strong and valiant. The boy was far from strong, his mother thought, and not particularly inclined to be valiant, with spindly legs, and his protruding and short-sighted eyes that never seemed to look anyone straight in the face. But through a long series of divorces, second marriages, poisoning and adoptions, the House of the Caesars kept its line unbroken.

## VII

LIFE at the Palace was dull for young Nero. Since his mother had married the Emperor, he had felt more lonely.

more deserted. He now often thought of the words that his mother had spoken to him on the day of his adoption by the Emperor. He was on a terrace receiving his lessons, when his mother had advanced through the curtains of brightly-painted leather, "From today you will be Nero Claudius. One day you will be called Nero Caesar!" As she spoke the words she turned and disappeared again through the curtains—tall, beautiful, majestic. The tutor at the desk did not dare to interrupt the reverie of his young pupil, as he stared beyond the terrace of the Imperial Gardens stretching down the slopes of the Palatine Hill.

Nero was a mere lad of thirteen, with somewhat massive features and protruding eyes. Heavy eyelids and a hint of nearsightedness gave the pale blue eyes a dreamy air. His hair had a strong tinge of auburn, almost a copper-red, and dressed in thick masses, like a halo, it made the high forehead look pale and noble. The boy had turned to his tutor, the freedman Anicetus, and touching his head he said, "The very hair of my father." He spoke in Greek, for it delighted him to speak that tongue so fluently and with such a pure Attic accent: "We Aenobarbs are aristocrats to our finger-tips."

He was a strange boy, who had always relied upon his beautiful and loving mother. Now every day Senators and Knights came to bend their backs or their knees before him. The worst of it was that they came secretly, introduced by Pallas or by some servant, and they came to beg favours of him. Favours? Was he, then, in a position to grant favours to men who bore such great names? Yes, they told him, he had only to pass their requests to the Empress—his mother. Young Nero was learning human baseness.

Not yet had he a clear idea of what power came from being a member of the Imperial Family, but every day he could see the signs of the stupendous prestige enjoyed by his mother. Agrippina had obtained what no other Empress had achieved before; the same honours due to the Emperor. When Ambassadors came to prostrate themselves before Claudius Caesar, they made obeisance also to the Divine Agrippina. Dressed in the *paludamentum*, the regal mantle of purple and gold, Agrippina took the salute of the standards. The Senate revered her. One day she surpassed all limits of pride and ascended the Capitol in the chariot reserved for the statues of the Gods. Upon the new gold coins her profile was shown next to the Emperor's. Young Nero was fascinated by this image of Agrippina upon the bright golden coins. His mother!

A small group of carefully chosen patrician boys were now admitted to sit with Prince Nero at lessons; among them were the two sons of General Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, and, of course, young Prince Britannicus. The tutors reported regularly to the Empress on Prince Nero's progress. They said that he seemed over-sensitive to poetry, and strangely imbued with a sense of the dramatic. The Circus, and even more the Stage, attracted him with a kind of morbid fascination. Anicetus fostered this passion for the theatre, and often took him secretly to see a new play or some famous tragic actor. When at sunset, Nero returned from having shared the enthusiasm of the delirious crowd in the Circus, in a spectacle that was thrilling in its terrible horror, he could no longer keep his eyes upon the book or concentrate on his writing-tablets. One day a tutor caught him describing to his schoolmates the ghastly death of a famous chariot-driver of the "Greens," the Imperial racing colours. The

driver had fallen from the chariot in the heat of the race and was dragged around the arena by the horses, a terrible loss for the "Greens." The tutor asked what it was all about. Nero replied that he was describing the tragic end of Hector being dragged by Achilles behind his chariot around the walls of Troy. But why this useless lie?

Young Nero's tastes and inclinations were developing rapidly. He was passionately fond of mimic dances. He loved painting and music, but more than anything else he loved poetical composition. He was fascinated by the poetry and beauty of drama, and was thrilled by the sense of the theatrical, in life as well as on the stage. Since his mother Agrippina was installed as Empress, Nero delighted to breathe the solemn pomp that his mother had brought to Court; the aura of sovereignty that she diffused; the ceremonial, the hieraticism by which she was surrounded. He felt that now his life too had truly become a grandiose performance. Of power, so far, he had seen only the mirage. His flatterers told him that he was full of genius.

Rapidly, his appearance was becoming very remarkable. Not very tall and rather thick-set, he had nevertheless acquired dignity in his demeanour and in his walk. His hair, thick and naturally curled, was rather attractive with its deep colour of copper. His eyes were blue, slightly misty, overhung by the heavy arch of his eyebrows. His nose was noble and his expression disdainful, sometimes hard, but always melancholic and embittered. With a full mouth, drooping wearily at the corners so that his visage showed a pensive air, he appeared maturer than his years. It was a face that one could admire or dislike, but one that could not be dismissed as commonplace. It was a face which seldom showed a smile to remind one of

how young he was. A changeable masque, disclosing the disquiet and the urge of an unstable spirit, of a passionate and restless mind, of a thirsting heart which would never be placated or satisfied. And it was the mirror of a heart that was yet untilled. So far, no master had sown upon it either evil nor good. His pleasure had been his law. Had he been born the son of an ordinary man he would undoubtedly have turned to the Arts. Perhaps Beauty was the only thing in which he seriously believed. Music and poetry and sculpture roused in him violent or delicate emotions and he spent countless hours trying to draw and model. He loved to pass his fingers over the strings of a lyre. No one took these attempts very seriously. Worse still, no one told him that the lesson of Art is a long one, full of effort and concentration. From the platform upon which Fortune had placed him, he thought the summit was near and that he could easily attain it.

It was at this stage that his mother decided to give him as a tutor the philosopher Seneca.\* The first result of Agrippina's decision was to cause the eclipse of Anicetus. A small thing in itself, yet it was to have incalculable consequences, because from that moment dated the profound, almost bestial hatred of the freedman Anicetus for Agrippina.

## VIII

THE tutor, Lucius Annæus Seneca, was a Spaniard born in the year 6 B.C. at Cordova, where his father Marcus, himself a man of letters, was a teacher of rhetoric. While Lucius Seneca was still a child, he was sent to Rome and placed under the care of his mother's sister. Subsequently his father followed with the rest of the family.

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, VII.

prospered rapidly, and put his son to school under the celebrated Stoics. Young Seneca, imbibing the precepts of the Pythagoreans, scrupulously abstained from eating the flesh of animals. When Tiberius threatened to punish some Jews and Egyptians who abstained from certain meats, Seneca was persuaded by his father to give up this austere practice. Seneca soon displayed talents as an eloquent speaker, but dreading the jealousy of Caligula, who aspired to oratorical excellence, he thought it better to abandon that pursuit and gave himself to philosophy, applying at the same time for the offices of State. He soon obtained the office of Quaestor; but after being involved in a scandalous love affair Caligula banished him to Corsica.

Seneca had a rankling memory of that episode. He was a proud Spanish youth, already the favourite of fortune, engaged in teaching the doctrines of Pythagoras. Many ladies came to his lectures; one of them was Julia Lucilla, the beautiful sister of Emperor Caligula. One day, after the lecture, she asked him to explain to her a point in moral philosophy which she could not quite grasp. They sat in her sedan-chair and he explained the point to her. But Caligula, who knew his sisters only too well, did not approve of such *tête-à-tête* enlightenment in moral philosophy, and the adventure cost the young philosopher eight years of banishment to the island of Corsica.

The wild solitude of that island was an excellent ground for noble thought but the philosophical mind of Seneca was of the type which finds that noble teaching and the composition of lofty essays has nothing to do with one's secret leanings and tastes; and while his beautifully worded essays and books on Life and Morals gained him a reputation in Rome as an upright mind and an unflinch-

ing character, privately Seneca wrote letters to the powerful. He begged favours. He humbled himself. He sold his soul—for ever. After that, for the rest of his life, he was to be merely a sham, a cardboard façade offered to his contemporaries and to posterity; the sham of being a great philosopher. Once, years afterwards, he was asked why he wrote such noble essays in praise of poverty, when he loved so much his wealth. Seneca tried to explain by replying that a writer should never put too much sincerity in his work, lest he should lose his balance of artistic detachment. He had written three tracts on the Consolation of Life; and he was well aware that Petronius used to say about him: "As big a humbug as a philosopher."

When at last Seneca was allowed to return to the City, his long, lean figure was clothed in a grey toga and his face, of a yellowish colour, was tinged with the hectic flush of tuberculosis. That he was inordinately greedy for money he took great care to hide, although in Rome, where only money mattered, valuable acquisitions and wealth were the recognized signs of success. Outwardly, Seneca's sole desire was to write brilliant essays and tracts, with solid sentences carefully polished, upon *Life and Death*, *Youth and Old Age*, or *The Pleasures of a Simple Life*. It was much easier to expound high principles and praise poverty from the comfort of a splendid house. Anything outside his interests left him untouched.

True, his private life remained, at least outwardly, quite decent, although the luxury he loved to surround himself with was singularly greater than what one could reasonably expect of an advocate of austerity. But the reasons that prompted Agrippina to choose Seneca as tutor for her son were of a different nature.

The principal reason was that in the eyes of the Senate, of the upper-classes and the sober-minded middle-classes who had remained stodgily conservative and republican, Seneca was a paragon of all the ancient virtues. At a time when few had any virtue left it was easy to assume an attitude of virtuousness by admiring virtue in somebody else. No one could reproach Seneca with any crimes; not even the supposed adultery for which he had been exiled to Corsica. Kept away from Rome for many years, Seneca appeared as the living symbol of righteousness persecuted by despotism. Time and distance had made him look a great character—greater than he really was.

In engaging Seneca as a tutor for Nero, Agrippina was therefore looking to the future. In this moment she had power; but what would happen when Claudius died? Only if she could assure the Throne for her son would the future be safe, and this she could do only by rallying to her side the sympathies of the moderate parties. Seneca as a tutor to young Nero was the very man to make the necessary impression.

It did not take Seneca long to size up his Imperial pupil. Even less time was needed to guess what he would be able to make of him, or more precisely what he would never be able to make of him.

Nero was now fourteen years old, an over-intelligent and over-sensitive adolescent, spoilt by flattery, ambitious and indolent, a boy whose childhood had been sad and mortifying. Now he found himself suddenly thrown into a dream world, an atmosphere of continuous apotheosis. How could a tutor explain to his pupil that absolute power is merely the antithesis of servitude?

Seneca, after all, was a man of his time. In his deepest

heart he was an astute opportunist, whose uplifting speeches and books dissembled his weakness. Away from his library he was but a rhetorician who might delude himself that he was accomplishing a mission and preparing for Rome the ideal sovereign, a new Augustus.

That was Seneca, the great tutor of Nero, always ready to settle his young pupil's difficulties with a well-turned aphorism. "The happy man," he told Nero, "is not the one who knows, but the one who acts. Life must be lived, not idly contemplated in thought. Better a life composed of a thousand bad deeds than a splendid one only imagined in the mind." Or he would say: "The ability to conceive and expound ethical truths is not necessarily coupled with a corresponding power to realize them in practice. In fact, a man may be justified in living a variegated life for the purpose of acquiring those experiences that will lead his mind to higher speculative thoughts." And he would add: "To appreciate the nobility of poverty one need not necessarily be a pauper. In fact, the poor are probably the only ones who could never be converted to a life of abstinence."\*

Maybe Seneca knew his own limitations, and felt that the end would justify the means. Soon indeed he realized that to preserve an influence over his pupil he must employ flattery. To instil into Nero the need for an apparent uprightness—if not the love of it—Seneca resorted to the flattering refrain of all the courtiers: "Remember that you will be Caesar!"

The same words Nero had heard for the first time from his mother's lips: "You will be Caesar!" But how differently she spoke them! And Nero adoringly called her "The best of mothers." He still found himself deeply

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\* Seneca—*Moral Works*.

troubled by his mother's presence, strangely troubled indeed. He would have been unable to say what mysterious feeling composed his love for his mother. And his mother only addressed herself to the strongest and most ardent feeling of any youth—to his pride.

Seneca, too, found it easier to reach Nero's soul through his pride. "Should one day you mount the Throne, remember that amongst all the humans you have been chosen to play the part of a God. You will carry the life and destiny of all the Empire within your hands. You will be the best loved and maybe the most hated. You will be burdened by the terrible load of your greatness."

Yes, it was Seneca the philosopher who had been chosen to be Nero's teacher. He brought him up on good orthodox doctrines and he babbled to him about goodness and justice and mercy—but it was all a sham.

## IX

NERO was barely fourteen when he received the *toga virilis*, the dress of a man, three years before the legal time. It was as though the adoption by the Emperor had made him come of age.

The ceremony took place on the 16th of the Kalends of April—the 17th of March in the year 51. On the eve, he was dressed according to tradition, in a white tunic with saffron stripes, as a sign of good omen, and was put to bed in this tunic. The following morning he was called early, and before leaving the Palace he consecrated to the House Gods the gown of his boyhood and placed around the Penates his golden chain, the *bullæ*, the golden ball that every boy wore around his neck as a charm during his childhood. An Imperial train of attendants

escorted him to the Capitol. There, in the ancient temple of Jupiter, he made offerings and sacrifices and at the hands of the High Priest he received the white toga that made him a man. So dressed, he descended into the Forum, where a clamouring and applauding crowd was waiting to receive him. The whole City was in festive mood, for it was the holiday of Bacchus, the Bacchanalia. Masquerading bands of children ran about the streets, escorting the procession of their elder brothers who went to receive the toga on the same day as Prince Nero. At the cross-roads, the Priestesses of the God Bacchus, their heads crowned with ivy, fried small cakes dipped in honey, which they sold to the new men. The Government and the Emperor had been generous with free distributions of corn to the people and bounties of silver to the troops, and since early morning the Circus Maximus, which Claudius had recently adorned with new fences of marble and gilded pillars, had opened the gates to one hundred thousand spectators. For the first time Nero took his place in the *pulvinar*, the Imperial box, wearing the triumphal dress.

The following day, upon a proposal of the Senate, he was named Consul-designate; was proclaimed *Princeps Juventutis*, and received the Proconsular powers *extra muros*, which was an extraordinary dignity, unprecedented, conferring upon him the supreme command of all the armies camped outside the City walls. And to make him more popular with people and troops, money was again distributed in his name. At his passage the populace shouted "Nero Imperator! Nero Caesar! Nero Divine!" Games were held in his name. The crowds shouted themselves hoarse for this red-headed adolescent who appeared day after day in the Imperial box,

impassive and yet giddy with applause, proudly dressed in the triumphal toga edged with purple and gold.

What could Seneca do? He could neither take his pupil away, nor condemn the mode of life of an Heir Apparent. Years afterwards Nero was to say: "My tutor taught me the principles of Stoicism. He told me that our soul is the image of God, and that real happiness is to be found in the peace of a pure conscience, and wise is the man who can master his passions. And he said that I must be offered all temptations and perils, so as to be trained to master my passions." But in those days whilst he repeated his tutor's beautiful maxims he tasted the furtive pleasures that his tutor counselled him to avoid.

"You see," he said one day to a friend, "one should not preach so much austerity to a young man; it makes him long to savour the opposite."

But Seneca was an inveterate schemer. He perceived that he would lose all influence upon his pupil should he not give him the means to gain applause and admiration. So he taught him eloquence, and composed for him splendid and lofty speeches that Nero recited before a select audience, with well-rehearsed gestures and appropriate inflections of voice. Nero loved this kind of game, which was fashionable, and many authors and poets used to be invited in the patrician houses to read their manuscripts and recite their compositions; and famous lawyers repeated in private their great orations of the Courts. Seneca engaged for Nero a master of rhetoric, who trained him to show his *bravura* in preparing speeches and orations according to all the technique of sophistry that was the current fashion, and Nero passed whole days learning the speeches by heart and practising the postures and gestures and accents.

## X

At sixteen Nero was solemnly married to Britannicus's sister, Octavia. In all truth she was now Nero's adoptive sister, but the great Caesar family had always been a confused medley of adulteries and incests.

There was no love whatever between bride and groom. Octavia was a child of nine, and Nero disliked her intensely. But in Agrippina's mind the union was designed to make sure of the Throne for her son.

The nuptials were celebrated according to the strict religious rites of the patrician classes. Nero and his kin went to the private temple of the Emperor, where Octavia was waiting with her small court, robed in a long white gown, and with a woollen girdle around her slender waist. The long veil of the Vestal Virgins, the *flammeum*, enveloped her entirely, enclosing her in a cloud of purple and gold. Before the House-Gods, Nero and Octavia promised to accept one another as father and mother of their future children. There was a banquet at the Palace for friends and relatives, after which the bride was conducted by little boys and girls to the nuptial chamber, preceded by freedwomen carrying nuptial torches against the evil eye. Nero received his bride on the threshold of his apartments, where the lintel of the door was draped in white. The room was decorated with the statues of the Gods and Goddesses presiding over the marriage, the draperies were then let down to prevent indiscretions.

But it was all a farce, for Octavia was led out again through another door. It was thought useless and shameful to give the young man such a child-wife and Agrippina felt that the consummation of the marriage might spoil the bride's chance of having children in her proper time.

It might even have scandalized the populace. Octavia would be kept apart, while completing her education, at least until she should reach puberty.

XI

DURING the first three months after Nero's mock marriage to Octavia, Agrippina pondered a great deal. She felt that it was now time for action. And Pallas was urging her to it.

All Italy was resounding with festivities and celebrations. Shortly before Nero's marriage a great gathering had taken place at Lake Fucino for the opening of the canal that was to join the Lake with the River Liri. Nineteen thousand men were amassed on ships for a splendid show of naval combat. People had come to the shores of the Lake from Latium, Apulia and Abruzzi, on foot, on mules, on donkeys, on horseback; from cities and villages peasants and townsfolk had massed on the hill-sides surrounding the Lake to enjoy the great show and above all to watch the opening of the floodgates that would let the waters into the canal and bring new fertility to the barren lands.\*

The Emperor and the Empress accompanied by Nero had come to preside over the display. Agrippina was dressed in a garment of golden tissue that glittered in the sun. The *naumachia* was a most splendid spectacle. But when the floodgates were opened, nothing happened. The gradient of the water had been misjudged; the immense work was to be done again.

Agrippina accused Narcissus, who had been in charge of the works, of having cheated the Treasury. The First

\* Dio Cassius—*Historiae*, LX.

Secretary of State and Emperor's favourite answered back, "How dare you accuse me? What about your own misdeeds? Have you not pushed out of the way the very son of the Emperor?"

The situation was growing tense. But Nero, who was now the Emperor's son-in-law as well as his adoptive son, submerged the Senate under a flood of eloquence, reciting with admirable composure the orations that Seneca composed for him. The tutor saw quite clearly that his pupil was not in the least interested in his teaching. In fact, philosophy bored him. For the time being it was a novelty and an amusement to deliver speeches, and while the young man passed the hours in learning them by heart, he was doing no mischief. Nero was thus playing the part of a public advocate. He defended the rights of cities damaged by fire or oppressed by taxes. He invoked freedom for the good peoples of Rhodes; and when he spoke of Ilion, he surpassed himself: "O Father Conscripts, if true it is that no other sentiment is more sacred to us than that which joins us with the memory of our forefathers, is not the city to which Rome owes her very birth deserving that we should love her like a mother?" After this telling speech the obliging Senators thronged round the young orator, kissing in admiration the hem of his toga.

## XII

CLAUDIUS was very old. Moreover, he was becoming senile. He still ate too much and drank too much and he was too fond of women. No longer was he the Claudius of former years, always a weakling but also a busy scholar and an excellent administrator. Now he abandoned himself to the pleasures of the banqueting hall,

attended by four women—a blonde Syrian, a huge negress with purple lips, a slim Jewess who made him savour cruel caresses, and a bronze-coloured Egyptian.

Agrippina watched these scenes with inscrutable eyes. The ceiling of the banqueting hall opened, roses and perfumed water rained gently upon the guests. Naked slaves served and danced among the tables. Ephebes came to lie with the guests, conversing amiably. When the excitement of the feast seemed to flag, beautiful dancers accomplished the union of Psyche and Cupid to the accompaniment of flutes and lyres.

Narcissus made a supreme effort to outbid Agrippina. He chose the moment when the Augusta, as Agrippina was now called, had obtained the sentence of death against her sister-in-law Domitia Lepida. Narcissus took his chance, and attacked Agrippina openly. He calculated that this unjustifiable sentence would make the Empress unpopular. The only crime of Lepida was that she exercised upon Nero an influence that displeased Agrippina. Nero was commencing to show an inclination to poetry. His aunt Lepida felt that such an outlet might do him good, and prompted him to cultivate his taste for Art. Nero was delighted by his aunt's encouragement and praise.

There were in Agrippina's life crimes big and small, some dictated by her determination to remove all obstacles from her path, others that are difficult to explain. What caused Agrippina to do away with her sister-in-law Lepida, paternal aunt to Nero? Lepida had received Nero as a little boy in her house and the young man was not insensible to the friendship that had grown between them in his bad days. But with Agrippina, maternal love was a mixture of personal ambition, egotism and pride. Perhaps

there were two other reasons. One was that Lepida could rival with Agrippina in wealth, influence and beauty; and the other was that Agrippina knew only too well that Lepida's morals were as bad as her own and that Lepida was capable of the same crimes that she herself might commit. Agrippina decided therefore that it was time to be rid of her sister-in-law. An absurd accusation of sorcery was brought against Lepida, and Lepida was lost. The Palace, awed with terror, remained silent.

One morning, before the crowd of courtiers, Narcissus advanced towards Prince Britannicus, paid him reverence, embraced him and cried aloud: "O disinherited Prince, when shall you have the courage to chase from this Palace those who have taken your place? May the Gods protect you till the day when you will call around yourself all those who are disgusted by incest, prostitution and treasons!"

A few days after this scene Narcissus was taken ill. His doctors advised his immediate departure for Sinuessa, in the Campania, along the shores of the Thyrrhenian sea.

The situation in the Palace was now very tense. Claudius showed an unusual affection for his son Britannicus and one evening at dinner in drunken mood he went so far as to say that it was his destiny to watch the misbehaviour of his wives and punish them afterwards. He muttered vague words about giving Britannicus the *toga virilis* and presenting the young boy to the people of Rome "Who will, at last, have a real Caesar."

The hour had come.

Agrippina dined with her husband, a thing that occasionally still pleased the old man; moreover, it was a good excuse for keeping away from the banqueting hall the usual favourites whose tongues were loose. Soon

after the *hors-d'oeuvres* a dish of mushrooms was brought to the table, of a variety of which Claudius was extremely fond. Halotus, the taster at the Imperial table,\* tasted some of the sauce and presented the dish with his own hands to the Emperor. Agrippina ate some smaller mushrooms and looked approvingly to Claudius pointing to the biggest ones. Claudius ate them with relish and asked for more. Agrippina lay on the couch, and watched him anxiously. Had Locusta been equal to her reputation of infallible poisoner? With Narcissus away to relieve his gout in Campania, Agrippina had found it easier to win over to the conspiracy not only Pallas but Claudius's own doctor, Xenophon. Seneca had not been actually informed, but the old fox was certainly well aware.

The poison, Locusta had said, would act almost instantaneously. But it was not until an hour later, when the poison had entered the blood, that they saw Claudius shiver and turn pale and hold his stomach with both hands, his teeth chattering. The diners, knowing well the irascible temper of the old man, sent hurriedly for doctor Xenophon.

In that body always full of viands and wine, the violence of the poison seemed lost and produced only strong evacuations. Claudius stopped groaning. Agrippina thought he would survive.

In the meantime, the doctor arrived and examined the Emperor cursorily. It was, he said, only a touch of indigestion. "Let me, O Divine, tickle your throat with a feather; you will empty your stomach and feel better at once." But the feather had been dipped into the same poison. Claudius allowed the doctor to give him the treatment, vomited and said he felt better. In fact he

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\* Suetonius—*Tiberius Claudius*, XLIV.

spoke of going on with the dinner. But the cramps in his stomach returned. "What you need," said the doctor, "is a wash-out and some rest." Then Xenophon turned to the Court: "It is merely a passing ailment. Tomorrow the Divine Claudius will celebrate his recovery with a new banquet."

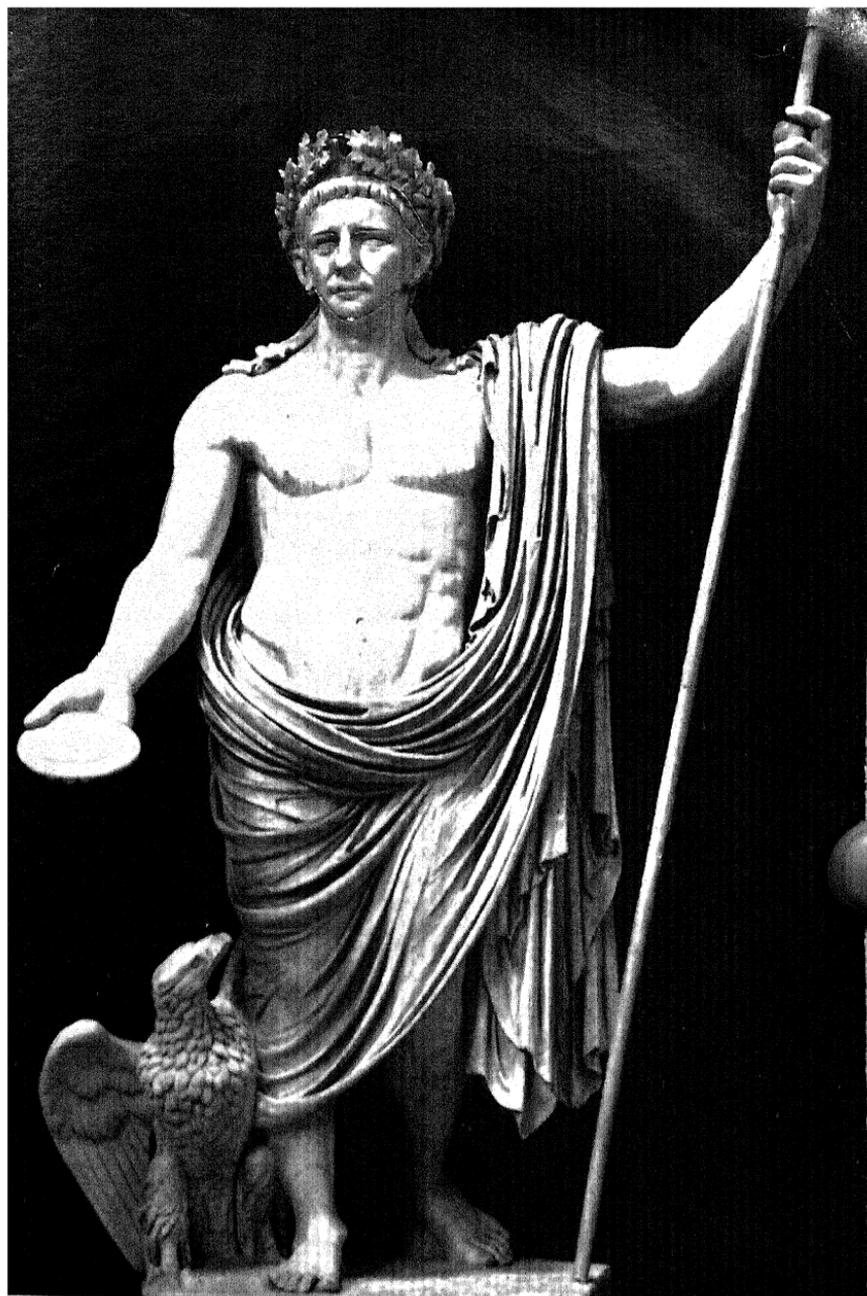
The slaves lifted the Emperor from the couch, and carried him to his apartment. No one saw him alive again.

The agony lasted forty-eight hours and was excruciating. That enormous body, rotted by gluttony and amorous excesses, still had an extraordinary resilience. Agrippina spent long hours at Claudius's bedside. She touched his forehead, almost caressingly, waiting for the moment when it would turn cold. She held his hands in her own, feeling his pulse which was beating hard and strong against her fingers. Would death never come? Would it not be better to order a slave to suffocate him with a pillow, as Caligula had done with Tiberius? Afterwards she could easily be rid of the slave . . .

Luckily the pains prevented Claudius from speaking. When he tried to sit up, a sudden giddiness brought him down again. He moved, he rolled, and a deep nausea shook that immense stomach. Like a man tormented by sea-sickness, the retching efforts left him exhausted. His hands pressed his liver. Agrippina passed her fingers under the linen, touching the swollen body; under the taut skin she could feel a bigness, hard as a stone.

Claudius rattled. A foetid smell rose from the bed. No, Agrippina had nothing more to fear. The Emperor could no longer utter a word, no longer make an intelligible sign. At the end of the second day he passed away.

Agrippina ran to the children's room, hysterical with



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[The Vatican Museum, Rome]

Statue of the Emperor CLAUDIUS showing him holding in his right hand a shell, symbolising his conquest of the Sea when Claudius came to visit the new Province of Britain in the year 44 A.D.



relief and happiness; she hugged the children amidst kisses and tears: "My little Britannicus! O image of your Father! Octavia, my darling, whom I love as my own daughter!"

On the terrace where they had their lessons, Seneca was busy making Nero rehearse the speech that he must deliver to the soldiers in the camp and to the Senate.

At this time the Senate was making offerings to the Gods and thanked Jupiter for the better news of Claudius. The people were told that the Emperor was confined to his bed.

The deception went on all day and throughout the night.\* The civic crown of Augustus and the naval crown of Claudius still stood outside the Palace.

The following day at noon, the groups of idle people always lingering before the Palace saw the great doors thrown open and upon the threshold appeared not the sleepy Claudius but his adoptive son, with eyes downcast, his face pale and grave. Among the crowd some furtive messengers from the Court whispered the news: "Claudius is dead! Claudius is dead . . ." But suddenly the Praetorian Guards massed themselves around the Palace Square commanded by Burrus their General, in full dress. With breastplates glittering they raised their halberds and standards and let their cries ring out to the people of Rome:

"Long live Nero, Emperor and Caesar!"†

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\* Suetonius--*Tiberius Claudius*, XI.V.

† Suetonius--*Nero Claudius Caesar*, VIII.



# THE YOUNG EMPEROR



*Book Two*

THE YOUNG EMPEROR

I

**B**EFORE the rostra in the Forum of Caesar was placed a gilded tabernacle, shaped like a small replica of the temple of Jupiter, and within the tabernacle was a bed made of ivory, covered with a cloth of purple and gold. Propped up at the head of the bed was the bloated face of the dead Claudius, heavily made-up by the Imperial Undertakers for exhibition to the crowd—for the funeral of an Emperor was as good as a show.

Standing erect upon the rostrum was Nero, delivering the funeral oration for his adoptive father: "In his sacred person was the wisdom that always triumphed. Moderate in his desires, master of all passions, neglecting his personal happiness for the greatness of Rome, Claudius Caesar deserves to be admitted among the Gods."

Among the official mourners someone muttered that however wise the old fellow might have been, they would not be now extolling him to the Heavens had he not been such a glutton. A Senator, recognizing in every sentence the pen of Seneca, was shaking his head: "The great Julius Caesar was an admirable orator; Augustus used to speak with ease and elegance; Tiberius was almost pedantic in his language and his love for archaic phrasing; Claudius, when sober, was an erudite, but it is tiresome to hear a young man reciting his harangue like an old actor."

The enthusiasm of the populace was great. Old Claudius had disgusted Rome. The populace will forgive

anything to a sovereign except ridicule ; and Claudius had been an object of ridicule, an old man cuckolded by a young wife, a gross buffoon, sleepy and not always clean, a doting old man who would consult the Senate about a new mode of seasoning a sturgeon ! The new Emperor was young and smart. Well, we shall see. In the meantime everybody laughed over Seneca's pamphlet, *Apokolokyntos or the Metamorphosis of the Pumpkin*. They said that Seneca had written it in one night ; perhaps, said the evil tongues, he wanted to apologize for having had to compose this solemn funeral oration as well. The pamphlet was skittish enough : " His soul went out of his body with a thunder, while in the grumbling of his favourite organ he cried ' Ah . . . Ah . . . I think that I have messed myself . . . ' After which he rose to Heaven. They went to announce to Jupiter the arrival of this big man. They asked him from which land he came, and he answered with such a thick tongue that no one could understand the language he spoke, for it was certainly neither Greek nor Latin. Jupiter told Hercules to go and seek out the trouble. The god who had conquered so many monsters felt uneasy at the sight of this creature. When he heard his raucous and bellowing voice, he thought it might be a sea monster and for a moment he feared that he would have to add a thirteenth labour to his record. But looking at him more closely he found that, perhaps, it was only a man . . . "

After the funeral and the lighting of a great pyre in the Campus Martius, Nero said sarcastically : " You see, I can neither ignore the *Apokolokyntos* nor punish Seneca. In writing it he forgot his duties as newly-appointed First Secretary of State, but in the oration he prepared for me he said all that a perfect Minister should say."

## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

The accession to the Throne had been a tiresome task. After the Praetorians had acclaimed him Emperor, Nero had to wear the red cloak and the gilt armour and visit the troops in camp, outside the City. The visit was delayed until seven o'clock, for the omens were so disastrous that no earlier time was judged proper. At last, he was carried to the camp, and from it he made a short speech and languidly distributed his gifts to the troops. He was then carried to the Senate House, where he put on the toga and read the Speech from the Throne.

The address, prepared by Seneca, was on noble and traditional lines: "Receiving the duty that Rome places upon me, and of which you, O Conscript Fathers, consider me worthy, I declare that I have not deserved it either by my birth or by my adoption . . . If my duty obliges me to make decisions, rest assured that in taking them I shall think only of the welfare and happiness of Rome. I know my inexperience, my young age, my ignorance. But surrounded by the wisest of counsellors, I will set myself the noblest of examples . . . The Emperor will no longer act as advocate in any trial or take sides in any law-suit. He will take care in appointing the judges and magistrates to ensure that the laws are strictly observed. I pledge from this moment an absolute separation between the State and my person. A citizen among the citizens, if I am the first among them, I must also be the most loyal and the most respectful towards Laws and Country. From this day the Senate ceases to be the servant or the instrument of the Imperial will. I reinstate it in the fullness of its ancient privileges."

The Speech took the Senate by storm. The Imperial clique was delighted; the old die-hards themselves could find nothing but approval. The surrendering of the

judicial power was a stroke of genius. If the Emperor was as good as his word it would mean a return to the Age of Augustus. Unanimously the Senate passed a vote of thanks giving their complete approval, and the Lord President, speaking with great emphasis "on behalf of this ancient and august Assembly" begged the Emperor to accept all the honours that had been heaped upon the previous Emperors. Nero accepted them with good grace, but he modestly refused the title of Father of the Country, on account he said, of his youth.\*

That night Rome talked of nothing else but the Speech from the Throne; the greatest and wisest speech ever heard since the great Augustan days. In the Palace, elated by the news brought in by Ministers and courtiers, Nero chattered with great animation about his determination to restore the liberal government of Augustus. He would no longer judge crimes of lese majesty in a secret Court—indeed, there shall be no more crimes of lese majesty. No longer will the Emperor be ruled by a freedman—and this was a blow to Agrippina, for it was aimed at Pallas her lover. No longer shall Rome have Ministers chosen through intrigues; but they shall be public men supported by public opinion.

Seneca, that very day, had been officially appointed First Secretary of State with duties of Prime Minister, and said: "Nero Caesar, you must indeed revive Augustus's times!"

But Gaius Petronius, whose excellent taste in all things was already making the deepest impression upon Nero, smiled suavely: "My lord, the people are never grateful for law and order."

That same night, after Senators and high officials had

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, VIII.

departed, Nero detained Petronius in intimate conversation. He did not wish to be alone and he sought the image of his own emotions in the mirror of his more cultivated and more mature friend: "Don't you think, Petronius, that was rather a stroke of genius to refuse the title of *Pater Patriae*?"

Petronius looked at this new Caesar with his customary indolence: "My lord, I know that you wish me to retain with you the frankness of former days . . . It was certainly a proof of good sense to realize that a young man of seventeen could scarcely be father to such an ancient city as our Rome."

## II

NERO was the symbol of his times. The Roman Empire had taken eight centuries to evolve; yet, half a century after reaching the peak it was already declining to its fall.

Julius Caesar had seized power in the year 46 B.C. and in his short career he set the outposts of the Empire. Caesar's adoptive son, Octavianus Augustus, in his forty-three years of reign, perfected the Empire and gave to the world a *Pax Romana*. Less than forty years later, Nero inherited an Empire that was already moving to its doom. Witness the relations of Britain and Rome; Julius Caesar showed the flag in Southern Britain in 55 and again in 54 B.C.; Claudius sent his General Aulus Plautius to conquer Britain in the year A.D. 43 and he himself visited the new Province in 44; Nero, in the year 60, after crushing Queen Boadicea's revolt, will suggest withdrawing from Britain.

In every way the Rome of Nero no longer resembled the Rome of Augustus's great days. In a short time a profound change had come upon the Roman people. Even before

Caesar, the many wars and conquests outside Italy had brought about a new outlook on life. Firstly, with the acquisition of many barbarous Provinces, Rome became industrialized. To make the new industries prosperous, an industrial population had to be created. This, by necessity, brought into the City craftsmen and workers from every land. The population of Rome was therefore re-assessed and divided into urban tribes, composed of freedmen, of foreigners and old Roman citizens enriched by the new trades and commerce. The ancient agrarian tribes were still considered the most honourable and the salt of the Roman people; but only in name. From that time, the population of Rome was made up of a core of genuine Romans and an ever-mounting influx of foreigners and emancipated slaves to whom the freedom of the City was granted.

Pride in their conquests and the increasing splendour of their City soon gave the people of Rome a new attitude to life: it made them consider manual work as unworthy of conquerors and fit only for slaves and subjected peoples. From this to a kind of superior indifference for public affairs the step was a short one. To the debates and agitations of the Forum, the Romans now preferred the lighter and more pleasant things of life. The people nursed the delusion of sharing with the Caesars the Empire of the world. Nothing—they said in their pride—nothing that the world has ever produced is the equal of Rome. To be a Roman citizen was the peak of a man's aspirations, *Civis Romanus sum*. This new outlook was fostered by the highest and noblest men of all the Provinces of the Empire, who only aspired to be granted the right of citizenship; for only in Rome did Fortune dispense her favours. To Rome flocked the intriguers and

the ambitious to exploit the vices of the great and the corruption of the sovereign people.

Rome was also crowded with slaves. New trades and industries had created a class of big-business men; and work, in the factories and in the home, was done by slaves. The law was very severe to these underlings; if a slave committed a crime against his master, all the household slaves were punished with death. *Quot servi tot hostes*, said the law; all who are slaves are enemies of Rome. There was, however, for the slaves a brighter side. Already under Augustus, Dennis of Halicarnassus wrote that it was vice and crimes that gave freedom to a slave. Aristocratic Senators and freshly-knighted millionaires, in the luxury of their mansions and country villas, were in the hands of their clever slaves no less than the Emperor was in the hands of the freedmen he had appointed Secretaries of State. The slaves surrounded their masters with refined attentions and kept from them all minor cares and irritations. They carried their masters about the City on elegant litters; they fed them on a cosmopolitan cuisine; they amused them; they provided for their pleasures. The masters were thus free to seek the Emperor's patronage for their businesses and industries.

The population of Rome had grown immensely. In the first century A.D., Rome had a population approaching 1,500,000. But it was also immensely changed from former times. There was now a middle-class sandwiched between a new and conspicuous moneyed class and a proletariat that had no other aspiration but to be kept by a Welfare State. Athwart this new society was the old aristocracy, or what remained of it, divided and uncertain between the fashionable philosophy of Stoicism and a traditionalism that was totally out of tune, and thirdly,

a course of conduct that made a mockery of morals.

The lower classes were a mixture of small plebs quite aptly called *humiliores*. Their lives were precarious and for small violations of the law they were sent to the mines, whilst for more serious crimes they were put to death on the cross. Above the plebs stood the *honestiores*, or the bourgeois, who each owned a minimum of 5,000 sesterces, and were precluded from serving the State, but could rise to the Knightly order when their property increased to 400,000 sesterces. They could then hope to catch the Emperor's eye and obtain a command of some auxiliary troops or a job in the Excise, which was an excellent office for increasing one's wealth and obtaining a further rise in the world. Above all classes was the Senatorial order, whose members should own at least one million sesterces, and could be appointed to the highest offices. In the Senatorial order money counted far more than virtue.

Over all, higher indeed than all mortals in the whole Empire, was the Prince. By the perpetuation of Julius Caesar's fiction of being descended from the Gods, the Emperor was the supreme incarnation of Law and Religion. The distance between the Emperor and other men was immeasurable for it was a difference not of station but of nature; the Emperor pertained of the Divine. Because of this, when at Nero's death the Julian Family died out, the people of Rome discovered that sovereignty was no longer the apanage of a family preordained by Heaven to rule—which was a rude shock, followed, as is every rude shock in history, by a fresh recurrence of civil wars. Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero were Emperors in the name of a divine right; Galba, Otho, Vitellius were merely adventurous Generals who could but pretend to be raised to divinity upon the shields

of the Legions that they had commanded. It made all the difference.

Never, before Nero's times, had Rome taken such a cosmopolitan character; never before had the Roman people been so submerged and changed by the ways and ideas and vices of the foreigners that flocked to the City. It was indeed the case that when episodes of xenophobia occurred, it was the former foreigners themselves who affected a self-preserving traditionalism against newcomers. The benches of the Senate House were filled with Senators who were Roman only in name, for they came from France, Spain, Africa and Asia; a Babel of adventurers who controlled Rome and the Emperor with their suavity and cunning.

But the Emperor stood alone as the supreme and absolute master. It had commenced with Caesar. When Caesar seized power, all the magistratures that the Roman people had evolved during seven centuries for the conduct of the Republic—the Consulate that was the quasi-Royal power of the people; the Tribunes who protected the sovereign rights of the people; the Censors who held a moral authority over all classes and chose the Prince of the Senate who became head and chief of the Roman aristocracy, so important indeed that Caesar himself was content to be called Prince of the Senate; and the Supreme Pontiff who lived in a palace close to the Forum, the *Domus Regia*—all the ancient and respected magistratures, seemed to disappear when Caesar seized power. He had preserved them, but they were empty names.

Caesar's genius had been above human laws. Caesar emerged victorious out of a formidable war in the course of which all laws, human and divine, were violated. The care that Caesar took to proclaim that any crime is per-

missible to gain an Empire left him no alternative but to rest his safety upon absolute power. The Tribunician power gave him the right of grace; the Censorship authorized him to change at his pleasure the citizen's condition; the Pontificate made him master of everything that pertained to the soul. And the people accepted it; and Senate and people swore into Caesar's hands their complete loyalty. Each citizen swore to defend with his sword the Divine Julius; and all accepted the hereditary right of sovereignty of the Julian Family. As Caesar had no children, they granted to him the right to name a successor and pass the Imperial purple to his descendants by adoption. After this the ancient Rome was no more. The Empire that Caesar left at his death was a concentration of power and glory that nothing could efface or diminish, neither revolutions nor the inadequacies of those who came after him; but the will of the Roman people was broken for ever. To the bitter end the pretence was carried on of describing the Orders in Council as issued in the name of the Senate and of the people; but the ancient formula *S.P.Q.R.—Senatus Populusque Romanus*—became a farce and a mockery, and Augustus, who was a wise and good man, confessed on his deathbed that his long reign had been nothing but a marvel of deceit and hypocrisy.

The strength of Rome and the secret of her greatness had been the capacity to combine in her Constitution two elements of prosperity that seemed to exclude one another—the debates and agitations of the Forum which gave vent and encouragement to individual liberty and the unflinching respect of tradition, the rigid faith in the destinies of Rome, the absolute submission to the family laws. But after the advent of Caesar the old character

of the people changed. The glory, the splendours and the abominations of Mount Olympus, home of the Gods, were now attributed to the Palatine Hill where Caesar and his successors reigned and ruled as demi-Gods. The ambitions of men, the prostitution of slaves, the appetites of the masses, all looked to the Palace as the sole fountain of grace and favour. In less than fifty years the most hideous scandals became the normal way of life. A great military man, Antonius Primus, plotted with four Senators to gain possession of the vast estate of old Balbus, and the most eminent names of Rome conspired to forge a new Will. Octavius Sagitta, a Tribune of the people, seduced the Lady Pontia and made her leave her husband, but after the divorce the lady sought a better marriage and jilted her lover. He murdered her. Numantia, repudiated by Silvanus, made him drink a philtre that turned him insane, and he threw his second wife from a window. In the Consular family of Papirius, a mother descended to incest; her son killed himself in shame. The lawyer Silius, who had agreed to defend a client in Court, betrayed him to the other party for a larger fee. Vinus, who one day was to be Minister of State to Galba, the successor of Nero, stole a golden goblet from Claudius's table; the Emperor, who had the humour of a drunkard, invited him again and made him eat and drink out of earthen vessels to avoid a second theft.

Whilst Augustus had been able to contain extravagance and to throw a mantle of decency over the general decline of morals, after him the great and the rich gave free rein to their pleasures and spent their days at the Circus, their nights at orgies. Only money talked; the people's plaudits went to those who could count their slaves in *decuriae* like platoons of soldiers. Work was no longer a

noble task, for work alone could not bring the wealth that only speculations or the Emperor's favour could secure. Yet, the vast fortunes of the favourite ones were nothing compared with the incalculable wealth of the Emperor.

The Emperor had at his disposal not only his private estate and all the legacies that were left to him, to ensure a portion for the legitimate heirs; the Emperor possessed immense latifunds as well, especially in Asia and in Africa, which were continuously enlarged by the confiscation pronounced by the judges against some unfortunate citizen. The Emperor could treat as his private exchequer the Treasury into which flowed the apportionment of the taxes levied in all the Provinces of the Empire for the upkeep of the Army and Navy. Furthermore, the Emperor could dispose at his pleasure of the revenue from Egypt, which was a private endowment of the Crown, and he could delve into the booty of war: all this without rendering account.

The Emperor's household, that Augustus had so anxiously preserved on the traditional style of simplicity and modesty, was now conducted in the manner of an Oriental Satrap. To look after the Emperor's wardrobe there was a regiment of slaves divided into as many classes as were the varieties of the Emperor's dresses and uniforms; for the tunics to be worn within the Palace there were grooms *a veste privata*; for the dresses to be worn outside, grooms *a veste Forense*; for the service uniforms, grooms *a veste castrense*; for the dress-uniforms, grooms *a veste triumphale*; for the dresses to be worn at the theatre, grooms *a veste scenica*; for the Circus, grooms *a veste gladiatoria* . . . And the vessels for the Emperor's table were cleaned and looked after by as many squads of servants as there were kinds of vessels; drinking vessels,



Plate 41

[The Capitol Museum, Rome]

Head of NERO as a young man, with the red beard which earned him the nickname of "Bronzebeard", although he shaved it at the age of 21.



eating vessels, silver vessels, golden vessels, vessels of rock-crystal, jewelled vessels . . . His personal jewellery and ornaments were entrusted to special freedmen called *liberti ab ornamentis*, who were divided into keepers of the brooches, *a fibulis*; keepers of the pearls, *a margaritis*; and his ablution and toilet was attended to by bath attendants or *balneatores*; masseurs or *aliptae*; hairdressers or *ornatores*; barbers or *tonsores*. The ceremonial of his receptions and audiences was regulated by a body of gentlemen-in-waiting, the *velarii* who raised the door-curtain into the Presence Room; the *ab admissione* who introduced the visitors to the Presence, and the *nomenclatores* who read out the visitors' names. For the dining hall, there was a phalanx of attendants, the *fornicarii* who looked after the kitchen ranges; the *coci* or chefs; the *pistores* or bakers, the *libarii* and *dulciarii* or pastry-cooks; then there were the *structores* or majordomos and butlers responsible for planning the dinners and banquets; the dining-hall footmen or *triclinarii*; those who carried in the dishes or *ministratores*, and those who cleared away the plates, or *analectae*, and the cup-bearers who filled the cups and who varied in importance accordingly as they held the bottle, *a lagona*, or tendered the cup, *a cyatho*; and there were the tasters or *praegustatores*, and the chorists and singer, *symphoniaci*, and the musicians of the minstrel gallery, and the dancers or *saltatrices*, and the Court buffoons or *moriones*, and the dwarfs, *nanni*, and those charged with keeping the talk going, who were called the *fatui*.

The person of the Emperor had, perforce, to be surrounded by a pomp that was part of the sacred function of the Divine and August Sovereign. The Emperor was the "master of all things." He was one of the Gods.

From him descended the happiness of the people. And the populace of Rome, in Nero's times, had found their happiness in two very material things—the *sportula*, that was the free distribution of meals provided by the Emperor's generosity, and the Circus, the free games and entertainment equally provided by the Emperor's munificence. The famous phrase, *panem et circenses*, bread and shows, was coined in Nero's times. Truly it synthesized the spirit and the morals of the times.

## III

It is debatable what influence the men nearest to him, guiding him in the first stages of his rule, had over Nero. Certain it was that at the very moment when, thanks to his mother's deeds and misdeeds, he had mounted the Throne, Nero felt that he needed to be protected from her.

This protection he entrusted to Seneca, who in practice assumed at once the position of Regent, and also Burrus, who was confirmed as Commander of the Praetorian Guards. Seneca, with cunning, begged to be excused from many of the functions so that he could devote more time to business. He did not dine regularly at the Imperial table nor did he trouble the Emperor at all hours on small routine matters. He also, most tactfully, requested the Emperor not to embrace him in public: that was an understandable sign of respect on the part of a dutiful pupil towards his aged tutor, but his pupil was now the Emperor while he, Seneca, was no longer his tutor but his humble Prime Minister. The Emperor was duly impressed, and Seneca did not allow him to realize that he was merely anxious to escape the suspicion that had blackened Socrates concerning his pupil Alcibiades.

Afranius Burrus, a true soldier, was more direct and to the point. The day after the Speech from the Throne, while Nero was trying to make him agree to some suggestion of his, Burrus answered: "Caesar, when I have expressed an opinion it is of no use to ask me for it again."

Nevertheless, the first care of Nero as Emperor was to show gratitude to his mother. The very same evening that he received from the Senate the titles of Caesar and Divine, he was asked by the Officer of the Guard the password for the night. With a romantic gesture he replied: "The best of mothers!"\* The following day Nero asked Seneca whether it would not be proper to give his mother the same honours that were given to the Empress Livia after Augustus's death. Immediately, at the Prime Minister's suggestion, the Senate invested Agrippina Priestess of Claudius, and henceforth she went about preceded by two Lictors. Some days later the Senate voted that the sittings be held at least twice a week at the Palace to enable Agrippina to attend: seated behind a curtain, the Empress would be able to hear and see all unseen. A Cohort of Praetorians was granted her as guards to her rooms, the same number as for the Emperor's apartments, besides the German Guards that were personally attached to the Imperial House. Agrippina kept the Guards as an outward sign of her personal status, and as a special honour to the memory of her father Germanicus.

It was difficult for a young man of seventeen to free himself, all at once, from his mother's control and authority. Some time later the Ambassadors from Armenia were being received by the Emperor. They were introduced into the Presence Room, where Nero seated upon his chair of office waited to give them an audience.

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, IX.

Behind the Emperor were grouped the Consuls, the most important Senators, the Generals of the Army and, inconspicuous among the courtiers, the First Secretary of State, Seneca. The Praetorians, with breastplates shining and their halberds topped with tufts of scarlet plumes, were massed upon the steps of the Throne, their faces impressive under the tall helmets. Before Nero, the Ambassadors arrayed in their splendid robes, with brows encased in golden mitres and their arms covered with bracelets, made a deep obeisance.

Suddenly, preceded by her Lictors, Agrippina appeared. Almost hieratic within her veils, she advanced slowly, and without hesitation commenced to mount the steps. There was a shudder of surprise among the Senators. Was Rome going to suffer again the indignity it had endured under Claudius? Was a woman—this woman—coming to share the Throne once more? What would these barbarian envoys think of a woman upon the Throne of Rome?

But from the troubled group of courtiers and officials the little figure of Seneca bent forward and whispered a few words to Nero. The young Emperor rose from his chair, and with the utmost dignity and grace and half a smile upon his lips, like a young Prince who feels the greatest respect for his mother, he advanced towards Agrippina and greeted her deferentially and kindly. Then, he took her arm, and still talking to her with a gentle smile, he escorted her to the door of the Presence-room. Without haste he resumed his place upon the dais. The honour of Rome was saved. The audience continued.

Concerning this incident Agrippina did not utter a word to her son, but she understood. From that moment she knew that it would be necessary to fight.

## IV

ON the whole, at this stage, the Throne merely meant to Nero independence and the freedom to enjoy life. Seneca, combining the dual duties of Prime Minister and private Mentor, still wrote the Emperor's speeches and trained him in deportment for the Senate.

"Nero Caesar is young," it was often said in the reading-room of the Senate-house, "but his youth will help to give us a better government and more stability than we have had under that dotard Claudius. Besides, he has two excellent Ministers. Seneca will follow our policy and Burrus will control the army."

Events were proving this forecast right. All was quiet and well ordered at home and throughout the Provinces. The Empire was at its zenith. It covered all the known world, from the Straits of Gibraltar to the western parts of Asia—Spain, France, Switzerland, Southern Germany up to the Rhine, Austria and Hungary, Greece and Macedonia, the Balkan countries, Asia Minor and all the Near East as far as the Euphrates, the whole of North Africa, Carthage, Numidia, Mauritania, Lybia and Egypt, and it had, under Claudius, occupied the south of Britain and Wales. The Roman world was at peace and the administration of the Dominions was controlled with much care. Any excess of power on the part of the Proconsuls and Governors was promptly checked.

The new Emperor was talking of nothing but peace. He even expressed the intention of withdrawing the troops from the most peaceful Provinces, such as far away Britain, so as to give greater confidence to people at home and abroad, a statement that set the Colonial Office in an uproar. It was all very well, they said to the Prime

Minister, to speak of the most peaceful Provinces; but they were peaceful only because the Legions were there! To withdraw the troops would only be to court trouble; perhaps an invasion by unknown peoples. It was absolutely necessary to find an argument that would convince the Emperor.

Seneca hit indeed upon an idea. He submitted to Nero that to withdraw the troops from Britain would detract from the glory of his step-father Claudius who had received the submission of the British tribes. That country was far from conquered yet; such a move might give incentive to the native kings to revolt and the effect upon Northern Gaul, always on the look-out for political trouble, might prove disastrous. Seneca did not disclose that he had vast investments in Britain which were much safer under the protection of the Roman Legions. Nero gave way, and thus both the Colonial Office and the Imperial General Staff were pleased.

In Rome, however, the Emperor was freer to proceed with liberal reforms. To prevent forgeries, a method was invented of having documents bored and run through three times with thread and then sealed. For Wills an innovation was introduced by which the two first pages, with nothing else but the testator's name upon them, were to be presented blank to those who were to sign them as witnesses, and no one who wrote a Will for another should insert a legacy for himself. It was ordered that litigants should pay a reasonable fee to their lawyers but nothing to the Courts, the charges of which would be borne by the Treasury. The Senate's dignity was increased by making the Senate a Court of Appeal as high as the appeals to the Emperor. New gymnasia were built for the young people of Rome and the day they were opened the

## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

Emperor in person graciously distributed to the sons of Senators and to the younger Knights the oil with which they rubbed their bodies before taking part in the sports. A certain Veiento, charged with having published a libel against some Senators and the College of Priests, was promptly tried and sentenced. And the first time a sentence of death was submitted to the Emperor for endorsement, he cried: "Ah, I wish I did not know how to write!"\*

In those days of general delight over the new and young Emperor, people in Rome were inclined to magnify everything. The Senate seemed to delight in issuing extraordinary Orders: "Let the people of Rome address tributes of praise to Nero Caesar for eight days! The Emperor shall wear the Triumphal dress for eight continuous days! Let Nero make a glorious entry into the City and ride to the Capitol to receive an ovation! The people of Rome will raise to Nero two statues of solid gold and silver in the temple of Mars, as high as those of the God!"

To cap these honours a further Senatorial Decree ordered that the year shall henceforth be reckoned from December, Nero's birth-month. He accepted all other honours, but declined the last one. With youthful frankness he told Seneca: "I think that a little show of modesty will please the people even more. Besides, the idea of beginning the year from the last month seems rather absurd." Seneca approved, and felt that his pupil and Emperor had more shrewdness than he imagined. And never one to let an occasion pass, he recited one of his aphorisms: "There is nothing the people love better than a show of modesty and leniency. Let the reins go loose

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\* "*Vellem nescire litteras.*"—Seneca, *De Clementia*, II.

occasionally, and the people will call you a true democrat.”

But with his friend Petronius, Nero regretted that Seneca had made him neglect the studies of the ancient philosophers: “My mother considered philosophy unworthy of a Prince and according to Seneca a Prince should be an opportunist, not a philosopher.”

## V

AT twenty it is pardonable to be fickle with life and more so with love. Octavia, barely thirteen years old, was a poor companion for a young Emperor a little intoxicated with the heady wine of success and hankering after aestheticism and art. When his mother Agrippina had decided upon the marriage, Nero had gone through the ceremony almost with repugnance. Octavia was not pretty. She was only very virtuous, and her father Claudius had not brought her up to be particularly brilliant or witty. No one wondered that Nero neglected her. When his friends enquired after the Empress Octavia, he answered that his young wife was like those Generals who having failed to win a full battle received only the insignia of triumph, not a real triumph.

Seneca understood the situation. The cunning Stoic, who had so often written about the sanctity of marital life, realized that Octavia was not the girl to give Nero that sentimental and physical satisfaction to hold an impetuous young man. She was merely an undeveloped child. On the other hand, Seneca could not allow the Emperor to commit the crime of adultery. All Rome would laugh at Seneca's expense: “The pupil of such a perfect man!”

## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

Seneca decided therefore that there would be no harm if the Emperor, in the secrecy of the Palace, amused himself with the sweet and delightful Acte. In fact, Acte was Nero's first love. A freedwoman from Asia, she was of extraordinary beauty and possessed the finest attractions a woman can have for a young lover. She was also modest and chaste, a very rare jewel in Rome.

Fearing the suspicion of Agrippina and anticipating her fury at the thought that another woman might gain a hold upon the Emperor, Seneca, with the full approval of Burrus, induced the wise and grave Annaeus Serenus to declare publicly that Acte was his own mistress. Only a wise and grave man can have no sense of ridicule. In devotion to the Imperial tutor and in loyalty to his Sovereign, Serenus agreed to play this delicate part. To the world it was Serenus who provided Acte with an elegant house and a retinue of attendants.\*

Agrippina, who guessed the purport of this manoeuvre, said, "It will pass." But soon Nero spoke of retiring to Rhodes and to a bucolic life with the woman of his heart. Seneca explained to his pupil that there are exalted stations from which one cannot escape. In his abdication Nero would find no safety. The Empire was an inescapable destiny.

When it was reported to Agrippina that Nero thought of repudiating Octavia and marrying Acte—and some obliging friends, at the prompting of the enamoured Emperor, had already prepared for the charming Acte a genealogical tree showing her to descend from the ancient Kings of Pergamus so that Nero, easily influenced by anything theatrical, was saying that it would be marvellous to ally the Julian family with the family that from Troy

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\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XIII.

had given origin to Rome herself, she tackled her son before the whole Court. "See you all," she said, "the spectacle that my son offers to Rome! The Emperor, trailing like a doting old man at the feet of a former slave, a creature good to give a man an hour of pleasure! But no, she is the official mistress of Caesar. And for all this I took such pains to make my child Domitius the legitimate heir of Claudius, and for all this I gave him as a tutor the wisest of men! Now the wise man is choosing for him a concubine and the Emperor is reduced to making love to a freedwoman! Octavia, his proper wife, is neglected and repulsed. And I, Germanicus's daughter, am insulted, turned out, deprived of my proper status and honours. I am reduced to serve as a screen to the former slave Acte!"

The scene was too long; it was also dangerous. Agrippina believed she would intimidate her son. She only detached him from her for ever.

Some days later Agrippina came to her son and asked for forgiveness. "My son, my words expressed but badly what was in my mind. Yes, I confess, it is very painful to me to see another woman have all the tenderness of my son. A mother finds it difficult to realize that her son is a grown-up man, and that she can no longer fill his days and his mind. But I have thought it over, I have understood. I excuse everything, I only wish to retain your affection. Don't fear anything from me, my son. Your greatness is the sole aim of my life."

Nero embraced his mother. Agrippina was waiting for this moment. She knew, she had known it a long time, that her caresses, her perfume, her very presence could be disturbing to her son. She pressed him ardently to her bosom, against her breasts that heaved under her veils.

## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

Nero felt her trembling. She sighed, and as though unable to contain herself, she pressed her mouth to his lips.

Nero felt like the hero in the Greek tragedy; he uttered: "My gratitude, O mother, is more than I can express." He disengaged himself from the embrace. Agrippina went away, her heart heavy not with shame but with rage and hate.

No sooner had his mother left the room than Nero was seized by fear and regret. Perhaps he had misunderstood his mother? Perhaps she would now take upon him one of her terrible revenges. Full of forebodings he yielded to an impulse of generosity. Locked away in the strong-rooms of the Palace were the jewels and ornaments that the wives of the Caesars had worn. He chose from amongst the treasures a splendid pectoral and a head-dress and sent them to his mother.

Agrippina returned the jewels with an explosive message: "Remember that everything you possess actually belongs to me. You are sending me as a gift merely what is mine."

From this moment Nero accepted the challenge. Suspecting Pallas of inciting Agrippina against Acte, the following day he ordered Pallas to resign from the position of Imperial Treasurer which he still held and to leave the Palace. Pallas had the impertinence to put two conditions—the favour of Agrippina gave him the courage to lift his voice. The conditions were that his financial tenure should go without enquiry and that he should not be considered in debt towards the State.

Nero felt that this insolence was beyond bounds and yet he was only too glad to be rid of the rascal. But he could not resist the amusement of seeing the man make his exit. The deposed Minister quitted the Palace as though he

were going on a triumphal expedition. An escort of German Guards walked before him—the personal Guard of Agrippina, then followed Pallas, lying upon a litter which eight Abyssinians carried shoulder high. Behind him was the cortege of his clients and friends, of all those who thought it wise to back Agrippina. Many Greeks and Orientals mingled in the queue, recognizable by their garish dresses, their gilt ornaments and jewels. One would have said that an Asiatic king was descending from the Palace into Rome. “Well,” said Nero with good humour, “our friend Pallas has abdicated . . .”

A few days later Agrippina created another scene. The dismissal of Pallas had hurt her, in her interests and in her personal pride. Nero was dining privately with a small party of friends, which included the young Prince Britannicus. Suddenly Agrippina entered the dining-hall. At the sight of the Empress-mother all felt uneasy and alarmed. She advanced, with her right arm outstretched in accusation against the Emperor: “My son, you seem to forget Britannicus. Britannicus is no longer a child! He is Claudius’s own son, the real heir to the Throne, which Domitius stole with the help of his mother whom he now so ungratefully insults. Rome shall learn of all this. Let Burrus and Seneca escort me out if they like! The Army shall choose between them and Germanicus’s daughter!”

The scene was so absurd and the purpose so transparent that no one said a word. The servants were astonished and frightened—they knew only too well what fate awaited a slave who heard too much. Agrippina looked round, then she retired like an actress from the stage.

## VI

THE Emperor was perplexed. Time had come for a decision; and he realized that he must decide alone. Of his two councillors, one was an excellent soldier, honest and loyal but unenterprising; the other, a subtle thinker but far from being a man of action. Yet, time was pressing, for Agrippina was capable of desperate deeds and Nero felt that even now Agrippina was plotting. That sense of the dramatic upon which his life was hinged, the insistent urge to see himself as a hero in a Greek drama, the identification of the born actor with the character in the play, took hold of him.

Agrippina was his mother, and conflict between mother and son would be the peak of a yet unthinkable tragedy. Much simpler to put aside the instrument of Agrippina's wrath. The populace hated Agrippina, for she was a notorious character; yet she was the Emperor's mother. But the palsied Britannicus was almost of no significance.

Young Prince Britannicus was a lean young man, of striking appearance, with a dreamy air and affable manners, and the enchanting grace lent by silence. But he was cursed with epilepsy, the disease of the Caesars.

Britannicus led a retired life. He had no part in public affairs and desired no part in politics. He never attended the Senate, though he belonged to it by right. Whatever he had suffered for the slight that had robbed him of the Throne, he never gave vent to his feelings. His only joy seemed to rest in composing poetry. His intimate friends spoke of Britannicus's poems as exquisite and original; Lucan called him the poet of the future. Often Britannicus entertained his friends by reciting his verses, in a gentle voice, plucking the strings of a harp with his thin fingers.

Nero had heard him play and chant his poems but once, and that day a bitter jealousy entered his heart. His own poems lacked that captivating novelty of form, nor could he play the harp or the cetra. Yet, many a time he had seen Britannicus overcome by a seizure, his face turn blue, his neck swelling convulsively, frothing at the mouth. Once it happened at a public celebration, and the gathering was immediately dispersed, for such a fit was considered a bad omen. The Romans called epilepsy the sickness of Hercules, and who suffered from it was reputed to be both accursed and prophetic, blessed and damned.

One day, resting with the Emperor in the library where they still had some occasional hours of tuition, Seneca brought up the subject of the reasons of State as justifying extreme deeds by the Sovereign. "*Fastigium tuum affixum est,*" said Seneca. "Your destiny is written in the Heavens. A refulgent light surrounds you as Emperor; all eyes are turned upon you. The more you think you can pass out of your own light and the more you rise upon the horizon . . . Political necessities may well impose upon a ruler acts which may revolt his conscience. There is such a thing as historical fatality; the catharsis that brings about the tragedies of real life which will provide sublime themes for poets . . . Caesar alone can say to himself: Only I can kill a man or save his life without violating the Law."\*

Late at night, working at his latest book in his library, the philosopher felt with some satisfaction that he had at last found an apt title for his new treatise. Turning over the pages, he wrote it in a bold hand—*De Clementia*.

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\* Seneca—*De Clementia*, I, Ch. i, iii, v, viii.

## VII

ONCE the decision was reached and the deed explained to himself in terms of the superior interest of Rome—"the heroic tradition of the great Republican times, when all family feelings were brushed aside in the country's interests"—the rest was easy. Agrippina herself had shown Nero the way—poison.

The poisoner Locusta was still alive; indeed, Julius Pollio, Tribune of a Cohort of Praetorians, had been set to mount guard over her in her dismal abode; both jailer and protector of the woman who had supplied the poison that had disposed of Claudius.

The "thing" must be carefully planned. The greatest secrecy and dissimulation was necessary so as to avoid Agrippina's suspicions. The same men that she had placed near Britannicus to protect him were now used as hired assassins.

At a first attempt the agents tried too small a dose. The plot miscarried. Britannicus suffered only a slight indisposition and recovered. Nero took fright: his mother was too deeply versed in the gentle art of poisoning not to grow suspicious over Britannicus's sickness.

Locusta was therefore sent for. Nero was so excited that he beat the woman with his own hands. The old witch pleaded that she had diluted the strength of the poison to avoid any danger of suspicion.

The following day Locusta set up her laboratory in a closet of the Emperor's apartments. She promised to produce "something that would act like lightning." For a few days the Imperial apartments were like an experimental death-chamber. Several poisons were tried upon animals, but they still proved too slow. On the fifth day

Locusta announced, "This will do the trick." The poison was served with some food to a pig, which ate it greedily and dropped dead. Locusta murmured: "It is entirely tasteless."

That day Nero went into the gardens, still strongly perturbed. But five months he had been on the Throne, yet he had already learned many things. Political necessities, as Seneca put it. And, as Seneca said, the Emperor was above the Law.

He went to look at some new birds in the aviary. They were delightful little birds, sent from some islands off the Lusitanian coast, yellow and tiny, singing away all day long. Nero pushed a finger through the silken net that enclosed the aviary and the birds flew about the cage with a flutter of wings, taking shelter upon the branches of the dwarf trees that grew inside the cage, or clinging to the pale-blue net, the colour of air. One of the birds looked at the Emperor with tiny black eyes, turning its head right and left, and with a swift wing dropped lightly upon his finger. Nero approached his face to the mesh, and the bird chirped against the Emperor's lips.

It was decided that the poison should be served to Britannicus under the very eyes of the Emperor: no risks this time! It was customary for the Imperial family to sit occasionally at the Emperor's table with the young sons of the Emperor's personal friends. One of these dinner-parties was arranged: Agrippina herself and Octavia lay on each side of the Emperor upon the same couch.

A large Persian carpet of the most brilliant colours and pleasant designs was spread upon the Imperial couch. At a neighbouring table, below the Imperial couch, sat Britannicus and on his right was Titus, the eldest son of

Vespasian, who was already spoken of as a promising young man training to become a valiant General, charming of manner and pleasant of mien.

Agrippina and her son eyed each other suspiciously. The scene recently made by Agrippina was in everybody's mind. Britannicus, still under doctor's treatment for his recent indisposition, had to keep to a diet. A special soup was served to him. One of the Imperial tasters placed by Agrippina to watch over him, scalded his tongue in tasting the soup; then the bowl was passed to the Prince.

Britannicus found it too hot and returned it to the servant, who poured some cold broth into it. Britannicus drank it. Had he been an older man, he would have made his attendant taste it a second time; but he was young and had the insouciance of youth. In less than a minute the diners saw Britannicus raise himself on his elbow, transfixed, with one hand pressed to his throat, and then he fell back upon the cushions. He was dead.

A cry of horror filled the room. Titus, out of curiosity, put his lips to the cup; he was ill for several months afterwards.\* Agrippina looked on, livid with surprise and with terror. From his couch Nero glanced round. "Do not trouble yourselves, my friends. My brother Britannicus, as you all know, is subject to fits . . . Let him be taken to his rooms. He will soon be better."

Two African slaves carried the body from the dining-hall. The dinner went on. Agrippina did not say a word, and she thought of the terrible prediction she was told long ago, that her son would be Emperor but would kill his mother. And this, she now thought, was all of her doing. If the Emperor could now say that Britannicus

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\* Suetonius—*Titus Flavius Vespasianus*, II.

had merely had a fit, it was she who had underlined so much the sad fact that Britannicus suffered from epilepsy. If the Emperor had made use of Locusta, it was she who had first introduced the poisoner.

The dinner went on in the private banqueting-hall where bright lights were reflected in the polished marble and golden panels; an interminable dinner, attended by dancers and mimes and jongleurs. The very entertainment for a party of young people.

The violence of the poison had made large black spots on Britannicus's face. The face had to be smeared with creams and cosmetics so that the spots might not be seen upon the pyre. And the body was hurriedly cremated in the Campus Martius. Everything had been carefully arranged.

It was one of those terrible nights of heavy southern rains. Between lightning and crashes of thunder, the rumour spread rapidly through the great city: "Britannicus has been murdered!" Crowds of silent people wrapped in dark cloaks stood in the Campus Martius in spite of the storm, when a band of soldiers, carrying torches, came to collect the ashes of the young Prince who had borne such a famous military name. The crowd felt that within the Palace, high up on the Palatine Hill, tragedies unfolded with all the terror of a Greek drama. Here and there among the crowd someone spoke in a quiet, sedate voice: "Dear people of Rome, there are things one must understand . . . A throne cannot be shared! It was unavoidable that one of them should die—the Gods have made their choice."

In a corner of the vast Fields some barbarians whispered together, in the vernacular of the Suburra. Suddenly someone got upon a pillar and uttered strange

words: " Babylon shall fall! She will fall, this City that is keeping all others in bonds! He who adores the beast shall suffer the flames and the sulphur, before the Angels and before the Lamb! And the flames of his torments will burn in the centuries of centuries, *per saecula saeculorum!* "

A patrol of Guards approached: " Keep moving, you there! " The man got down from his pillar. The crowd pulled their hoods further down over their eyes. " Some more Eastern cranks," muttered the Officer of the Guard; and with his men he continued his round.

## VIII

" FROM Petronius to his friend Marcus Valerius, greetings.

" Strange things are happening in Rome. Since Britannicus's death our Divine Nero Caesar is undergoing a great change. Perhaps you have not read in the Gazette the explanation that Nero Caesar published two days after the ' thing '. I will quote for your edification a few lines only: ' I was looking forward to the privilege of sharing with my beloved brother the burden of power. The Gods have decided otherwise. They have condemned me to rule the Empire alone. I can look for comfort only in your support and that of the Senate. Do not refuse it to me and grant me this consoling hope, that in my present grief, in this solitude which makes me the only surviving descendant of a family destined to rule, I shall at least know the sweetness of being for ever loved by you.'

" Knowing only too well the hand that wrote this trash, one cannot even say that it is Seneca at his best. In the banqueting-halls it was judged embarrassing; in the

taverns, so my barber informed me, it was considered too false.

“But now the Divine has invented a new form of self-expression. You know our Rome has some very lurid districts, alleys where the dregs of the Mediterranean ports live, the scum of the African shores, of Spain, of Greece, gladiators in search of a job, deserters from the army, absconders from the law. Streets that at night are far from safe. Well, now the rumour goes that at night through these narrow lanes a band of young men are roaming. They go about escorted by hefty and armed slaves. Their amusement is to push about the citizens who are returning home after a supper-party. The greatest fun is to kiss the ladies and throw the men into the sewer. Occasionally they break open a shop. Usually the fun ends in some brothel or a tavern, where girls are provided, and the party plays *tableaux vivants*. One night they bumped into Senator Montanus, who gave our Divine a black eye. Afterwards someone told Montanus that he had thrashed the Emperor; and the old fool was stupid enough to write to Nero Caesar and beg to be excused! No one wondered when we read in the Gazette that Senator Montanus had committed suicide.\*

“Now, however, our Divine goes out with an escort of Guards, a thing that makes General Burrus grumble that the Guards should not see with their own eyes how the Emperor amuses himself. But Nero Caesar calls it ‘high spirits.’ By the way, a few weeks ago he went to visit his aunt Domitia, who was very ill. You know that the old girl is very rich. She was greatly touched by the honour, and caressing her nephew’s chin she said: ‘When I see that beard shaved, I will be glad to die.’ He turned to

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXVI.

his friends: 'As soon as I go out I shall go to the guests  
Very witty!

"I think the truth of it all is that our Nero ~~Casid~~ on  
suffering from ennui. And Seneca, alas, is not the most  
entertaining of counsellors. What he needs is a woman to  
love. And sweet Acte is already on the wane.

"Keep well, and do send me a pot of your honey,  
flavoured of azaleas."

## IX

It was at this time that Nero met Poppaea. Or, as Seneca  
would have said, it was his Daimon that put Poppaea into  
his life.

Her real name was Lollia Poppaea, daughter of Lollius,  
who had been a friend of the dreadful ~~Sejuna~~, the evil  
spirit of Emperor Tiberius. Her mother, Poppaea Sabina,  
had been considered the most beautiful woman of her  
days. She died in the reign of Claudius, owing to the  
jealousy of Messalina. Quite young her daughter  
married Crispinus, a wealthy Knight, who was Praefect  
of the Praetorian Cohort, and upon her marriage she dis-  
carded her paternal name of Lollia to assume the name of  
her maternal grandfather, Poppaeus Sabinus, a Consular  
personage who had been decorated with the Triumphal  
insignia.

Poppaea was the most famous beauty of her day.  
Perfectly educated, her intelligence added grace to her  
conversation and manners. She possessed the fascination  
of those women whose charm comes from their serious-  
ness, from a touch of melancholy in their appearance, an  
air of modesty and reserve. Whenever Poppaea went to  
the theatre or walked under the arcades of the Campus

taverns, that was the fashionable promenade at sunset, false. covered her face with a veil.\*

“Moreover, Poppaea was blonde, and in Rome a real blonde was a rare flower. Her hair added to her appearance a suavity, a delicacy of tones. Poppaea appeared in public but rarely, gliding amongst the men almost without noticing them, radiating modesty. She was indeed ravishing, bewitching. In Court circles it was whispered that Poppaea had a price, like anyone else—but a very high one.

When Nero met Poppaea for the first time, she had recently married Salvius Otho, a rich and brilliant young man, with that touch of refined elegance that to the Emperor represented the ideal of a fashionable man. Was Otho’s marriage only a feint in a big game in which Nero would be the pawn?

It was remarked at the Palace that after his marriage Otho came to Court without his beautiful wife. The Emperor, piqued, asked him why he did not bring the lady to Court. Poppaea was thus introduced to the Emperor. And Nero fell madly in love with Poppaea.

Wealthy and fastidious, Otho surrounded Poppaea with every luxury. Poppaea appeared to Nero in the setting of a splendid house, surrounded by exquisite refinements, decked with pearls and gems; she could almost say that the Empire could add nothing to her happiness. When Salvius Otho was asked to dine at the Palace, instead of keeping late hours as it was the rule, he left quite early “to go back to his adorable wife.” One day he showed Nero how to perfume his feet before lying on the dining couch. Another time, Nero sprinkled some precious perfume on Otho’s gown. The following day, Otho had the

\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XIII.

## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

honour of entertaining the Emperor and when the guests entered his dining-hall, this same perfume, poured from silver sprinklers, fell like a dewy rain upon them and on the marble floor.\*

One night Nero ordered his litter to carry him to Otho's house quite unexpectedly, and begged his friend to let him see Poppaea; only to see her. But Otho laughed and advised the Emperor to return to bed. It was a small episode, so understandable in a young man . . .

All the Court now knew that the Emperor was madly in love. In love in a way that he had never been before. He had believed that Poppaea would give herself to him, but Poppaea had remained calm and distant. One day Nero caught Poppaea's eyes looking intently at him, and suddenly averting her glance. He was thrilled, and he spoke to her like any young man who is in love. "If you refuse me your love, the Empire itself will be for me an intolerable burden!" Poppaea waited long before answering. At last she looked at him with eyes filled with tears: "My Lord, I am a married woman; my husband is young and noble. Were I an ambitious woman, the splendour of your love would make me forget my duties. But I cannot chase away my lawful husband."

A few days later the Court was politely agog. Otho had fallen in disgrace, but the merciful and generous Emperor was dispatching him as Governor of the Lusitanian Province—leaving his wife behind. Poppaea was installed in an official residence.

But she did not bring Nero joy and cheer, only plaintive reproaches and regrets. She was nothing but an official mistress; the Emperor was like a little boy under the wing of his mother; Poppaea might one day be chased out of

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\* Plutarch—*Lives*.

the Palace; if the Emperor could not bring himself to give her the rank she deserved, why did he not send her back to her husband? She sighed; then she added: "The Emperor must at least save her from the hate and vengeance of Agrippina."

## X

THERE were people at Court who said that Poppaea had some Jewish blood. Sure it was that in the secrecy of her rooms Poppaea was superstitiously toying with the religious practices of the Jews who lived across the River. It was quite fashionable among the ladies of Rome to take an interest in the rites of the Jews, who professed to believe in an invisible God. Without bothering to investigate what was really meant by it, the Roman ladies were drawn by the mystical unquietude of the Jews, by their belief in eternity, their certainty that one day a Messiah would come to deliver the world. Poppaea did not understand what the world wanted to be delivered from, but the fervour of her Jewish friends found a response in her temperament, even in her silences, that aura of mystery that exercised such an ascendancy over her Imperial lover. She almost felt that her new religious practices increased her power and influence upon the Emperor.

But Poppaea's real religion was her own beauty. No other woman ever carried so far the cult of her body.

Out of her porphyry bath, Poppaea contemplated in the long mirrors of polished silver the image of her body that had the milky whiteness of the Parian marble. She took care to preserve that exquisite whiteness with baths of asses milk. In a special stabularium, at the farther end of the Palace grounds, were kept four hundred asses, which supplied the milk for Poppaea's morning bath.

Whenever she travelled, the four hundred asses made the journey in advance of her train.

From her husband Otho (who was bald and wore false hair so cleverly mingled with his own that the fact was not discovered till his death)\* Poppaea had learned to cover her face at night with a mask of paste that protected it from the ill-effects of fresh air. She used a thick cream, similar to the grease-paint used nowadays by actors in their make-up, and with this cream mixed with fine powder her masseuse made a kind of porcelain layer over her face. When she was not attending Palace functions or going out, she kept this mask on all day, and when she took it off, her face, of a resplendent whiteness, seemed to blush deliciously at the lightest emotion.

For her hands she used crocodile mucus which made them soft and white. After her bath her slaves dried her body with swans' down, which seemed to cover it with a fine dust, and they stroked her tongue with flat ivory sticks to make it soft and velvety.

Then she abandoned her body to the hands of her personal attendants, who vied with one another with the cares of her person. Her numerous slaves were divided into classes, according to their specialities; the African masseuses who kept her body firm and supple; the hair-dressers and perfumers from Cyprus; the dressmakers and dressers from Alexandria; those who had the keeping of her gowns and jewels in perfumed boxes; others who were expert in lacing her sandals and shoes. In the vast dressing-room the supervisors of each service stood aside, vigilant and guiding while their mistress, wrapped in a dressing-gown and seated at the mirror, studied every curl of her hair or a new inclination of the head.

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\* Suetonius—*M. Salvius Otho*, XII.

Poppaea knew that she had the most beautiful hair in the whole of Rome. It was as warm and brilliant as amber. Many ladies of Rome, envious of her golden head, used a powder of saffron, a German soap and some oils and brilliantines of which Martial and Ovid have preserved the recipes. In his poems Nero sang of Poppaea's hair, which he called "hair of amber"; and the illusion was complete when the Tuscan perfumers supplied Poppaea with a new oil made from ambergris, which exhaled a most suave fragrance. Poppaea wore her hair all around her brow and as far as the rosy shells of her ears in three rings of small curls, made with a heated iron curler, alike and symmetrical, while the rest, drawn back and rolled over her slender nape, was held in position by little chains and rings of gold. Narrow white ribbons, embroidered with precious stones, were occasionally used to tie the chignon. At times she used hairpins adorned with pearls, or single pins fashioned like javelins. Her jewellers always chose for her pearls from the Red Sea because of their marvellous and unsurpassed whiteness. At her ears she wore drop ear-rings made of three diamonds, whose tinkling at each little movement of her head seemed to play an accompaniment to her speech.

A dark-headed girl from Samos knelt at her feet fixing the low shoes of Sycione, made of soft white kid, with soles of thin golden leaf, which enhanced with their metallic tap-tap the elegance of Poppaea's steps upon the marble floors. The small slippers enclosed her feet like a modern court-shoe, and were embroidered with pearls and held over the instep by straps of gold cord and silk. A clip, shaped like an eagle, or a crescent, was occasionally used in place of straps.

Before putting on the shoes, the maid enveloped

Poppaea's feet and legs, as far as the knees, into narrow bands of the finest linen, which were held tight by garters as rich as diadems. Then, another maid passed upon her head the first tunic, of fine linen; but before the tunic, an embroidered corsage was adjusted over her breasts, a kind of brassière made of strong cloth of wool mixed with gold and silk, that came from the East. This corsage was the most brilliant part of a lady's dress, at times it was as jewelled as a pectoral; and the stole, or long robe which was worn unfastened over this corsage, was so draped as to show the corsage, although the stole was held at the waist by a jewelled belt. The throat and the right arm were left bare, adorned with necklaces and many bracelets.

Dreaming of the Throne and a power that she could conquer only with her beauty, Poppaea neglected nothing that could charm Nero. She knew by heart the third Canto of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, and her womanly instinct added a thousand counsels to those of that poetic master. Much better than the poet, she knew that there was everything to be gained by making a lover wait. She knew how to push a rival into the shadow; she knew that Nature should be improved upon. She practised the art of deportment and walking under the portico of the Theatre of Pompey, she perfected the artifice of adding attraction to a fault, she knew how to put a spark of femininity and levity into her smile. Poppaea was the first woman in Rome to wear clothes of pure silk, and the only one to enwrap her head with long veils.

She spent hours at the mirror, studying herself critically, considering those gestures which she felt could be improved. She watched the fluttering of her eyelashes and the trembling of her body, and every movement of

her limbs. She had acquired by practice the capacity to put on whatever expression she desired.

The greatest charm of her face was in the delicate fascinating nose, and the changeable expression, almost elusive; a face that could be girlish and petulant, or severe and passionate. Around her nostrils there were a few pale freckles that gave her smile an intriguing air. Her mother had taught her to be sparing with the rouge pot and she swallowed some drops prepared for her by a Syrian slave, that acted as a stimulant and lent her freshness and vivacity. And to sweeten her breath she chewed pastilles made of myrtle.

She had a delightful laugh, a thing that can hold a fascination and be communicative of joy and cheerfulness. She spoke Greek beautifully, a language that was very fashionable and sounded so much lighter and appealing than the more solemn Latin.

She had developed her coquetry to the point of returning to the natural modesty of woman, because she knew that modesty, albeit an assumed virtue, is the most provocative of charms.

## XI

NOTHING prompts an enamoured man to action more than a blow to his vanity. The sadness assumed by Poppaea was in itself enough to hurt Nero, for what greater prize could a woman demand than to possess his heart? But relentlessly Poppaea reiterated her reproach, "You are not really the Emperor; the real ruler of Rome is your mother. You think that you have confined her to her house, but her house is more important than the Palace. All decisions of real importance bear the stamp of her authority. The Praetors, the Aediles, the Tribunes,

the more important Senators, all hasten to her, not to you. And she has amassed an enormous fortune; her gold pieces talk for her everywhere. I get news and gossip from every side. I hear things that would never reach your ear. Do you know what the people call you? They call you 'Empress Nero.' And they call your mother 'Agrippina, Emperor of Rome'."

Another day she put on the table a gold coin, a bright new one and flicked it with a little gesture of contempt. Nero looked at her, already frowning in expectation of the bitter remark that was sure to come. And come it did. The coin glittered on the marble table, showing, beautifully minted, the proud head of Agrippina. With a touch of her fingers Poppaea turned it on the other side: "And what is this?" she said with a hiss of venom in her voice. "What is this head of an overgrown boy described as Nero Caesar? Who has authorized the design of this coin that to the end of the earth will convey the impression of a Diarchy or, worse still, of an Imperial Matriarchate?"

Nero was dumbfounded. He answered: "I am an artist, that is all I care."

Poppaea smiled: "And your mother saves you the trouble of being the Emperor. That's all. And she takes great care to remind the people not that she is Nero's mother, but that she is Germanicus's daughter. That still counts for a lot. More than your poetry."

Thus the poison of envy bit into Nero's heart, adding to the torments of passion. What shall he do to satisfy this woman? Lurid thoughts traversed his mind. He thought of sudden illness, of fatal accidents that can free one from a person who has become a bad dream. He imagined himself repudiating Octavia, marrying Poppaea,

giving the people a great banquet and feast, the crowd acclaiming him and his new Empress . . . But Agrippina was there, the living obstacle between himself and Poppaea. And Nero discovered that he hated his mother.

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One day, when Agrippina spoke again of quitting the capital, Nero answered that perhaps it would be an excellent idea. "What am I doing in Rome nowadays?" she said plaintively to her son. "In the Palace in which I alone have made you Emperor, upon the Throne where you fill the place that I alone have given you, a concubine plays the role of Empress. Far away from Rome I shall try to forget your ingratitude."

Twenty-four hours later Agrippina left Rome for Anzio. Overjoyed, Nero told Poppaea that no longer would the Empress stand between them. Poppaea replied: "A mere departure does not change anything." And her lovely features were drawn and sad, and there were tears in her eyes.

That night Nero felt that Agrippina must disappear. He could think of nothing else.

He was afraid to share with anyone the dark plans maturing in his mind. The thought of them filled him with horror. For he loved his mother, even when he hated her; maybe he loved her even now. He recalled how, in the last three years, she had tried to awaken in him a monstrous desire—by surprise, by insidious approaches. Why did Fate pursue him with this Oedipus's and Orestes's destiny?

Yet, such a dark deed must be shared with accomplices. One was Tigellinus.

Tophonius Tigellinus was a lecherous man, as lewd of

mind as he was in taste and manners. No one knew for a certainty what father he came from, nor did Tigellinus boast of any ancestry. All that was known about him was that, in his youth, Tigellinus had become rich by disposing of three wealthy uncles. As a young man Tigellinus had one day surprised Agrippina: some said that she had tried his prowess in bed. Caligula exiled him to Calabria. But while in exile, he invested his uncles' money wisely. On his estates he bred horses. Instinctively his horses had turned their heads towards Rome. One day their master arrived in Rome and set up as a horse-dealer for the races, and Nero, who was fond of horses and always on the look-out for first-class thoroughbreds, had come to know him well.

The other accomplice was Anicetus, Nero's former tutor, who was discarded by Agrippina to make place for Seneca. Now Anicetus had risen to the command of the Misenum's Fleet. He was that kind of man who stops at nothing, and he had an old account to square with Agrippina.

No one told Poppaea, but she divined it from the first. She told Nero that she was sure he would give her the greatest proof of his love. And she suggested poison: "It is the surest and the simplest way. And," she added with sweetness, "the least painful. Also, it can appear accidental."

But Nero was frightened. One could risk poison upon an old man, or an invalid. But a poison was not always sure to work on a vigorous person, and for many years Agrippina had accustomed her body to the strongest poisons. The conspirators would risk making fools of themselves.

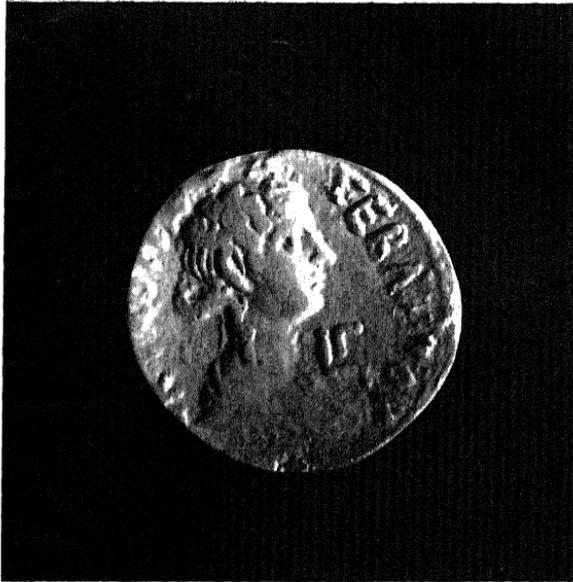
A dagger? Anicetus shook his head: "Do not spill

blood. To use a dagger is to spread the cry of murder." And then, Anicetus expounded a beautiful stratagem. Was he not the Praefect of the Fleet? He knew therefore all the dangers of the seas. "Supposing something happened to a ship, far enough from the shore, say that a bulkhead gave way; it would be the end. Imagine a journey at night, the sky is starry and the wind is sweet, then something unforeseen happens, the ship is sinking, the illustrious passenger disappears before help can come . . ."

"By Jove!" cried Nero. "It sounds like a naumachy!" The idea was no longer frightening nor terrifying. It seemed a play, or like being at the Circus. There was no longer any murder, only an accident, just a planned accident . . . Who would talk of the vengeful Furies or use big solemn words?

## XII

AGRIPPINA had gone to her villa at Anzio, that was white and elegant, perched on the very tip of the promontory, like a galleon with all sails set to the wind. The terraced gardens, with their porticoes shaded by rambling roses, were a delight. Resting her head against the cool marble of a pillar, Agrippina thought of Rome across the bay, imagined the busy crowds in the markets, the jostling in the Forum, centre of the world. The Palace and its gardens, symbol of all that was now denied to her for ever. She did not regret her lost power, her Lictors, her chariot that was like a Goddess's, her invisible presence that was felt even in the Senate, all the honours that no other woman had ever attained. What she grieved for most deeply was to have been banished by her son. It



*Plate 51*

The only existing likeness of OCTAVIA, first wife of Nero. From a coin in the British Museum, minted in Egypt: in the Greek lettering she is called "SEBASTA —The Revered."



## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

seemed but yesterday that he was looking upon her adoringly. A Chaldean magician, who had studied her horoscope in the skies, had not long ago foretold her that an extraordinary event was upon her, "the stars," he said, "disclosed no more." What, she thought, could be more extraordinary than this message from her son regretting her exile and calling her again to his side?

For it was of no use to live in Rome, in the house of Antonia, not far from the Palace and yet so far away from it, and be surrounded by an army of spies who reported her every movement to the Emperor and to Poppaea, "that woman." She too had her agents, who mingled with the Emperor's Court. In fact, the two parties spied on each other. But she knew that now all her efforts were fruitless. Britannicus's death had been a great shock for her, almost an admonition. She knew she was marked. She felt that "that woman" was bent on getting rid of her. Since Britannicus had died she had thought of using Octavia as a tie with the Opposition party, but Octavia was such a silly girl! She knew that, prompted by "that woman," her son had entirely escaped from her own control. And now there was this letter inviting her to join the Emperor at Baiae, to celebrate with her son the holy days of Minerva and "renew the affection that should never have been endangered."

\* \* \*

When Agrippina disembarked on the shore at Cape Misenum from the bireme that had brought her from Anzio, a small group of courtiers came forward to greet her. She recognized Seneca, Burrus, Anicetus, Tigellinus. In front of them, all alone, Nero was running towards the shore—just like a boy. Agrippina threw herself into her

son's arms, and he kissed her, murmuring the words that once were so often upon his lips: "The best of mothers!"

The sun was setting in the opalescent sky. The surf gently washed the beach. The hills along the bay had a benign undulation. It was such a joy to be again with the gay Court! Nero offered to escort his mother as far as the white pavilion assigned to her, so white among the dark trunks of the Mediterranean pines. A litter was waiting to take them. They lay down, leaning on the silken cushions, chatting pleasantly. A cortege was formed. The peasants and the fishermen bowed respectfully, the Guards stood at attention, gazing upon the Imperial demi-gods. In the golden dust raised by the bearers' feet they reached Baiae, where supper was waiting.

\* \* \*

Two days soon passed full of pleasure and joys. Now the fateful ship was again crossing the bay. Agrippina lay upon a couch, in the cabin that had been prepared for her on the forecastle. Travelling with her were her lady-in-waiting, the Lady Acerronia, and her bailiff and treasurer Crepereius Gallus. Agrippina lay without speaking, her mind filled with the beatitude of this renewed life. When they had parted, her son had kissed her bosom, "the breasts that suckled me."\* Now the ship glided silently, its sails full of wind, the oars cutting the water rhythmically, each stroke punctuated by the voice of the officer marking the time. From the shore floated the perfume of the fields and of the forest of pines.

Suddenly a sinister crash occurred overhead. Agrippina sat up on her couch. The roof of the cabin thundered down; masses of lead followed with a thud. Crepereius,

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXIV. Dio Cassius—*Historias*, LVI.

## THE YOUNG EMPEROR

hit on the head, fell down dead. The Lady Acerronia ran out shouting for help. But Agrippina, merely grazed on the left shoulder, moved out silently, hiding behind a big coil of ropes. From her hiding-place she saw all the oarsmen, at a signal, rush to one side of the ship, which heaved steeply, almost capsizing. A few sailors, caught unaware, swore loudly and disappeared overboard. Astern, Agrippina caught sight of Acerronia beating the air with her arms, and then dropping into the depths below. With the suppleness of a cat, Agrippina bent low, ran between the abandoned oars, and let herself down the side of the ship. She was a splendid swimmer, and the shore was not far away. She heard Acerronia cry: "Help! Help! I am the Empress!" Two sailors threw her a rope, and then, the moment her head was level with them, knocked her savagely with an oar and let the body drop back into the sea. Agrippina put her head under water, and raising it only to take breath, swam vigorously towards the shore.

\* \* \*

At Baiae the Emperor was sitting up. With him were Seneca, Burrus and Anicetus. The freedman was lying upon a bed, glancing now and then at a clepsidra which was slowly marking the time, and plucking a garland of roses which he pressed nonchalantly to his nostrils.

Upon his couch lay Nero, pale and restless. Now and then he rose, and walked up and down, pressing his white hands upon his breast. Seneca gazed at the floor, with a frown upon his brow. Neither he nor Burrus had been told, but Seneca guessed that the Dowager-Empress had left on a fateful journey.

Two hours passed, and Anicetus still plucked roses and threw them down. The Emperor became more and more restless, and paced up and down the hall. In the tense silence his sighs sounded like sobs.

Suddenly there were shouts outside, a door was opened wide, and Nero stared at the entering messenger, who was Agrippina's freedman Lucius Agerinus. The man threw himself at the Emperor's feet, unable to speak clearly: "The Divine Agrippina, the Empress . . . There has been a sinking . . . The Gods' protection . . . The Empress is safe . . . She swam to the coast . . . She has been taken to Bauli . . . The Empress sends you word not to be anxious for her; she only desires to rest."

Nero dismissed the messenger. Then he turned to Anicetus, but was unable to speak.

"The coup has failed, that's all," murmured the freedman. Anicetus plucked a few more roses, then he calmly said: "If you leave her time, she will run to Rome, denounce the attempted murder, arm her slaves, and maybe tomorrow she will raise the Legions. Even the Senate may rise against you. If you give her time."

Nero turned to Burrus and Seneca, but he could only utter: "My friends . . ."

The two Ministers glanced at one another. It was a monstrous situation. Yet it admitted no choice. Agrippina was a thoroughly bad woman and Nero was revealing himself her worthy son. But, in the circumstances, what was the higher interest of Rome? The vile freedman had just said it: "Agrippina will raise the Legions." The atrocious crime would raise a cry among the Legions and a revolt would mean butchery in Rome, maybe in all the cities of the Empire. Nero would be deposed, true, but who would be set up as the next Emperor? Should one

risk a new era of massacres, bloodshed and proscriptions for the sake of a thoroughly bad woman?

Seneca, Prime Minister and philosopher, spoke first. Without looking at Nero, as though the Emperor's presence did not count, he asked of Burrus, Commander of the Guards: "Can you order the troops to strike?"

"They will not do it. They love the Emperor, but they revere the memory of Germanicus like a fetish. Not one will touch Germanicus's daughter." Then the General added contemptuously: "Anicetus has started this mess—let him finish it."

Without a further word the two Ministers bowed to the Emperor, and left the room. Nero was now alone with the cynical Anicetus. The freedman threw away the plucked garland, rose lazily, and calmly he said: "Go to bed, O Caesar, and try to have happy dreams. I shall work for you."

A few minutes later Anicetus was galloping towards Bauli, taking with him the triarius Hercules and a centurion of the Fleet named Oloarite.

The three forced Agrippina's door. She received them standing, and fiercely asked: "Have you come to finish me?"

With the flat of his sword the triarius gave her a blow on the head. The centurion drew an ugly dagger.

Agrippina backed to the wall. With both hands she opened her dress and uncovered her beautiful bosom: "Strike at the stomach!"\* The blade went down to the hilt. Without a cry Agrippina fell to the ground.

\* \* \*

All night Nero paced the room, watched by Seneca who, fearing a desperate deed, had returned to the

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\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XIV—" *Ventrem feri, exclamavit.*"

distracted Emperor. And all the time Nero murmured: "The sun! When will the sun rise?" And now and then he uttered: "The world will understand . . . My love . . . Poppaea . . ." It was frightful and pitiful.

The horrible night ended at last, and the sun filled the room. The Emperor shrank from the paleness of the sea and the delicate mist of dawn, for he was seeing his mother's ghost. But from all sides triumphant shouts filled the villa: "Rise, O Nero Caesar! Your faithful Centurions and Tribunes are coming to renew their oath and vow, and thank the Gods that you have been preserved to the Empire!"

It was Burrus speaking, Burrus standing at the door and looking at his Emperor with eyes full of disdain and yet putting upon Nero's lips his very justification and his new role: The Gods had spared him . . . He had struck to avoid being struck.

To the chiefs of the Army, to the local Magistrates, to the representatives of the Campanian towns who all day came bringing their thanks and felicitations, the Emperor repeated his tale, with tears in his eyes. Later, he found the story quite plausible, and susceptible of improvement. Seneca helped to prepare a message to the Senate. For a few days the Emperor believed it himself. Then he suggested that the Court should move to Naples. Baiae was too dull, the sight of the sea was monotonous, one could almost imagine that one heard cries in the night.

Nero did not tell anyone that he had nightmares. The men of the galleon had told strange stories, how the ship was supposed to have given in under the pressure of the water; but the machinery that should have crashed down upon the Empress had failed to work properly. Nero could

no longer endure the atmosphere of Baiae. He imagined he heard the flutes of the funeral beyond the hills. In Naples one would meet more people, and delight in the popular rejoicing at the Emperor's escape from the mother who had plotted against him.

In Rome the obliging Senate invented new flatteries and honours. Minerva, whose quadriennial Games Nero had gone to celebrate in Baiae, certainly deserved a statue in the Senate House, as an *ex-voto* for having spared the Emperor. Agrippina's birthday was entered among the ill-omened days.

From Naples, Seneca advised amenities, pardons, the recall of political exiles. Everything was going well. Only, at night, the Emperor could not bear to look into a mirror. He had his mirrors covered. He moved restlessly from place to place, Sorrento, Salerno, Cuma, Herculaneum, Pompey, Capua . . . Every city put up triumphal arches to the Emperor. Before him marched the Praetorian Guards and the splendid Numidian Cavalry. A squadron of gigantic African lancers followed, dressed in white and red, marching with long dancing steps, eyes fixed, spears in the right hands, long bronze shields covering their left sides. The Imperial escort was dressed in gay silks, with diadems, necklaces and broad bangles glittering with gems. Surrounding Nero's litter, beautiful young slaves, with the slender bodies of Tanagra statuettes, scattered roses. Upon the silken cushions, the Master of the World, tired, fatigued, angry with himself, his eyes heavy with sleeplessness and fright, his face made-up like an idol's, passed amongst the applauding crowds.

The Court feared he might commit suicide. They begged him to return to Rome. They urged upon him that the people were anxiously waiting, that the Empire

would wane if the Emperor would not hold it firm in his grasp.

The Emperor returned to Rome. It was an apotheosis—a God taking his place in the Roman Pantheon. From the City the people came out into the country to meet him. The whole route was like a huge amphitheatre, in which all the people of Rome applauded but one actor, who passed under arches of flowers amidst the notes of zithers, cetras and flutes. Everywhere petals of roses rained upon the Imperial procession. Nero glanced round through his monocle of polished emerald, languidly saluting the adoring crowds, with his hand laden with rings and holding a handkerchief of pink silk.

In his fantastic equipage he climbed to the Capitol and rendered thanks to his brother-god Jupiter. The Roman holiday was starting, never to end.

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE



### Book Three

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

### I

WHEN Apollonius of Tyana arrived in Rome, on the very first day while he was having dinner in a tavern, he was approached by an itinerant singer who, standing with his lyre in an ingratiating posture by his table, began to sing. The fellow declaimed fragments from Aeschilus's *Antigone*, then he sang a *Hymn to Youth* "composed by the Emperor," he said. Then the entertainer took from his purse a small box, and from the box he took out an old chord. "From the Emperor's lyre!" he said with pride.\* Apollonius gave the man a coin, and the man bowed and moved to another table. The innkeeper said: "The fellow makes the rounds of the restaurants singing songs and poems composed by the Emperor." Then he winked half an eye: "I think he is subsidized . . ." Apollonius told him to hold his tongue and serve a cup of wine to the singer.

Yes, the Emperor was singing—to keep away the Ghosts. His mother's ghost returned each night. He was so distraught that he confided his nightmares with his most intimate friends. He spoke of the Furies that haunted him at night. He must be told that they were but dreams, caused by bad digestion.

But were they dreams?

In the Public Baths, where people met to chat and gossip, somebody had put into circulation a story, that after his mother's death Nero went to view the corpse—

\* Philostrato—*Vie d'Apol. Comius de Tyane.*

“to be sure that she was dead”—and he had handled her limbs, pointing out some blemishes and commending other points; and growing thirsty during the gruesome survey, he had called for a drink. “Almost inhuman,” the gossipers said, and spat upon the beautiful mosaic floor.

One day the Chief of Police found on his desk a report that one of the many statues of the Emperor that stood in the City had the sack of the parricides wrapped around its neck. Another night a child was found exposed in the Velabrum with this tablet: “I am not going to bring you up, my son, lest you murder your mother.” On the 30th of April, the day in which the Senate rendered sacrificial thanks for the safety of the Emperor, there was an eclipse of the sun, and the day suddenly turned into night. On the 9th of May, that was the day of the Dead, some Palace servants whispered that the Emperor had left his bed at midnight, and ran out of his room barefooted, snapping his fingers to frighten away the ghosts, and he had performed all the customary exorcisms against the ghosts, washing his hands three times at a fountain, and then he had gone back to his room throwing over his shoulders some black broad-beans which he carried in his mouth, all the time repeating adjurations.

Night after night the Ghosts troubled his dreams. And no magician or soothsayer could placate his mother’s rage.

\* \* \*

Someone at Court suggested sports. The Emperor needed recreation. Nonchalantly Nero answered, “Let us try.”

From his childhood he had an extravagant passion for horses. As a boy he used to talk of nothing but the Circus races, although he was not allowed to watch the games.

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

Even now he still amused himself with toy-chariots driven by four horses. He had a tiny set of chariots made of ivory painted in different colours, and he made them run upon a small hippodrome of yellow marble.

The Court now went regularly to the races. The Emperor doubled the number of the races, so that the meetings lasted nearly the whole day. Then he tried to drive a chariot himself, in his gardens, before the applauding courtiers and attendants. Soon he said it should be a great thrill to race in the Circus. To show the people how much the Emperor shared the taste for games, he ordered a new amphitheatre to be built in the Campus Martius, all of wood, so that it could be erected very speedily, and to serve as a model for a future colossal Circus. The builders used for it the greatest tree in existence, a beam of larch one hundred and twenty feet long and two feet in diameter. The Emperor was delighted with the contractors for the speed with which they had built this amphitheatre. All the time he was moved by a strange impatience, a kind of restlessness. He felt impatient with public works that meant years of labour and waiting.

When the first games were held in this new circus, Nero gave orders that no one should be killed, neither gladiator nor prisoner condemned to the beasts. He included in the programme a bull-fight, exactly as it is now preserved in Spain. The game had been introduced by Julius Caesar, who had seen it in Thessalia where horsemen were very clever in killing wild bulls. After the horseman had harassed and tired the bull, he dismounted, faced the bull and seizing it by the horns he overpowered it and broke its neck.

The new amphitheatre was built in a way that could

be easily turned into a *naumachia*. Huge reservoirs poured water into the arena from underground pipes and on the improvised lake appeared little fleets which were kept in readiness in the property-stores of the circus. The ships competed in speed, then, ranged in squadrons, they enacted a mock battle between Athenians and Persians. One day the Emperor presented a greater novelty yet. He filled the arena with real sea water, and the astonished audience saw monstrous fishes swimming and fighting. All at once the locks were opened, the water rushed into the aqueducts, and upon the clean dry sand the gladiators reappeared.

It was all innocent pleasure, and like all innocent pleasures it soon wore thin. What else could one do to keep the Emperor amused? One day Petronius suggested trying something nobler and more refined. "Why not try the Arts? The only progress Rome has yet to achieve is to equal—for to surpass it would be impossible—the brilliance of Greece, the polish of Athens." He paused a while; then he looked at Nero with a nonchalant air: "What a task for a young Emperor!"

For Petronius was a nonchalant man, and Nero could not deny that he was charmed by him—almost jealous of him. Petronius was now in his early thirties, just the very age when a man can look at pleasures with an experienced mind; he had returned to Rome from his Proconsulship of Bithynia a most polished and fascinating man. So distinguished was he, so elegant in everything! That way of speaking, direct and adroit, interspersing his beautiful Latin with Greek words and expressions. Such a brilliant conversationalist! Certainly, Nero thought, no one else at Court could equal him. Witty if there ever was a wit, not afraid to speak his mind, and never offensive, never

vulgar. His house in the Carinae district was exquisite. Nero had seen only the banqueting hall, when he had once honoured his friend with his presence at dinner—"out of sheer curiosity," Petronius had whispered to his majordomo. But that banqueting-hall, which could be entered direct from the paved garden, where lovely fountains played upon beds of verbena, the favourite flower of Petronius, was a perfection of simplicity. The columns of the triclinium were of green Lacedemonian, the gayest of marbles. The floor reproduced a lovely mosaic by Pergamus, the *Asarotos aecos* or "the house unswept"; amidst the remnants of a meal, the artist had depicted a dove drinking into a bowl, and the shadow of the bird's head was mirrored in the water. On the walls there were a few small paintings by Pyraeus, delightful conversation-pieces portraying the gossips of the kitchen and of the shops. (Nero had really felt envious of those paintings. It was a novel idea he thought. He must have some for his private dining-room.) The walls themselves were panelled with rare marbles, which made a lovely frame to the cheerful panels painted in the taste of Ludius, who composed the first bucolic scenes, taking his inspirations from Virgil's *Georgics*. The frieze along the ceiling was adorned with bronzes by Myron, who was most clever in depicting animals, and upon an appropriate pedestal stood a group of Nymphs by Praxiteles. At the four corners of the pleasant apartment stood huge vases of silver, splendidly chased in bas-reliefs, in the style of Acragas, representing hunting scenes from Xenophon. The vases rested upon tables of cedar-wood, the grain of which was like a curly head of hair disarranged by the wind. Each table had probably cost more than a million sesterces. And the servants waited upon the guests silently, the

majordomo supervising the dinner with the solemnity and composure of a patrician. Also the parties on the couches were quiet and composed; no excess of drinking, no orgies. The music was subdued. The courses were rich and splendid, but not spectacular. It was almost a homely dinner, but distinguished by the excellence of the cuisine and the perfect choice of wines, flowers and entertainment.

Nero remembered it quite well. There was no denying it, Petronius was a very elegant man. The day after that dinner-party, the Emperor had indeed told him: "I shall have to call you *Arbiter Elegantiarum* . . ." The populace adored Petronius notwithstanding his superciliousness, for he was kind and generous, the kindness of the true aristocrat, showing the generosity of a wealthy man and a man of taste.

Yes, the Emperor thought, Petronius was right, and no one else had ever suggested it. To achieve a new greatness through the Arts!

## II

SOON the Palace became a meeting place for poets, writers and artists of all kinds. A special office was set up to deal with musicians, actors, pantomime-artistes, jockeys and dancers. Their names and addresses were taken, and they would in due course be communicated with. Those who came by appointment were seen by the Entertainment Director, and if the case warranted, would upon appointment be given a short audition before the Emperor in person. As a rule, these auditions took place in the Yellow Pavilion, and the Emperor's friends assisted in the choice. The best impresario, the Emperor would



Plate 6]

[The Capitol Museum, Rome]

Head of the statue of POPPÆA, in the Capitol Museum, Rome. The head, of striking beauty, is of Parian Marble, whilst the shoulders are draped in a gown of coloured marble.



say, should act as his own agent. Never rely upon anyone else's taste or choice.

Some of these artists were engaged as teachers or trainers for the Imperial Permanent Company. Others were dismissed with a compliment and a small gift as a memento of Nero Caesar's graciousness. The Emperor spent many hours watching the training of the Corps-de-Ballet, now and then adding a suggestion or giving a hint of how a step or an attitude might be improved. He spoke of opening National Schools of Dancing and Acting. He planned to make the operetta a popular show, so as to turn popular taste away from games of blood and fighting. "Those more manly games," objected the diehards, "keep alive the sturdiness of the people and their republican sentiments." "Quite so," answered Nero, "but who wants republicanism under a Caesar?" And as for the fighting spirit of the Romans, it was well-nigh a thing of the past.

Now the Emperor had a literary salon. The regular party comprised Petronius, Titus and Labeon; but the Emperor's Greek secretary Epaphroditus saw to it that the group was properly arranged about the room to the greatest effect. There was Lucan, Seneca's brilliant nephew. The actor Paris, who was the ladies' darling. Senecio who could drink *ad infinitum*. Occasionally one of the guests would introduce some utterly unknown young man, mentioning his talents as yet unrevealed. Some unkind gossips whispered behind their hands that these unknown poets were often allowed to piece together the "rather fragmentary" poems jotted down by the Emperor in his moments of inspiration. But the Emperor, to whom the slander had been duly reported, showed one day to his friends his manuscript tablets, full of erasures

and corrections. Indeed, of nothing else was he more proud than of having had one line quoted with honour by "our great Seneca"—*Colla Cytheriacae splendent agitata columbae*. In his poems he put his taste for the gigantic, he used big words. He read them to his friends. Sometimes he recited them in his private theatre. The audience always rose in acclamation. One day a voice called out that the Emperor's poem should be cast in golden letters and offered to Jupiter Capitolinus. The Emperor knew that the flatterer was one of his dependants, nevertheless he was overjoyed that the audience applauded in assent.

One night Nero told the company that he had a grand idea—a History of Rome in verse. Who would possess the afflatus to realize it? Lucan answered that he would try. But some weeks later he stated that, poetically speaking, such a stupendous task could not sustain itself. It would be possible to confine it only to episodes. He had commenced the treatment of one episode, quite good it seemed to him. He would call it *Pharsalia*.

The Emperor preferred to compose light songs, little romances. He was delighted when Tigellinus told him that one of his songs was the tune of the day in the Public Baths. The composing of songs implied an ability to accompany oneself on the lyre or cetra. Terpnus, the harpist, was therefore engaged to teach the Emperor to play. Terpnus also taught him the little tricks of singers for improving and preserving their voices. For several weeks the Emperor sat with the famous citharedus until late at night, while Terpnus played and sang after supper. "My uncle Caligula was a good dancer. I am certainly a good poet, and I will become a great singer."

There were philosophers too in the literary circle. As

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

a rule, philosophers were received only once a week, after dinner. The Emperor rested on a couch, while the philosophers expounded and discussed their systems. At times the Emperor set to the company a problem, and a lofty discussion ensued. The Emperor listening, now and then dropping a remark. The philosophical soirées were rather tiresome, but Nero said that they improved his philosophical education, which had been greatly neglected by his tutor: "That comes from having a philosopher for a tutor. Seneca only gave me his own works to read . . ."

But he worked hard at his poetry. At night he kept tablets and stylos by his bed so that he might note down every idea that floated into his mind. He wrote many poems, among them an idyll on the subject of Daphnis and Chloe, and an Ode to Apollo. And he began a tragedy which streamed from his pen with wonderful facility. He apportioned his time so that not a minute of his day was wasted. He also plunged into study, and read a great deal. Seneca took him for quiet walks, directing his attention to things which he had never noticed before.

One day the Emperor had a doubt, that his poems were but school exercises. He showed to Seneca his very best. The old man read it through with impassive mien. The poem was quite banal. But could Seneca disappoint his pupil and Emperor? They read the poem together again, correcting a line here and there. Nero was delighted. All considered, Seneca felt that it might be a good thing to have a would-be-poet occupying the Throne. Also it flattered his vanity to have his artistic suggestions listened to. The friendship between the Emperor and Seneca became more intimate. It opened new vistas to the First

Secretary of State and former pedagogue. "It is happy for you to have chosen the path of poetry," Seneca told the Emperor. "The mighty rules the world, but the poet possesses the world completely. When I was in exile on the wild island of Corsica, I should have perished of anguish had I not been a poet."

Nero was thrilled. He repaid Seneca with generous gifts, which the old philosopher very readily accepted. In fact, thought the old man, they were coming handy to pay for the new fountain he had laid in his garden. It was so much pleasanter to write about simple life in a most beautiful garden.

Often, at sunset, the Emperor sat alone upon a terrace. From the Palace gardens one had a view of the beautiful Hill. The hill used to be a paupers' burial ground, with its zigzag lines of open pits where the dead slaves were piled. Later on, for hygienic reasons, it was abandoned as a cemetery, and Maecenas, at the time of Augustus, had turned the hill into a public playground. A hundred years of laying fallow had benefited the soil and every bush and flower grew luxuriantly. Towards evening the air became so heavy with the scent of flowers that anyone stopping there long was seized with dizziness. At this hour, people said, witches could be seen on the magic hill, and sorceresses grubbing among the abandoned graves to find the herbs from which was brewed the potion that had driven Emperor Caligula mad. Nero looked at the hill, and he thought of a poem in which he would sing of a young Emperor who had gone to grub among the graves with the witches and the sorceresses, to seek the herbs with which to brew a potion for the woman he loved. In his galloping fantasy he already saw himself singing the poem before all the people of Rome, and the

people would rise and implore the Emperor to sing more and more . . .

## III

Now the Emperor was thinking of nothing but plays and songs. If only the people of Rome could hear his beautiful voice!

One morning, Seneca, chatting with the Emperor after the signature of State papers, told him that, in a way, those pursuits were unworthy of a Caesar. Nero looked at his First Secretary of State in surprise. Seneca himself had praised his poetical inclinations. "A God," Nero said, "did not disdain these pursuits—Apollo played the lyre. Surely he was not belittling himself in becoming Apollo's equal?"

Seneca shrugged his shoulders and bowed himself out of the room. In all truth he had merely mentioned the matter to appease his own conscience. He knew quite well that in the next room there was the actor Paris, waiting for him to go out and resume his dramatic lesson.

To humour the Emperor, and also to keep the "scandal" within bounds, Seneca and Burrus built in the Vatican valley, on the right side of the River, a small closed circus where the Emperor could, at his pleasure, gallop around in his chariot drawn by the thoroughbreds supplied by Tigellinus. But what Nero wanted was the atmosphere of the Circus, the competition, the shouts of the crowd, the excitement of the public races. Short of this, he organized small private races among his friends, and drove *Asturcon*, his favourite Asturian horse.

Soon the rumour of these private races went round Rome, and the populace said that they wanted to see their young Emperor driving a chariot. One day a great crowd

pressed at the gates of the private circus, joyfully clamouring for admission. Without consulting either Seneca or Burrus, Nero gave the order to open the gates. The crowd acclaimed the Emperor dressed in a green tunic, erect in the light chariot, a golden ribbon around his hair, the reins lashed about him like the drivers in the Circus, in his girdle a short knife with which to cut the reins in case of danger, the beautiful horses, with their ears plastered stiffly back, their eyes moving restlessly, waiting for the crack of the whip. The race started. The chariots were soon hidden in a cloud of dust. Seven times they went round the course, and each round was indicated by removing one of the seven stone dolphins, high above the track. The chariots closed upon each other, the drivers straining forward, the horses' flanks shining with sweat. An immense roar rose from the crowd, every throat shouting the Emperor's name. He had won! The crowd expected it. They cheered him to the Heavens. He returned to the Palace in high spirits. He said to Seneca: "I will lend myself to the enjoyment of the people."

After this he felt that he could now truly and properly appear on the stage. Again Seneca and Burrus expressed their doubts. "The majesty of the Empire," they said. "The risk of lowering the Emperor's superhuman position by competing with a profession for which many people felt a certain contempt." The Emperor found enough answers to his Ministers' objections. To the prejudices of the Roman diehards one could oppose the opinion of the more enlightened Greeks. The people of Greece had always held actors and comedians in high esteem. Sophocles himself used to perform his tragedies although he had been sent abroad as ambassador and made Commander of the Armies. Simon, son of Miltiades, loved to

sing at the banquets. The Heroes and great Captains of ancient days had cultivated music, thus following the example of the Gods themselves. In Rome itself the citizens used to take part in the performances of the *Atellanae*, without being less esteemed for this. The histrions were despised solely as slaves and debauched individuals. As artists they were given applause and wealth. Society had always made friendship with actors and singers, and considered them welcome guests at dinners and house-parties. Did the Emperor need to remind his First Secretary and his Prefect of the Palace of the great actor Roscius who received from the Treasury one thousand denarii per day? Or of Esopus the tragic actor, who was so prodigal that he used to breakfast on meals worth ten golden pieces, and left nevertheless to his children twenty million sesterces? And Roscius was an intimate friend of Cicero. Indeed, he helped to train him as a public speaker. Let the Emperor give the signal, and soon all the greybeards of Rome such as Poetus and Piso—the honour of the Stoics and the hope of the aristocrats!—would be seen on the stage performing tragedies . . .

Seneca and Burrus looked at each other. There was nothing to be done. Soon, however, it became clear that the Emperor himself was terrified at the possibility of his debut on the stage being a fiasco. Roman people were good judges of plays. They would not hesitate to hiss the Emperor off the stage. He could not stand the dishonour of being booed.

It was then that Tigellinus hit upon a most brilliant idea. Tigellinus, the clown, the twister, the lewd, but so clever, so cunning. And the idea was so brilliant that when it was mooted to Seneca and Burrus, they most

heartily approved of it. For at least it relieved their fears.

Tigellinus's idea was to do away with the risk of the Emperor being booed. To make sure that there would be applause, not applause that would sound absurd and ludicrous, but applause coming from all sides of the theatre, applause that should eventually bring down the house. And thus Tigellinus, with the assistance of the Commander of the Praetorian Guards invented that immortal trick of theatrical success—the *claque*.

The "thing" was discussed and organized at Seneca's mansion, which rivalled by now the Palace in splendour. The house of Seneca the Stoic, now practically controller of the whole Empire, was a very great house indeed. The square court was surrounded by a sober portico of Doric design, and under it were statues, panels in bas-reliefs set into the walls and some of the small paintings that were the height of fashion, with garden-scenes or conversation-pieces. Seneca's town house was the home of a collector and a great connoisseur. There was, among other things, a unique collection of ivory tables, delicately inlaid with ebony. Seneca was now a very wealthy man. His fortune was estimated at three hundred million sestertii. Some said he had made money by his loans to the Briton Kings at a very high rate of interest. A wise man indeed, austere in mind and thought, and shrewd in business; a most profitable combination.

At these meetings Poppaea also took part, besides Seneca and Burrus. (Petronius had politely declined the privilege, promising to assist in the preparation of the programmes.) The Emperor had made up his mind to make his debut for the Juvenalia Games. Poppaea suggested the Marcellus Theatre, and said it would be wise to have some other artists on the bill, Paris for instance,

who was such a darling of the women, and Alytros whom the Emperor liked very much.

Burrus was reluctant to express an opinion. The Commander of the Guards was troubled by his old leg wound, and when he took off his gilt helmet the scar over his forehead shone red. Of late he had become gloomy, suspicious and taciturn. Every day more he despised the web of intrigues which was entangling the Throne. The day before he had again asked Seneca, "Do you really mean that the Emperor is going to be an actor?" And now he had to arrange for a detachment of Guards to attend the performance, spaced out among the audience, to avoid disturbances and ensure good order.

It made him feel vexed even to have to discuss the arrangements. He gave, however, some good news about the famous *claque*. He had chosen a number of Leaders of the Festival, to act as non-commissioned officers and to lead the applause. These Leaders would receive a salary of forty thousand sesterii, payable monthly without any advance except a bonus equal to two months' pay. One must not trust this sort of men too much. If they had too much money in their purse, they may absent themselves, or fall ill on the very day. Then there would be officers whose duty would be to give the signal for the applause, for one should avoid the risk of the applause coming at the wrong moment. These officers were chosen from among the Knights and the nobility. There were plenty of needy young loungers in Rome. The whole lot would be trained on the parade-ground. An old actor had given him a good hint—avoid letting the applause die out slowly. It must stop abruptly, after a thunderous, irresistible outburst. Someone would cry out a few words, but only here and there, like the "bravo!" of an enthusiast

after hearing a top note. Anyway, there would be several rehearsals.

Like the old soldier that he was, Burrus was as good as his word. He took his new recruits in hand, and divided them in platoons. Some were to sit on the stage itself, others in the orchestra stalls to give the lead to the troopers distributed among the dress-circle and the vast pit reserved for the populace.

Then Tigellinus found a name for this new Cohort: *Augustals*—the Artistic Guards of the August Actor. The Emperor was delighted with the name. *The Augustals*. The name sounded excellent.

From amongst the many young idlers of Rome, the most handsome and those who were most inclined to enthusiasm were enrolled in the Cohort of the Augustals. It was described as an honorary body, but nearly all accepted the salary. The *élite* was composed of those who were to stay on the stage, to hearten the singer. Seneca considered the thing quite innocent. He himself, during the rehearsals, gave the signal for applause by moving the hem of his toga.

#### IV

THE preparations went on feverishly. For several months the Emperor worked hard and rehearsed under his dramatic and singing masters. To develop his voice he submitted to all kinds of training and privations. Two days a week he ate nothing but spring onions from Aricia and young leeks stewed in oil. He gave up eating bread; he spent hours on a couch with a small slab of lead upon his chest, to fortify his lungs.\*

\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XIX and XXXIV: "*Nero . . . lamina pectori imposita, sub ex cantica exclamans, alendis vocibus demonstravit rationem.*"

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

Then he thought that his Imperial dignity would be assured if he were supported on the stage and accompanied in the performance by the scions of the oldest families and some of the most noble knights. Seneca passed the word round. Within a few weeks a new Corps was formed and duly registered with the Consuls—The Society of Imperial Philodramatics. Attractive offers were made to members to induce them to join. Quite soon there were enough philodramatics to form a regiment. At the Public Baths the people nicknamed them the Dancing Legion. But in this way the Emperor was merely following a fashion. There was in Rome a Society of Citharists, rather a poor sort of club, where songsters and poetasters met to air their sorrows and gossip while eating a meal. All at once this Society of Citharists bloomed into a most fashionable Club. It moved to the elegant district of the City and took over beautiful premises and the Emperor agreed to be Honorary President. It became quite the thing to lunch or dine at the Citharists'.

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At last the great day came. The Juvenalia celebrations always began early in the morning. Rome was beflagged and garlands hung from windows and balconies. Processions and bands paraded the streets. Everybody was in festive mood for the yearly holiday of Youth.

For several days Nero had received no one except his singing master and the actor Paris. A silken scarf round his neck, he spoke in whispers.

On the morning of the great day he went out under the Palace porch to review the procession. The chariots and carriages were covered with flowers and garlands. A

band of urchins with crowns of smilax danced around the ceremonial chariot carrying a gigantic Phallus made of fig-wood, and behind it came the priests and an escort of noble matrons and mad women. Already in the Circus the young men of twenty-one were shaving their first beards and casting them upon the fire as a sacrificial offering.

In the early afternoon the crowd flocked to the theatre. The news was out, the Emperor would sing from the stage. No other item on the bill could have attracted a greater audience. Burrus, however, and the Chief of Police had organized a strict scrutiny of all who entered the theatre. Inside, the Augustals were already in their places, properly distributed among the audience.

But in his dressing-room the Emperor was very nervous. To avoid uttering one single word, he wrote on a tablet what he wanted to say. His secretary and his singing-master nodded their sympathy and understanding. He asked again what position his name had been posted on the bill. He was told that he was the fourth. "Is it a good place?" The dresser assured him it was the best one. "And the new curtain, does it look well?" He was assured that the curtain looked splendid. It was indeed a marvel of marvels. An immense canopy of blue cloth, spattered with golden stars, covering the open roof of the theatre like a firmament.

Finally a page crossed the stage, solemnly carrying the Emperor's lyre wrapped in a silken cover, and laid it on the altar of Dionysus. The entire Court and the principal Senators were already seated around the stage. From the auditorium cries arose in a martial staccato: "Ne-ro! Ne-ro! We-want-Ne-ro!" The *claque* was commencing to work. Seneca felt quite relieved.

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

At last Nero entered. Great applause and cries of joy greeted his appearance. The Emperor was of medium height, but on the stage he seemed very tall. His stature was increased also by the high-soled cothurns worn by all actors, laced with gold clasps, the green toga bordered with gold contrasted beautifully with a chlamis of purple, thrown upon his shoulders. Upon his face was a golden mask, as was proper for a performance. Soon the public from the stalls noticed that the mask had the face of Poppaea. The ladies in the stalls were smirking, but the whispers soon went round, and the populace was delighted that the Emperor should pay this compliment to the woman he loved.

Nero sang fairly well, or rather recited a poem in melopean cadences, accompanying himself with the lyre, a beautiful instrument, elegantly modelled in silver and gold. From the background Seneca and Burrus gave the signal for the applause, moving the hem of their togas. The Augustals and the *claque* took up the cue promptly, and answered with thunderous applause. The crowd, in a joyful mood anyway, and carried by the *claque*, joined in enthusiastically. Nero had a grand success. Wreaths and flowers were thrown upon the stage. People yelled for encores. Someone called out: "It is a divine voice!" Nero spread out his hands, and threw kisses in all directions. In his dressing-room a crowd of admirers was waiting to kiss the hem of his dress. Others offered him fig-leaves and laurels as the day demanded. The Emperor could hardly contain his exultation.

The audience had been cleverly chosen from amongst all classes, from the elegant salons and from the shops. A kind of exhibition had been built for the occasion in the Park of Augustus around the Naumachia. From

booths and stalls all kinds of desirable gifts and refreshments were offered. Every member of the audience had received with his ticket a voucher enabling him to secure an article of his choice.

The populace was truly delighted. No one had a clear idea of what kind of entertainment they had witnessed—was it a concert recital, or a new kind of show in the style of Athens? However, the spectacle had been grand and the *mise-en-scène* superb. The ballet that preceded the recital was good, and the short farce at the end had served to enhance the classical quality of the Emperor's performance. And the viands and cakes and drinks distributed during and after the show were really first-rate. To cap it all, a lovely present to bring home as a souvenir! The river was floodlit from barges. The mob sang and danced all night. It was capital, indeed. Everybody in the Baths and taverns and at the barber-shops was already asking, "When will the Emperor give another performance?"

Seneca took a long breath. The Emperor was more popular than ever. Was it the Emperor's merit or the fault of the populace? Seneca shrugged his shoulders. Life is the mirror of the times. One might still appreciate an essay in praise of Virtue, even if there is no one who believes in virtue. Or in Seneca at all.

As a matter of fact, there was something of a tiff, the following day, between the Emperor and the Commander of the Guards. Burrus repeated his congratulations; but he tartly remarked that, according to what he had gathered from the report of the Chief of Police, many of the spectators had been chosen among classes that it would have been wiser to leave out. It was not right to bring the populace to the level of the Palace. Things that were part of life at Court, a mere *divertissement* for

persons of one's class, might be misconstrued by the people. It offended and harmed the patricians, and at the same time it might lower the dignity of the Emperor in the eyes of the people. One should not forget that the Roman people had been bred on military glories . . .

Nero waved this talk wearily aside. What did the old General understand? Present-day Romans preferred their actors to their generals. The Emperor's popularity was much greater for having sung in the theatre than if he had conquered a new Province. The General should go into the Forum and put this question to the people: "New games or a new Province?" They would simply laugh at the question . . .

## V

FROM Petronius to his friend Marcus Valerius. "I hardly need to mention that our Divine Nero Caesar is now immensely popular. His *début* as a singer has been an immense success. Now the *môt d'ordre* is to keep up with popular taste. We mingle with the gladiators. We are bosom friends with the Oriental acrobats who make huge pyramids of naked bodies. I have high hopes that I shall be able to learn a new dance between daggers planted on the boards. No dinner-party is fashionable without a sprinkle of these lionized guests.

"Our Divine says that we must invent something new to amuse the people as well as ourselves. Tigellinus, who has been appointed Grand Master of this unending masquerade, has already suggested all kinds of new inventions. He has made the impresarios add bizarre turns to the Circus shows, such as races of chariots drawn by four camels. The day before yesterday, our noble friend Atinius was let down by ropes on to the stage, seated upon

an elephant. His creditors, I hear, are no longer pressing him. Afranius has composed a kind of charade or pantomime entitled *The Fire*, in which the performers are allowed to carry off, and to keep for themselves, the furniture of the house which, according to the plot, is burnt upon the stage. For several days we have had the Games enlivened by throwing into the arena thousands of articles of all descriptions for the people to scramble for—fowls, lambs, clothes, pieces of silver and gold, pictures, tickets for corn, all for the fun of seeing the populace scramble. But Tigellinus shall have to rack his brain for something else. Moreover, Nero wants to behold the Games from the front of the proscenium, and when the scramble starts, the crowd comes much too close to the Emperor. The Chief of Police has pointed out that an accident might occur, and who would be blamed but Tigellinus?

“Nero Caesar, however, is quite happy. Since the Theatrical Phase commenced, Nero declares that he has discovered his real self, whatever that means. Last night he confessed to me that he is very proud of his peculiar good looks—his increasingly heavy jowl and high-bridged nose, which, he says, give him the appearance of an Asiatic sovereign. This is the point—he seems particularly proud of looking like an Asiatic king. In all truth, his body is growing much too stout for a man of his age, and his legs are far too slender for such a fat body; but when he is properly arrayed, and with a touch of make-up to improve his sallow complexion, his head is quite striking. It has dignity and geniality. It is indeed the head of an actor. His barber has devised for him a style of hair, in rings of curls, one above the other, and now the Divine affects a certain carelessness of dress, and has taken to wearing around his neck a large silk handkerchief to protect his

throat from the damp air of Rome's evenings and so as not to endanger his voice.

"Only the colour of his hair causes him some concern, for notwithstanding the touch of gold dust that his barber uses quite cleverly, it is definitely a red head. The populace nicknamed him Bronzebeard before he shaved his first beard (and put it in a gold box upon the knees of Jupiter), and the nickname sticks. Some days ago he said, 'Do you know why we have red hair?' And he went on to tell me this lovely story, 'From the Domitii there came two celebrated families, as you know, the Calvini and the Aenobarbs. We Aenobarbs derive both our extraction and cognomen from Lucius Domitius. When this glorious ancestor of mine was entering Rome, he was met by two strangers who asked him to announce to the Senate a victory of which the City had not yet heard any news. Lucius Domitius was surprised by their august appearance and mien, and the two strangers, to prove that they were more than mortal, stroked his cheeks, and by a single touch they changed the colour of his beard from black to red. Ever since we Aenobarbs have had red beards.' When this lovely story was told, he smiled almost expectantly, looking at me with his protruding, short-sighted blue eyes, flickering his red-lashed eyelids, and then he added with a sigh, 'But I cannot, alas, change your beard, my dear Petronius, although I am called Divine.'

"Another day he said: 'It was quite proper that I should have been born on the eve of the Saturnalia, for I was designed by the Gods to be Emperor of the Saturnalia.' But Lucan, who has a poisonous tongue, whispers about town: 'Nero entered life as one goes to the grave, feet first.'

“ I am resuming this letter to add that last night we have enjoyed a new fancy. Tigellinus has brought forth a new ‘ invention,’ a series of living tableaux depicting mythological scenes and episodes. All the guests were asked to take part. Rather a shocking thing, I must say. Even Nero is afraid that our censorious Senators must be in an uproar. As for myself, I would not be surprised to hear that our Senators are not shocked at all. Besides, when the mythological scene became too crude, the Emperor advanced upon a small platform, cetra in hand, and sang to us a tragic poem. The balance of art was redressed.

“ He has also said that he considers that Rome is quite ugly. These narrow lanes, he said, their filth and smells; in the summer nights, from the Suburra, there seems to float up to the Palace a foetid air . . . One day, he said, he must change all this. Quite true, our Rome is not really a beautiful city, and the smells are appalling. Nevertheless, I think it was a dangerous thought to express. Yet, our Divine loves to survey the City from the terrace, through his emerald monocle, and he says, ‘ Even as a name, Rome is too old. I would like to build somewhere else a really great city and call it Neropolis.’ And he told me that he often thinks that he is the only modern man in Rome.”

## VI

ONE day, some time later, the Emperor had returned to the Palace from the theatre in high spirits. He had gone down into the orchestra among the Senators to receive from the hands of the men of Consular rank, whom he had appointed judges of the theatrical competitions, the crown for the best performance in prose and verse, which

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

had been unanimously decreed to him. They had also awarded to him the crown for the best performance on the lyre. This had delighted him beyond words. He had saluted the crowd with affection, while the populace cheered him to the echo. Then he had ordered that the two crowns should be hung upon the statue of Augustus.

So that when Seneca was announced, the Emperor, still filled with those pleasant emotions and his mind turned to the gesture he had made to the memory of his great predecessor, greeted his Prime Minister with a reference to the afternoon's occurrence, "Augustus," he said, "would have been proud to see a new ornament added to the line of the Caesars."

But the Prime Minister had come to talk about some public discontent over the fiscal policy. Nero listened patiently for a while, as he always did, at the same time considering what a colossal bore his old tutor was. Then, he said, "These complaints and accusations against the Public Treasurers have given me an idea. I think indeed that it is the most extraordinary idea ever conceived by a ruler. I am going to propose to the Senate that all taxes should be abolished."

The Prime Minister was simply flabbergasted. "Divine Nero Caesar," he replied, "the Senate will exalt the Emperor's magnanimity, but very firmly they will reply that without its ordinary revenue the Empire could no longer exist."

"Then let the people be informed of the sources of the Imperial Finances and their expenditure. It will do good to the plain citizens to be initiated into high finance."

Seneca shook his head, and embarked upon one of his interminable tirades. Of all the offices created by the Romans for the administration of the State, he said, the

most important was the Consulate. Later came the Tribunes created to protect the rights of the people and of the small landowners in particular. The houses of the Tribunes used to be open day and night to the citizens who might at any time require the Tribunes' assistance. The Tribunes watched over the Senate, and their persons were sacred. They opposed any law and kept in check both the Senate and the people. In the same way, the Tribunes had a right to veto judgments by the Senate in criminal trials. Between the Consuls and the Tribunes, who had more strictly political powers, there were the Censors, who held a moral authority over the citizens of all classes and orders. The Censors could examine the life and conduct of the Senators themselves and pass censure upon any Knight who neglected his horse or upon any young patrician who unduly prolonged his bachelorhood and they could deprive him of his rank and degrade him to one of the lower orders. There was a time when the President of the Senate was chosen by the Censor for his high morals. Nowadays they choose him for his laxity . . .

The Emperor yawned. But Seneca was now expatiating, "The Prince of the Senate was the real leader of Roman aristocracy. He was the first to speak in the debates in the House. His vote had a special weight. Even at the time of Augustus . . ."

The Emperor seized the opportunity with impatience: "I declared at the outset of my reign that I intended to govern according to the model of Augustus. I omitted no opportunity to show my generosity, my clemency and complaisance. I abolished the more burdensome taxes. I reduced by three-quarters the rewards appointed for informers by the Papian Law. I distributed four hundred

sesterces a man. I gave annual allowances to the noblest Senators who were in reduced circumstances, in some cases as much as five hundred thousand sestertii. I gave to the Praetorian Cohort a free monthly allowance of corn.\* Who can say I am not generous and munificent?"

As all this was quite true, Seneca had no answer. In fact he felt rather annoyed with himself for having allowed his tutorial habit to take the upper hand, thus preventing him from broaching the subject that had been the primary reason of this audience. Now the Emperor was roused, and it was wiser to let him have his say.

"My Prime Minister and honoured teacher, let me remind you that during his Consulship the Divine Julius Caesar robbed the Capitol of three thousand golden pieces and put in their place three thousand pieces of gilt copper of the same weight. He stole like a brigand. In Spain he held to ransom even the colleague he was going to replace. In Lusitania he sacked the towns that had opened their gates to him. In Gallia he destroyed the cities and took away everything of value. He robbed the sanctuaries of their votive offerings. He amassed gold in plenty; and to what purpose? To bribe the troops and the Senators and the Knights. Yes, indeed, people were less frightened of the cruelty of Sulla than of the generosity of Julius Caesar!" But soon he laughed: "So-called public virtue is nothing more than hypocrisy. Even Augustus said so."

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Nero was indeed very fond of exalting his own rule. His government was honest, he repeated. The Provinces were wisely ruled. He had reinstated the people's meet-

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, X.

ings. What more could an Emperor do without being taken for a downright Republican?

No one, indeed, could say that the administration was not satisfactory. Eight years of peace had allowed the Empire to develop its resources to the utmost. Seneca and Burrus guided the Imperial government with a light hand. Rome ruled the world without oppressing it. Only on the Eastern frontiers the Parthians were giving trouble; but it was an agitation of long standing, going back to the days when the terrible Parthians had destroyed the armies of Crassus and defeated Mark Antony. It was a question of protecting the trade of Rome with the Far East. As soon as they had become masters of Egypt, the Romans had followed up and increased the business relations which the Greeks had established with India. Already under Tiberius, each year one hundred and twenty ships left the port of Myos-hormos, on the Red Sea, to carry trade with the Far East.\* Overland they reached the country of Seressa, in the centre of Asia, which dealt in a rare and valuable textile called silk.† The Parthians were jealous of their trade with the Chinese, and wanted to retain their monopoly of silks, and they never permitted the Romans to cross their Province and reach the interior of Asia. It was therefore a point of honour and a business advantage to wage war against the Parthians. Furthermore, the Parthians disputed the suzerainty of Armenia to Rome; their king Vologese—a descendant of the powerful Arsacides—meant to place his brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne.

A campaign was therefore decided upon, and on the advice of Burrus, the command was entrusted to Domitius

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\* Strabo.

† Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, VI.

#### THE THEATRICAL PHASE

Corbulo, an excellent general. Corbulo was a man of Herculean stature and strength, sober and rigid in life, well proven in battle and splendid in command. He believed, like the famous Marius, that the enemy must be conquered rather by attrition than by the sword, and therefore he insisted on inflexible discipline for his troops. He made his army, softened by too long garrisoning in the East, spend the winter out of tents and train by long marches and arduous exercise. He himself went into the front line, bareheaded in cold weather. Soon his army made the enemy tremble, and in the year 61 the war commenced against the Parthians.

Corbulo advanced into Armenia at the moment when Tiridates, heading his innumerable cavalry, was sacking and plundering the territories of those who supported Rome. In the midst of this formidable cavalry, always on the move, the massive Roman army advanced, surrounded by an enemy that found victory in retreat. Tiridates tried against Corbulo the strategy that Surena had found successful against Crassus and Phraate with Antony. Some of Tiridates' forces were light cavalry on very fast horses, armed only with great bows. They fought while escaping. Their arrows were winged with such force that the Romans received the wound without having seen the missile. Other troops, called cataphract, were entirely covered with an armour made of shells and steel, like human crocodiles, which left the warriors entire freedom of movement, turning on horseback as they pleased, and the long halberds they carried made them formidable assailants. Now and then they manoeuvred *en masse*, raising a cloud of dust that made them invisible, and in this smoke-screen the cavalry encircled the Romans, piercing them with their lances.

Tiridates tried to encircle Corbulo with his hordes. His troops opened out of the plain, moved like a storm amidst clouds of dust and fluttered on the horizon like a thundercloud. But Corbulo's army advanced in impressive order, like a solid moving fortress. So compact was Corbulo's army that the city of Artaxata was captured and burnt. Corbulo continued his advance towards Tigranocerte, but the great city opened its gates, and Armenia submitted. The former prisoner Tigrane, a ghost of a king, was sent from Rome by the Emperor to reign over Armenia. But Corbulo, who alone could keep the country in check, was victimised by jealousies in Rome, and was ordered to take over the Governorship of Syria.\*

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Equally successful was the quelling of Queen Boadicea's revolt in Britain. General Commander in Britain was Suetonius Paulinus, who meant to pacify the island and obtain, if possible, one of those victories that change the face of things.

The revolt had been brewing for a long time. King Prasotagus, who held sway over Norfolk and Suffolk, before taking leave of this life, in the year 61, made the Emperor Nero his heir jointly with his own two daughters, hoping in this way to save both his kingdom and his fortune. But as soon as he was dead, the Romans seized his land and desecrated his house, and his widow, Queen Boadicea, was thrashed with rods and his daughters dishonoured. Queen Boadicea was a lady of terrible appearance, with a harsh voice and a wild bearing, her neck encircled by a heavy necklace of gold, her bosom tight

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\* Tacitus—*Historias*, III.

into a corset, and she wore a flowing mantle of brilliant colours held by a brooch, her flaxen hair floating upon her shoulders.

The fury of Queen Boadicea was increased by another reason. King Presotagus had had some financial deals with Seneca, who had privately loaned to him large sums of money to breed horses. After King Presotagus's death, Seneca had called in his loans, that were a kind of mortgage on reversions, and Boadicea did not hesitate to tell Seneca to go to the devil, and decided for open rebellion.

Mysterious and supernatural signs announced the revolt. In the Curia of Camolodunum, capital of the Province, ghosts were heard calling aloud for vengeance. One morning the great marble statue of Victory was found overthrown from its pedestal and lying prone on the ground as if the Goddess had surrendered to the enemy. At night the Theatre resounded with screams, and one day somebody said that the sea was the colour of blood and the tide had left upon the shore the outline of horrible corpses.

The veterans settled by Claudius at Camolodunum were the first victims. The whole town was razed to the ground. The Roman temples were burnt. The Ninth Legion, which rushed to the defence under the command of the Legate Petilius Curialis, was put to the sword to the last man. A similar fate befell Londinium, which was beginning to be a commercial centre of some importance, and the same happened to Verulamium. Seventy thousand Romans and allies met their death under the scythed chariots of the terrible Queen, or were massacred and burned at the stake.

Suetonius Paulinus hastened from Wales, and succeeded in putting together a new army of ten thousand men.

Against him stood no less than one hundred thousand Britons. But Paulinus compelled the enemy to give battle on the ground he had chosen. He had at his disposal the Fourteenth Legion, with the reserves of the Twentieth and some auxiliaries drawn from the neighbouring garrisons, ten thousand men in all. He chose a narrow gorge flanked by impassable forests,\* and having made sure that he had the enemy only in front, he waited for the Britons in an order of battle that was well known since the time of Marathon.

Before the hills between which Paulinus had taken position there was a vast plain, upon which the multitude of Britons advances helter-skelter, cavalry and infantry together. So sure were the Britons of victory that they had brought with them their wives and families, and had placed them upon wagons at the end of the battlefield to enjoy the sight of the grand combat. Boadicea, standing upon her war-chariot with her two daughters before her, dashed from one clan to another, shouting that she was on the field only as a woman of the people, ready to die to avenge her lost liberty, the wounds inflicted on her own body and the outrage on the virtue of her daughters. As soon as she finished speaking she took from the folds of her dress a hare, a sacred animal for the Britons, and seeing the hare running at full speed, they took it as a good omen.

The battle began. Paulinus had placed the Fourteenth Legion in the centre, surrounded by light infantry, and had arranged the cavalry on the flanks. The Fourteenth at the start stood still, shielded by the narrow entrance to the valley, but as soon as the enemy came within range, the whole Legion charged as one man. Simultaneously the auxiliaries attacked, and the cavalry with their long

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\* Where there is now London's district of King's Cross.

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

spears overcame all obstacles. The greater part of the Britons, taken by surprise, tried to run away, but the retreat was cut off by their own chariots and wagons that formed a dangerous circle of spectators at the end of the field; and the Romans made a slaughter from which not even the women and children escaped. Queen Boadicea, rather than fall into the hands of the Romans, took poison.\*

The news of the revolt, followed by the resounding dispatches from Suetonius Paulinus, created much talk and satisfaction in Rome. But the stories of the vengeance applied by Paulinus prompted Nero to show leniency instead, and he spoke to his Cabinet of returning to the policy of Augustus who had persistently refused to occupy Britain. The Cabinet pointed out that an evacuation, even after such a military success, would have dangerous repercussions throughout the Empire, and would be difficult to explain even in Rome. The Emperor, therefore, limited himself to send the freedman Policletus with extraordinary powers and a formidable train, and as Suetonius Paulinus, in a subsequent engagement, lost some boats, Nero seized the opportunity, and recalled him.

## VII

PEACE, Nero could say, reigned everywhere. Nothing, however, seemed to escape a touch of ridicule. Some little time later, the Ambassadors of a German tribe arrived in Rome to beg from the Emperor the freedom of their territory. During their stay they were taken to the Theatre of Pompey to see the play. They could not understand the drama on the stage. On the other hand,

\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XIV.

they were most interested in the emotions of the public, and even more in the structure of the auditorium, and the different seats and boxes reserved for the various orders of citizens. Suddenly the German Ambassadors noticed in the orchestra stalls a group of spectators dressed differently from the other members of the audience. They asked who were the strangers seated with the Senators. Their escort explained to them that those places were reserved for the Ambassadors of people who had proven to be most brave and loyal to Rome. At this, the Germans rose and proudly went to sit among the Senators.

But one day a strange rumour ran through Rome, that Fortune had abandoned the Emperor. The previous night, while he was dining in a villa at Subiacum, the lightning had overthrown the table and broken the cup in his hands. A few minutes later a comet appeared in the sky—without any doubt, the omen of a change on the throne. The people, superstitious in the manner of a people no longer possessing any real faith, considered Nero already dethroned. But who would be his successor? Public rumour hinted at Rubellius Plautus, a Senator who, through his mother, could claim Julian descent. He was the very opposite of Nero. A man of grave mien, austere and reserved. His ancestors came from Tivoli, where the lightning had struck the Emperor's table—what surer sign could one wish for? In a few hours Senator Rubellius found himself surrounded by a potential Court.

Nero felt the danger, but acted with much tact. He returned to Rome without delay and treated the rumour as a joke. Sending for Rubellius he advised him to retire to the East before the foolish attempts of a clique should place him in a false situation and force the Emperor to treat him as an enemy, which was far from his mind.

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

Rubellius agreed that the Emperor was more than right, and being a wealthy man, decided to start on an explorative journey to open up business in the Near East. At a farewell dinner the Emperor was heard to say: "There is not a single Senator of note whose astrologer has not predicted the Throne for him."

At that dinner, it was noted, the Emperor had invited two of the stoutest Liberals of the day, the orator Domitius Afer and the historian Marcus Servilius. Afer, greatly admired by Tacitus, had achieved fame because, his talents apart, he was the very antithesis of the great jurists of the day. Famous lawyers were accustomed in the Courts to make a theatrical show of their haranguing, always arriving escorted by a long queue of clients acting as a clique, and speaking with emphatic gestures, gesticulating with well-cared-for hands upon which rings with precious stones glittered. Afer despised those artificialities and spurned rhetorical mannerism. Servilius, on the other hand, prided himself on his rigid sense of honour. His only foible was to wear around his neck two letters of the Greek alphabet written upon a piece of parchment and wrapped in a small piece of linen. He said that they would preserve him from weak eyes in old age. Servilius and Afer were two characters in Rome, serious to a degree, and acting their parts of old die-hards with the utmost composure. Indeed, they would never admit that it flattered them to be treated with great respect by the Emperor, but Nero knew it.

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Soon after, the news went round that General Burrus was very ill. Eyebrows were raised; heads meaningfully

shaken. It was known that Burrus was utterly against a marriage between Nero and Poppaea.

Burrus had begun his service under Caligula. He had fought in many battles and won reputation as a brave soldier. But in peace time the soldier was bound to stumble over a multitude of impediments. Heroism was an irrelevant virtue amid the complications and intrigues of a Court. Of recent times, he loved to mount his horse and ride into the Praetorians' camp; and there he watched the Centurions reading the order for the next day, and in the stables the magnificent horses being fed, and the soldiers passing by, many of whom he knew by name, strong men, splendid warriors. It was but a few years ago that he had brought the young Emperor to this very camp, vainly seeking to arouse in him an interest in the army. Now he had given it up. He was descended from a great military family. He had kept intact the military spirit of his ancestors. What would become of Rome with an Emperor who was not interested in the army? An Emperor who had no higher ambition than to sing on the stage?

The Emperor was informed that the old soldier was ill with laryngitis. Nero appeared extremely grieved and anxious: "I will send him my own doctor." He sent indeed to Burrus the specialist who looked after the Imperial throat, with orders to paint the General's tonsils with an infallible drug. But when the Emperor himself went to visit him, Burrus turned his face to the wall. "How do you feel?" the Emperor asked. "Immensely glad to die," replied the old soldier.

Thus the rumour went, and Burrus's death remained a complete mystery. There was no motive whatever for a dark deed. Burrus was loyal and faithful, and he had

upheld the Emperor in the dark hours of his mother's assassination. There is no word anywhere that points to a murder. On the other hand, no one has registered Nero's regret at losing his faithful friend. All that is certain is that there was no delay and no hesitation in appointing a successor. Indeed, the successor was already chosen. The command of the Praetorian Guards was divided between Foenius Rufus, who would assure the Emperor of the loyalty of the plebs, and Tigellinus, who deserved a sign of his master's gratitude for all his efforts to keep the fun going.

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But soon afterwards the Court turned against Seneca. After all, he was an old bore, and a hypocrite and a humbug. And who could deny it? His riches, it was said, were greater than the Emperor's. Most unbecoming for a philosopher preaching austerity! What did he want to buy with his wealth?

Others whispered to Nero, "This Spanish rhetorician does not want to admit that our Divine Caesar's genius is putting to shame his out-worn talents. He has announced that he is going to publish a book of poems! Soon he will step on the stage too, with a harp in his hands." And someone else said, "With Seneca at your side, you look like a pupil under an unending tutelage."

Certain it was that close to Nero sat Seneca, all-important in his vast riches, his position and his selfishness; more important still for his talents and for his reputation as an austere philosopher. His houses and gardens were almost as splendid as the Emperor's. He had accumulated wealth, accepting the Emperor's generous gifts of other people's confiscated estates. He was all-

powerful in Rome, perhaps more powerful than the Emperor, and now he spent his spare time composing poetry. It was reported to the Emperor that Seneca, who publicly compared Nero's voice to that of Apollo, in private had laughed at Caesar the Singer, and Caesar the Poet, and Caesar the Charioteer. Moreover, it was Seneca who had urged his nephew Lucan to compose the poem *Pharsalia* in which Cato was glorified at the expense of Julius Caesar, when he, Seneca, knew that on the name of Julius Caesar rested the glory and power of his very master. And Seneca was professing the greatest admiration for Demetrius the Cynic, who had dared to criticize the Emperor, and on being called to the Palace and pointed out the danger to which his insolence exposed him, had replied to Nero: "You may threaten me with death. So does Nature threaten you." And Seneca, the Augustals said in their falsetto voices, had praised at the Baths the courage and wit of this reply!

Seneca, who was informed of all this by his own spies, decided it was time to beg the Emperor to exempt him from public duties and allow him to retire. He asked for an audience, and in a well-prepared speech begged the Emperor to allow him to quit public life: he would place in the Emperor's hands all he had received from him—honours, riches, everything. He was now too old to manage public affairs and opulence did not suit his philosophical mood.

It was a clever speech. Nero sensed the trick that was prompting such a request, for he knew his old tutor only too well. He answered with another speech. He repeated his friendship for his Mentor and Prime Minister, and voiced his regret at the idea of losing his company and his services. But nevertheless, Seneca's request left the

## THE THEATRICAL PHASE

Emperor nonplussed. Prime Minister Seneca was a bore; more than that, he was at times vexing and embarrassing, with his attitude of an old tutor, almost forgetting that the Emperor was no longer his young pupil. But nevertheless he was a good standby. One could trust him with the conduct of public affairs; if not devoted or loyal, and certainly not affectionate, he was able. He knew all the correct answers. He could be relied upon to give the right advice to his Sovereign. And although the Emperor knew only too well that he was greedy to a degree, he had a knack of appearing a superior person, an honest philosopher. But now he wanted to leave.

The Emperor felt annoyed, almost angry. Especially as the old man gave no plausible reason, only the transparent excuse of old age and ill-health, and the desire to withdraw to his studies and writings.

The Emperor eyed Seneca for a long time. He knew that no inducement would make the old man change his mind. There was nothing else but to give way graciously, and try afterwards to discover the real cause. But it looked like desertion. And no one had a right to desert the Emperor.

## VIII

AFTER Seneca's departure, Nero wondered whether there was some fatality in his life. *Fastigium tuum affixum est.* They were Seneca's words. Nero recalled to his mind the subtle teaching of Seneca and the speech his tutor had trained him to deliver before the Senate on the day of his accession. And the message that Seneca had drafted for him after the murder of his mother. And the wise way that his old Prime Minister had found to justify the Emperor's whim of acting on the stage. And the hint

that the Prime Minister had given him to spare Rubellius Plautus and make a show of magnanimity. And now Prime Minister Seneca wanted to retire. What was behind it all?

Seneca kept away from the Palace and took to living a life of frugal austerity in his luxurious house. He closed his door to all clients and protégés and he ceased to go out. He let it be known that he was ill and deep in study, writing, correcting his works, fortifying them with new truths.

Nero told his friends, "When one carefully considers Seneca, one finds that he does not honestly love anything or anyone, neither his Prince nor what he calls his virtue." And Tigellinus added venomously: "Seneca's poverty is a kind of audacity. His inactivity is a manoeuvre that will give him time to await his opportunity."

One day the Emperor was told that Seneca had upheld Thrasea in the affair of Praetor Antistius. It was merely a strange and somewhat unimportant tangle upon the interpretation of ancient laws. Praetor Antistius, who had made himself obnoxious by turbulent behaviour during his period of office as a Tribune, had gone so far as to compose a satire against the Emperor and read it at a dinner-party at Ostorius Scapula's. Tigellinus's son-in-law Capito happened to be amongst the guests, and soon afterwards Tigellinus brought a charge of *lèse majesté* before the Senate against Antistius. The crime was proven, and the Consul Marullus, the first to speak, expressed the view that the accused, deprived of his office, should be punished according to the Twelve Tables. According to the formal text of those ancient laws, Antistius should have been strangled in prison, for honour was esteemed so highly in ancient Rome that he who

besmirched the honour of another man was considered to have committed a crime as great as an attempt at assassination.

But public opinion believed that in that affair of the Antistius trial the real intention was not so much to punish a culprit as to find an opportunity for the Emperor to make a grand show of clemency. Indeed, the law of *lèse majesté* had been set aside by Nero at the beginning of his reign. Should the Senate apply to Antistius the severity of the ancient laws, Nero would use his power to show mercy to the condemned. But that plan, which Nero had actually discussed with his Cabinet, was unexpectedly frustrated in the Senate by Senator Thrasea Peto who thwarted the Emperor's intention and stole from him the glory and pleasure of an act of clemency.

In his speech Thrasea made a great show of praising the Emperor, and as he passed for an opposition Liberal, his speech of praise for the Emperor won the Senators over to his point of view. The Senate, therefore, merely sentenced Antistius to be banished and his private estate confiscated. Before putting the sentence on record, the Consuls informed the Emperor of the Senate's vote. Nero was stunned to find that the Senate had thought fit to anticipate his personal clemency. But he held his hand, and replied that notwithstanding the terrible insult of Antistius, he would not oppose the Senate's indulgence; in fact, the Senate might even discharge him, the Emperor would not object.

Yet, why had Senator Thrasea thwarted the Emperor's desire for clemency? And why should public opinion now whisper that Seneca was ranging himself on the side of Thrasea?

But the Emperor was young! Young and tempera-

mental, and inclined to lighter things. Seneca's defection was soon put out of mind. Tigellinus took great care to make the Emperor forget it. For Tigellinus enjoyed the Emperor's confidence by contrast. Seneca was as much the false embodiment of virtue as Tigellinus was the personification of everything vile and depraved. He was a bosom friend of the Emperor, and he realized that the surest way to retain this friendship was to foster all the Imperial whims, the worst even more than the best. He did not even ask for gifts or for a salary. He smiled at Poppaea and pulled a face behind Seneca's back. And even now, he had a way of sighing that made Nero laugh; and the Emperor, alas, was bored.

## IX

POPPAEA was pressing the Emperor to marry her, to regularize, she said, her position at Court: "Why don't you get rid of Octavia? She has given you no children, no heir."

This was true, and sterility could be an excellent reason for repudiating a wife. It was equally true that Octavia had a very good defence—Nero had never been her husband. But that was another matter, for Nero had always felt a strange, inexplicable repugnance to approach the virtuous Octavia.

The idea of repudiating her had long been in Nero's mind. Once he had mentioned it to Burrus, and Burrus had answered with his usual soldierly frankness, "If you want to repudiate Octavia, you must give her back her dowry." But the dowry that Octavia had brought at her wedding was the Throne.

Now the Throne was his and there was Poppaea—and

Poppaea was with child. The secret gave Nero an incomparable happiness. He dreamed of the heir he was going to have; it was urgent to avoid at any price the risk that the child should be born with the stigma of illegitimacy.

Octavia was therefore officially repudiated. Maybe she was glad to be rid of it all, to get away from that crazy Court where everybody treated her with contempt and neglect. Her life had been dull and grey. Nero's indifference for her had turned into a mutual feeling of revulsion. He cringed whenever Octavia came near him. Her black hair was combed back smoothly, like the hair of a virgin, and there was something alien in her face that stifled any effort to feel affection or passion for her. When her changeless blue eyes looked straight at the Emperor's face, a feeling of physical discomfort seized him. Since her brother's death Octavia had never appeared at the dinner-table. Whenever she made an appearance in the drawing-room, she seemed to look fearfully around to make sure that no one was behind her. After her marriage to Nero she had lived in the Palace, not daring to stir out of its high, gloomy walls. Half-woman, half-child, in daytime she played with her dolls; but at night she would sit in her room with her old nurse Lalage, her little dark head pressed between her hands. At times she would say: "He doesn't love me." Or she would ask: "Why doesn't he love me?" The great-grandchild of Augustus would then stand up for her nurse's appraisal. She was very small, but delicately made and graceful. The old nurse would answer, "You are beautiful, my Empress, you are very beautiful." "But still he doesn't love me." From her apartment on the ground floor she could see into the portico and the gardens beyond, shrouded in darkness. From somewhere in the night came the sound

of a flute. Occasionally she would meet the Emperor, but Nero would avoid her very glance. That timid, fearful child-wife, whose eyes were always red with weeping, whose hands and feet were always cold, wearied him. He had come to think that Octavia was a hostile influence on his poetical inspiration. They rarely exchanged more than a word of formal greeting: "Empress . . ." "Emperor . . ." At the last feast of the Lupercalia, when sterile women submitted to flagellation, Octavia had the High Priest himself touch her loins with the whip—but the Emperor remained more distant than ever. Yes, in a life of utter disenchantment, it was better to part. Away from the Court she would find a new life; after all, she was not yet seventeen.

Twelve days later Nero married Poppaea\* with the full ceremony of traditional marriage—the young bridesmaids singing the bridal hymns, the escorting of the bridegroom to the bride's chamber, the draperies raised for an instant so that relatives and friends could see the newly-wed pair lying in the same bed, then the draperies fell back again, the servants put out the lamps, the departing guests murmured the customary good wishes for the happiness of Nero and Poppaea . . . Like a farce on the stage, whispered someone. But Nero was really happy, for he was deeply in love with Poppaea. And she already carried in her womb his future heir.

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But the repudiation of Octavia—or was it the marriage with Poppaea?—caused public protests. The people, who had accepted in silence the poisoning of Britannicus, the assassination of Agrippina, the "liquidation" of Burrus, rebelled at the idea of the poor innocent Octavia being

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXV.

chased away by her Imperial husband and supplanted by the hateful Poppaea. To Seneca, who had come to offer his belated congratulations, Nero expressed his surprise. The old Mentor replied: "Sometimes the people can be hurt by a simple injustice. The soul of the people always retains some spark of innocence and sense of equity." The old humbug, Nero thought with annoyance, always these moralizings!

The fact was that Poppaea upset public opinion. She was too haughty, too disdainful, her very beauty was too unreal, almost un-Roman. And her mixing with the Jews caused much criticism. On the day of the nuptial ceremony and the formal proclamation of Poppaea as Empress, there were demonstrations in front of the Palace. The populace asked forgiveness for Octavia and insults were hurled at the new Empress. The crowd had to be chased away by the Guards with the flat of their swords.

It was, therefore, decided to make public the reasons for Octavia's repudiation. Agents were sent out in the City with this kind of tale. The repudiation had a very serious reason, which the Emperor, out of kindness and consideration for Octavia's youth had preferred to keep quiet. But Octavia had a lover, a man of low caste, almost a slave, a flute-player from Egypt. Everything had been discovered, even the name of the lover was known—Eukeros.

To give some semblance of authenticity to the story, a mock trial was staged. Senators were called to the Palace to sit as Justices and Tribunes, Army Chiefs, all the usual advisers of the Emperor. Poppaea, veiled as Agrippina used to be, sat on a throne next to the Emperor. Tigellinus, his arms crossed upon his glittering breastplate, stood like a sinister buffoon behind the Imperial pair. The

Chief hangman with his assistant in a corner of the room, prepared the pincers, the levers, the thumbscrews, all the instruments of torture. Octavia's maids were introduced to be questioned, naked, while the executioners advanced towards them holding red-hot irons. With the hot irons almost touching their breasts, or upon the "horse" with their legs outstretched and the wooden peg splitting them apart, the girls confessed to anything. Some courageously shouted that their Imperial mistress was as innocent as a dove. The executioners tortured them, rather blandly, as in a play. The number of confessions extorted was more than enough. Tigellinus asked of one: "Confess that Octavia gave herself to anybody. All the world says so!" The poor girl answered, "If one had to believe all the filthy things that are said about you, you should be hanged and quartered!" The Court laughed. A little humour accorded well with the merciful spirit of the Emperor. Octavia was merely banished to Campania.

But again the people protested at the exile. Nero was much perturbed.

In the peculiar Roman life, there was, between the people and the Emperor, a kind of daily intimacy that made any friction intolerable for the Emperor. Notwithstanding the great powers of the Throne, the people had retained unimpaired certain rights of control and criticism. The Senate was servile yet obstructive. The people were devoted yet insolent. This was because for the people the Emperor was merely a crowned Tribune, whose job and duty was to feed and amuse them with Circus shows. Every day the Emperor must preside over the Games at the Circus, give justice in the Forum, offer sacrifices in the temples, and the crowd acclaimed him, spoke to him. It was a continuous communing of life between the

#### THE THEATRICAL PHASE

Throne and the People. Hence the necessity for the Emperor to be forever popular, and the impossibility of living in Rome without continuous ovations.

How could Poppaea show herself in the Imperial Box at the Circus if one hundred thousand spectators threw at her the name of Octavia? Nero was frightened by this popular emotion. Orders were issued to bring Octavia back. The news was at once circulated in all districts of the City and announced in the *Acta Diurna*.

The news provoked an explosion of joy that was equally immoderate and dangerous. The people marched *en masse* to the Capitol to render thanks to the Supreme God Jupiter. Crowns of roses were laid upon the busts of Octavia, such a homage of flowers that the head of the exiled Empress seemed to bloom out of fragrant petals. And, what was worse, several effigies of Poppaea were smashed. To crown it all, the crowd went again to the Palace to acclaim the generosity of the Emperor. But the felicitations were mingled with insults for the new Empress. It looked like a sedition. Once more the Guards that Tigellinus and Foenius kept in readiness in the Royal Gardens had to be called out. The crowd backed away leaving on the Palace Square many wounded and dead.

But the outburst had doomed Octavia. In a few days Poppaea's friends hinted to the Emperor that Octavia was not only a nuisance to the Empress, but a danger to the Emperor himself. In a city where the Emperor's liberal policy permitted such public licence, two or three hundred thousand citizens, without reckoning the slaves and freedmen, could suddenly rise, prompted by the same sentiment or pretext; and ten thousand Praetorian Guards would no longer be able to quell the revolt. And who could say whether behind these demonstrations there was

not lurking the ambition of someone waiting to be proclaimed?

Poppaea threw herself at Nero's feet, giving her anguish a touching theatrical turn. If her absent rival had such power over the crowd, what would happen when she returned to Rome? Let her return indeed, and bring into the Imperial Family the breed of an Egyptian flute-player! Let her come back. If the Emperor hesitated to take back Claudius's daughter, the people would find for her a new husband and proclaim him Emperor!

Behind Poppaea was Tigellinus. Octavia's end was decided. Poppaea departed for Anzio, to await the birth of her child.

Two days later an incredible confession was placarded all over Rome. Anicetus, the sailor who had proved so useful in the "liquidation" of Agrippina, had confessed to being the secret lover of Octavia. Anicetus was already on the high seas towards his new Governorship of Sardinia. People were flabbergasted. Who would have imagined it! Poppaea and Tigellinus lost no time and Octavia was despatched to the Island of Pandataria. It was equal to a sentence of death.

A few days later the actual order was issued. A detachment of Praetorian Guards arrived on the island bringing to the former Empress the order to commit suicide. Terrified, the young girl cried: "I have not done anything! Have pity on me!" But the Centurion had his orders and an eye on promotion. He nodded to his men. Octavia was seized. They gagged her to stop her screams, and her wrists were cut. Then, as she wriggled on the ground, they threw her into a cauldron of boiling water and pushed her down. Her head was brought on a salver to Poppaea.

# THE FIRE OF ROME



*Book Four*

THE FIRE OF ROME

I

IT commenced with the arrival of Peter, when Claudius was still on the throne.

Peter had arrived in the month of January, from Antioch. He was a man without education or birth, poor and common in appearance. He landed at Ostia; then he came up the River on a fisherman's barge. The boat reached the Gardens of Servilius, where the Anio joined the Tiber, and he saw Rome extending before his eyes. On the right bank the building-yards, the immense docks, the warehouses of the Emporium, and above them the temples and monuments crowning the Aventine. On the left, the gardens of Caesar's Palace, beyond which rose the fortress of the Janiculum. The barge went as far as the Velabrum, where the fish-market was, and there the mysterious traveller lost himself in the crowd.

Peter went to live in the Jewish district, between the Janiculum and the Vatican. He did not like the Jews, nor did they like him, for the Jewish colony of Rome, like all the Jewish colonies the world over, had an excellent information service, and Peter's journey had been preceded by a detailed account of the simple man's activities in Judaea, and his attachment to the hated and false prophet Jesus of Nazareth.

Moreover, Peter had come to Rome to preach, and he was thus opposing the popularity of Simon Magus. Peter had met the great impostor in Samaria, when Simon, surprised at the rapid progress of the new faith and attracted by the miracles performed by another of the Master's

disciples, Philip, had offered Peter a large sum of money to teach him the science of healing by the laying on of hands. Peter had repulsed him in horror, and Simon, hurt in his pride, yet feeling that the new faith would make much progress, had decided to forestall the true disciples, and had come to Rome to preach it on the most attractive basis, the working of miracles.

But Simon was no genuine healer, nor could he work miracles, and his intrigues were the main cause of the measures ordered by Emperor Claudius against the followers of the new faith. For the Jews and the new proselytes quarrelled wildly upon the great point whether the man Jesus, who was crucified, had been the true Messiah that the Jewish nation expected. At times the quarrel became as wild as a seditious disturbance, and the Magistrates, for whom both Jews and Christians were a great nuisance, urged Claudius to sign a decree expelling the agitators from Rome.

Peter was a simple man, but he had an extraordinary capacity for making contacts and friendships. Soon he came to know the wealthy Easterners who lived in the Esquiline and Viminal districts and in their houses he made the acquaintance of Senator Pudens and his wife Claudia, both of whom he soon converted to the new faith. Spiritually, the time was most suitable to the new faith, even among the educated classes, for the animism that was the essence of the Christian preaching appealed as an attractive novelty to the Latin minds, which had lost faith in their materialistic Gods. Pudens offered Peter hospitality in his house, and Peter accepted it, in the first place to get away from the orthodox Jews who were his bitter enemies, and secondly because he fully realized that his real work lay among the Roman people.

Meetings and services took place in the house of Senator Pudens. Peter sat in the chair of Pudens himself, debating and teaching, and administering baptism and communion. That chair became an object of veneration to his followers, and it is now in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, enclosed in the stupendous bronze cathedra that Bernini made for it, almost suspended in mid-air, above the Altar of the Confession.

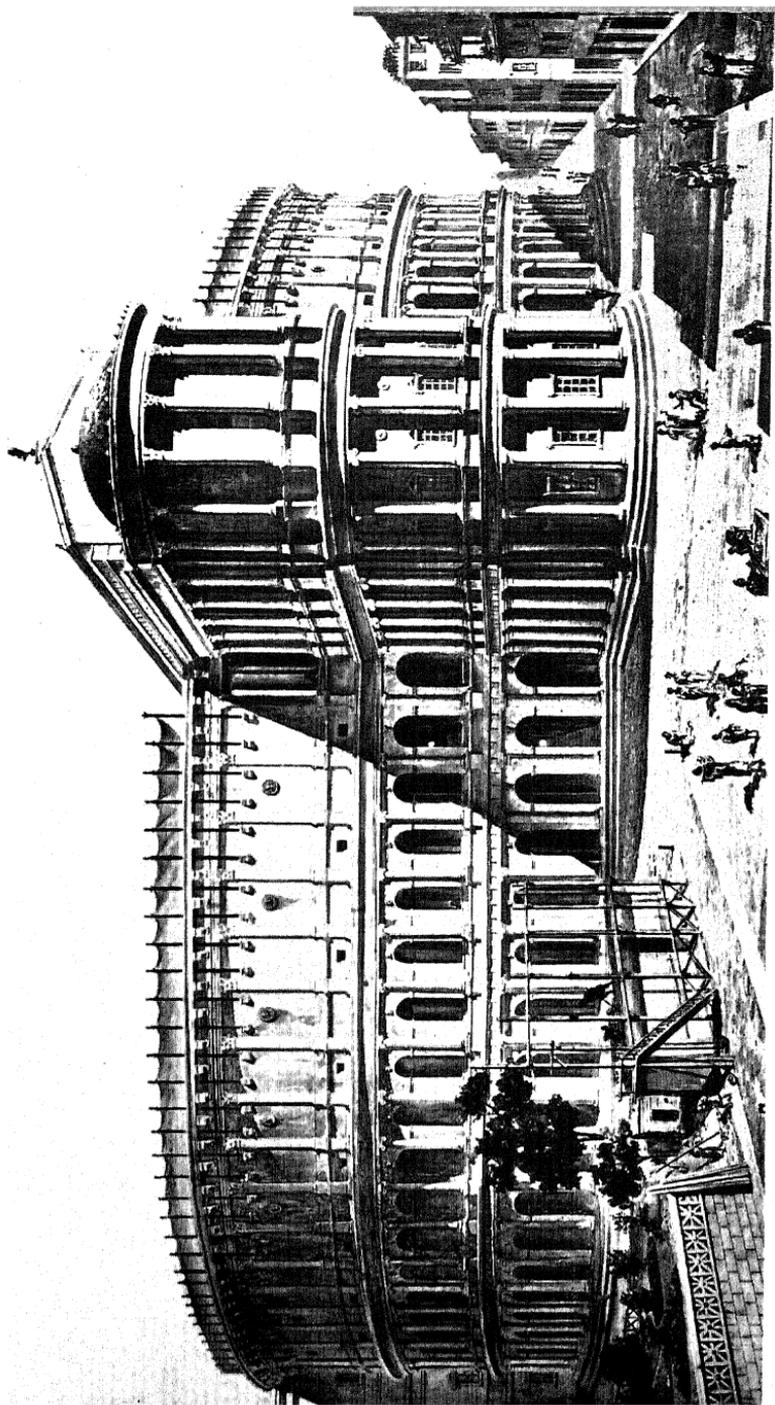
Next to Peter stood his three coadjutors, Linus, Cletus and Clemens, to whom he left the care of his disciples and church when he was away from Rome. Round them stood the newly created deacons and deaconesses, the latter covered with veils and the former enveloped in the wide and colourful cloaks of the Dalmats—their mantles were for ever named dalmatics. The congregation was composed of men from all classes and lands, workmen in simple tunics stood next to patricians and senators with togas bordered with purple, slaves and knights, Gauls and Egyptians, Armenians and Numidians, men of all languages and customs.

The man who presided over those meetings had nothing that might attract the attention, neither nobility of manner nor intellectual genius. Peter was a plain and simple man, almost a rustic; but he said that he had followed the Master and lived with Him and because he was so simple a man, other men believed him. And he was a man of miracles, too. They brought to him people who were ill and ailing and he cured them by the simple touch of his hands. They ranged them along the road where he would pass, and even his shadow was enough to heal them. He was always dressed in a simple tunic and a kind of blouse or *penula*, and over his shoulders he wore a *pallium* or mantle. His crisp, iron-grey hair made a

halo around his bald patch. His face had an expression of simplicity and goodness, but his eyes, often filled with tears, seemed pools enclosing a secret grief. When they enquired of his sorrow, and asked him if he was not delighted to see his disciples growing to such large numbers, he replied that nothing would ever make him forget that he had disowned the Master. He was most anxious to select among his disciples those who would preach and convert others; and while they spread his faith, they worked at all trades, or tilled the fields, and all said that they wanted to serve and not to be served.

When the new faith was properly constituted in Rome—Peter called it “his family”—he departed and visited all Italy and the Western Provinces and then returned to the East. In Rome his coadjutors continued his work. They preached that patricians and slaves were all brothers in the eyes of God. And they announced the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of man. They said that work was holy and pain good for the soul. They instructed the humble and the slaves in truths that were more profound than even Plato himself had considered. They disclaimed any merit for such truths, and said that they came to them from the Master, who was the Son of God and had been crucified by the Jews and yet had been resurrected on the third day to return to His rightful place in heaven. They said that there were no empires and no Roman power, for the whole earth was but the Kingdom of God.

Deacons and Deaconesses were appointed to instruct the neophytes and assist the needy. It was a spiritual legion, stubbornly fighting its way amidst pagan life. They visited and helped anybody who was in need. In choosing those who made the visits they considered the condi-



*[From the rare book of Reconstructions of Ancient Rome, by G. Gattevchi in the Library of Palazzo Venezia, Rome]*

**THE THEATRE OF POMPEY** with the Temple of Venus Victrix, built in the year 52 a.c. The Theatre had a seating capacity of 17,580 spectators and was used by Nero for a Gala Show in honour of the Parthian King Tiridates who came to Rome to be crowned.



tion, sex and age of the person to be visited so as to make the visit sweeter and more helpful. The deaconesses visited the young girls and women and took charge of abandoned children.

Since the early days of the Republic, the people of Rome had been divided into tribes and each tribe into ten Curiae. The Curiae had special buildings for prayers and religious ceremonies. The residents of a district were expected to take part in those ceremonies and to honour the Gods of their Curiae. The priests in charge of a pagan parish were called Curions. Next to this special cult of the district there were temples of the great Gods, protectors of Rome, to which all the people went on days of celebrations. Peter retained this organization, and in each district he created meeting-places for divine services, while they served also as dining-halls for the poor. This was not a novelty in a strict sense, for each Roman Curia used to hold solemn dinners, which were an ancient tradition instituted by Romulus and Remus, and the Christians called them *Agapi*, followed by the *Eucharistia*.

To escape persecution the growing followers of Peter went underground. They sought the catacombs and the grottoes of the Vatican Hill, which was considered a desecrated place, for people said that, under Claudius, a great snake was found in a cavern and when it was killed and opened, a whole child was found in its belly. The entry to the main cavern was obscured by a huge oak and the people said that the tree was older than Rome herself. An inscription, upon a plaque of lead, in Etruscan characters, said that the tree had been an object of veneration since time immemorial. Under that tree priests and soothsayers used to deliver oracles. Their chants had indeed given to the deserted hill the name of Vatican—

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*vatis cantus*. The apostles of the new faith made it their favourite abode, and invented a new catchword—they said that under the new faith the name of the City would soon be changed—*Roma, Amor*.

The Romans found the Christian preaching offensive to their pride and hurtful to their form of life, and yet the preachers gained the confidence of the lower classes, by raising their lives to the level of their own preaching, never asking a price for their lessons as street-corner philosophers used to do, but sharing their last copper with the poor. Those who attended the secret meetings for curiosity found nothing reprehensible in them.

The strangest thing, in the materialistic world of Rome, was that many proselytes sold their houses and lands and distributed the proceeds among the needy, and declared that there was joy in giving their earthly goods away, for they were thereby acquiring more beautiful ones. They undertook to live a blameless life, spoke of miracles, exalted their faith and said they felt very happy. It was a new philosophy of life.

The Roman world was a great ordered Empire, yet Rome was in agony. To the confusion of races and peoples, a Roman pattern of statesmanship had been applied and notwithstanding the laxity in morals, the main concepts of life survived, the State, the family, the Gods. Rome was heavy with the centuries that had been filled by wars, conquests, civil strife, the chasing out of her Kings and the advent of a Republican rule which in course of time had turned back to the more spectacular attraction of a mock-monarchy called Caesarism, the obsession of a patriotic ideal and a religious creed that had submitted the individual to the ideology of the State. Rome was full of the errors of an imperialism which had

become too big to be contained, infected by the vices of Greece and of the East, weakened by the abandon and corruption of an aristocracy that was now too old and debased, with the gradual disappearance of ancient virtues, the absurdity and slow deterioration of a religion which was a Pantheon of impossible Gods and empty formulae and gestures.

It was at this point that the pagan world realized that the new faith was attacking its very existence, because it considered the Roman world as the Kingdom of Satan. And at this point Rome, so lenient and broadminded and tolerant, turned for once to persecution, because the new religion preached by a small band of obscure Eastern zealots was overthrowing the whole Roman conception of life.

## II

In the year 61 another man arrived from the East. His name was Paul. Burrus was then still alive and Praefect of the Praetorians.

The man Paul came to Rome in chains, by order of Nero Caesar. He had left the port of Caesarea in Palestine, with a Centurion set to guard him during the journey, and was shipwrecked. Paul and his guard spent three months of winter at Malta, in the local jail. At last, they took sail again. A ship from Alexandria called at Malta, and the Centurion embarked with his prisoner. They made a call at Syracuse, where they spent three days, then at Reggio in Calabria, where they waited one whole day for the wind to rise, and at last they proceeded towards the Bay of Pozzuoli near Naples. It was a leisurely way of travelling, and the Centurion allowed his charge to mix with the crowds who were soon intrigued

by the strange apostle who lost no time in telling them of his prowess and renown. Indeed, they delayed Paul in Pozzuoli for seven days. The Centurion closed an eye, half amused and half doubting, not knowing what really to make of his peculiar charge. When at long last they left Naples for Rome, Paul was in chains again. But on each side of him marched now two disciples, Aristarchus and Luke, who had begged the Centurion's permission to share the fate of their master.

In Rome, Peter had arranged a great welcome to Paul. The Christians were to meet him at the Forum of Appius, some twenty leagues from the City. Paul entered Rome on the sixth day of July, during the yearly celebrations in honour of Apollo. All the people were garlanded with laurel. On arriving in the City, the Centurion handed over his prisoner to the Praefect of the Praetorium, for Paul was a prisoner of State. And Paul was a personal prisoner of the Emperor because he had called Nero Caesar his greatest enemy.

The Centurion gave a report of the good conduct and courage of the prisoner during the voyage; and Paul was spared the indignity of a prison, and permitted to reside in a little house, but chained to his guard. Each day the guard was changed, and in this way there was no chance of the prisoner persuading the guard to allow him to escape. The guard was supposed to protect Paul against the Jews, the declared enemies of the new Christian religion.

Paul was given residence in one of the busiest districts of Rome, between the Forum and the Fields-of-Mars, and there he lived two years, quite close to the spot which is now the Corso. During those two years he preached to all who had patience to listen to the strange prophet.

To supplement his needs, he was permitted to weave ropes and canvas for huts. Now and then he was allowed a walk through the City, always chained to his guard. He spent many hours writing, and one long epistle he addressed to his friend Philemon, begging his pardon for the misdeeds of an escaped slave named Onesimus, who had taken shelter in Rome after robbing his master. The poor devil had lived for a while on the proceeds of his robbery. Then, reduced to destitution, he had addressed himself to Paul, who converted him and made him a dignitary of the new faith, and ordered him to present himself to his master and put himself at his mercy.

Some time after the arrival of Paul, the Emperor felt curious to learn something of this extraordinary prisoner. The Praetor thought he could best describe this new prophet by reading to Nero some passages of a letter Paul had written to his followers in Corinth. The letter had been intercepted, but later the Police had considered it better to let it go on its way. One passage said: "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journey often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils of the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watching often, in hunger and thirst, in fasting often, in cold and nakedness; in Damascus the Governor under Aretas the King kept the City of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me, and through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands!"

Said Nero: "Is the man in earnest, or is he a boaster?"

Yet, the Emperor was told, the greatest danger was Peter.

The Emperor was duly acquainted with the activities of Peter and the spreading of the new faith.

“Is it true that they meet in the catacombs?” The Praetor explained that the Christians buried their dead in a common ground along the Via Appia, a few miles from the Capuan Gate, and as they were too poor to build tombs above the ground, they built them under the ground, which was soft and strong; they had honey-combed the earth, and held their religious services there. It was difficult to say how many those Christians were, a few thousand certainly, mostly slaves and artisans. The most peculiar point, the Emperor was told, was that there was no figuration of their God. They adored an invisible God. And this constituted a danger, for the great quarrel of the Jews was indeed that Rome put the image of the Emperor on the coins and called it Divine. At times the Christians went by symbols—a fish, for instance.

Another point to be watched, the Praetor further explained, was that the new faith was an association of men and women who were asking nothing whatever from Nero Caesar. An association of men who seemed to find happiness in an abstract thought—in the idea of goodness and love. Peter and Paul asked the Stoic to be humble, the lazy people of Rome to work. They preached a brotherly love amongst all men because, they said, all men were equal in the eyes of God.

The Emperor found it all very interesting, but his Councillors were full of forebodings. Cicero, some said, used to reproach himself for feeling regretful over the slave he had lost; who denies that a slave can be as good as his master? Let the slave prove his worth and gain

his freedom. Were there not many freedmen among the Emperor's councillors and ministers? The great problem was that the people of Rome had grown lazy. People outside Rome lived an ordinary and healthy life. They worked, they were peasants or craftsmen, they still thought of life as one should. But the people in Rome did not produce anything any more. They now merely passed on the goods which were made elsewhere by foreign labour. Rome was too powerful and too wealthy; and the people had actually fallen into the error of considering greatness and wealth as their own personal property. The State was merely a bailiff and an impresario charged with the duty of keeping the people well fed and amused. Perhaps the fault was that Rome was too full of foreigners. Without exaggeration, said Nero's Councillors, when one wanted to hear people speak Latin one must go into the country and meet the peasants. Everything was Greek in Rome; even the wives, said the *beaux esprits*, misconducted themselves *à la grecque!* The streets of Rome were full of foreigners. Business men and intriguers of all sorts seemed to have congregated to exploit the vices of the great and the corruption of the sovereign people—soothsayers from Thessalia who sold philtres, Magi from Chaldea who foretold the future, circus acrobats, *psyllae* who charmed snakes, dancers from Antioch and Cadix, beautiful courtesans from Asia Minor, the motley crowd of Greeks who knew so well how to get into family secrets and thrive on polite blackmail; the versatile Greek who knew to perfection the gentle art of managing the lady of the house and her husband as well as the children and even be willing to court grandmother! The Greeks, so persuasive, so charming, so indispensable. No household could be without them. They

were butlers, tutors, secretaries and lovers, all at once or by turn; imposing their fashions, their tastes, their opinions, their habits which, alas, were not as lofty as their philosophies. At sunset, by the temple of Castor, the slave-dealers got ready their stalls for the following market-day. All the slaves were foreigners. They were displayed upon platforms with feet bare and white-washed, and tablets hanging from their necks describing the marvellous virtues or vices of each. When a dealer had a lot of no particular interest he described it "suitable as eunuchs." And in Rome, nobody worked, nobody wanted to work, only amusement, *panem et circenses*.

Quite so, quite so, said the Councillors and Ministers of Nero Caesar, but who was going to change it?

### III

THE Emperor was at Tivoli, because the waters were good for his voice. At the Pavilion the tables had been laid in the garden, under a pleasant canopy of striped linen and rambling roses and honeysuckle. Nearby there was a large aviary shaped like a temple, full of rare singing birds. Marble basins were filled with live fish of all kinds, which the guests could choose and hand to the cooks. No sooner had the party taken seats on the dining couches than one elegant wit called for hemlock. The Emperor looked up, "Has any Centurion already conveyed to you an order to depart from this world?" "O no," the gentleman answered; "I want hemlock because it's an antidote to wine, and so I will drink myself to death!"

On the tables course followed course, fish, poultry and game, a roast pig stuffed with live quails that flew away

## THE FIRE OF ROME

when the siniscalch cut open its belly. A troupe of chefs solemnly entered the pavilion, preceded by a troupe of musicians playing flutes. The chefs carried a whole boar upon a huge silver salver. The boar was stuffed with pheasants, the pheasants were stuffed with quails and the quails were filled with ortolans; a marvel of marvels. Near each table a cook watched over the hot-plates, to keep the seasoned dishes warm. In a crystal bowl a huge fish was cooked under the eyes of the guests.

As the dinner proceeded, the gluttons retired to the vomitorium and then returned to gorge themselves again. Others simply let the attendants wash their hands and faces with perfumed waters, and passed to a second tent where the tables were even more sumptuous. Golden lamps high above burned perfumed oils. The guests were crowned afresh with tea-roses, the air was cooled by feather-fans moved by slaves, the dishes were lighter and more savoury. The attendants no longer poured falernum into the cups or massicum cooled with snow. They served sherbets made with snow mixed with delicious syrups and light wines. In the middle of the hall dancers from Antioch performed a ballet to the tunes of zithers and flutes. They passed around the tables to allow the guests to admire their lovely figures. In a corner half a dozen players were gambling for high stakes. The onlookers shrieked with laughter when a throw of the dice had deprived one player of his villa at Capua. Another player proffered to gamble his own life. How brilliant! Would he really pay?

A great storm had gathered in the sky. The thunder rolled on the left. The Emperor paled at the bad omen. But to show his disdain for omens and rumours, the following day he dared to bathe in the waters of the Marcia

fountain. His fashionable physician from Marseilles was against the stove-bath, and recommended to his patients cold baths, even in winter. But the very cold waters of the Marcia did not suit the Emperor, who was taken ill. Was the omen at the dinner-party true?

During his illness the Court met regularly around the Emperor's bed. They discoursed upon Death, the future of the Republic, on who would—one day—succeed to the Throne. The latter subject was always an interesting one. If no heir was born, the Caesar House, so painfully continued through all kinds of adoptions, would inevitably be extinguished with Nero. Who would the Emperor designate as his successor? The Emperor leaned on his elbow and laughed. "Why do you want me to mention a name? I would only gain one friend and lose a hundred!"

But happily there was no need to name a successor, for soon afterwards the Empress Poppaea gave birth to a child. It was the year 63. It was not the much-desired heir, as the baby was a girl, but Nero was beside himself with joy. The baby was born at Anzio, at the villa on the rocky promontory that Nero had made fashionable, because it was his own birthplace. Many nobles had followed the Emperor's lead and made Anzio a delightful winter resort. The famous *Apollo* by Praxiteles was there, upon the main terrace of the Emperor's villa.

Nero called the baby Claudia and gave her the title of Augusta, and said he would follow the practice of the Pharaohs and make his baby daughter heir to the Throne. The Senate ordered a public thanksgiving, two golden statues for the Goddess Fortune, and voted a temple to Fecundity and annual games in honour of the Domitia and Claudia Families, to be celebrated at Anzio.

Nero was immeasurably happy. He said it was an event that put him at peace with the Gods.

But on the day that the entire Senate came to felicitate the Emperor, Nero desired that the presence of a certain member of the opposition should not cloud his happiness. Senator Thrasea was requested to withdraw.

Why did Nero show such peevishness on a day of national jubilation? He had, quite true, an account to settle with Senator Thrasea over the affair of Praetor Antistius; but the animadversion had a deeper cause. In the first place, Thrasea had married, under Claudius, the daughter of Cecina Peto and of the famous Arria, a woman who possessed the courage of her mother who, when her husband was compromised in the revolt of the Legions in Illiria and was brought to Rome in chains, had followed him into prison, and when there was no longer any chance to save him, she tendered him the dagger with which she had already stabbed herself, saying "Take it, Peto, it does not hurt!" When friends warned Thraseas that he must beware of Nero, prompted by his wife he replied, "Nero can put me to death, but he cannot destroy me." The Emperor, Thrasea thought, was blind to the situation in Rome. Rome was full of passions, and passions generate discontent. Many people were waiting for a leader who would deliver them from what they called tyranny, for it is typical of some men to call tyrannical every government to which they find themselves in opposition. And the discontented politicians of Rome looked upon Thrasea as a leader of their secret party. There was Cornutus, a distinguished gentleman of no importance, the undistinguished poet Caesius Bassanus, two more poets, Persius and Lucan, united more by their love of letters than by their mode of life; and several

others. Persius had a gentle temperament; he was very handsome and as chaste as a virgin, and he loved his mother and sisters with an exemplary love. Cornutus, his master, had introduced him to Lucan, who was Seneca's nephew. They gave public readings of their poems, a fashion which was much favoured by the Emperor. Lucan had introduced Persius to Seneca, but the young man had found too great a contrast between Seneca's writings and his private life, and considered that the old man's virtue was merely a pose.

In the second place, Thræsea made a great show of his being a Stoic. To his friends he spoke openly of his conception of life that stood poles asunder from the Emperor's. "Those who love the pleasures of life and do not hold Death in disdain, cannot walk along the steep path of freedom. In the contemplation of the cold peaks of Truth there is a sublime and virile pleasure incomparably more satisfying than any voluptuousness."

To this the Court circles replied that the Greeks had invented Stoicism but were sensible enough to practise it very little. In truth, it was said at Court with much contempt, Stoicism as it was practised in Rome had nothing to do with the doctrine of Zeno. It was a vague pantheism made up to suit one's political opinions. One was tired of listening to the usual cant about the fierce austerity of Cato the Elder. Cato, after all, was a martyr to pride. He had ceased to be a man of his times, to become a myth. But was the great Cato—somebody asked with sarcasm—was he such a paragon of virtue? More than once he was picked up drunk in the streets. He was a usurer, a cynic who approved of young men frequenting the brothels. He kept his slaves underfed, inciting them to hate one another. He libelled Socrates and denounced Scipio. And

as a widower, he did not disdain having a young female slave coming to his bed.\* As for his great-grandson, Cato the Younger had despaired of his own country, and loved the empty name of Freedom more than that of Rome. When Rome fell under a Dictatorship, he considered it unworthy of him, and repudiated his country like a son abandons an infirm and debauched parent. The result was that by declaring before his suicide that a man must choose between servitude and death, Cato fortified Caesar by this insane exaggeration of personal freedom. Yes, it would be some time before the busybodies of the "ancient freedom" could raise their heads.

## IV

THE Emperor's joy was shortlived. His daughter died when she was but a few weeks old. Poppaea spoke of the evil-eye. The Christians were mentioned again before the Emperor.

The loss of his child threw Nero into the darkest grief. He said he felt demented. Tigellinus suggested that he should seek some relief in amusements. Nero uttered that there was nothing but to let the days go by. The Gods were forsaking him.

One night he said, "There remains nothing now but for the world to hear my singing!" Rome, he said, did not understand the poetry that was in his heart. He would go to Naples, first, in the ancient Parthenope, the city of songs, where at night one could still hear the Sirens singing. Then he would go to Greece. Yes, he would sing at Olympia: "That ancient theatre shall at last have the glory of hearing an Emperor sing." The Greeks will love his voice—it was such a long time since Apollo had deserted them! Now Apollo was walking the earth again

\* Plutarch—*Life of Cato the Censor*, XXXII.

in the person of Nero Caesar, and the Earth will be charmed. The Emperor will lead the choirs at Delos, and the Agathyrses, the Dropes, the Cretans shall dance their solemn dances around him.

He spoke of visiting Egypt and of playing at Alexandria. The Orient, he said, fascinated him. The corn of Egypt fed the people of Rome. Its mysterious religion attracted the minds of the savants. Alexandria still was the centre of the world. Her port, her light-house—one of the seven wonders of the world—the unique library, Alexander's tomb, the philosophical school, the floods of the Nile of which no one knew the sources, Egypt's history and monuments, everything was seducing Nero's imagination. More than anything else, the memory of Ptolomeus Auletes attracted him, the King who was, like him, an artist. And the story of Mark Antony and his picturesque love for Cleopatra . . . "I will leave Italy," Nero said to his friends, "I want to build a new Capital of the Empire in the East. My new City will be the greatest on earth. The East alone can give the measure of my dream!" It was the first idea, almost the prophecy of what was to happen three centuries later—the transfer of the Capital of the Empire from Rome to the East. The poetical attraction of the Orient, more artistic, more enlightened, as counterpoised to the stiff Roman traditionalism, with the indifference of the people for Art.

Now, said Nero, he must prepare the people for his absence, and by an Edict he announced his intended departure for Alexandria. He climbed the Capitol to take leave of Jupiter, thence he descended into the Forum to make his devotions at the altar of Vesta. In that mysterious temple were preserved the most sacred things, the pledges of the perpetuity of the Empire; things so

sacred that not even the First Magistrates dared to look at them. One day Nero had felt overwrought, and an impulse made him penetrate those mysteries. But no one learnt what he saw in the temple of Vesta. In Rome it was murmured that the real reason of this sacrilege was a mad desire for the Vestal Rubria, and that he had taken her by violence.\*

But the day that he went to the temple of Vesta to ask the Goddess to protect his journey, he was seized with a strange fear. When he rose to leave the temple, a corner of his toga was somehow caught. Nero felt as if an invisible hand was keeping him by force, and trembling in every limb, and believing that he was seeing an apparition—the terrible Ghost of his nightmares—he fainted upon the floor.

After this, the idea of the voyage to Egypt was abandoned. A rumour was put around that the Emperor had seen the grief of the people at the thought of being separated from him, and his love of Rome was greater in his heart than any other love. Two Centurions were sent to Egypt to try to reach the sources of the Nile. The Emperor went only to Naples.

Naples was a strange mixture of Roman and Greek—crowded with Greeks from Alexandria, whose chief interest was to sell their corn to the Emperor at a good price. The Emperor sang to them with such enthusiasm that, notwithstanding a mild earthquake which occurred during the performance, he went on through the *grand'aria* without interruption. The walls of the theatre seemed to rise up from the ground and quiver. There were screams of terror, but the crowd was held back from panic by the sight of the green-robed Emperor who con-

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXVII.

tinued to pluck at his harp-strings. To the excitable Greeks Nero was almost a Hero. Besides, no one was hurt. Nero declared that it was a sign of Apollo's approval.

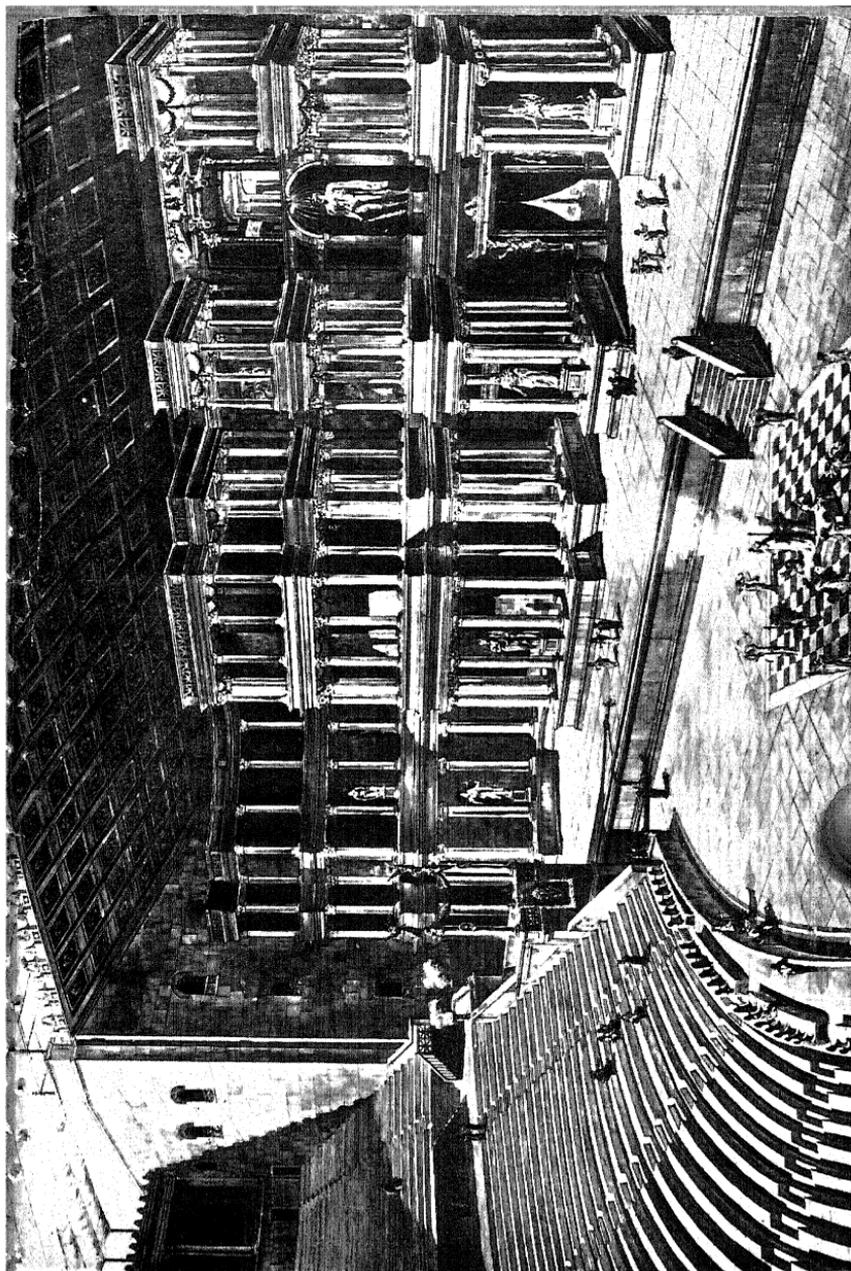
It was also a good opportunity to test the *claque* on a big scale. The Legion of the Augustals had been increased to fifteen hundred officers and men. It was now militarily divided into cohorts. The Captain of each cohort received a salary of forty thousand sesterces and the rank and file were paid accordingly. An elegant uniform had been designed for the Augustals. They wore their hair long and floating in true artists' style, and a ring on the middle finger of their left hands. They were now properly trained not only to applaud, but to express amusement, appreciation and enthusiasm: each sentiment had its suitable range—the murmur, the exclamation and the castanettes.\*

After Naples, Nero went on to Beneventum. One of his favourites, Vatinius, gave in his honour a great fête. Vatinius was a gross buffoon, lewd of speech, whom Nero had met during his nocturnal escapades in Rome. Now he had become an influential personage. This Vatinius hated the Senate. It was a bugbear with him. One day he told the Emperor: "I hate you, O Divine Caesar!" "Why, pray?" "Because you are a Senator." Nero laughed at the joke: "Vatinius is a step in my descent towards popular taste. My first admiration was for Seneca. Then I passed on to Tigellinus, now to Vatinius. The next step will be a monkey."

In Benevento the Emperor made ready to leave for Greece; but at the last minute he hesitated, terrified by the fear of a fiasco before a Greek audience. He decided to return to Rome to train further his voice.

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XX.



[From the rare book of Reconstructions of Ancient Ro.  
by G. Gatteschi in the Library of Palazzo Venezia, Ro.]

The marvellous stage of the THEATRE OF POMPEY: the stage and scenery are reminiscent of the Olympian Theatre built by Andrea Palladio in Vicenza, Italy, in 1583. The chequered section was the Orchestra, and in the front row of the auditorium are the stalls reserved for the Senators and other personalities.



To celebrate his return, he gave the people fantastic feasts, in the Forum and on the Capitol. It was a whole year of continuous festival. All Rome was submerged in a furious Bacchanal. Then, the Neronian Games were announced. Everyone connected with the Circus, the keepers of the beasts, the athletes who filled the training gymnasia, the mimes, the clowns, the comedians, the dancers, the singers, all those who lived and thrived around the public games, gave vent to their enthusiasm. Those theatrical people constituted a vast multitude for whom nothing else counted but Nero and his prodigious talent. In the Public Baths, under the porticoes, in the taverns, in the sports clubs, in the basilicae, in the markets, in the Forum, people talked of nothing else but Nero. There was a true Caesar, an Emperor who entirely lived for the people!

The day the Games commenced, Nero went to preside over them. He was received with tremendous applause. But after greeting him, a hundred thousand spectators rose as one man, and begged the Emperor to let them hear his celestial voice. Nero answered that he would sing at night in the Palace gardens. The crowd was not satisfied, and called for a song at once. A song in the people's own ground, the Circus—Caesar must bow to the demand of the sovereign people. Nero showed some reluctance but the Praetorians on duty at the Circus joined in the public request. It was exactly what Nero was waiting for. As it was of the highest importance to please the Praetorian Guards, he would make them share the responsibility of his actions. He announced that he would compete for the Circus prizes. Solemnly his name was added to the list.

When his turn came, Nero mounted the stage. When he had previously appeared in a theatre, Burrus and

Seneca had assisted him, to give greater solemnity to the unprecedented event. This time Foenius and Tigellinus appeared on the Circus stage with the Emperor. They carried his harp. The Military Tribunes and the Emperor's intimate Court pressed around him.

Nero sang first a dramatic aria, then he recited some poems, and lastly acted a tragic part. The applause went to his head, and he felt he must surpass himself and astonish the people. A kind of fatality urged him to play the parts of Atreus and of Oedipus and Orestes. The public were both amazed and fascinated. It was a unique experience to see the Emperor play the parts of the characters whose tragedies and crimes were so similar to those of the man acting them on the stage. Each gesture and each word suggested a confession. It was no longer a dramatic performance, it was a tragic reality.

But the populace was thrilled. The novelty, the strangeness of the spectacle, Nero's popularity, all excited the crowd beyond measure. At the end there was delirious applause. As an actor Nero had triumphed. And he felt that from that moment he had attained the pinnacle of popularity.

It was true. Nero, the adored Prince, the applauded actor, poet and songster, was the sensation of the day. He had truly touched the very depth of the people's heart. When he returned to the Palace he gave vent to his feelings, "Perhaps," he said, "I personify the last expression of Paganism. And I know how to keep Rome attentive and charmed."

## V

RESIGNING himself to the opposition of the diehards, Nero now turned all his attention to preserving his popularity.

He put on shows, distributed food, granted new favours to the troops. And again and again he appeared on the stage. To his critics he replied: "There is a subtle wisdom in my conduct—so long as the great actor is applauded, the Emperor is safe."

He had no longer any serious thought but that of his "professional" standing. Nothing flattered him more than to be treated as a distinguished artist. Some astrologers dared to say that one day Fortune would deprive him of the Empire. He replied with the words that have become immortal, "An artist can live anywhere."

He gave infinite attention to his artistry on the stage. The mask, which, according to custom, he must wear on the stage, was now the exact reproduction of his own face, but in the mask of the Goddess or Heroine worn by the actor who was playing with him, he still wanted to see the features of Poppaea.

During the whole of this year the Emperor lived, so to speak, on the stage. He had his food served to him at the theatre, at the gymnasium, in the Forum, anywhere in view of the delighted populace. One day when he was having his meal at the Palace, which overlooked the Murcia Valley, he heard the clamour of the multitude impatient over the delay in commencing the Games. At once Nero rose from his couch and, without waiting for the purple cloth that was thrown into the arena to give the signal to start, he ordered his napkin to be thrown from the window to the crowd that was looking up at the Palace. The crowd were so delighted at this sally that they applauded him frantically. That night a chronicler recorded the incident for posterity.

One day Petronius entered the Emperor's private apartment and found him lying on a bed on his back, with

a sheet of lead on his chest. The Emperor was in the midst of his tricks for the preservation and improvement of his voice. Indeed, a few minutes later, a masseur approached, and lifting the sheet of lead, began to rub his Imperial patient with both hands, following an upward movement towards Nero's throat, at each stroke raising his hands and shaking the fingers as if to drop the impurities. The massage lasted some ten minutes, whereupon Nero rose from the bed, took from the hands of an attendant a goblet, and began to gargle and spit into a silver bowl. "It helps the vocal chords immensely," he said to his friend between retchings. "At night I have a clyster administered.\* The barber of that Cypriot singer Diodorus gave the tip to my head-valet. It gives greater power to the lungs."

Then they passed into the study, and the Emperor showed a letter to Petronius, "Marcus Ostorius is offering me one million sesterces for my services to sing at his dinner-party next week. Of course I will give the fee to charity, but it is most flattering to me as an artist."

Nero had too much taste not to realize that poetical and musical compositions were impossible in the vast and tumultuous atmosphere of the Circus. They required silence and concentration, a closed hall where tempered lights could better dispose the audience to a lofty performance. He therefore changed the time of the theatrical shows from midday to the evening. He invented real theatre-shows. Some criticized him loudly. It was too great a break from tradition. It was immoral to go to a theatre at night-time, it would incite people to further debauchery. But there were no scandals, in fact, people found the new shows rather tame.

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XX.

The pantomimes, which the Emperor had at one time banned because of their scurrility, returned now to the City, to the infinite delight of the people. Nero hit upon a brilliant idea. He turned them into a mixture of comedy and singing and he wrote several himself. Thus was born the eternal musical-comedy and the operetta. *Apella the Jew* was the first popular operetta to be tried in the Emperor's private theatre. Those shows were for private audiences only, and the beautiful little theatre seated one thousand spectators. Another novelty was that the curtain on the stage was no longer lowered but raised from the stage at the end of each act, so that the last things to be seen were the actors' faces and not their feet. One thing, however, annoyed the Emperor immensely—the great Jewish actor Demetrius Libenus, who had amassed a fortune, would not consent to play on the Sabbath.

The mania for acting continued unabated. First thing in the morning, Tigellinus brought in a great batch of letters from admirers begging the favour of hearing the Emperor's heavenly voice. The Emperor ordered with much delight to have the fan-mail answered individually, and informed the writers that he would gratify those who desired it in the Gardens. One day a group of Guards sent a message that they themselves with a crowd of friends would be happy to hear the Emperor sing, although there were no games that day. "Assemble them in the Gardens and distribute wine and refreshments," ordered the Emperor; "I will sing to them presently."

But Nero's favourite pieces were still the tragedies based on the Greek plays: *Canace in Labour*, *Orestes*, *Oedipus*, *Hercules Mad.*\* A great favourite with the populace was *Canace in Labour*, but Nero never saw the joke. For

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXI.

Canace was the daughter of an Etrurian King, whose incestuous intercourse with her brother had been discovered in consequence of the cries of the infant of whom she was delivered, and she killed herself. The joke was that when Nero performed the piece for the first time, somebody in the audience asked what he was doing, and a wag replied: "He is labouring in childbirth."

## VI

To emulate and please his Master, Tigellinus gave a feast even more prodigal than the Circus shows. In the centre of the Ninth District, which comprised the Pantheon and the Theatre of Pompey, there was the Pond of Agrippa, fed by the overflow of several aqueducts. It was a beautiful little lake, surrounded by gardens, temples and sacred groves.

Over this lake Tigellinus built a vast floating platform, supported by a thousand barrels chained together. Upon the platform were erected pavilions and porticoes covered with gaily-coloured awnings. On this floating platform took place a banquet of which the world had seen no equal. The servants who were chosen to wait upon the Emperor could be recognized by their long and perfumed hair, their tight ballet-tunics, the golden bracelets adorning their arms and legs. They could also be recognized by their effeminate impudence.

Among arches of flowers, lying upon an ivory couch, in a triclinium of purple, surrounded by his Court, the Emperor banqueted from vessels of crystal and gold. The most illustrious families attended the feast. With chains covered with flowers, there were exhibited elephants, tigers, and lions that Tigellinus had brought from Africa, bears

from the Hyperborean mountains, wolves of Scythia, colossal and monstrous turtles. From the shore the populace watched the show.

It began at sunset with erotic dances and pantomimes. When darkness fell, the floating platform was brilliantly lit. Voluptuous songs rose in the air; choirs, hidden in the groves, answered one another. When the dinner ended, small boats, their sides encrusted with glittering metals, pulled slowly to the platform, and the guests left their couches. The boatmen were naked. They had been chosen among the most handsome Orientals who hawked in Rome, painted like courtesans. Along the shore, cubicles similar to the low brothels of the Suburra had been built, lit by torches, and in them there were beautiful women, ready to give themselves to anyone. Many of them belonged to illustrious families.

But the Emperor could not be satisfied with this ordinary pleasure. For him Tigellinus had staged something extraordinary. He suggested to Nero to celebrate his nuptials with the mime Pythagora and act as the bride. A mock marriage was performed. The Emperor was seen by all standing near the statuesque Greek. Upon Nero's head was placed the white veil of a bride, the Augurs took the omens, the servants put up the nuptial bed with purple sheets, and walked in front of the newly married.

All Rome witnessed the sacrilegious embrace. And for once the crowd did not applaud.

The following day the Emperor left for Anzio, traveling along the River. As usual, on the banks of the Tiber, there were faked hostelries where ladies, dressed as chambermaids, pressed the guests to stay. But this time Nero had no desire to stop. He realized that the "marriage" with the mime Pythagora was a mistake.

## VII

ROME was too big and too old. It was called the Capital of the World, but all who had seen the world knew that notwithstanding her size and the many wonderful buildings and monuments, Rome was far from having the grandeur of some of the cities across the seas. Rome had nothing of the orderly vastness of Alexandria, nor the solemnity of Carthage, or the elegance of Athens.

Rome had grown uncontrollably vast, and she was now beyond any planning control. Firstly she had grown, like the human body, in size and proportion, and when she could no longer expand longitudinally, she had grown vertically. She had now reached a population that no one exactly knew, except that it could be counted in millions—and there was a certain vanity in the voice of any ostler or barber when he could boast of the “millions of Rome,” but it was neither easy nor pleasant to live and even less to move about in Rome. The public buildings, some of which were very impressive, were hidden and suffocated by the congestion of endless rows of apartment-houses and private dwellings. The streets were no more than lanes, narrow and tortuous, which obstructed the traffic and made any idea of public transport out of the question.

Time after time Bills were mooted in the Senate for a drastic modernization of the City, but nothing had ever come of it. There was always a stubborn opposition that spoke of the sacrilege of destroying the traditions of Rome; a place could not be pulled down without offending the deepest spirit of the Roman people (admitting, of course, that such noble sentiment existed); some absurd old wall could not be touched lest it should prove to be

## THE FIRE OF ROME

the original wall built by Romulus; and so on and so forth. At the bottom of it all there were the vested interests of the patrician classes, who had leased their ground to the speculators who built the rickety and ramshackle buildings of seven and eight floors divided into hundreds of apartments, and they knew that they would lose heavily on their investments should any great town-planning be attempted. The result was that no one knew any more where the *Urbs Roma* or Rome proper ended and the *Ager Romanus* began. The rural territory had become part of the City and it was utterly idle to persist in the anachronism that only the people of the *Urbs* were Roman in the true sense. Should any census be taken, it would have been only too clear that almost four-fifths of the population of Rome was composed of foreigners, mostly Greeks and Levantines, with a good sprinkle of Egyptians.

Half a century before, Augustus had done no more than take up again the original plan of his adoptive father Julius Caesar, when in the year 8 B.C. he had, for reasons of expediency, identified the City with the fourteen districts into which he divided the ancient and the new, thirteen districts on the left bank of the Tiber, and the fourteenth upon the right bank, calling it *Regio Trans-tiberina*.

But the streets in each district, the one hundred and sixty streets or *vici* recorded by the Censors, were unworthy of a great metropolis. The ancient *domus* or houses had given place to many thousands of *insulae* which, with the exception of the private residences of the great, were immense blocks of apartments for the middle and working classes. Even the meaning of *domus* had changed, for to say 'a house' meant now merely one of the

dwelling into which a block was divided, and which were often no more than squalid hovels of one or two rooms, where whole families lived in cramped and insanitary conditions. Only the very expensive apartments offered the number of rooms that were to be found in the traditional *domus*, the porter lodge or *atrium*, the *triclinium* or dining-room, the *tablinum* or lounge, the sleeping-rooms and, if the apartment was on the ground floor, the *peristillium* or pleasant courtyard surrounded by a little portico. The rooms of an apartment were purely and simply rooms that the tenant could use as he thought fit and practical. Some of these blocks of flats were immense. There were some that almost looked like skyscrapers. Gone for ever were the restrictions of Augustus, that any building to be used as a private dwelling should not exceed an elevation of sixty feet so as to provide a reasonable measure of safety for the inhabitants. Martial, a few years later, wrote in one of his amusing ditties that he had to climb to the third floor, but that was nothing compared with what another of his fellow-tenants had to do—to climb to the seventh: it was indeed very often the case that when the top floor was being devoured by the flames of a fire, the tenants of the flats on the third floor still slept soundly and undisturbed. The lower floor in the blocks situated in the meaner streets was divided into shops and storerooms, and the shops were anything but an embellishment of the streets. The great majority were nothing better than warehouses, or the workshops of craftsmen. And upon a kind of ledge running around the four walls, reached by a short flight of stairs, there lived the family of the shopkeeper, in what unhygienic discomfort may well be imagined.

Nor were the conditions of the tenants of the apart-

ments proper much better, for there was no water installation, and all water for domestic purposes had to be brought up from the public fountains. Where no fountain existed because of lack of aqueducts, as it was in the district on the right bank of the River, water had to be drawn from the local wells.

Nor were there any lavatories, and although the *Cloaca Maxima*, built several centuries before that time, was kept in such an admirable condition and was so vast that Agrippa was able to traverse it from end to end in a boat, there was no system of sewers and drains to collect the waste from each house. The *Cloaca Maxima*, reaching from the Forum at the foot of the Aventine as far as the River near the bridge of the Four Heads, and its affluents, the smaller sewers, collected the garbage and waste from the ground floors and public lavatories directly built upon them; but there was no direct collection from the private houses. Only the rich could obviate this horrible inconvenience by having lavatories built in their houses and cleansed by the water that reached the house from the main supplies of the aqueducts, and when the residence was too far away from a main sewer, the waste from the house went into an underground ditch, which was cleared periodically by a dealer in manure who had bought the right of clearance.

But the poorer classes and the tenants of the upper floors had no alternative but to go outside the house, and if they could afford the small charge they would enter one of the public lavatories which were run by the *conductores foricarum*, who contracted them from the Excise. A horrible and absurd situation, for those public conveniences were public in the widest sense, like the latrines of an army camp. One went there and met friends, shame-

lessly chatting of this and that, and cadging invitations to dinner.\* To visit one of these conveniences was to be amused by the people's behaviour, no less than by the number of superfluous refinements provided. Around a circle or a rectangle designed with a certain elegance, a stream of clear water ran in small ducts before which there were as many as twenty seats, and the open seats rested upon brackets of stone or marble sculptured like dolphins, and often, above them, there were little niches with statues of Heroes or Gods or a small altar dedicated to Fortune, perhaps because that Goddess was supposed to bring also good health. But the poorest and the meanest citizens did not even go to a public lavatory, but used the jars purposely left by the dyers who had bought from the Government the right to place such vessels outside their establishments to collect the urine necessary for their industry, or one would run from the apartment with pot in hand and go to empty it into a vat standing at the bottom of the stairs. Or, worse still, one went to a near garbage heap, and many streets were infested by such a malodorous pond for the deposit of excrements. The Histories mention that Cato the Elder had ordered them to be covered up and done away with, but they were still extant in Nero's times, and were often used by the prostitutes to get rid of an unwanted child. To this picture could be added the danger, that threatened passers-by after nightfall, of receiving upon their heads the contents of a pot emptied from a window by a careless lodger.

Crowds congested the streets in day-time, succeeded at nightfall by a congestion of carts and animals. For all goods and victuals were carried into the City by night, by an ancient order of Caesar who quite rightly realized

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\* Martial, XI.

that in such narrow streets, crowded with pedestrians and sedan-chairs, it was impossible to have a flow of lorries and carts bringing in merchandise and goods. So that from dawn until sunset no cart was allowed to circulate within the City, and those who had not finished unloading before sunrise were obliged to park in a proper place until sunset. But this very proper order had the disadvantage of turning the night into a bedlam, for throughout the night the streets resounded with the creaking of wheels and the stamping of hooves on the slippery stones, and the shouts and swearing of their vociferous drivers. It was, in fact, impossible in Rome to spend a quiet night. And in the day-time one might be surrounded by a flock of sheep escorted by a placid and unhurried shepherd, when it was not a funeral procession complete with band of flute-players and women mourners wailing at so much an hour.

Rome was indeed a city of great contrasts, from the quiet districts where the new-rich had built their elegant residences and laid out their vast gardens, to the noisy and crowded popular districts of the markets and buildings for the poorer classes. Along the main streets one saw white-robed Arabs, Gauls in strange coats and trousers, Jews wearing the white tunic without ornaments that set them apart; Greeks and Spaniards, slaves from Africa whose dark faces shone out against the scarlet-and-gold liveries with which their masters adorned them. Strange tongues could be heard, while in the elaborate litters passed the noble and the rich, old aristocrats and wealthy freedmen, lying on their cushions, some perusing books or papers, others conversing with overpainted ladies. The Forum itself, the most Roman of all places and the very heart of the City, was no longer the severe and solemn place of

former times. Early morning, as soon as the sun gave a golden glow to the beautiful statues, the vast square began to fill with people. Not far from the great sundial, the soap-box orators took up their stations and idlers began to appear in plenty, people who did nothing but lounge about the Forum till night fell. Then came the brokers, the commission-agents, the bankers, the money-lenders, to open their offices and banks. In front of the statue of the She-Wolf, symbol of Rome, an Arab sold sulphur-matches. The air was filled with the noises and infinite smells of a cosmopolitan crowd, the odour of ripe fruit and edibles came from the nearby market, and the whiffs of perfume booths. Only the *argiletum* was comparatively quiet, the square filled with rows of book-stalls piled up with the latest publications, some in rolls, with the title neatly written on the outside or hanging from a tag, some made up in book-form, in the fashion set some years before by the Empress Livia when she published her letters to Augustus. But even there a noisy crowd took its stand later on in the day—the poetasters who could find no publishers and pestered the passer-by or the well-known customer and read aloud to him their latest compositions, glad of a few coins or an invitation to supper.

The fact was that too few people did any work in Rome. Tens of thousands lived idly. Nobody knew how they lived. On patronage certainly, kept and fed by their wealthy patrons, or by the Emperor. Goods were manufactured in provincial factories with cheap labour and marketed in Rome at the lowest price. The wealth of the Empire kept prices low in Rome, and the City had become an immense bee-hive of idlers and speculators. A huge city waiting for the catastrophe that would sweep her away.

## VIII

THE Emperor was at his villa at Anzio, when a courier was announced with a most urgent message. The courier rushed in and almost dropped at the Emperor's feet, and uttered wildly:

"Rome is on fire."

Someone nonchalantly remarked, "Another fire! Well, can't the firemen put it out?" But the courier waved one hand despairingly:

"The whole City is burning."

No one spoke. Nero turned his eyes in the direction of Rome, although it was impossible to see beyond the hills of Nemi and Monte Cavo. And the tranquil lapping of the tide against the marble wall of the terrace seemed to make more dramatic the news he had heard.

The Court was inclined to treat it lightly. Surely it was only another of the fires that were so frequent in the over-populated districts of the City. It proved, they said, once again how necessary it was to rebuild that part of the City on more rational lines. Those houses were all built in large blocks and of poor material. The firemen's usual rule was to try to limit a fire to an "island," and then let it burn out.

But with the passing of each hour new messengers, mounted on small Numidian horses that galloped like gazelles, brought fresh details of the fire. The flames, they said, had reached the shops that surrounded the Circus, between the Palatine and the Coelius, shops full of oil and clothes . . .

By dayfall an official report stated that the magnitude of the fire was unprecedented. And a violent wind was fanning it. The Circus was like a huge cauldron. From

it the flames had already reached the gardens of the adjoining hills.

The Emperor paced the terrace. The sky over the distant City, in the declining light of the sunset, appeared red, and the smoke billowed in great clouds. Other messengers arrived. The Gods, they said, had ordered this destruction. Entire districts were being destroyed and hundreds, thousands of people had already perished in the flames. The people were in panic-stricken flight, shouting and wailing like madmen, imprisoned in walls of flame. The old part of the City was entirely gone.

Nero asked, "Is it an accident or a crime?" All the messengers could say was that an accident could not have started eight different fires in eight different districts, all at the same time.

The Emperor ordered his horse.

He travelled all night, with Tigellinus, his secretary Epaphroditus, and a small escort of Guards. The night was unusually calm and starry. At Ariccia, Tigellinus suggested that the Emperor should rest awhile; but Nero was a good horseman and merely took some food from a platter held by an ostler. They changed horses and rode on. At dawn they reached the Alban Hills. Whatever hope Nero had that the fire might be limited to a few districts was wiped away by the sea of smoky mist that appeared before his eyes from the summit of the hills. The sight of that yellowish haze was terrifying. Albano was crowded with people in terrified flight. All enquiries elicited the same ominous reply that the fire had started on the right bank of the River, perhaps in the Suburra; it had mysteriously spread simultaneously along the Esquiline and the higher districts.

Long before the Appian Road, flanked by the tombs

of the ancient families, the Campagna was swarming with a crowd beyond control. But when the Emperor reached the Capuan Gate strange words caught his ears: "Do not worry! The fire was started by orders from above . . . Perhaps it is a new sort of game . . ." Nero pulled the hood of his cloak down over his face, and entered the City without a word.

The Palace was almost deserted. Most of the staff had taken flight with the other fugitives. There was no sign however of violence or intrusion. Diomedes, the Master of the Household, greeted the Emperor with his usual welcome and backed to open the curtains of the first audience-room. Without delay the Emperor endeavoured to take stock of the situation.

All he could ascertain at a first hurried conference was that the fire had started in that part of the great Circus that adjoined the districts of Mount Coelius and the Palatine. The shops and taverns, full of inflammable goods, had supplied ample fuel and the sudden wind had fanned the fire into monstrous tongues of devouring flames.

For many weeks no rain had fallen in Rome. The air about the Seven Hills was sultry, dry, and parched. In the streets and valleys it was close and foetid. The heavy heat oppressed the people and when the fire had started the streets were unusually empty. Some had reported that near the Circus Maximus dark figures were seen moving among the shops and the wooden barracks, leaving behind a trail of flames. Was it true or merely a figment of imagination?

The Emperor was told on all sides that Rome was facing complete and utter destruction. The immense circumference of the Circus, which occupied the Murcia Valley, was rapidly being surrounded by the fire. The

flames had devoured the shops, the warehouses, the stables, the considerable material and props that served for the Games. Carried by the wind over the Palatine, the fire had lapped the large walls and the great Babylonian steps on the eastern flanks of the hill. But then the flames had swept to the left, along the newly built road towards the Forum, and to the right, along the Triumphal Road and the Coelius district. There the fire had quickly enveloped the crowded Suburra and rising again over the hills, had reached the Esquiline district.

It was the 13th of July of the year 64—four hundred and fifty years after Rome was invaded by the Gauls, and the anniversary of the day on which the Gauls had burned the City.

The whole night, and each succeeding night, the Emperor toured the ravaged districts, made himself known, announced that help and victuals would be brought into the City at once, shelters would be erected for the homeless and Rome would be rebuilt in a very short time.

But the people ignored him. The name of Nero roused no cheers and everyone was too much concerned in seeking some lost relative or in running away pushing a cart laden with the few chattels that could be salvaged.

More surprising still was the inability of the firemen and salvage squads to stem the flames. No sooner was a safety cordon thrown around a block of houses than mysteriously the flames rose beyond it. Voices said that torches were being thrown into the houses, deliberately. By whom?

Several times the Emperor risked his life in those narrow, winding lanes, his face blackened, his hair singed,

## THE FIRE OF ROME

his tunic shrivelled.\* A wealthy freedman, not recognizing him, promised him gold in plenty as a reward for helping his wife and children out of a burning house. Nero answered: "I am Caesar, the guardian of my people and I only desire their love as my reward." Hour after hour, by day and by night he walked through the streets, exercising authority, giving orders or planning measures for the safety of the Capitol and the Forum. He went about on foot, often without escort. He gathered together officers and young patricians, to each allotting his particular task, threatening death to anyone who failed Rome in that hour. But the people were too distracted to recognize the Emperor. Near the ruins of a temple a man suddenly came upon Nero: "Are you Caesar?" "Yes," the Emperor answered, "I am Nero Caesar." "Then you shall die by my hand, for it is by your orders that Rome burns." The Emperor opened his tunic and bared his breast. "The guilty man takes flight. As I am innocent, I am not afraid to die." The man hesitated, and casting the dagger away he departed. Later that man recorded the episode.

On the fourth night, while the Emperor was taking a little rest after a brief meal, Tigellinus said: "Caesar, why don't you compose a poem on the Fire of Rome? What a subject for such a poet!"

Nero looked towards the gardens devastated by the flames: "Immortal deeds, immortal songs," he uttered. "In ages to come the soldiers will sing these same songs by their camp fires. The common people will chant them like a great lament. A song that might be sung till the end of time . . ."

He seized his lyre, and leaving the room he walked out

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\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XV.

to the terrace. There he paused, and stood surveying the ruined City below and the sky that hung like a pall above the ruins of Rome. His friends who had followed a few paces behind saw that he was declaiming, but the words were drowned in the noise. Soon the Emperor stopped. For a short while he stood with his two hands upon the parapet of the terrace, staring below. Then he lifted his eyes to the mournful sky once more, and turning on his heels he descended the steps and re-entered the room.

But at the foot of the hill, from the hovels of the Suburra, a man ran out and scurried hither and thither crying aloud, "Nero has caused Rome to be burned so that he may sing to the accompaniment of the flames!"

The name of the man was Hilliel, a Jew of the Gaulonite tribe. By morning the story had gone from mouth to mouth, that Nero Caesar had mounted the Tower of Maecenas, to sing the song of the Fire of Rome. Thus Nero's lament, that had remained unsung, gained immortal fame.

## IX

THE fire lasted six days and seven nights, and nothing could bring the flames under control. The flames devoured everything with such hungry violence that the danger disheartened the most courageous. Soon the Second, Third and Fifth Districts were an immense pyre in which the populace, mostly composed of excitable Orientals, saw the temples of Isis and Serapis crumble with their abodes. The cries of infants, the screams of women, the blind hurry of those who were fleeing and those who were endeavouring to help, made a chaos in which each one became an obstacle to another. The houses crashing down amidst clouds of red smoke, the shrieks of the victims, the dense choking smoke which the

wind turned into a suffocating lava, the robbers plundering and pilfering, made the scene an inferno of terror and tragedy.

People had camped in the temple of Mars. In the cemeteries the larger tombs had been seized. The shops were sacked for bread. Everywhere bands of slaves, now without masters or overseers, threw themselves upon the escaping citizens, and butchered them to steal their small bundles of goods. Germans, Africans, Asiatics, all shouted in a babel of tongues. Around the Palace the Praetorian Guards were camped, armed with lances, with orders to draw blood should the crowd attempt a coup.

On the sixth day the mounting tide of fire was halted at the foot of the Esquiline Hill, by demolishing the houses in its path. The crowd by then had mostly taken refuge in the fields outside the City. Others camped in the public squares where they obstructed the work. And so, at last, it was possible to take stock of the calamity. Of the fourteen Districts of Rome, only four were left standing. Three had been razed to the ground. The other seven were a cemetery of darkened, tumbling walls.

With two-thirds of the City destroyed, the most precious monuments of Rome had disappeared—the temple that King Servius Tullius had erected to the Moon, the temple of Jupiter Stator which was dedicated to Romulus, the great altar that Evander had consecrated to Hercules, the ancient palace of King Numa, the Penates of the Roman people, and the temple of Vesta with all the mysterious pledges of the greatness of Rome which were deposited in the sanctuary and the great trees of the cloister from which was suspended the shorn hair of the Vestal Virgins. Over the Capitol the flames had risen as high as the great statue of Jupiter itself. At the

sight of this, the desolate crowd felt that Rome was indeed moving relentlessly towards her doom and many threw themselves into the flames to perish with their unfortunate City.

Rome, the epitome of the World! Rome who had contained all the other cities. Rome within whose walls one could recognize, in the same way as the smaller churches are nowadays marked upon the floor of a great Cathedral, the boundaries of Alexandria the Opulent, Antioch the Beautiful and Athens the Splendid! What amassed wealth, what accumulated spoils had perished! But most irreparable was the loss of the masterpieces of Greek art, the paintings, the statues, the manuscripts.

A world of ashes and a weary people are without feeling, and the dark and dour amongst them now spoke openly against Nero, accusing him of being the cause of the City's ruin. Three or four hundred thousand people were homeless, without clothes and food. In dull amazement they contemplated the ruins of what had been Rome. Like flocks of sheep they wandered about the chaotic streets, gaping at the ruins of palaces and temples. But others marched about in bands shouting angry protests. It was urgent that shelter and food be found for the populace.

The Emperor ordered his Gardens to be opened, as well as the vast Campus Martius and the Monuments of Agrippa. He gave orders to build immediately huts and shelters and addressed an urgent appeal to the neighbouring cities for food and clothing. Bread, wheat and oil were distributed. No effort was spared to comfort and quieten the people.

Nevertheless the strange tale still went round—that on the night of the third day, when the flames were at their

highest, the Emperor had climbed the Tower of Maecenas, in the dress of a tragic actor, and sang a poem upon the Fire of Rome.

When rumour of it reached the Palace, a Privy Council was called. It was no use denying the obvious. And it would be idle, at that juncture, to start seeking the detractors and instigators. The populace was in no mood to take sides, for or against. The fire had been too overwhelming a calamity to allow thought for anything else.

Said Tigellinus: "Why not make political capital of it?" "Yes," he said, "let us humour the people, and ask them why has the Emperor ordered Rome to be burnt? Then tell them it was because he wanted to rebuild another Rome more beautiful than the old one and give the Romans a more splendid City . . ."

Nero listened with a frown on his brow. If such had been his intention, would he have commenced the fire from the great Circus? That vast place of enjoyment would be very valuable to offer some distraction to the crowd! The House of Passage, that Caligula had built and which crowned the Palatine like a diadem, linked by tall arches to the Nymphaeum of Claudius, and from there extending towards the Esquiline as far as the gardens of Maecenas, that wonderful building too had disappeared. How would the people believe that Nero had ordered its destruction? Indeed, the anxiety to save the treasures contained in the House of Passage had been one of the reasons for the Emperor's hurried departure for Rome. How could anyone believe that he had ordered their destruction?

## X

As soon as the fire was dead, the customary propitiatory sacrifices were offered to the Gods. To placate the Gods was tantamount to putting the blame on them.

The Sybil's Books were consulted. Prayers were addressed to Proserpine. Ceres was included, too, although it was not quite clear where the Goddess of crops and fertility came in. The ladies went in procession to Juno, first on the Capitol, then at Juno's temple by the sea, which gave them an opportunity to stay away for a while. The floor of the temple and the statue of the Goddess were washed with purified waters. No one could be certain that Jupiter's Consort was thus appeased, but everyone was aware that the Emperor's enemies were not. Senator Subrius was openly attacking the Emperor, and was boasting of his desire to kill Nero; and the populace called Subrius *pulcherrimum animum*—a most beautiful soul.

The people accepted the clothes and the corn and the wine that the Government so liberally distributed. They settled themselves as best they could in the public shelters whilst many found a profitable occupation in pilfering the ruined houses; and the Chief of Police advised that, in view of the present mood of the people, it was best to close both eyes to this.

At the end of the second week Nero informed his Councillors that he proposed to send a message to the Senate announcing that he was going to commence at once the rebuilding of Rome. And opening some rolls, he disclosed his plans for the new Rome.

Without delay, almost miraculously, the rebuilding of the City came to life. Huge armies of builders and carpenters were drafted from all the Provinces of the Empire to rebuild Rome according to the new plans. The streets were enlarged. Houses, in each district, were built in the same style and of the same elevation on both sides of the streets. There were well-proportioned squares from which arboured avenues spread star-like. Public buildings were built of a size proportionate to the needs and of a style in keeping with the neighbouring houses. Each block of private dwellings was provided with a large courtyard. The main streets were furnished with arcades under which people could shop in all weathers. House-owners were ordered to build of stone each block of houses, and that each must be detached. There must be water-reservoirs to be used in case of fires. The Emperor suggested that the frontages would look all the better if the houses had porticoes that could serve as shelter from both rain and sun, and he took upon himself the enormous cost of all those embellishments, for the house-owners soon allied themselves into an association, clamouring for a State subsidy. To promote speed in rebuilding, prizes and bonuses were offered to anyone who would build a house within a given time.

The ships that brought wheat from Egypt and Africa were used, on their return journey, to clear away the debris, which was dumped on the marshy land along the coast of Ostia. Down the Tiber there was a continuous passage of ships bringing food to the City and carrying away the rubbish. From all new buildings wood was eliminated or confined to fixtures, thus reducing to a minimum the risk of future fires. A Decree was issued preventing the wealthy owners from monopolizing water

in their gardens and fishing-ponds; in fact, water was made a public property, and a new Corps of Watermen was created to inspect and keep guard on fountains and conduits; a new and more equitable division of all the sources of water was made and all citizens were to share in this benefit.

The Emperor was very proud of his new city-planning. Women, however, whispered that the piazzas in front of the houses made it difficult for lovers to meet unobserved.

The sight of the empty spaces left by the disappearance of the House of Passage was a great temptation to Nero to rebuild a new Palace. The Palatine dominated Rome. It was visible from all parts of the City; and it was the finest District of Rome. The House of Passage went from the Palatine to the Coelius above the Imperial Road. It would be absurd to leave it an eyesore of ruins.

Nero loved the spectacular. The power and glamour surrounding the Throne fostered in him the sense of the fantastic. He felt now that it was his duty to rebuild for the Emperor a new Palace worthy of Rome.

He sent for the architects Severus and Celer, and ordered them to prepare the plans. The new Palace should be of gigantic proportions, magnificent, and full of originality. It should contain such marvels of arts to surpass and eclipse every other royal residence, present or past. The architects were told that they could draw upon the Treasury, in fact upon the whole Empire.

The new Palace was built in seven months. It was called *Domus Aurea*.

## XI

THE plans for the new Palace covered a surface equal, in modern terms, to the Tuileries and Louvre Palaces in Paris and their gardens altogether.

## THE FIRE OF ROME

As the fire had devoured more than two-thirds of the City, it was impossible to retrace under the ruins the narrow and small houses that had composed the popular Districts called the Suburra. Many owners, whose estates were due to pass automatically to the State or to the Emperor, had perished in the disaster. In a society selfishly given to celibacy and very largely composed of freedmen and individuals from all the corners of the world, the Emperor was, by law, entitled to the largest share of their succession. The impossibility of dividing the ruins equitably rendered it expedient, in the interest of the legitimate heirs themselves, that the Emperor should claim and apportion the whole estate. And the gaps created by the fire made it advisable to enlarge the Palace Grounds, so as to clear away the ruins that marred the view between the Esquiline and Coelius Hills and the Palatine. Out of those ruins rose Nero's Golden House. It was a group of palaces, almost a small town in itself.

Like all patrician houses in Rome, it had a great courtyard in front and in the centre was erected a colossal statue of Nero, modelled by the sculptor Zenadore who at that time was in great renown for a statue of Mercury of gigantic proportions, which he had made for the city of Avernum in France.\* Zenadore made the statue of Nero† one hundred and twenty feet high, cast in an alloy made of the richest metals. This statue remained stand-

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\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXXIV.

† This statue was later removed by Emperor Adrian from the courtyard of the Domus Aurea and re-erected before the Temple of Venus and Rome, opposite the new Circus Maximus; twenty-four elephants were used for the removal and a trace of the monumental base, forty-five feet in length, is still extant. The statue was much taller than the statue of Liberty of the Port of New York. Adrian turned Nero's statue into Elios, the Sun God, by adding to the head seven rays eleven feet long; then Commodus transformed it into Hercules, substituting for Nero's head a bearded face with the likeness of Hercules. The statue was still existing in the VIIth century.

ing for many years facing the new Circus Maximus, and the Romans, long after Nero's death, used to say, "Let's go to the Colossus." Thus came to the new amphitheatre the popular name of Colosseum.

Behind this statue opened an immense peristyle one thousand steps long, with three rows of columns. The floor of the peristyle was of mosaic, made of coloured marbles, which surrounded the plinths of the columns, while the capitals, adorned with golden leaves, harmonized with the paintings upon the ceiling. Those paintings, gay or serious, were executed by many artists, working under the direction of "the majestic Fabulus," so called because he never worked without his toga and handled his palette and his brushes with great solemnity.\* Fabulus had studied under Ludius, who, at the time of Augustus, excelled for his seascapes and country scenes, and from the painter Pyroticus Fabulus had learned the art of representing fruit and animals in small pictures, thus starting among those Roman connoisseurs the taste for miniatures and still-life pictures. But Fabulus's speciality were his large compositions, such as "Phoedre ready to hang herself after being rejected by Hippolitus," or the large mural of "Coriolanus being disarmed by his mother."

The art of painting on stone and of colouring marble had just been invented.† Praxiteles used to say indeed that his most beautiful statue was "the one which was painted by Nicias." For the Greek artists had learnt to colour their marble statues by painting them or by injecting a dye into the stone. They put a blush upon the cheeks of a statue representing a young girl. The Romans

\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXXV.

† Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXX.

went a step further and on certain occasions they dressed with magnificent garments and armour the statues of their Gods and famous men. This new device of colouring marble was extensively used in ornamenting the vast floor and long walls of the peristyle. It was also found most useful in the composition of mosaics, which require a great variety of colours, as well as in the decoration of rooms and galleries where the use of a uniform tone increased the effect, and varied according to the purpose of the place.

Under the porches and in the peristyle were large mural paintings depicting scenes from mythology and history. For that kind of painting the painters used colours mixed with Carthaginian wax which they dried off by means of a hot iron as soon as the colours were applied. This gave a surface that withstood the open air and it was what we now call encaustic. In some of the galleries the columns were bounded at the base by a wall as high as the hip of a man. The space within that wall was filled with earth and planted with shrubs and rare plants which, during the summer days, when the polychrome curtains were drawn, perfumed the shaded galleries.

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It was not enough to build a splendid residence, for it was also necessary to furnish adequately the rooms, the halls, the galleries, the baths. It was necessary to give life to the apartments and gardens, to put in them bronzes and marbles, statues and groups.

But Nero would have in his Palace only fine works of art, the masterpieces of the great artists. An Artistic Commission was therefore sent to Greece and Asia to collect all that was worthy of the Emperor. Never was

a collection of sculptures and pictures and *objets-d'art* made more speedily and with less regard for cost!

President of the Collecting Commission was Acratus, a freedman of Nero, assisted by the philosopher Carinas. The two ransacked Greece to the last village. The temples of Delphi alone yielded five hundred statues. But here and there the people rose in protest against this abduction of their Gods and Heroes. Acratus and Carinas had, at times, to ask the local garrisons to keep the populace quiet. The "Venus of Milo" lost her arms in the combat and one night a group of citizens went to steal her back from the quay where the statue lay ready to be packed and shipped. They hid her so well that for nearly eighteen centuries the "Venus of Milo" was lost to mankind.

More than two thousand statues went to people the galleries of the Golden House. A multitude of guests, silent and immobile, surrounded the Emperor who wanted to be amphitryon of all the Heroes and Gods.

Nero displayed even greater luxury in the decoration of his baths. The water of the sea and the sulphur water of Albula, near Tivoli, were conveyed through special ducts and pipes to the Emperor's baths and the swimming-pools. In winter, the reservoirs were heated and in summer the water could be refreshed by throwing snow into it, collected from the mountains and kept in special cellars.

The walls and floors of the baths were adorned with mosaics or lined with rare marbles. Mother-of-pearl and the rarest stones that one could find in the mountains of Asia Minor were used lavishly in the private apartments of the Emperor. The bedrooms, both of the Empress and of the principal guests, had beds made of scented wood, inlaid with gold and covered with rich Oriental tapestries,

or with coverlets embroidered with pearls from the Red Sea arranged in arabesque designs. The walls were lined with panelling made of revolving ivory tablets set on pivots which turned at a touch, showing each time a different picture. Those panels were also arranged in such a way that they could throw flowers. Hidden machines could, at a touch, spray perfumes upon the floors, and in the ceilings of the dining-halls there were hidden conduits from which fell a gentle rain of perfume upon the diners.\*

Nero's own bedroom was a vast apartment in which he kept his private collection. There hung the most exquisite paintings, in frames of carved ivory or delicate woods, and upon a special table stood the golden statuette of Victory with the lovely limbs, the faithful companion of all the Caesars, a beautiful precious thing that Nero superstitiously carried with him on all his travels. The Emperor's bed was covered with a rare cloth of golden brocade, woven upon purple silk, and was adorned with pearls and precious stones.

Nero was highly superstitious, and as he believed in the magic virtue of stones, the walls of the sleeping alcove were encrusted with talismans of all kinds. There was the horn of Ammon, a gold-coloured stone, which had the virtue of giving the sleeper prophetic dreams; there was the jasper, favourable to those who had to deliver harangues; the amethyst, which prevented drunkenness, and the sacred agate of the Isle of Crete, which gave protection against the bite of spiders and snakes. But Nero did not know that a workman had placed, just where his pillow touched the wall, the blackstone spotted with blood, the baroptene which inspired monstrous things.

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXI.

Next to those talismans, the dactylitheque of Nero was the rarest and richest treasury in the world. All the temples of Rome and Greece were robbed to provide ornaments for the Emperor's private apartment. From the Capitol itself the collection of gems of King Mithridates, which had been consecrated to Jupiter by Pompey the Great, was pilfered of the choicest specimens and treasures. Upon consoles of marble and tables of cedar-wood, pearls, diamonds and other precious gems sparkled in bowls of alabaster or agate. There was the famous opal which had belonged to Mark Antony, who had proscribed Senator Nonius for the purpose of confiscating the gem. There was the sardonyx of Polycarpus Tyrant of Samos, taken from the temple of the Goddess Concordia to whom the Empress Livia had consecrated it within a horn of gold, the agate of Pyrrhus the famous enemy of Rome—a stone into which Nature had carved the image of Apollo and his nine sisters with their attributes and symbols.\* And there was the beautiful emerald which Nero used as a monocle at the gladiatorial combats in the Circus, and the rarest of gems, a marvel discovered in the gold mines of Lamsacum—the celebrated emerald which had belonged to Alexander the Great.

Upon other tables were arranged a profusion of statuettes of bronze and brass, the latter a metal which was a great novelty and was manufactured with much skill at Corinth. And there were the first pieces of Chinese ceramics ever seen in the Western world, brought by the caravans of Parthian merchants trading beyond Persia, and stem-cups of a fine exquisite substance that was neither glass nor porcelain and were called by the Romans *murrine* cups; and Nero had one of rare beauty, bought

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\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXXVII.

for him for three hundred talents. He furthermore had two small cups of rock-crystal, transparent and delicate like the thinnest glass.\* Upon a plinth of precious marble rested a statue fifteen inches high in smoked jasper, representing Nero himself wearing a breastplate. There was also the Serapis, cut from one big emerald, and the statue of topaz which was made for Queen Arsinoe. In this apartment too was kept the golden lyre which Nero played to accompany his singing and declamations. The Imperial lyre rested upon a stand of ivory, surrounded by the golden crowns that Nero had won in the competitions of music and poetry.

Next to the Imperial apartments rose a great dome, representing the Heavens. It was the roof of the dining-hall, the chief masterpiece of the Golden House. For upon the interior of that cupola, stars and constellations traced in gold and diamonds rose and set according to their heavenly course. Fixed to turning pivots, the stars marked the Day and the Night, and reproduced the course of the Sun and the Moon and of the main stars of the firmament, depicted with all the nuances of light and shadow.† The whole banqueting room had been conceived to harmonize with that marvellous cupola: while the Sky moved over the guests' heads, their feet rested upon Hell, the black frogs of the Styx and all the Kingdom of Pluto. It was a vast composition in the taste of the great mosaic that was in the temple of Fortune at Preneste. A figurative map of Ethiopia had recently been presented to Nero‡ and this had prompted him to have the walls of his dining-hall painted with figurations of all lands and rivers and seas

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\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXXVII.

† Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXI.

‡ Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XII.

of the known world, with the rivers traced and the principal cities represented by their chief buildings. Amidst those pictures, in which all the Provinces of the Empire were depicted, with their special products and crops, their animals, their inhabitants and particular customs, the Emperor could at a glance embrace the whole Empire. He was able indeed to say that, like Jupiter upon Olympus, he had his world under his eyes.

Afterwards many guests came to hate that room, for the revolving ceiling made one feel giddy, especially when the cups of Falernum had been too plentiful; but the machinery that made the room rotate was a marvel of engineering and its architect was rewarded with a fabulous prize. The wonder was that he was not liquidated to prevent him building another hall like it.

The many buildings forming the Golden House rose on the shores of an artificial lake, which was large enough to allow small ships to manoeuvre. In the vast gardens, lakes and ponds of fresh- and sea-water were laid, in which strange fish swam. Further away, all the animal monsters of the Indies and of Africa were enclosed in a small Zoo, both for amusement and for use in the Circus. Nero's old racing horses, that had won prizes in the races, were pensioned in magnificent stables; their saddle-cloths were bordered with purple like a Senator's toga. In the midst of meadows and pastures were huge aviaries, filled with rare and beautiful birds. To a monkey, of which the Emperor was particularly fond, was assigned a special house and the ape was attended by numerous servants. Next to this was the house of Asturcon, Nero's favourite horse.

But the greatest novelty was to have enclosed within boundaries fields, dark forests and solitudes stocked with

wild animals. There were monsters too—the hermaphrodite mules, and an anthropoid presented to the Emperor from Egypt.\* From the Near East had come the art of dyeing the wool of live animals and upon those fields grazed sheep of divers gay colours.† There were rivulets and brooks, made picturesque by small mills, vineyards and fields, their unexpected rural touch enhancing by contrast the marvels of art and the beauty of the landscape. Upon an elevation rose a small temple dedicated to Seia, the God of crops. The temple was built of an extraordinary stone which had just been discovered and has never been found again: “Under the reign of Nero,” wrote Pliny, “there was brought to Rome from Cappadocia a white stone, as hard as marble and transparent even within its coloured veins. Nero built with this stone the temple of Seia. When the door and the windows were closed, one felt within that little sanctuary the light that was outside, but not as we see it through the stone called specularia, but as though instead of coming through the stone the light was enclosed inside. It was a most seductive effect. *Tanquam inclusa luce, non transmissa.*”

When the whole palace and gardens were ready, Nero made a grand tour of the place. The party then returned to the forecourt, the Emperor smiled with appreciation and said: “Now I have a house worthy of a great artist.”

## XII

THE luxury of Nero’s and Poppaea’s life involved enormous expenditure. Nero loved prodigality and splendour. To Spiculus the gladiator he gave houses and land which

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXVII.

† Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, VIII.

had belonged to Consuls who had earned a Triumph. For the moneylender Paneros he ordered a funeral worthy of a King. He never wore the same dress twice. When he travelled, a thousand carriages transported his luggage. The couriers who preceded his train, riding beautiful horses, were huge negroes adorned with necklaces and big bangles on their arms and legs, whilst the mules that pulled the carriages were shod in silver, and their drivers wore dresses of pure Caucasian wool.

The fire of Rome had brought to a climax the extravagance of Nero's life; it had created a gulf which threatened to swallow his popularity and his fortune. To recapture the people's affection Nero had recourse once again to the Circus games, with increased magnificence. His impresario Julianus brought the extravagance to the point of fixing buttons of amber to the nets that divided the arena from the audience. On one occasion, all the "props" for the games were made of this precious substance, including the gladiators' weapons and the biers for the dead!

Day after day the combats of gladiators, the chariot races, the fights with animals went on, as well as the free distributions of meals and corn, not to mention the lotteries which gave everybody hope of winning a rich prize. Never were the Games so splendid. *Panem et Circenses!* Bread and amusement became the rule of life. The die-hards were often complaining that it was not so in olden times, but the politicians cynically replied that it was a sign of complete maturity to be fond of pleasure: indeed, to satisfy the people's inordinate passion for pleasure was the only way to keep going.

Hastily repaired at an enormous cost, the Circus Maximus witnessed shows of unprecedented splendour.

Roughly constructed of timber under Tarquinius Drusus and enlarged later under the Empire, the Circus had become a most superb building. Julius Caesar had extended it, surrounding the arena with a moat ten feet deep and as many broad, to protect the spectators against danger from the chariots during the races. Claudius rebuilt the *carceres* in marble, and gilded the *metae*, that were the two focal points of the arena where the chariots took the turn. The Circus was the main centre of attraction in Rome; it was six hundred and twenty-five feet long and two hundred feet wide, and was big enough for two hundred thousand spectators. It was a by-word in Rome, *Totam hodie Romam Circus capit*, and Nero, who was vain, said it in the sense that when he took part in a race all Rome rushed to the Circus to applaud him.

The Circus's Games had a religious origin, for they had been instituted by Romulus. King Tarquinius gave them greater pomp, following the ancient Etruscan custom. Tarquinius was a great king, and for that he was expelled, for the people always want the misrule of a Republic after a great king. Later, the Senate decreed that the Republic should provide the Games with State money. Since then, the Magistrates had charge of the Games. Some looked after the administrative side, others were actually in charge of the programmes and made detailed arrangements with the impresarios who offered new turns and provided the artists for the theatrical shows, the gladiators for the combats and the beasts for the fights. The Curule Edile presided at the Games in Triumphal dress.

The great Gods in whose honour the Games were held, descended from the Capitol in solemn procession to come and sit among the people in the Circus, and before enter-

ing the Circus the procession traversed the Forum, headed by the Edile standing upon a chariot drawn by four white horses. The Senators and all the Magistrates followed on foot or horseback, according to their rank and dignity. On one occasion when Augustus was ill, he insisted on following the procession lying on a litter. Behind the Senators came the youths of fourteen and fifteen, who were already considered worthy of watching the Games, then came the sons of the aristocracy on horseback, the other classes followed on foot and divided into companies; all in perfect order, like a grand military parade.

After them came the chariot-drivers in war dress; there never were fewer than a hundred chariots, belonging to the four racing stables into which the Turf Club was divided, each recognizable by its racing colours and even more by the beauty of the horses and their distinctive harness; the *Albata* or the Whites, the *Russata* or the Reds, the *Veneta* or the Blues, and the *Prasina* or the Greens. It was a great sight, and it always drew the most thunderous applause.

After the horses came the athletes, each team marching together, naked and ready for the fight; then came the troupes of dancers, escorted by their musicians and choirs. The dancers wore long scarlet tunics with belts of polished copper, carrying a small sword at the belt and a short spear adorned with bright feathers and plumes. Some of them had helmets of brass adorned with aigrettes, for they danced the Pyrrhic dance, marching in time, each troupe headed by a band-master.

Then followed the choirs of Satyrs dressed in goats' skins with tufts of long hair on their caps, and Silenes wearing rough tunics, chosen for their hairy chests and huge bellies and bibulous faces. They parodied in comic

ways the serious dances, to the accompaniment of music especially composed to enhance their amusing gestures.

The Gods came last, preceded and escorted by a large number of priests and attendants. The statues were carried upon litters on stands or upon gilt chariots drawn by four horses led by children of noble families holding the bridle, with crowns of oak and pearls upon their heads and dressed in purple and gold.

The four Pontiffs of the four Colleges closed the impressive march. The procession advanced along the streets strewn with flowers, under canopies of veils drawn from roof to roof, the houses and temples being hung with carpets and tapestries, and at every crossroad stood acolytes burning incense and perfumes in silver pans.

While the triumphal procession of the Gods proceeded towards the Circus through the Forum and the Velabrum, the populace was already crowding the Circus to its utmost capacity. From the *Euripe*, the large ditch which separated the lower range of seats from the arena and protected the public from the chariots and the savage beasts, up to the colonnade that crowned the uppermost tier, the multitude seated on the steps chattered and munched melon-seeds, and their noise could be heard as far as the Murcia Valley below the aristocratic Palatine or the Hill, as it was called. Suddenly someone shouted that he had espied the procession. All eyes became fixed upon the arena where the sand of specularia stone glittered and shone like a golden snow under the sun. Upon that resplendent arena the procession entered and displayed itself. Finally, the golden statue of the Winged Victory appeared. The two hundred thousand spectators rose as one man, saluting the Eternal Protectress of the Empire.

The procession made the tour of the arena ; a propitia-

tory sacrifice was solemnly offered to the Gods, whose statues were placed with measured and precise gestures upon the *Spina*, the wide wall that divided the arena lengthways, or sometimes in the little temple under the *pulvinar*, that was the Imperial box. The Magistrates, the Senators and the Vestal Virgins, all mounted the stairs to the large tribune which rose right above the dungeons and stables from which chariots and beasts would emerge. In the Imperial box the Emperor was surrounded by his Court, while the adjoining boxes and steps were filled with members of the aristocracy. It was a gorgeous show; the jewels and bright dresses; the fashionable ladies indulging in silken raiments imported from the East; the elegant courtiers in white togas bordered with purple; the shimmering breastplates and waving plumes of the Praetorian Guards.

Then the Games commenced. The Edile advanced holding in his right hand a roll of scarlet cloth, and threw it vigorously into the arena. The cloth unrolled like a tongue of flame or a jet of blood: it was the signal. The Heralds blew their long silver trumpets, and four chariots rushed out of the stables' great gates and hurtled into the arena towards the starting line.

The first day barely sufficed for the chariot races, and the Games might indeed last thirty, forty, or even one hundred days. But the races were always the first show. Grooms in spectacular dresses held the horses at the bridle and the drivers made much display with the reins in one hand, the long whip in the other, a tight-fitting helmet of silver or gold on their head, their heels and legs swathed in bands of linen, the body in a short tunic of the colours of their stable, and wrapped around the waist were the long reins which the driver could, in case of emergency,

cut with the dagger that was at his hip. Thus the chariots took position while the splendid horses held high their heads caparisoned with a gilded branch, their long tails turned up in a tight knot, the manes braided with silken ribbons and pearls, the pectorals glittering with golden ornaments and charms, the necks adorned with nets and the colours of their stables.

When all the competitors were in line, a trumpet was blown and the Edile gave the starting signal. For the races the Edile was dressed in a rich scarlet tunic, similar to the tunic of Jupiter Capitolinus. He had an embroidered toga of Tyrian red "as large as a tent," as Martial put it, and he was indeed a show all in himself, that gorgeous President of the Games, bedecked like an idol, holding in his right hand an ivory stick topped with an eagle with outstretched wings, and on his head a crown of golden leaves so heavy that an attendant had to hold it\* and so rich that Martial wrote that one single rose from that wonderful garland would have sufficed to make a rare goblet for him! †

The races, especially when the chariots were drawn by six horses or more, were so dangerous that from the moment the horses started and the dust began to fly under the narrow wheels the multitude applauded in wild excitement. The greatest danger to the competitors was in the risk of coming into collision with the axle-hubs of a rival chariot, that might overturn the vehicles and kill drivers and horses. Moreover, in each race the chariots had to go seven times round the arena, a total of two and a half miles, and as the two turning points at each end of the elliptical course were always on the left of the team of

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\* Juvenal, X.

† Martial, VIII.

horses, a successful turn, when there were four horses or more, depended upon the agility of the two outer steeds, which were called *funales* because instead of being coupled to the yoke they were attached only by a rope. For the whole team was actually held by the driver in his hands, only the inner horses being yoked to the small saddles sticking out from the long pole that was attached to the middle of the chariot's axle. The harness consisted of a bridle and a pair of reins, which passed through rings attached to the collar-bands and long enough to be tied to the waist of the charioteer. If the bend was turned at too narrow an angle the fragile chariot might break. On the other hand, if the turning was taken too wide, the chariot would lose ground or risk being hit by another. The drivers therefore strained all the time to incite the horses and at the same time to look back to avoid a collision with the chariots behind. Not for nothing the victorious *auriga* celebrated his victories with inscriptions that left nothing to the imagination: *Occupavi et Vici*—I kept the lead and won. Or he was the outsider that had won 100-1, *Erupi et Vici*. After each race special telegraphists released a storm of carrier pigeons that would bring to the sporting patrician in the country or to an official abroad the news of the victory of his favourite team.

And what splendid horses! They came from the best stud-farms of Italy, Spain, North Africa and Greece, reared from the finest thoroughbreds, taken in hand at three years and trained for two, and when five years old put to the strenuous races of the Circus. Those with more staying power were put at the yoke, while the more spirited were used as *funales*; and each animal, upon the door of its box, had its pedigree and a full record of its

performances. Their names were inscribed upon the oil lamps that the hawkers sold as souvenirs. Often a fond owner would have the name of his favourite horse inlaid in the mosaic floor of his country house: *Vincas non vincas, te amamus, O Polidoxe*—Win or lose, we love you, O Polidoxe! Of *Tuscus* we know that he won 386 races. *Victor* was true to his name 429 times. And the drivers! Apart from the prize money, the successful *aurigae* received fantastic salaries from the owners to retain their services. Rome was proud of the drivers who had won a thousand victories. They were called *miliarii*, and the names have survived of Scorpo who won 1,043 races, of Apaphrodite who had won 1,467 victories, of Pompey the Brownie with 3,559 victories, and of Diocles who, having won 3,000 races with pairs of horses and 1,462 with four-in-hands, retired at last with 35 million sesterces in the bank.\* In the cafés of Rome, in the barbers' shops and the Public Baths, everybody spoke of the love affairs and escapades of the most famous drivers. Their portraits were stencilled upon the walls and the curio-shops sold their busts in plaster and bronze. Between the races the bookmakers took the bets.

On the following days there were athletic matches, and the gladiators' combats. Acrobats climbed at great speed the solid tortoise that thirty other companions formed with their shields held above their heads. Under the feet of the climbing racers the mobile tortoise trembled and clanged, for the racers wore boots with great iron nails and the blood soon sparkled on the arena. Real battles succeeded single duels; men fought against wild beasts; Thracian horsemen gave thrilling bull-fights; African elephants, carrying huge turrets filled with gladia-

\* See the *inscriptions* collected by Dessau, and Friedlander, *Anhang*.

tors in armour, charged one another. From all the corners of the earth the most feocious beasts or the strangest animals were collected for the Games. The Ocean was dragged of its monsters no less than the Desert, for the naumachias were now very popular. In the East and in the Desert beyond the fertile plains of Lybya and Mauritania native huntsmen set traps for rare beasts to be sent to the Rome impresarios.

In the intervals between the games, the poets visited the noblest beauties in their boxes, scattering epigrams and elegant quips. Slaves in white tunics with their hair held by a scarlet ribbon distributed sherbets and iced melons and cakes, shouting their wares from tier to tier; a novelty instituted by Nero. Soon the attendants drew back the huge velarium of scarlet and yellow cloth that protected the spectators from the sun. The sky was now turning amethyst and a gentle breeze blew from the Alban Hills. From numerous pipes a fine rain of perfume fell upon the crowd. The attendants watered the arena to keep the dust down, and in the small conduit at the foot of each tier the water ran bright and clear, diffusing a pleasant freshness.

It was true that the greater number of bestiaries and gladiators left the Circus by the Libitine Gate, their corpses drawn by hooks, and others were carried away to die in the dressing-rooms where the managers cursed and counted their losses. But the winners had received palms, crowns, purses filled with gold and, more precious than all, their freedom, for Nero had set a rule that no gladiator should see his *polluce verso*, the Emperor's thumb turned down. "Why ask for their death? Alive they will adore me; dead, they will curse me in Hell."

Soon the people near the eastern gate would begin to

shout with joy and proffer their hands. It was the Edile rapidly traversing the middle gangway, and like a labourer sowing his field he scattered right and left handfuls of wooden balls engraved with a number. Those who were lucky enough to catch a ball would on the morrow present themselves to the Palace stewards and receive a gift corresponding to their number—a piece of furniture, an ornament, a vase, a statuette, a small painting, a purse filled with silver, a slave, a beautiful dagger. Some were lucky enough to win a cottage in the country or an apartment in town . . . The audience chanted and lifted their arms towards the Imperial box: “*Ave, Nero Caesar, our Charming Prince!*” The Emperor looked at them through his emerald monocle, nodding his head in acknowledgment.

\* \* \*

But Games and Public Works were draining the Treasury. Nero was obliged to make the Praetorian Guards wait for their pay, and the Praetorians were his real standby. Other things influenced the situation—the great influx of foreigners coming to Rome after acquiring in the Provinces the right of residence and the restlessness of slaves brought about by the new Christian doctrine. All this increased the number of groups hostile to the Emperor. It was not an easy thing to clothe and feed the army of paupers created by the fire of Rome, and not as an ambitious extravagance, but because of the frequent shipwrecks around Cape Misenum the Government planned to cut a Canal across the Pontine Marshes, to enable the barges loaded with grain to travel safely to Rome. Yet the *beaux* of Rome lamented that the works in the Pontine Marshes ruined the vineyards where the Cecube vine was grown!

Nor was the populace grateful. Nero felt the shudder of isolation. Tigellinus took stock of the situation, and again whispered his advice: "Nothing will do but to discover the culprits who set fire to Rome. That alone will interest and satisfy the people."

All at once the Emperor was surrounded by voices accusing the Christians. His Ministers, the Senators, the priests in the temples, philosophers, men of letters, everybody, Roman and foreigner, rose to accuse the Christians.

At last Nero called a Privy Council. As at all meetings at which Nero presided, business began with an interchange of witticisms. Then Nero got near the real matter in hand:

"The paternal administration of Claudius and my own liberal policy have made it possible for those men Peter and Paul to preach their new God in all the Provinces and even in my Praetorium."

Tigellinus answered tartly, "The Emperor's over-generous tolerance of the Christians will be otherwise interpreted."

Poppaea supported Tigellinus. The Emperor looked around and rested his eyes upon Seneca, who had been asked to attend the Council. In a mocking voice the Emperor said, "The Christians! I wish you would tell me something about these Christians. I hear that you are an admirer of the man Paul."

Seneca answered, "It is an animistic religion. Rather complex to explain in a few words."

But Tigellinus asked, "Has the Emperor ever heard their hymns? They call fire and horrors upon Rome . . . The Christians are a common crowd, mostly slaves and low-class foreigners. It would give the greatest satisfaction and pleasure to the Roman people to see the punish-

ment of these slaves and foreigners who have caused fire of Rome."

Seneca lifted a finger in his didactic manner. He would put it in this way, he said. He was not interested in their superstitions; they were neither very original nor particularly attractive. But what should cause concern, from a political angle, was entirely another point. "These Christians," he went on, "are spreading strange social theories. They say that slavery is wrong; that slaves and masters are equal. This can be so, and I am not interested whether this is or is not subversive. But the fact is, where would anyone be if there were no slaves? There would no longer be labour for the mines or the factories."

Seneca paused to wet his lips at his cup of plain water and Nero looked at him impassively, thinking how clever and lucid the old fox could be; how masterly he could turn anything good or bad into a sound reason of State . . . Seneca continued, "These Christians are preaching a new social order—a dangerous game. They believe in the equality of all men, and this new concept attracts the slaves and the poverty-stricken. It is something more dynamic than Spartacus's movement. It is of no use to apply a milder and blander form of slavery for all Romans are doing it nowadays. But this new Christian gospel goes further and deeper."

The Emperor smiled, pleased as he always was by a brilliant speech, and he looked around the Council table, at his Ministers and advisers, one by one. There was Lollius, President of the Senate, wearing the new style of shoes with the very thick wooden soles, which made it awkward for a corpulent man to walk. There was Foenius, the Commander-adjunct of the Praetorians, honest and intelligent as a soldier could be, but certainly

and caring one way or another, anxious only to see the Emperor preserve his popularity. There was Seneca, hiding his real mind as he had been doing for a long time, and there was Tigellinus, eager to see the Christians punished for the fire. Tigellinus—it would be curious to know what secret cause Tigellinus had for hating the Christians so much . . . And there was Poppaea, unofficial member of the Privy Council, whose view counted for so much nevertheless, even with him. The Emperor did not look at the Jewish lawyer, who had been invited to attend merely in an informative capacity, to give the views of the country from which the Christian religion had come.

The Christians, the Emperor thought, might provide a solution. The populace hated them thoroughly, and would therefore be satisfied. The Christians, as Tigellinus said, were mostly foreigners and freed slaves. There were also some Romans among them; but these could be quietly spared if need be. Or perhaps their punishment would act as a salutary example to the people of Rome not to meddle in alien religions and return more wholeheartedly to their proper Gods. Indeed, the punishment could be offered as a sacrifice to Jupiter Capitolinus and to Apollo. Yes, Apollo might be pleased, for he was too often forgotten in the medley of foreign deities. Afterwards the Emperor would announce his departure for Greece and maybe Apollo would be favourable to his artistic tour.

The Chief of Police now spoke, saying that this new superstition was making followers by the thousand, especially among the lower classes. It changed their heart—the lower classes had no mind, they only had a heart which pushed them hither and thither. This new religion

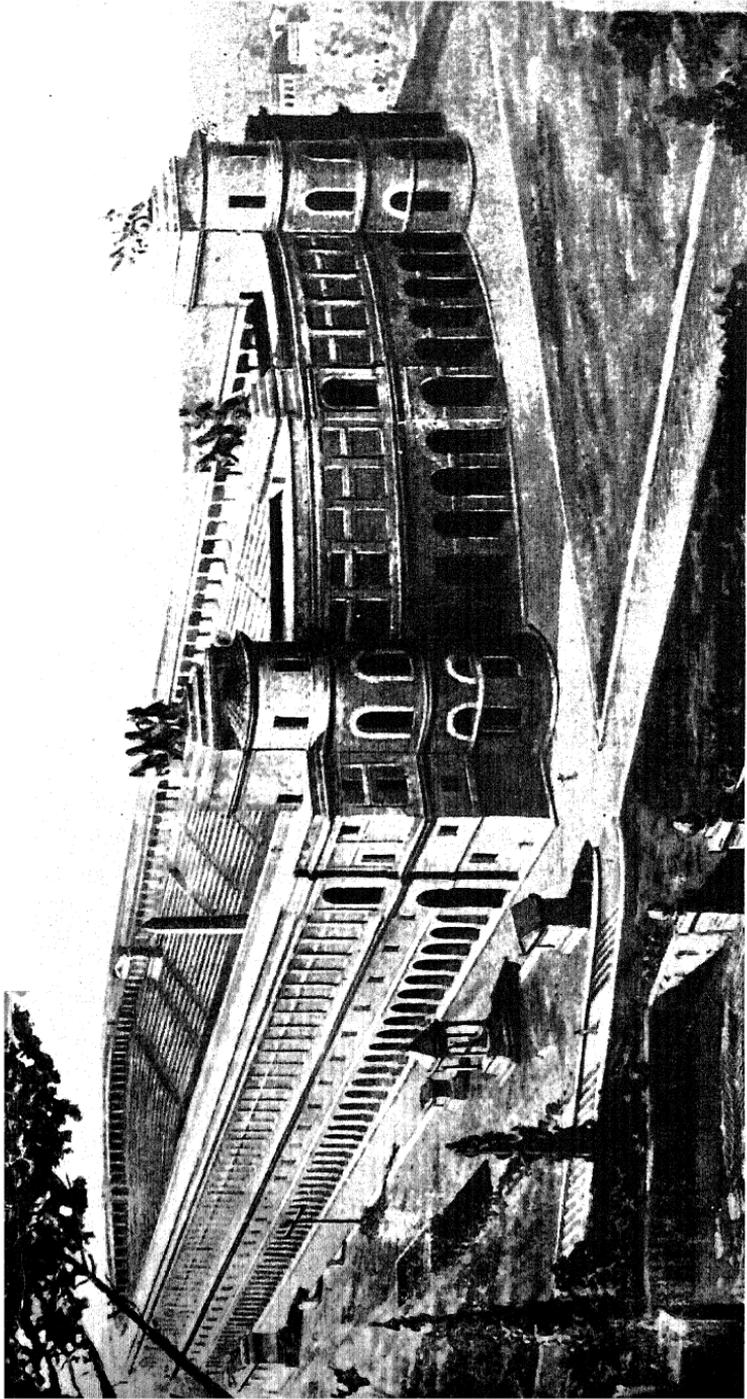


Plate 9]

[From the rare book of Reconstructions of Ancient Rome, by G. Gatteschi in the Library of Palazzo Venezia, Rome]

The **NERONIAN CIRCUS** built for Nero's private amusement in the Gardens of the Palace which extended to the foot of the Vatican Hill. In it Nero gave his private performances as a charioteer and as a singer. The Obelisk which is seen in the middle of the Circus stands now in the centre of St. Peter's Square in Rome where it was removed by a most ingenious engineering feat on the 30th April, 1586, by order of Pope Sixtus V.



took them away from the beliefs of their fathers, upon which Roman life rested. The Emperor would be surprised, the Chief of Police went on, to learn how many converts this man Peter and the other man Paul, who at this moment was not in Rome, had made in the very Palace.

Nero looked up, "And what should the Emperor do with them?" The Chief of Police shrugged his shoulders. The example must come from Caesar's house, and those had already been arrested. As a precautionary measure or in anticipation of the Emperor's decisions? For both.

Tigellinus cried out: "To what purpose a trial? Why allow them to preach from the witness-box? Better try some of the leaders, and announce a general sentence. They brag of being Christians, they are all self-confessed. In every tavern there is but one subject of conversation: 'What punishment will be devised for the Christians?'" Tigellinus extended his two hands towards the Emperor in the attitude of a supplicant to a God, "O Divine Caesar, it is important that the people shall speak of you only as a great artist."

That night it was announced that the trial of the Christians would soon commence. The announcement met with general approval.

### XIII

WHEN the Chief of Police was ordered to collect the evidence against the Christians he found that his heaviest task was not to solicit but to stem the flood of informers. The strangest thing was that few asked for a reward. Who was sending them? Whose hand, or what motive, was behind that avalanche of information? Some of it was very interesting.

A young freedman of Poppaea, Narcissus by name, sent in a neat report :

“ Some months before the fire a Christian, believing that I was a new convert, took me to a room where many Christian chiefs were assembled. I was told that in this room, hidden under the floor, were kept the rolls on which are written the chronicles of their religion, for the Deacons feared that certain hostile Jews who dwelt in the Grove of the Muses might try to steal them. In that room, that night, I saw the two main gossellers, Simon Peter and Paul of Tarsus, and a certain Tabeel whom they also called Rufus. Simon Peter, who had only recently returned to Rome, told of his preaching and organizing in other lands, then they all fell silent and intent. The room was now in darkness, lit only by the wavering flames of three torches set upon an altar. After a little while the man Tabeel began to toss and groan and mutter, acting like a Sybil before she gives out her prophecy. Presently he rose, his face quite changed, and where there had been only the man Tabeel there were now two persons—Tabeel and a stranger. Tabeel began to interpret for this stranger, who said, ‘ He who dwells within me now is one who passed away through violent death into a holy life. I see him being stoned, and he is lying upon the ground, bloody sweat upon his brow, while the young men cast their cloaks at the feet of his persecutors and run away with fear and shame.’

“ The man Paul cried out, ‘ Tell us his name ! ’ Tabeel answered, ‘ He gives me no name,’ and Paul said, ‘ It is Stephen ; it is Stephen whom I caused to be put to death in the days of my ignorance.’

“ Then Tabeel sighed and groaned louder and louder, and went on : ‘ Stephen is now in the form of an Angel

and rejoices in that torture and death. And he says to me: "Behold, I come bearing tidings of the end." Stephen is pointing to two dark Angels. They have wind in their wings, and fly over the city of Rome. The first Angel stretches up his hand and plucks a star from the sky. He is casting this star into the very centre of Rome. I see the star falling in places we all know, close beside the Circus. It kindles and lights up a twisted street. Now the Capuan Gate is all aflame, and a great fire is rising and spreading like a peacock's tail. People are running and fleeing. The whole City is in an uproar. The flames of the falling stars spread swiftly, and the two Angels blow upon them. The Angel of Destruction is announcing quite loudly, "Babylon is passing, Rome is no more, her pride is crushed." I see the temple of the Moon falling under the flames; the shrine of Vesta, the mighty temple of Jupiter, they all fall. The flames, like vipers of fire, climb the hills up to the Palace of Caesar. It is the end, the Day of Atonement, when the Dead rise and stand before our Lord.'

"Peter and Paul cried: 'Tell us the day, the time of this!' But Tabeel groaned and tossed, and only said, 'I cannot see; there is again darkness around me.' He tossed and groaned; and speaking in the tongue of the Jews he said: 'Another summer will not pass before this City is destroyed by fire. There shall be great tribulations and many signs and wonders; but they are signs of the coming of Christ. And woe to Rome and to Caesar!'

"Everybody in the chamber beat their breasts, and cried aloud in prayer. Tabeel fell back upon the ground and lay there. Simon Peter said: 'Brethren, bear these things in your hearts and impart them to no man. For they declare that the time is near at hand; keep watch, therefore, and be prepared.' He quickly gave the assembly

his blessing, and marvelling and muttering all went into the dark street."

Another report said :

" On the first night of the fire a frenzied group was seen gathered around a man they called Hillel, who is another chief of the Christians and well known amongst them as having preached at all times the destruction of Rome. There was also Peter ; but although Peter called them to their chamber of assembly, Hillel cried, ' The Christ is coming at any moment ; the Heavens are opening ; He will appear in all His Glory ! ' And he urged them all to sing hymns and thanksgiving to the Lord who was giving them the first sign by setting fire to the City. All the younger men marched down the street, chanting what they call the Psalm of David, with radiant faces, their eyes ablaze with hope, delight and ecstasy, believing that the Last Judgment had come and that soon they would be carried up to the Heavens.

" Hillel," said the report, " was seen again with a great band of followers, watching a burning mansion, and their faces were so full of joy that people around them cried in protest : ' Are you so glad of this destruction ? ' And the Christians answered, ' Yes, for it is a sign of the end.' Peter and Mark asked their followers to help to save the victims and the wounded ; but Hillel said, ' Why waste our labour ? At any hour the Christ will appear from the clouds and the Last Trumpet will sound, and we shall be encircled by a host of Angels and carried into the Heavens '."

Another informer said that this attitude of Hillel had caused great dissensions among the Christians, and after the fire Peter with Mark had summoned Hillel to their presence and endeavoured to reason with him, but they

could not change his passion and fanaticism, and he still talked of the wrath of God upon Rome. Whereupon Peter summoned all the faithful to a lonely place outside the City, and he announced that the time had come to determine the future of the Church in Rome, and while he and Mark and Linus were of one accord, Hillel stood apart. He proposed that his first Deacon Linus be the Overseer of the Church in Rome when he himself might go to other lands to preach the Word; but he denounced Hillel as having forfeited the faith of the Lord Jesus by refusing to save a woman who was perishing in the flames. Hillel, he said, would have us hate our neighbours, which is against our faith. But Hillel spoke with vehement passion, telling of the suffering of the Jews at the hands of the Romans, and again he affirmed that the fire was the first sign of the end of Rome. There came shouts of 'I am for Hillel the Gaulonite,' or 'I am for Simon Peter of Galilee.' The gathering broke up in turmoil and since then the Christians, said the report, were divided in Galileans and Gaulonites."

But the Chief of Police felt that that story was of no import to the case.

One day a small packet of letters was placed on his desk, a correspondence between Seneca and Paul of Tarsus. There were the original letters from Paul, and neat copies of the letters from Seneca, prepared by an amanuensis of the great man. "For posterity," thought the Chief of Police, "and how very useful!" Eagerly he scanned the letters. They were of no terrific import but showed beyond doubt that Seneca was in close touch with one of the principal leaders of the Christians, and the followers of this new religion were now indicted as responsible for the fire of Rome.

“Annaeus Seneca to Paul, greetings. I suppose, Paul, you have been informed of that conversation which passed yesterday between me and my Lucilius, concerning hypocrisy and other subjects; for there were some of your disciples in company with us. I desire you to believe that we much wish for your conversation. We were much delighted with your book of many Epistles, which you have written to some cities. Of such sentiments, I suppose, you were not the author, but only the instrument of conveying, though sometimes both the author and the instrument.”

Again from Seneca to Paul, “I have completed some volumes of your letters and divided them into their proper parts. I am determined to read them to Nero Caesar, and if any favourable opportunity happens, you also shall be present, when they are read . . .”

And Paul to Seneca, “As often as I read your letters I imagine you present with me. I hope that we shall presently see each other.” But another letter from Paul to Seneca said: “Concerning those things about which you wrote to me, it is not proper for me to mention anything in writing with pen and ink . . .”

Some months later Paul was writing, “Although I know the Emperor is interested in our religion, I desire that for the future you will not mention me, for you had need be careful, lest by showing your affection for me you should offend your master.”

And there was one from Seneca, of recent date: “Annaeus Seneca to Paul, greetings. All happiness to you, my dearest Paul. Do you not suppose I am extremely concerned and grieved that your innocence should bring you into sufferings? And that all the people should suppose the Christians so criminal, and imagine all the

misfortunes that have happened to Rome to be caused by you? But let us bear the charge with a patient temper . . . ”\*

The Chief of Police made some notes from the letters, then he put them away safely—they would come in useful some other time, and for some other purpose. And he grinned, thinking of the Empress’s surprise, and of Tigellinus’s astonishment should they hear this latest craze of our over-confident philosopher Seneca, former Prime Minister.

## XIV

THE trial of the Christians took place during the summer, the year 64. It was a quick affair.

A motley of prisoners stood in the Praetor’s Court, many of them slaves, ill-clad, dark men from the East. Here and there a better-dressed Roman of the lower classes. There were a few white-robed women, Eustachia, Mary who was lady-companion to the Lady Pomponia Graecina, wife of General Pomponius who had been a commander in Britain, and was now one of the steadiest converts to the new faith. There were also Claudia and Melania.

The prisoners’ leaders and spokesmen were Patrobas, Hillel and Junia. The medium Tabeel was brought in between two guards.

One by one the spies and witnesses gave evidence. They said that the prisoners had refused to help the citizens to put out the fire, and many had openly rejoiced at the sight of the great fire—and this was a partial truth. Patrobas was called upon to speak for the defence and he said that it was true that they all belonged to one community and worshipped Jesus of Galilee, who was the Son of God.

\* *Apocrypha.*

“Then,” he was asked, “are you all Galileans?”

“Call us Galileans, if you like.” Therefore in the records of the trial the Christians were all described as Galileans.

But Patrobas denied any charge of incendiarism. He said his companions were all sober men who would abstain from deeds of violence, as it was contrary to their faith.

The Judge was beginning to doubt the testimony of the informers, when Hillel was summoned and questioned. With crazy eyes and fierce manner Hillel declared, “The Christians have not set the City on fire—it was Jesus, the Son of God, who caused the Angels to cast down flaming stars from the Heavens to destroy Rome. O you Romans, our God is the friend of the poor and of the slave, and the end of Rome is at hand, and we rejoice at the burning of Rome for it is the beginning of the end. We would not help those who were perishing because it is well that all Romans should die!”

At this there was great excitement among the public. The Judge said that it was plain that all who admitted they were Galileans were confessing that they were members of a revolutionary society which had as its purpose the destruction of Rome. They were therefore enemies of Rome, and as such their punishment was death.

After the sentence a vast crowd went before the Palace to acclaim the Emperor. How far the demonstration was a spontaneous one, nobody cared to enquire.

Nero appeared on the terrace, raising his right arm in gratification. It was indeed the first time that a demonstration had taken place before the Palace—the new Palace—since the great fire.

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Producers, directors and artists were called into con-

sultation upon the form of a mass execution of Christians. At last it was decided to give a mythological fête in the Vatican Gardens—a huge gala night.

The Christians were arrested *en masse*. Soon the prisons were full and prisoners were placed in the dungeons of the Circus.

The first day three thousand Christians were tied to stakes, wrapped in clothes soaked with tar and oil. The stakes, joined crossways and fixed under the chin of the victims, were planted at intervals along the paths and walks of the vast gardens, around the small green alcoves, within the thickets, inside the little temples, near the statues and all around the race-course.

Then, at night, those living statues were lit. The sulphur and the bitumen of their clothes flared up, raising thick, deep red flames. It was a fantastic spectacle. The dark gardens became a series of flaming avenues, of vibrating torches. The bodies writhed; their arms, purposely left free, beat the air, which was filled with horrible cries. The human torches seemed to be jumping towards the sky. Dense clouds of smoke carried the acrid smell of a huge sacrificial offering. From thousands of dying mouths rose a cry of agony. Here and there voices were heard, "I forgive my enemies. I am ascending to join God my Father in Heaven."

The crowd was admitted to promenade along those flaming avenues. Many victims had been sewn inside skins of animals, and were now driven before the crowd. Patrobas led the band and looking towards the Emperor's box he cried out a prayer for Nero's soul. Melania, dressed as Dirce, her naked body lashed to the horns of an angry bull, was applauded as a great sight, the bull tossing its head and charging round the arena.

When the fête was at its height, Nero, dressed as Apollo, on a chariot of ivory drawn by twelve Bacchantes, appeared on the yellow sand of the main avenue. A troupe of Nymphs burned frankincense before the chariot; another scattered petals of roses. The procession, escorted by bearers carrying torches reflected by mirrors, made the tour of the gardens, greatly acclaimed. Servants of the Palace passed the word that a fresh supply of iced wines and a sumptuous supper was awaiting the people of Rome.

While the Vatican was thus flooded with triumphal light and sinister flames, at a spot above the opening of the Vatican grottoes the families of the victims knelt in prayers. When the fête was over and the crowds were leaving the gardens singing ribald songs along the Via Triumphalis, the Christians came out of their catacombs and collected the martyrs' ashes and bones. Before daylight the pious procession had disappeared again in the mysterious galleries and tunnels cut into the soft bowels of the hills.

The Chief of Police reported that all was quiet in Rome and talk in the taverns was of unanimous praise. Nero toyed with his necklace of large pearls: "Now we shall be able to get on with our task of rebuilding a more splendid Rome."

## CONSPIRACIES



*Book Five*

CONSPIRACIES

I

SOME weeks after the grim fête in the Palace Gardens, Seneca again begged the Emperor's permission to leave Rome for good and retire to one of his country houses. He had to use a stick now, he said, for he was tormented by rheumatism.

The Emperor declined to give his consent. On the morrow Nero's old Mentor pleaded a nervous breakdown and absented himself from Court.\*

The fact was that the depredations that Carinas and Acratus had made in Greece and in the East, despoiling the temples to fill the Emperor's private collection, made Seneca feel that it was better to be rid of it all. Seneca was now anxious to dissociate himself from Nero; and notwithstanding his greed, he was even ready to surrender all the riches the Emperor had given him. But Nero saw through this game. His former tutor and Prime Minister wished to escape the odium of remaining a Privy Councillor.

Moreover, Nero felt that the desertion of his old Minister was fanning all sorts of rumours and slanders. In the course of ten years he had seen Seneca flatter Claudius alive and insult him when dead. He had seen him accept without qualms a large share of Britannicus's estate; countenance the murder of Agrippina and justify the crime, yet now Seneca wanted to withdraw from this long complicity. It was the blackest perfidy.

\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XV.

The conspiracy of Piso soon convinced Nero that he was right about Seneca's real intentions.

\* \* \*

In the first place the Chief of Police reported that Piso and Seneca were visiting one another too frequently. Tigellinus, jealous of his colleague Foenius, added the latter's name to the list, suggesting that Foenius wished to avenge Agrippina of whom he had been a lover. At the head of the conspiracy there was Piso, chosen because he came from a family that was related to the most illustrious houses in Rome. Piso looked the embodiment of honesty. He was straightforward in his friendships, liberal of mind and purse, and as agreeable as he was handsome. That was enough to give Piso an aura of popularity which stimulated his ambitions. As a matter of fact, he was neither very lofty of mind nor superior in morals, but, as Petronius was wont to say, Piso had that amiable kind of laxity that makes a ruler easy to exploit and not too boring to support.

The worst, for his fellow-conspirators even more than for himself, was that it was more than Piso could do to hold in his hands the threads of such a conspiracy. Actually, Piso was the nominal rather than the real head of the conspiracy. The real authors of it were a Tribune of a Praetorian Cohort by the name of Subrius and the Centurion Sulpicius; two soldiers of the old stamp, who could not forgive Nero for having turned the Imperial purple into an actor's cloak.

At that point the conspirators gained the support of the Consul-designate Lateranus and Seneca's nephew, the poet Lucan. Lateranus, with patriotic fervour and without any personal hate for Nero, and Lucan, on the other hand, with a pretence of having been slighted by the

## CONSPIRACIES

Emperor, who was jealous, he said, of his poetical genius and success. It had indeed happened that Nero, listening one day to the exaltation of Caesar's murderers in a poem read by Lucan at a public lecture, after much irritation made a movement of impatience and rising suddenly from his chair left the hall followed by his Court, thus leaving a wide gap in the audience. And later, Nero let it be known that he did not desire that the poet Lucan should again be asked to give public readings of verses. The youthful author of *Pharsalia* never forgave Nero for this affront. He gave vent to his hate in the theatres and foyers, and at the Campus Martius he stooped as low as to scribble insults and epigrams on the walls. One day, in a company of friends, he quoted a hemistich from a song of Nero which was sung in town, *Sub terris intonuisse putes*, and added to it an offensive sound.\* Lucan had indeed completely lost his head. On all occasions he exalted to the sky the assassins of tyrants, insulted Nero in every way and promised anyone the head of the Emperor.

Strangely enough, among the first to join the conspiracy were two Senators whose bad reputation did not speak well for their civic virtues: Flavius Scevinus, whose motives were obscure, and Afranius Quintanus, against whom Nero had written a satire which was only too true. At their meetings the conspirators spoke only of the public good and of the crimes that must be avenged. They induced others to join them, Senecio who was a childhood friend of Nero, and Natalis, an intimate of Piso who, alas, had very badly chosen his confidants.

For the Emperor the only fact that really mattered was that hate and contempt for his present life should have

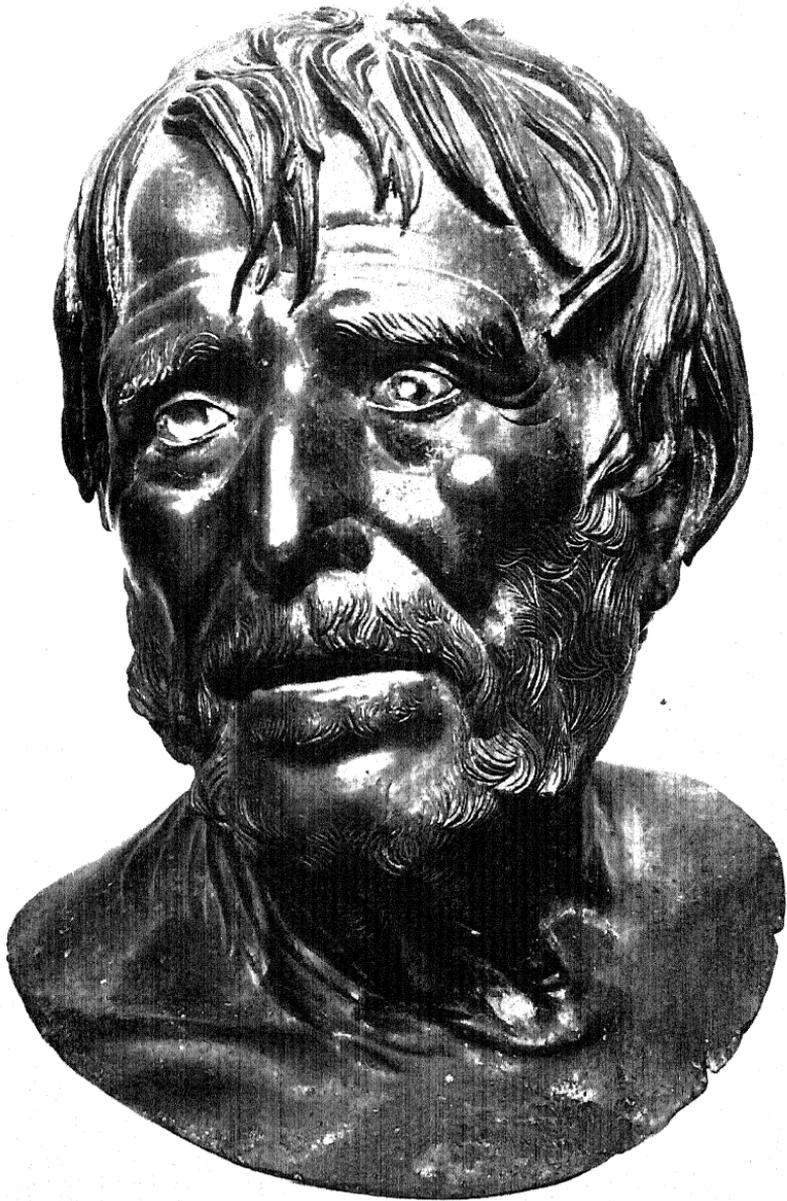
\* Suetonius—*Life of Lucan*.

spread among the Praetorian Guards, the traditional bulwark of the Imperial House. Besides Subrius and Sulpicius, other officers were reported to have joined the conspirators: the Tribunes Silvanus and Statius, the Centurions Scaurus and Venetus, and Foenius, who shared with Tigellinus the Command of the Guards.

When the conspirators saw that they could count on Foenius, they began to discuss the ways of carrying out the plot. Some wanted to set fire to the Palace and take advantage of the confusion to strike at the Emperor. Others suggested an attack on Nero while he was performing on the stage.

The plotting dragged on for many months, feeding on mere idle talk, till it became an absurd machination, open to all the discontented and to the fools. While the months were thus passing, a courtesan who was a party to the plot, felt so disgusted with the procrastination that she shook off the dust of Rome and went to take the waters at Baiae. Her name was Epicharis. At Baiae she contrived to use her professional influence to gain new recruits to the plot. The officers of the Fleet stationed at Cape Misenum were handsome and easy to convert. From the pleasantness of the Campanian coast the execution of the plot seemed an easy matter. Patricians and the very wealthy had villas at Baiae. From a spa, where gouty people used to go for the sulphur baths, Baiae had become a fashionable seaside resort. Among the most luxurious villas there was the one of a popular theatrical impresario, and another of an army contractor, who had amassed a fortune during the Parthian War, and was now living in the once famous palace of Lucullus. The Emperor himself was very fond of Baiae and had a pavilion there.

A frequent visitor of the lovely Epicharis was Volusius



Head of the philosopher SENECA, tutor of Nero and afterwards his Prime Minister. The face of the old philosopher, modelled upon a reputation of noble thinking, was in strange contrast with his real character.



## CONSPIRACIES

Proculus, one of the Commanders of the Fleet. Volusius had a grudge against the Emperor, whom he reproached with ingratitude. He felt that he was badly treated at the time of the murder of Agrippina and he would not hesitate, he said, to take his vengeance. Guilelessly, Epicharis disclosed to him the plot. Volusius ran to Nero and lay down all he had learned from the courtesan.

The Emperor was taken aback. The thought had never occurred to him that he might be unpopular. "I am so generous, I am so clement." He repeated Seneca's words, "Clemency not only increases the glory of a Prince, but increases the security of the Throne."

After Volusius's denunciation, Nero turned the matter over for some time. The poor naval officer was disconcerted, for he had hoped for an immediate crisis, with condemnations and deaths, out of which he would have reaped the gratitude of the Emperor. Instead, Nero simply ordered the arrest of Epicharis, and confronted the informer with the woman. Volusius re-affirmed his somewhat vague accusation, which the courtesan denied with a smile. Her meetings with Volusius had had no witnesses and she was able to deny everything. But the Chief of Police thought it wiser to keep her in "protective custody."

Still Nero wavered. Should he inflict a blow and have a string of corpses around his Court? He demurred. It seemed to him that his reign had already lasted a century, an aeon of rare triumphs and terrifying nightmares. One night he dreamt that his throne had changed into a galley, with purple sails, floating without a pilot upon the sea, a sea as red as blood. And in that sea, banging against the sides of the ship, was the corpse of his mother, her head bobbing up and down on the waves; her head that was

still so beautiful and was shouting horrible prophecies.

The matter of the conspiracy was dropped.

But when the conspirators learned of the arrest of Epicharis, they were taken by such fright that they decided to act at once. But where? And how? A dagger or poison?

After much thought and more futile talks, they decided upon a plan. Piso had a charming villa at Baiae, in a position which Nero had always found delightful. Now Piso had not been denounced. He should therefore take advantage of this and invite the Emperor to his house. But Piso declined. The idea, he said, of violating the rules of hospitality was much too horrible.

Piso was, or pretended to be, a sceptic. Although his fellow-conspirators had decided to designate him as the next Emperor, he was not much impressed, and looked upon the plot as a play by dilettanti. He was considered a virtuous man, but virtue is very often nothing more than a veneer for our vices. Piso did not believe in the Gods, although he did not use blasphemous words; he was a libertine, but not a drunkard or a degenerate; his mode of living was luxurious, but not offensive. In short, Piso was but a man of his times, without any real qualities, without convictions, without greatness or anything deep. He was simply a polite and charming gentleman, with enough cynicism to appear indulgent, and enough amiability to look superior. But did he really want to be Emperor? Of course, if all went well and his friends should insist, he would not refuse. If they wanted to assassinate Nero, it was their own look-out, but really he did not want to have anything to do with it. It would be repugnant to sit on the Throne of a man one has helped to murder. A most inelegant idea.

## CONSPIRACIES

Piso told his friends that he would certainly have nothing to do with the idea of killing the Emperor in his own house. He simply could not allow one of his guests to be murdered in his very house. It was a form of inhospitality that he could not admit. As his friends looked at him disconcerted, he added, "I even wonder whether a murder, in such circumstances, might not make the victim popular with the people. If you want to kill Nero, kill him in Rome, in the full exercise of his Imperial duties, as you would kill a tyrant. Then you can tell the Roman people that you have acted for their good. But in my house? Why, afterwards I should have to set fire to my villa. And my villa is so lovely, such a fine position!"

It was, of course, only a ruse. Piso was afraid that a deed so revolting would incur the odium of the people and destroy his chances of ever ascending the Throne, which might then pass to Silvanus, the grandson of Augustus, or to the Consul Vestinus.

At last, after much hesitation, the conspirators decided to carry out the plot during the Circus Games for the feast of Ceres, on the 12th of April. Nero, who now spent his time in the new Palace, would surely come into the Circus. It would be easy to approach the Emperor, either during the procession of the Roman ladies who carried with great pomp an egg, symbol of all life, or during the hunting of foxes released in pairs in the Circus with flaming torches attached to their backs. It was agreed that Montanus, who was strong and courageous, should throw himself at Nero's feet and beg monetary help for his private affairs; then he would seize the Emperor's legs, throw him on his back, and hold him on the ground while the Tribunes and the Centurions would finish him with

their daggers. Scevinus begged the honour of the first blow. He showed the fellow-conspirators a little dagger that he had taken, he said, from the temple of Fortune. While the assassination would take place, Piso should wait in the temple of Ceres near the River and there the conspirators would come, guided by Foenius, to lead Piso to the Campus Martius and present him to the Praetorian Guards to be acclaimed. It was later said that Antonia, Claudius's other daughter, had promised to marry Piso for the purpose of strengthening his claims to the Empire.

A few days later things came to a climax. Scevinus, the deadliest of the conspirators, returned home from a long talk with Natalis. This Natalis had been placed by Tigellinus near Scevinus, for the purpose of keeping an eye on him and on Piso.

Thus, on the very night before the Games, Scevinus, who was full of talk and imagination, gave the secret away, his nerves worn out by too many late parties. Indeed, Scevinus returned home, closed himself in his study, wrote his Will and then he took out the famous dagger. He tried the point and called his freedman Milichus. With a mysterious air he whispered to him, "Quick! Get the point well sharpened! Time is pressing. This is a sacred dagger and comes from the temple of Fortune at Ferentum. Tomorrow the fortunes of the Empire will depend on it!"

Then Scevinus called his slaves together and freed them. He read aloud his Will, which contained bizarre legacies. In the middle of the night he ordered a great banquet. And now and then he enquired about Milichus, "Why is he so long in bringing the dagger?" At the end the freedman returned with it, and Scevinus most foolishly uncovered his plans by ordering his freedman to prepare

bandages and make all kinds of absurd preparations.

Milichus guessed his master's secret and confided his suspicions to his wife. She urged him to denounce their master—great indeed would be the prize they would gain by saving the Emperor's life, and even greater the danger they were running by keeping silent. At daybreak Milichus hurried to the Gardens of Servilius where the Emperor was in residence. The Gardens were on the left bank of the River, on the Ostia side, above the Port, near the mouth of the Anio. There, under centuries-old trees, along avenues adorned with Greek statues, Nero enjoyed the quietude of a town retreat that was almost rural.

Milichus presented himself with a resolute air and said that he desired to have word with the Emperor. The officer of the Guards told him to hold his peace and go his way; but Milichus cried so loud that he was the bearer of a great secret that at last he was brought before Epaphroditus, the Emperor's private secretary. Epaphroditus listened to the tale and decided to take him to the Emperor. On bended knee, dramatically Milichus announced that a great conspiracy was on the point of taking place. He denounced his master Scevinus and told the Emperor his story in great detail.

One hour later Scevinus was arrested and confronted with his freedman. He defended himself with much composure, and called Milichus a scoundrel and a twister. Nero was on the point of believing him, when unluckily for Scevinus, Milichus's wife appeared. She told the Emperor of the secret meeting that had taken place the previous day between Scevinus and Natalis. The latter was immediately fetched and he and Scevinus were questioned separately. Their answers disagreed. Threatened with torture, both gave way at the mere sight of the

dreaded instruments. Natalis confessed the plot and named Piso; then he accused Seneca.

From that moment, confessions and betrayals followed one another. Scevinus, realizing that he was lost, gave away Senecion, Quintanus and Lucan. Senecion and Quintanus denounced their best friends; the poet Lucan, so noble with the pen, accused his own mother.

At that point Nero remembered the courtesan Epicharis who was still waiting in jail. She was ordered to be questioned again, and Nero felt sure that a woman would not withstand the tortures at the sight of which men had collapsed. But Epicharis remained silent. Neither the whip nor the knife nor the hot irons made her speak. The following day the inquisitors attempted to renew their examination; Epicharis's body was broken and bleeding and she had to be carried on a stretcher. But rather than give way she strangled herself with the handkerchief that was attached to the stretcher-bars.

All Rome trembled. Who had not, in their secret heart, wished for the Emperor's death? The Emperor shut himself in the Palace, like an exile in a lost island. His rooms were guarded day and night. The City walls were garrisoned with troops as if the enemy were at the gates. The Fleet came up the Tiber and held the City under her catapults. Arrests were the order of the day.

At the height of the trials Piso was urged by his friends to attempt a desperate coup by appealing to the people from the rostra in the Forum and denouncing the tyrant. But Piso only shrugged his shoulders, and answered that it was simpler to await in comfort the Imperial order to commit suicide. When the order came, Piso asked his physician to cut his veins in the bath, and hastily dictated a Will full of praise for Nero, vainly hoping to secure a

## CONSPIRACIES

small part of his estate for his wife Arria, whom he had taken away from his friend Domitius Silus.

After Piso came the turn of Lateranus. He was a Consul-designate, a man of some courage. Lateranus was beheaded on the spot where the condemned slaves were put to death.

And at last came Seneca's turn.

The old fox had behaved rather equivocally. On the very day that the plot was to be carried out, Seneca had come near Rome, and had a meeting with Subrius and some Centurions. For there was a plot within the plot, the Tribune and some of his friends intended to pass the Empire to Seneca and get rid of Piso even before the attempt on Nero.

Granius Silvanus, an officer of the Praetorian Guards, was sent to question Seneca. Granius, too, was in the plot, but the position was now that each one betrayed the other to save his neck. Seneca admitted that he had received a visit from Natalis, and very quietly told what had taken place.

Granius returned to the Palace to report. Nero asked, "Is he getting ready to die?" Granius answered that he had not seen any sign of weakness or fear in the old man. Poppaea and Tigellinus, who were with the Emperor at that moment, sneered with contempt. "Go back at once," shouted the Emperor, "tell him to make ready to die."

Still Granius declined to go to Seneca, and sent a Centurion in his stead with the Emperor's message.

When the messenger arrived, Seneca was at dinner, with his wife and two friends. He listened impassively; then he asked for his Will, and calmly added to it a few codicils with bequests for his friends. But the Centurion told him to cut the matter short.

Seneca turned to his family and friends, "As I am prevented from recognizing your devotion and your services, I leave you the only thing that I can still dispose of—the example of my life."\*

With this last piece of buffoonery the philosopher made ready to die in the grand manner. His wife and his friends were in tears whilst Seneca spoke to them words of comfort. Then, he himself shed some tears in taking leave of his young wife Paulina. She cried out that she would rather die with him. That seemed to please the old man a great deal and quietly he watched Paulina preparing to join him in death. The physician opened the veins of both, but as Seneca was weakened by old age, he bled very slowly, whereupon he asked that the veins of his ankles be cut too. Suddenly the pain was too strong, and to cover his suffering he asked Paulina to let herself be transported to another room. Once alone, Seneca adopted a proud attitude, and calling for his secretary he commenced to dictate his last words with much eloquence. He recalled his youthful years and his exile. He mentioned his four tracts on the Consolation of Philosophy for it was then that they had chosen him to be Nero's tutor and Mentor. That was the terrible thing of his life—he had brought up Nero on good orthodox doctrines. He had babbled to him about goodness and justice and mercy—and it was all a sham.

Now what was the good of dictating his farewell to life? Death was slow in coming. Seneca asked the doctor to give him poison and drank the hemlock. "Like Socrates," he said, for nothing less seemed decorous enough. But the hemlock had no effect either. Seneca

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\*Tacitus—*Annales*, XV: *Quod unum jam et tamen pulcherrimum habeat, imaginem vitæ suæ relinquere testatur.*

## CONSPIRACIES

asked to be placed in a hot bath, and sprinkling with water the friends and slaves who were standing around him, he invoked Jupiter Liberator. At this the Centurion lost his patience and shut the lid of the vapour bath with both hands. Thus the great Seneca died.

The same night Nero's tutor, philosopher and mentor was buried, as he had prescribed in the Will he had written in the days of his good fortune, without pomp or ceremony. Seneca's death, however, left Nero pondering. He spoke of it at dinner, albeit it was a rule with him never to mention sad subjects at table.

"He was an envious man," Nero said. "He was covetous and grasping. He loved riches, he was intemperate in his desires, he amassed wealth by any means, he imposed enormous usury upon the Provinces and shared the spoils of innocent victims. He betrayed friendships, he was disloyal in his duties, he was as humble and fawning in his exile as he was proud and selfish in the days of his fortune. He was devoted only to one person—himself."

Then he added: "Yes, Seneca was all this. And he was my tutor." And with that queer mixture of *naïveté* and sarcasm, Nero looked enquiringly around at his guests. No one spoke. After a while, he added: "After such a career, Seneca had the impudence to recommend his life to the admiration of posterity! Really, he overdid his last scene."

## II

TERROR and persecutions are like the ripples that a little stone causes when tossed into the still waters of a pond; each successive ripple becomes larger and larger, till the

last one seems to overflow the banks. Under the incessant denunciations the number of conspirators on trial grew and grew. Nero discovered the most unexpected enemies hidden in his own Palace. At all hours of the day companies of Praetorians were marching through the City and across the fields bringing new political agitators to the prisons hastily built in the very gardens of the Palace.

Before the Security Tribunal, where the Emperor sat between his two assessors, Tigellinus and Foenius in their capacity of Praefects of the Praetorium (one was going to betray him and the other had already done so), Nero himself examined the accused. The judges again called Scevinus, who was of an impressionable nature and easily carried away. It was clear that he had not yet spoken all he knew. But at the very moment that Nero was making ready to question Scevinus once more, his principal accomplices were there, yet free and unsuspected; some judges themselves. Subrius the Tribune was only awaiting a sign from Foenius to strike. His hand rested upon the hilt of his sword, his eyes questioning his chief. But Foenius held his hand, for Nero was surrounded by the German Liege-Guards whose devotion knew no bounds. Moreover, behind the Emperor stood Cassius, a man of Herculean strength. As in some play about a fabulous tyrant, the Giant stood guard over his Lord. And Foenius was a cautious man. But his cleverness was going to defeat him. He thought it wise to appear over-zealous, and he accused his own accomplices pitilessly. Nero himself and Tigellinus were surprised by his ferocity. But Scevinus felt indignant, "Say it yourself, Foenius. Reveal to our divine Nero Caesar the details of our plot, which you know as well as us."

Next day was the turn of Subrius, who, disgusted by

the cowardice of his accomplices, proudly cried aloud his own guilt. Nero was deeply moved by the defection of an officer of the Praetorians. "Why did you conspire against me?" he asked Subrius. The answer was, "Because I hate you. No one was more faithful than I when you deserved our affection. Yet now there is only hate and contempt for the murderer of his mother and of his wife; for the Emperor who has turned comedian!"

Nero felt overwhelmed. The accusations were as new to him as the reasons of those black deeds were old and forgotten.\* The ancient frankness of the Roman soul survived. Freedom of speech was still granted to the accused and there were only two tunes among Nero's subjects—flattery or insolence. Had he, the Emperor, mistaken flattery for truth? Subrius's answer was a great shock; the greatest shock Nero had received, for he was honestly convinced of the superior reasons of State that had dictated the death of his mother; and his fame as an artist was his own personal achievement and glory. As for the fire of Rome, he was entirely and absolutely innocent. Had he not transformed a misfortune into an opportunity for rebuilding a more splendid and modern city? Had not the idea of Rome and the needs of the people been his only concern? "Why? Why?" he petulantly asked Subrius.

Subrius died like a soldier, coldly appraising the sword that was going to sever his head. All the Praetorian officers died well. Only Foenius shed tears and sighed over his Will. Young Lucan, on the example of his uncle, opened his veins in a hot bath and then suddenly remembered a passage in his unfinished poem *Pharsalia* in which he had prepared to describe the agony of a soldier dying

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\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XV.

as he was now dying. Signalling to a secretary he dictated six lines, asking that they should be added to his poem.\*

For political reasons the Consul Vestinus was only proscribed, for Vestinus had married Statilia, although the Emperor was one of her many lovers. On the day of his sentence Vestinus attended to the duties of his office and gave a dinner as though he had nothing to fear. A Tribune brought him Nero's reproach for living in a house that was like a fortress dominating the Forum and possessing a family of slaves that was like an army. Vestinus quietly took leave of his guests, retired to his bathroom and his doctor cut his veins.

Seneca's young wife was spared. But the islands of the Aegean Sea were now peopled with exiles, who met in groups as large as colonies. The purge was vast and drastic.

Afterwards the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol was filled with offerings. The victims' relatives garlanded their houses with laurel, waited in the streets and threw themselves at the Emperor's knees. His hands became weary with kisses. In a sudden rush of emotion, and to forget the terror of it all, the Emperor distributed gifts to those who had served him well. Natalis was honoured, the freedman Milichus was ostensibly remunerated and granted permission to add the epithet of Saviour to his name. The Praetorians were ordered to assemble in the Campus Martius and the Emperor in person distributed a bonus of one thousand sesterces to each man. It was also announced that in future they should receive the grain free, at the Emperor's expense. The Senate held a special sitting, and at the Emperor's request conferred the

\* Lucan—*Pharsalia*, Canto III, 641.

## CONSPIRACIES

ornaments of Triumph on Petronius and Tigellinus and on Nerva who was Praetor-designate. Nerva and Tigellinus, as an additional honour, were voted triumphal statues in the Forum and in the Palace grounds. Nerva, who was one day to become Emperor and had already adopted as his son Trajan, remained through all his life loyal to the memory of Nero. And it was upon Nerva's example that the favourable opinion which Trajan held of Nero rested.

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After this, things became more normal again. Thanksgivings were rendered to all the Gods and in particular to the Sun who had cast his light upon such a tenebrous plot. It was decided to erect a temple to the Goddess Salus upon the spot where Scevinus had taken out his dagger, first evidence of the plot. It had already been voted that the month of April should be called with Nero's name; Senator Cerialis now proposed that a temple should be erected to Nero. But about this Nero felt the same as Tiberius who had always declined all divine honours. He said that he would rather be exalted as a great artist than a second-rate God.

The conspiracy had another result: that of bringing into prominence a certain Nymphidius. He was the son of a courtesan who was well known to all the officers in Rome. Nymphidius's tall stature and a certain ferocious air gave him a resemblance to Caligula, and indeed, he liked to boast that the late Emperor was his father. Nero chose this bogus Imperial bastard to succeed Foenius as Praefect of the Praetorians. He made a good pair with Tigellinus.

A few nights later, after dinner, the Emperor passed

his hand under Petronius's arm and walked out with him into the gardens.

"Petronius," he said, "I want you to be my Prime Minister."

Petronius turned his head slightly to look at the Emperor. He found the offer rather strange and for one fleeting moment he felt a touch of annoyance lest it should prove too tiresome to decline the offer with good grace.

Nero said again, "Will you accept?" Petronius was not only an Epicure, but a man of taste and perfect distinction. Born in Marseilles, of an immensely wealthy father, he had come quite young to Rome, and throughout his life he always had shown himself above all the positions he had held. Social life he had pursued with aristocratic ease and when entrusted with the government of Bithynia he had displayed a vigorous intelligence. After his return to Rome, Nero had taken to him at once. The Emperor had nicknamed him the Arbiter of Elegance, and Petronius had not disliked the name. After all, it was a good description. In all delicate questions Nero consulted his taste. His advice was often accepted, and nothing was worn or done by the Beaux at Court that was not first commended by Petronius. He was—now the Emperor thought—a man whom Nature had gifted with a nonchalance that took him easily through life. An expert in the art of enjoying life, neither violent nor debauched, always expressing the most licentious thoughts in pure language. A man who knew how to avoid excess and put distinction and grace into his vices. He gave the day to sleep, away from business, vulgarities and troublesome people, and the night he spent in pleasures with a few well-chosen friends, men who could talk well and knew that a dinner-party is made of good conversation as

well as of good food and wine. Nero greatly enjoyed Petronius's company; his way of walking slowly, with an air of indolence and fatigue; his drawl in speech; his economy of gestures, and his person that seemed tired by too long resting, yet there was no trace of pose in anything he did. Nero felt that if Petronius would now be his Prime Minister, he might find a new incentive to live and rule in a different atmosphere. Petronius was sure to bring it about. The populace of Rome adored him. Perhaps the very crowd found him so different, so gentlemanly, so more Roman than all the clowns that danced around the Court. And Tigellinus's conception of life and pleasure seemed to smack of the servants' quarters and of brothels. Nor did Tigellinus take very seriously his master's artistic aspirations. Petronius instead was the personification of Art itself.

Gently, almost hesitatingly, the Emperor touched again his friend's arm. How strange it was that with Petronius he almost felt shy! "Shall I announce at once that I have appointed you my Prime Minister?" And Nero looked at Petronius's handsome face and slightly cynical eyes.

Petronius flicked the stem of a flower with his ivory cane, paused, and then shook his head. "Nero Caesar," he said, "it is a great honour—or is it a favour you are asking of me? But it is too late."

"Why too late? Think of the years ahead, of the greatness we can bring to Rome! With your clear judgment, with my great Art . . ."

Petronius shook his head again, "It is too late, Nero Caesar. I am tired of life. You see, one should not live too long. Life becomes a frightening thing. Men like you and I should die young."

## III

A MARKED change was taking place in Nero. While the Senate lowered itself to abject adulation, Nero's pride seemed to touch the limit of folly. Petronius's refusal to become Prime Minister spurred Nero to return to his writings and to the stage. He felt he wanted to show his friend that he was above mere human beings. He was angry with Petronius, yet he needed his presence. The cynical and mocking eyes of the *Arbiter Elegantiarum* were a mirror in which Nero saw hints on how to correct many of his acts and thoughts.

One day a certain Bassius from Carthage, a man who had recently been knighted, arrived in Rome with the tale that he was on the point of discovering the treasure of Queen Dido, which, according to an ancient legend, was buried centuries before in a cavern.\* This Bassius showed a free hand to some Court officials, thereby obtaining an audience of the Emperor, a thing that was no longer easy since Piso's plot. The story of Dido's treasure sounded a very tall one. But a queer thought crossed Nero's mind. The idea of a fantastic treasure trove could be most convenient for all sorts of purposes. It was thereupon announced that a fleet would be placed at the disposal of Bassius and the newspapers published articles about the Treasure Fleet. The romantic story of Queen Dido, deserted by her lover Aeneas, was duly polished up. Orators and poets were instructed to celebrate the good luck that would put into the Emperor's hands untold riches with which to indulge his munificence and amuse the Roman people.

In that chimera Nero found a pretext to engage in

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXI.

expenses even greater than before. For several months the Ministers had been busy with plans for a Canal which was to join Ostia with the Lake of Avernus, beyond Naples,\* so that ships could pass through without a sea voyage. Really it was a fantastic idea to build such a canal one hundred and sixty miles long and of a breadth sufficient to permit ships with five banks of oars to pass each other; yet the Emperor had ordered all prisoners from every part of the Empire to be brought to Italy and set to work. To finance the scheme—he now said—he would have the immense treasure of Queen Dido. “Anyway,” Nero told the Senate, “the revenue of the Empire is much too great, and it would only make money cheap if we kept it in the banks.”

Queen Dido's treasure soon proved what it was, a fairy tale, for Bassius, assisted by an army of native workmen, dug up the soil of Carthage and, of course, found nothing; and after a time he killed himself in disgust. When the Emperor found himself in difficulties with his Canal plans, all sorts of means were devised to get funds. Three-fourths of the estates of the richest freedmen were brought compulsorily into the Exchequer upon their decease with the excuse that the freedmen bore the name of a family without sufficient reason. The estates of all such persons who in their Wills had not been sufficiently mindful of the Emperor were confiscated and the lawyers who had drawn up the Wills were heavily fined. Private individuals were forbidden to use garments dyed the colour of amethystine or Tyrian purple as pertaining to the Emperor, † and those who wore them were fined. When no other money could be raised, the temples were rifled of the rich offerings;

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXI.

† Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXII.

gold and silver statues were melted down, not excluding the statues of the House Gods of Rome, who were kept in the Capitol and considered the City's Protectors.

At the same time, Nero was very busy with the stage. For the second celebration of the Games instituted by him, he planned to show Rome what an artist the Emperor was. The Senate, somewhat alarmed, tried to avoid the repetition of this absurdity by granting in advance to the Emperor the Eloquence and Poetry Prizes. But Nero refused them: He did not need any favour to assure him of victory, the equity of the judges was enough.

On the day of the Games, Nero commenced by declaiming a poem of his own composition. The crowd in the Circus rose as one man and asked to be granted the favour of witnessing all the Emperor's talents: *Ut omnia studia sua publicaret*.\* Whereupon Nero formally entered the competition. His name was enlisted, for like all other competitors, he submitted to the rules. Two hundred thousand spectators applauded him in the way they applauded the popular comedians. Was it the novelty, or was it mass hysteria? The crowd clapped and shouted in a transport of joy.

On the second day there was such a rush for places in the Circus that several people were squeezed or trampled to death in the corridors leading to the upper tiers. Special Police and secret agents, distributed among the audience, controlled the public. Once the performance had started, no one was allowed to leave the Circus. Some women gave birth to babies during the show. Other people pretended to faint and were taken away on stretchers. In the great Senate box, General Vespasian, who had eaten too much, fell asleep while Nero was singing his

\* Tacitus—*Annales*, XVI.

*grand'aria*. Amidst the silence and suspense, at the very moment when the Emperor was warbling his most delicate notes, a deep snoring was heard. To save Vespasian, already invested with the Consular dignity, his friends signed a humble petition;\* but Vespasian had to keep away from Court for some time.

Nero won all the prizes. With a hint of pique he told Petronius, "Now I am really popular."

## IV

POPPAEA was worried. She was again with child; but the Emperor was neglecting her. The hope of giving Nero an heir was no longer enough to make her feel secure. She paid many visits to the magician Joah. Many a night a plain litter was brought to the side-door of her private apartments and her favourite lady-in-waiting whispered the address to the head-bearer. The carriers lifted the palanquin and started on their soft-footed run, rapidly disappearing through the alleys that descended from the Palatine to the Jewish quarter across the River. The head-bearer knocked at a door that was promptly opened and the Empress, wrapped in a dark cloak, swiftly crossed the sombre threshold, while the litter took its stand round the corner, and men of the Imperial Bodyguard in plain clothes hovered round the magician's house.

This soothsayer Joah, a Jew, had been much in fashion in the last years of Claudius's reign, for it was said that he performed miracles. But it was a risky thing to be too famous or popular under Nero and the shrewd Jew was now content with a small but select clientele of wealthy ladies, among whom was the Empress. And of late,

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\* Suetonius—*Flavius Vespasianus*, IV.

Poppaea came more and more to consult the magician Joah, for all he had foretold for her had come to pass. Now Poppaea stood in the room full of shadows, hung with panels embroidered with strange symbols, and she bent her pretty head before the tall and lean magician, whose white beard and bright eyes gleamed in the mysterious darkness. Joah looked at her a long time, then he said:

“I have the answer to what you are going to ask me.” The magician placed a hand upon the Empress’s shoulder, and at his bidding she lay herself down on the floor. And she heard strange noises coming from the earthen floor; shrieks and cries that seemed to come from the bowels of the Earth. Slowly Poppaea unveiled her eyes, and saw that the room was filled with a vapour that smelled of pungent spices. Upon the floor great spiders’ webs glimmered in the dim light and the magician stepped between them and halted before an altar. There he stood a while, looking dark and gaunt, murmuring words that she could not understand. At last he stepped back, noiselessly, and walked around Poppaea three times, drawing around her a white circle of light. With a rod he drew a cross, which meant the balance of the Universe. Poppaea covered her eyes once more, for she could not bear the glare of that circle of light. The magician ordered her to hold a small sheaf of corn with her left hand, and with her right hand to count three times twenty-seven grains. Poppaea did as she was told, and detached and counted with her lips twenty-seven grains, and then again and again, dropping them in a small cup made of copper. The magician took the cup and poured the grains into a silver bowl, which he filled with water from a ewer, and handed it to Poppaea, ordering her to drink it. She lifted the bowl,

## CONSPIRACIES

inside which the grains of corn sparkled like diamonds and when she took a sip from it, the water seemed to burn her through.

The magician took the bowl from her hands. He made passes with his fingers around her throat. Then he said, "Take heed! A new child will be your death."

Back at the Palace, Poppaea brooded over this prophecy. It was indeed a terrifying one. She had prayed so ardently to be given another child, to replace the lost one. She remembered Nero's tender joy when their little daughter was born, although he was disappointed that it was not a son to bring up as an heir. How could a new child be her death? Would she die in childbirth? Or would Nero tire of her during her pregnancy?

## V

ONLY a few weeks went by. One day, long after sunset, the Emperor came back from a chariot race, slightly inebriated, for he had paused in the paddock to drink with the winners and chat with the fashionable courtesans.

The Emperor entered his private apartment with an unsteady gait, leaning heavily on the arms of two slaves. The Empress was seated there, awaiting his return. She looked at him with disgust, and let an insult escape her lips. She mocked him for playing the actor and the charioteer. She mentioned her former husband Otho. She gave vent to her jealousy and her present ennui.

The moment was ill-chosen. The Emperor looked at Poppaea nonplussed. Then, with a drunken gesture, he jabbed her in the stomach with his sandalled foot.\*

During the night Poppaea died of a haemorrhage.

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\* Dio Cassius—LXII: "*Sabina Poppaea tunc est a Nerone interfecta, quam praegnantem, seu volens, seu—per imprudentiam, calce insultavit.*"

## VI

POPPAEA'S death threw Nero into extreme depression. Instead of burning the corpse, in Roman fashion, Nero ordered that it should be embalmed in the Egyptian style. He gave Poppaea the funeral of an Eastern Queen. He himself recited the funeral oration from the rostra in the Forum, and with touching words, he recalled the memory of his little daughter who had died in the cradle.

For days Rome was full of the funeral's pomp and around the bier were burnt all the perfumes that Arabia could produce in one whole year. Poppaea was buried in the Augusteum, the tomb of the Caesars.

Nero was most sincere in his grief for Poppaea. He regretted her as one regrets a source of joy that can be found no more. Someone mentioned a woman who was extraordinarily like Poppaea. Nero ordered her to come to the Palace, and endeavoured to feel some passion for her. But it was not possible to recall a vanished charm, or to deceive the mysterious impulses of love.

In the midst of those sentimental complications another political plot was discovered. The Praetor Sosianus was named. It seemed almost a diversion from the grief of mourning Poppaea. Then an epidemic came as a change. Nearly thirty thousand died of the plague in the course of a few weeks. Every house had its dead. Funerals filled the streets and from the Campus Martius the smoke of the pyres spread a pall over the City. At the same time storms and tempests, winds and lightnings caused disasters everywhere. A Knight, by the name of Cossianus, fell ill with a disease called the lichen. It had occurred only once in Rome, under Tiberius; a terrible disease, which showed in the face, beginning under the chin. The populace

## CONSPIRACIES

called it *mentagre*,\* because it gave a ridiculous appearance to the victim's chin. Strangely enough, the lichen spared the slaves, the middle-classes and the common people. It was truly an aristocratic disease.† Cossianus, sick with lichen, was a great friend of Nero. The Emperor, sorry to lose him, ordered his doctor to try all means to save him. The doctor replied that the only physician who could cure lichen was in Alexandria. Nero gave orders that a fast galley should sail for Egypt to fetch this physician. But when the Egyptian doctor arrived, he gave Cossianus an "heroic" medicine, made with cantharides. The patient died the same day.‡

But when the epidemic abated, the treason trials were started again, this time against Senator Thrasea. Thrasea's fault was that he led such an irreproachable life that the Senate could find no alternative but to be on his side. There is nothing worse than to be a champion of uprightness in lax times. There was therefore only one avenue open—to make Thrasea displeasing to the Emperor. As usual, Tigellinus hit upon a clever idea.

King Tiridates had just arrived in Rome. Son of Arsacides, King of the Parthians, Tiridates had come to Rome from the Middle East to humble himself at Nero Caesar's knees. He had come to seal the peace with Rome. There should be no more wars in the Empire. Tiridates's journey from far-away Persia was a Royal Progress. In all countries the people applauded his passage; hospitality was showered upon the Prince and his suite. Tiridates had declined to travel by sea, for he belonged to the Magi, and his religion forbade him to spit

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\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXVI.

† Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, *ibidem*.

‡ Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXIX.

into the sea or defile the waters with his excrements. He merely consented to cross the Hellespont, for the crossing was very short and he could do it without committing an impious act.

The Imperial Government had appointed Vivianus, son-in-law of General Corbulo, as official escort with a force of cavalry. Tiridates was bringing with him the Princes of his family and all his train of three thousand Parthian horsemen. Next to him rode his Queen, her head enclosed in a golden helmet, the lowered visor hiding her face. Notwithstanding the contribution of all the Provinces, the entertainment of Tiridates cost the Treasury the equivalent of nearly twenty thousand pounds a day.

The journey took nine months, from the farthest lands of Persia, always on horseback, by easy stages. When the procession reached the soil of Italy it was met by the Imperial carriages, sent by the Emperor; and Tiridates, instead of entering Rome direct, was first taken to Naples, to pay obeisance to the Emperor who was there on holiday. As a matter of fact, this was a little ruse of Nero's, meant to show the Senate and the people that the first homage was due to the Emperor, not to Rome.

When he appeared before Nero, Tiridates greeted him in Oriental fashion. He bent his knee, called the Emperor his Lord and gave adoration. Nevertheless, he refused to discard his sword, but to show that he meant no ill, he asked that the sword be nailed to the scabbard.

Nero, with his taste for the theatrical, found that gesture much to his taste. Accordingly, he asked Tiridates to follow him to Rome, and entertained him en route. The cost of those entertainments was enormous. The gladiators were paid the highest fees, arms were of the best,

## CONSPIRACIES

animals and beasts were brought from Africa and India, beautiful curtains covered the open theatres, sumptuous refreshments were offered to the guests and expensive trinkets and gifts were given away in lotteries at the end of the shows. The luxury was such that in the foyer of the theatres were exhibited statues and portraits of the most famous gladiators and even models of the rarest beasts to be seen in the games.

Tiridates was so impressed by the show at Pozzuoli that he felt it incumbent on him to take part in person in that great feast in his honour and calling for his bow and arrows, from his seat in the Imperial box he transfixed the wild beasts as they entered the arena and planted banderillas in two bulls.\* The courtiers whispered that he meant to remind the Emperor and the Cabinet of the Parthians' skill with such arms.

When at last the Imperial train approached Rome, the people and the Senate came outside the walls to meet the Emperor and his Royal guest. All the citizens were dressed in white; and the garlanded houses and decorated palaces made a great sight. Before the temples frankincense smoked in great burners and the statues of the Gods were dressed in magnificent clothes.

But the weather was foul. It rained continuously. There was no chance of showing the Armenian King to the people. Nero was much annoyed.

At last the rains stopped. The Palace was at once bustling with orders. Marvellous games were organized at Pompey's Theatre. The entire interior was renovated. The scenic arch was richly gilded, as well as the edges of the tiers of the auditorium. The great canopy above the public was of purple cloth, embroidered in the centre with the

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\* Dio Cassius—*Nero*, LXIII.

Emperor dressed as Apollo riding his chariot through the Heavens. A splendid buffet was provided after the show and Nero sang to a select audience. This performance so astounded Tiridates that a few days later he let the Emperor guess his feelings by saying, "You have in General Corbulo a superior servant." But Nero misunderstood the innuendo, and showered upon Tiridates presents of immense value.

Yet, in the midst of the rejoicing and splendour, a crime was brewing. Senator Thrasea had once more been forbidden to appear with the Senate at the Emperor's reception. By this Nero meant to show Tiridates that he was no less powerful in Rome than an Eastern King in his palace. Thrasea wrote to the Emperor to ask what offence had he committed to deserve such a snub. Nero opened the letter eagerly, for he hoped to find in it some words of fear or regret that would diminish Thrasea's character, but there were none. Whereupon the Emperor called a meeting of the Senate in the temple of Venus Genitrix.

The fact was that during the last few years Thrasea had altogether abstained from taking part in the Senate's sittings, openly saying that that noble assembly was reduced to a farce. Nevertheless his friends enjoined him to attend this very special meeting and avoid an open provocation. But the following day two Cohorts of Praetorian Guards occupied the beautiful temple of Venus, that Julius Caesar had built of white marble in the centre of the Forum. Troops lined the square and a motley crowd of apparently idle citizens took positions around the temple, carrying swords under their togas. Indeed, the Senators had to force their way through to enter the building.

## CONSPIRACIES

Fearing that Thrasea might not attend, Nero decided to send his Imperial Message to the Senate by the hand of the Quaestor. Thus both the Emperor and the accused kept away. In his message the Emperor mentioned no name, but bitterly deplored the indifference of certain Senators who neglected public affairs for the pleasure of their gardens. The orator Marcellus was ready to act as formal accuser, and Tigellinus had rallied his son-in-law Capito, who had a personal grudge against Thrasea for having supported the people of Cilicia in their charges of malversation against him. Tigellinus had drawn up a list of charges against Thrasea: he had walked out of the Senate during the debate on Agrippina's death; he had not been present at Poppaea's funeral, and lastly, when Nero was afflicted by a bad cold which threatened to spoil his golden voice, Thrasea had not taken part in the sacrificial offerings for the Emperor's recovery.

The indictment was conducted in a vulgar manner. Thrasea was summarily sentenced, with liberty to choose whichever form of death he preferred. Thrasea was at his house, calmly walking with his friend the philosopher Demetrius, discussing with him upon the nature of the soul. The Quaestor arrived, carrying the intimation of arrest by order of the Senate. Thrasea met the Magistrate under the shady portico of his house. He read with composure the *Senatus-Consulte*, then, entering his private room with Demetrius, tendered his arm to his doctor. As the blood gushed out and fell upon the floor, Thrasea turned to the Quaestor, "Let us offer a libation to Jupiter Liberator. Young man, you have been born in an age when it is desirable to strengthen the soul with an example of fortitude . . ."

As the family was not allowed to give Thrasea a solemn

funeral, the images of his ancestors could not precede him in the Forum and be placed around the speaker's tribune, nor rest upon curule chairs during the obituary oration. His son-in-law Helvidius, himself sentenced to exile, helped to prepare a pyre, and a few undertakers assisted without pomp at the cremation. The pyre of the staunchest die-hard burned silently during the night, like an abandoned house. Then the widowed Arria, her daughter and Thrasea's son-in-law collected the ashes and enclosed them in an urn, which was hastily walled up with the lamp that the Romans believed would burn for ever with the spirit of the dead. Towards dawn, after a night spent in those sad duties, Thrasea's family were surprised to hear an immense noise, the voice of the crowd. It was the populace acclaiming the Emperor who was going to the Forum to crown Tiridates King of Armenia.\*

Five Cohorts were drawn up on parade in the Forum. The Emperor arrived and seated himself upon an ivory chair on the rostra, in triumphal dress, against a glittering background of standards and ensigns. Tiridates advanced towards him on a stage erected for the purpose and threw himself at Nero's feet. The Emperor raised him quickly with his right hand, and kissed him. Then Tiridates spoke his petition in humble terms, which an interpreter repeated in Latin. In solemn words Nero replied that he was giving to Tiridates the crown of Armenia. Whereupon Tiridates was made to sit on a stool low enough to allow the Emperor to take away the simple tiara and replace it with the diadem, which was the cap worn by the Persian Kings, high and stiff, encircled around the head by a golden ribbon upon a blue ground

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\* Suetonius--*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XIII.

embroidered with white dots. The acclamations of the multitude filled the sky.

When the coronation was over, the guests were asked to remain in their places. Nero took from his head the laurel crown, and ordered two bearers to carry it to the Capitol and to go and shut the temple of Janus. "A new Augustan peace," he said, "is now rising upon the Empire."

## VII

ONE of the reasons that had prompted Nero to show Tiridates such magnificence and generosity was his ardent desire to be initiated into the secrets of magic. In his present position, outside and above human society, having attained the peak of absolute power, yet surrounded by dangers obscure and mysterious, Nero felt the dizziness of both pride and fear. He had only a vague idea of Persian magic which employed the spheres, the air and the stars, lamps, water, basin and hatchet. Unable to restrain his curiosity, Nero asked Tiridates to initiate him in those secrets.

Tiridates would only have been too glad to discharge with some magic the debt for the crown of Armenia; but neither himself nor his priests could infuse into the Emperor any mysterious power, nor open to him the mysteries of Persian theurgy. The priests that Tiridates had brought in his train were unable to explain their failure. They told the Emperor that Nature refused to disclose her secrets to those who had red spots on their body, but Nero had no defect or mark whatever upon his body.\* Nero suspected that Oriental magic was merely a highly perfected art of poisoning. However, he added

\* Pliny the Elder--*Historia Naturalis* XXX, "*Nihil membris defuit.*"

one more gift to Tiridates by granting him the right to rebuild the city of Artaxata that Corbulo had destroyed, and lent him a number of architects and engineers. Later on, Tiridates tried to attract to his kingdom a greater number of Roman architects and engineers; but the Governor was wise enough to give a frontier-visa only to those who had the Imperial permit.

Tiridates made the return journey by sea—the religious taboos about not polluting the sea counted only on an outward journey! He visited Athens and the other great cities of Greece; and once home, he rebuilt Artaxata and called it Neronia.

Nero, still hankering after the Persian magic, then invited Tiridates's brother, Vologese, to come to Rome, but Vologese answered that he should consider it a rare honour to receive the Emperor in his kingdom. Nero considered the reply an insult, but circumstances at home made him limit his defiance to a show of the flag.

Soon, however, it became necessary to reopen the Temple of Janus, for the Jewish war had broken out. On this occasion Nero showed great commonsense, for notwithstanding his annoyance with Vespasian for the poor opinion that excellent General had shown of the Emperor's singing, he entrusted him with the conduct of the war; and Vespasian, already famous for his victories in Britain, left for Palestine with his son Titus.

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But Nero was on the quest for magic. One day he asked: "Who is this man who claims that he can fly?"

It was Simon Magus, the cleverest impostor of the time. Contemporary of Jesus, Simon was now a man of ripe age. He had come to Rome several years before from the Pro-

## CONSPIRACIES

vince of Samaria in Judaea, accompanied by a woman named Helen, a slave he had purchased in Tyre. The woman helped him in his magic rites, acting as a kind of receptionist and assistant during the sittings that he gave to Roman ladies. Under Emperor Claudius, Simon Magus had had a hand in the sedition that troubled the Jewish district across the Tiber. Under Nero he helped to turn against the Christians the accusation of having caused the fire of Rome. With the growing bands of Galileans, he did not altogether deny the divinity of Jesus, but he claimed to be himself the re-incarnation of God the Father. And with his fashionable clients he conveniently mixed all the Gods. Indeed, he pretended that his woman Helen was no less than the re-incarnation of Minerva, while he himself was a child of Jupiter! To the Christians he administered baptisms, and made them see a flame floating upon a basin of water. To the Syrians he had presented this woman Helen as Barbelo, the daughter of Baal; for the philosophically-minded Greeks the same woman was one of the Eons, the embodiment of Intelligence, the go-between spirits between God and Man, of whom the Neo-Platonists of Alexandria claimed to have determined the number and nature.

But in Rome, Simon was cunning enough not to imitate the Christian Apostles, who addressed themselves to the common people. He looked instead to the great and powerful. He had secured the patronage of Agrippa, son of Herod and of Mariamne the Great. Tiberius had thrown him into jail, but Caligula had set him free and presented him with golden chains as heavy as the iron ones that Tiberius had tied round his ankles. His audacity, and some extraordinary feats he accomplished by conjuring, made him pass for a supernatural genius.

After the failure of Tiridates's priests to initiate him into Magic, Nero sent for Simon. He had heard the magician boast that he could fly. Nero challenged him to fly and placed his purse at the magician's disposal for the undertaking.

The great experiment took place in the small Neronian Circus. Simon had constructed an apparatus resembling the mythical one of Icarus. He opened his wings upon a platform higher than the highest range of seats, and courageously jumped into emptiness. But after flapping his great wings for a few seconds, Simon crashed to the ground in front of the Imperial box. The *ostiarrii* dragged away the body of the Magus, bespattered with blood.

Simon had not died of his great fall, for the apparatus lessened the crash; but ashamed by his failure, he soon afterwards threw himself from the roof of his house, and made an end of himself. Nero angrily told his friends, "Neither the astrologers nor the Magi are able to teach me what I am anxious to learn; yet the shabby Apostles from Galilee pretend to teach me what I do not care to know."

## VIII

SOON afterwards the order went out to throw Peter in prison.

So far, neither Peter nor Mark had been arrested. Peter was lying ill in the house provided by the Lady Pomponia Graecina, the Briton wife of General Pomponius. From his sick-bed Peter dictated to the scribe Silvanus several letters to be dispatched to Paul and to the heads of the churches in Greece and in the East, informing them of the persecutions in Rome and exhorting them to hold fast to their faith.





But Pomponia's servants brought the news that the Guards were searching for Simon Peter. So it was decided that at nightfall he should set out alone, meeting a carriage some little distance from Rome, to be conveyed to a surer hiding place.

An hour before his departure Peter told Mark of the time when Jesus was arrested and he had followed Him to the Palace of the High Priest, and how he had waited there through the night, sick with fear; and in turn two women had questioned him and twice he had denied all knowledge of Jesus, and again he had denied it when questioned a third time. The memory of that denial had followed him through the years, and it was now in his mind, in this lonely hour.

Later, a solitary man in disguise, leaning upon a staff, walked along the Appian Way. But no sooner had he left behind the Capuan Gate than he saw a vision of Jesus. Peter looked up in surprise, and asked: "*Quo vadis, Domine?*" And the shade of Jesus answered: "I am going to Rome to be crucified a second time."\* And so Peter wept as a child at the feet of the shadow upon the flag-stones of the Appian Way; and then he turned and went back again to Pomponia's house. In spite of his seventy years he was now radiant and happy as a young boy. That very evening he gave himself up to the Guards, and on the morrow was taken before a Magistrate and summarily condemned.

Two days later Simon Peter hung from a cross in the Vatican Gardens. Mark, Linus and a veiled woman watched from afar; then at dawn they collected the ashes and the bones of the first Apostle, and buried them in a catacomb not far from the Circus, in the Vatican Valley.

\* "*Eo Romam iterum crucifigi.*"

Then Silvanus the scribe wrote down a report of the end of Peter, and hid it in the catacombs outside the City.

## IX

THE curse of the Caesars was their inability to produce an heir. Julius Caesar had no heir and left the Empire to his adoptive son Octavianus Augustus; Augustus had no son from Livia and she could find no better way than poison to secure the Throne for Tiberius, her son by her first marriage. Tiberius left the succession to his nephew Caligula; Caligula, also without any heir, was succeeded by his uncle Claudius, and although Claudius had a son, Britannicus, he did not come to the Throne, for Agrippina had prepared the way for her son Nero.

Young and strong and able-bodied, Nero could not believe that he would have no son. Being now a widower, he turned his eyes upon Antonia, Claudius's other daughter, and offered her the chair that had been occupied by Poppaea.

In Rome some whispered that Antonia had a good memory and could not forgive the man who had poisoned her brother and done away with her sister; but in the Palace many took up Nero's defence. Britannicus, after all, might have been poisoned by Agrippina to clear away all obstacles from her son's path, and as for Octavia, the poor girl was a bore.

However, Antonia refused the offer of the Imperial hand, which was, to say the least, tactless on her part. At a Privy Council, Tigellinus recalled that Piso had once offered Antonia his name and surely she was conversant with the old plot. Antonia's days were cut short.\*

The Imperial hand was therefore offered to Statilia

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXXV.

## CONSPIRACIES

Messalina, widow of Vestinus. She accepted with pleasure. At a party at Petronius's it was murmured that the pleasure was not so great for Nero, for Statilia had long been his mistress.

Yet no other woman could efface the memory of Poppaea. Her memory haunted Nero like a heady and clinging perfume. Nowhere else could he find the same delicate beauty, the same charm, the same intoxication. He tried to forget her; he plunged into new attractions and pleasures. He could find nothing but lassitude and regret.

It was during one of those moods, that no pleasure could assuage, that the Emperor met Sporus.

Sporus was a most remarkable young man, whose features strangely recalled Poppaea's. The boy was somewhat broader than Poppaea, but otherwise he recalled her entire person in a startling way—the same forehead, the hair, the freckles about the nostrils, the stubborn changeable mouth . . . People said that a surgeon had performed upon Sporus a clever operation, which had changed his sex.\* Sure it was that when Tigellinus introduced Sporus to Nero, he had been mutilated—in fact, he could pass for a woman. And he was the image of Poppaea.

Nero married the boy.

And Rome did not protest! After this abysmal folly there was no longer balance or restraint in Nero's life. Sporus was renamed Sabina, in memory of Poppaea. He was made to wear the dresses and the jewellery of the dead Empress and he was given a lady-in-waiting, Calvia Crispinilla.†

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXVIII.

† Dio Cassius, LXIII.

Yet nothing could cure Nero's spleen. Strange and cruel appetites seized him. And one night he dressed in a lion's skin, and abandoned himself to bestial experiences upon young girls tied to marble pillars in his Gardens.\*

Now the Emperor usually resided in the small pavilion in the Gardens of Servilius, on the road to Ostia. He preferred this pavilion to the splendours of the Golden House. In the Gardens of Servilius he had erected his finest statues, and the river that flowed below made it easy to slip out of Rome unnoticed, for visits to Anzio or Baiae.

But the Emperor was ill. In physicians he had little confidence. At the beginning of his reign he had opened on the Esquiline Hill a School of Medicine and appointed as Head Physician a follower of Hippocrates, named Andromachus, who accompanied by his students made regular visits to sick persons in the poorer districts. But Nero had not much faith in his College of Physicians. Besides, Rome's physicians were split into many schools and factions. There were the Methodics, who ascribed all diseases to harmful secretions, and effected their cures through dieting and internal applications of cold and hot water. There was the new Sicilian School led by Athenaeus of Attala, which was called the Pncumatic School, and proclaimed that the soul was all-important and if the soul was treated the health of the body would ensue.

Tired of his Physician-in-Ordinary who could only order him a strict diet and forbid apples because they made the voice harsh and pears because they caused congestion of the chest, and no more peaches because they

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XXIX.

dissipated vital fluids around the heart, Nero favoured the Pneumatic School because in their kind of psycho-analytical methods he could see some of the magical practices which held such a fascination for him.

Perhaps his illness was psychological rather than physical. One day Nero sent for Athenaeus himself. The head of the Pneumatic School was a mild and smiling Greek with a long beard and magnetic eyes. He looked intently at the Imperial invalid. Then, he led him to the couch, closed Nero's eyes with his fingers, and ordered him to breathe deeply through his nose and asked him to hold the breath and count up to seven and release the breath through the mouth very slowly. Nero did as he was told, and felt a kind of relief and a feeling of greater calmness. After a few visits, Athenaeus left with the Emperor a number of small tablets upon which in brightly coloured letters were inscribed a few words intended to buoy up the Emperor's spirits. On the first tablet, in blue and gold, that were the colours of calm and peace, there was written "I am very calm." The Emperor was instructed to lie on his back and gaze intently at this tablet. Then he should pass to another tablet, upon which, in red and blue, was written "I feel very strong." Then he would gaze at lilac and yellow letters: "Apollo is smiling upon me"; and the next tablet of pure orange and green said: "I am a great poet." This last tablet gave Nero a feeling of intense joy. He held it in his hands and stared at it a long time: "I am a great poet."

Athenaeus's therapy worked wonders. The Emperor confided to his friends that his was a strange illness. It was, he said, the disease of all poets and artists, the fear of ennui and of death. Only in Art could he find an escape. And he worked again at his poems and his sing-

ing with renewed pleasure and energy. Once more at Court the only topic was music, artistic perfection and the marvels of Art. At times, the Emperor spoke of becoming a new Alexander and of his intention to extend the Empire to the far-away Indics. For a century in Rome they had thought of it, but now the idea was again taking shape. The Imperial General Staff received orders to work out the plans of a campaign. The Finance Minister said that the money for the campaign could be easily raised. Only the Generals dared to point out that nothing could be done till Judaea was brought to heel, the Province that lay athwart the route to the East and was a festering sore. But the Emperor brushed aside all objections. His campaign, he said, with a mysterious smile around his lips, would not be a fighting one—he would conquer the East with his poetical Art.

At that time Nero's appearance was changing in an extraordinary way, like the appearance of an actor who had assumed a new role. He had become very fat, his neck seemed enormous and his fleshy face had lost the former boyish appearance. It looked harder, like the face of an Oriental despot. It was not an ugly face; but a mask seemed to rest over the once gay visage. It was now like the face of a God, but a God radiating an aura of egotism and self-assurance.

And he became strangely superstitious. If he sneezed about midday, slaves had to run to the sun-dial to see whether it was already past noon, for if one sneezed after noon it was a very bad omen. If his toga caught on a chair or if he stumbled on entering a room he would not leave the Palace that day. One morning he ran bare-headed into the temple of Castor, whispered a question into the ear of the wooden figures and rushed out into the

street to listen to the words of the first passer-by; in the accidental words he would find the answer to his question. One day he was resting on a stone bench in Vesta's temple and when he tried to rise he staggered and was held back by the fold of his cloak. Petronius was with him and, leaning upon his friend's arm the Emperor asked: "What does it portend? Am I to die?" And he recalled that it was the second time that a similar accident had happened to him in the temple of Vesta.

But a few days later, Ambassadors arrived from the Greek cities, bringing to the Emperor the crowns decreed to him in their dramatic contests. Nero received the Ambassadors with much pleasure, without making them wait for an audience, and he admitted them to his table. Some of the envoys, emboldened by the Emperor's charming manners, during dinner begged him to allow them to enjoy his celestial voice. Nero was only too glad to oblige. The guests applauded warmly. Nero turned to his friends and pointed out how truly the Greeks were connoisseurs of good music and poetry! Suddenly he spoke again of his desire to visit Greece and take part in the artistic contests. The envoys were somewhat taken aback, and muttered that they were sure that Athens and Olympia would look forward to such a great honour.

It was at that time that the *beaux esprits* of Rome were much amused by an incident that sent the poet Cornutus into exile. The respected master of Persius and Lucan was asked by the Emperor what he thought of the idea of composing a History of Rome in poetry and dividing the subject into four hundred books. Mildly Cornutus answered that it was difficult to imagine how anyone would ever read four hundred books. "Why," said Nero, "has not Chrissipus composed a greater number of

books?" "Yes," answered Cornutus, "but the difference is that Chrisippus's books are useful and help to improve the customs of the people."

## X

ONE day Acte went to see the Emperor and spoke to him about the Christians—such a weary subject! She was no longer the humble slave, the devoted mistress, whose frail beauty had the perfume of Arcadian violets. Life had moved on for all. Nero was surprised to see before him a woman of cold beauty, of pure eyes, of plain dress; a woman who was looking at him almost with estrangement. One should never look back at the love of yesteryear.

Acte mentioned the fine, sound philosophy and teaching of Paul of Tarsus. She was, Acte said, under his personal protection. Paul? Was he the same man Paul who was so troublesome with his long diatribes, a kind of advocate gone wrong? And was he not at present under arrest?

After Acte's departure Nero asked for the list of the prisoners of State. The Praetor Helius laid the list before the Emperor. This man Paul of Tarsus, he said, was a strange prisoner; it was, in fact, not clear what the charge was about. He was charged as one of the leaders of the Galileans, the treasonable persons who had set fire to Rome. And if he was one of their chiefs he should be charged with treason and sentenced to death like all the others.

But when the man came before Helios for examination, Helios was somewhat troubled with the nobility of his manner and the eloquence of his speech. He was more like an ancient patrician than a provincial traitor. More-

## CONSPIRACIES

over, this man Paul was a Roman citizen. It would be for the Emperor to decide the issue.

Paul was therefore entered for appearance before the Imperial Tribunal.

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Some months earlier, Linus and Pudens had met Paul near the Three Taverns. Paul had gone to live in the house of Linus for a while, instructing brethren to set out for other lands and carry the word. Before long, however, news was brought to the house that Alexander the coppersmith, who had his shop near the Capuan Gate, had denounced the presence of Paul in Rome to Helius the Tribune, and indeed soon afterwards Paul was arrested. He was a Roman citizen and Helius committed him to trial in the Praetorium.

While Paul was in prison awaiting trial, his friend Luke—for whom the Lady Pomponia had obtained a permit to visit his friend each day—tried to persuade him to invite his “son” Timothy to come to Rome. Many hours Paul hesitated, and he refused to dictate the letter to Luke; but at last with pained and reluctant fingers he wrote the letter to Timothy himself. “Paul, an Apostle of Jesus the Christ by the will of God according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus—to Timothy, my beloved son, grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and our Lord Christ Jesus. Greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy——” Day after day Paul toiled at the writing of that letter, for the fingers, being stiff with rheumatism, could only shape a few sentences each day. Luke might have written the whole of the letter, if Paul had agreed to dictate it, in little more than two hours; but Paul felt

he must write it with his hand. And when at last he neared the end of the letter, he bade Timothy to come speedily to Rome and bring Mark with him, and he asked for a cloak lightly discarded in the heat of summer and which was now his great need. So when Luke came at sunrise to visit him in prison, and again entreated Paul to accept his cloak, Paul proudly told him that in a short while Mark and Timothy would bring all he needed from Troas, and he handed Luke the letter written with such toil and pain.

Before the day of the trial, Luke reminded Paul that they had still no tidings of Timothy, and added: "The Gospel of Jesus as recorded by His servant Paul has not been written, and those sayings and doings of thine will be lost to the world."

"Write out thy heart, Luke, and all that God would have men know will be recorded."

On the eve of the trial Paul sent a message: "Bid Luke to set down a faithful record of our journeys and all that knowledge he has of Christ."

Towards the evening the Guards led Paul to the baths, that he shall be clean and decent to appear before Nero Caesar. Afterwards, in the darkness of his cell, Paul listened for a while to the hum of the City; then he slept easily, like a child.

\* \* \*

Caesar's Court was crowded, all the privileged people filling the hall, eager to see a man who was said to be different from all other men. When the prisoner was brought in, he blinked at the brilliant robes of the Knights, patricians and freedmen, and the glittering breastplates of the Guards.

## CONSPIRACIES

The Emperor entered and took his seat, smiling and waving to the public. Great applause welcomed him. Then the proceedings were opened. Witnesses were called; and again Alexander the coppersmith recounted the riots caused by Paul in every city he had entered in Asia, Syria and Greece. Other witnesses testified against the character and life of the Galileans.

The Prosecution summed up: The man Paul of Tarsus was the head, or one of the heads, of a conspiracy which was spreading from Judaea to all the Provinces. The Galileans called themselves followers of a Jewish rebel named Jesus or Christ, who was crucified in Jerusalem at the time of Emperor Tiberius, under Governor Pontius Pilate at the request of the Jewish Sanhedrin. These Galileans did not believe in any God, even less in the Divine Majesty of Rome embodied in the August Person of Caesar. It was a fact proven at previous trials that during the Great Fire the impiety of these Galileans was such that they sang ribald songs of joy when the temple of Hercules and the temple of the Moon crashed in flames.

Nero, who had been glancing now and then at Paul, had a feeling that he had seen the prisoner before. Suddenly the Emperor remembered the circumstances of his encounter with Paul, and said, "It is hard to believe that the prisoner could be a party to such a list of crimes." At such Paul cried out, "O Caesar, I deny them all. They are lies!"

It was out of order for a prisoner to speak without being addressed, but the Emperor looked again at the prisoner and hung his head in thought. Nero was now remembering Paul's words when he had met him one night returning from his revels and they had walked together beside the River, and Paul had spoken to him of things

and deeds that sounded so beautiful that might have turned into poems.

But the Prosecutor went on: "The prisoner is a magician. It is said that his sect practises dreadful mysteries. It is now a public fact that one of the chiefs had confessed at his trial that Rome was set on fire by the magic of their God."

The prisoner was asked to exculpate himself. He said, "We Galileans, have preached only love and charity, making them the rule of our life. We have taught obedience to our rulers. The Man we call the Christ was the Son of the true God and He walked the Earth in the guise of a man recommending obedience to Caesar, bringing hope to the humble and the poor, announcing the comfort of the resurrection of the soul in life eternal after death."

At this the Emperor rose and withdrew. To those near him he said, "This Jew says that the dead will live on. Is there a life beyond the grave, a life of shades such as we see at times in our dreams?"

The Emperor seemed in great agitation. Tigellinus realized that evil dreams had again troubled Nero's nights. "Do not believe in Heaven or Hell, O Divine! The Gods are old and gouty. The dead sleep for ever."

But the Emperor was obdurate. "I believe that this Jew, honest man or necromancer as he may be, cursed me one night two years before the fire, when I encountered him and walked with him by the Tiber. He speaks well and commands attention." With this Nero returned to the Court and the trial was resumed.

Paul was motioned to continue and he told of the appearance of the apparition of Christ on the road to Damascus. And he spoke of his encounter with the

## CONSPIRACIES

Master, and of what it had meant to him and of what it might mean to all men.

Suddenly Nero put a question to him, "You call yourself a seer. Tell me, then, shall Caesar reign over the Empire of the Dead?"

Paul answered boldly, "Caesar's mind is high and noble, and he will understand when I say that Caesar will not reign over an empire beyond the grave, for there the first shall be the last and the last first."

From the Court someone shouted, "Shame! Shame!" The Emperor looked at the prisoner intently. Then he murmured to the judges, "This man is like all the Galileans"; and he rose from his seat and left the Court with a frown on his brow.

After the sentence Paul was taken to the Tullianum to await execution. A rope was tied round his waist, and he was lowered into the dark, icy cell. The Tullianum was also known as the Sepulchre.

\* \* \*

Some days later, early in the morning, Paul was drawn out with a hook, and was marched out of the City. Now Timothy had arrived in Rome, and he awaited the departure together with Luke and Linus. The Centurion was a kindly man, and permitted the aged prisoner and the young man to embrace, and allowed his two friends to escort him to the place of execution. So the little procession marched down the Sacred Way, round the Palatine and the Aventine, and out by the Ostian Gate. They came to a hollow between the hills, where the block was ready. The Centurion allowed Paul to withdraw a little way and pray. Then Paul returned to the Centurion and said, "I am ready." Two guards led the prisoner to the

block; and swiftly, with the great sword, the head was severed from the shoulders of Paul of Tarsus—with the sword, because he was a Roman citizen.

The body lay all day in the charnel pit. Late at night, by the light of the moon, four men with lanterns came to the pit, gave a piece of silver to the watchman, and they wrapped the body and head of Paul of Tarsus in the old cloak that Timothy had dutifully brought from Troas. The four men were Luke, Mark, Timothy and Onesiphorus. Then they carried their burden to the garden of the Lady Pomponia Graccina, whom they called Lucina. She and her women washed the body with spices and oil, and laid it in a tomb. To the end of her days the Lady Pomponia from Britain watched over Paul's grave, and no Gentile knew of her secret treasure; and few Christians were aware that Paul did lie there. Upon this place is now the great Basilica of St. Paul's-Outside-the-Walls.

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Rome was quiet. The scribe at the Palace had nothing to enter in his records. Some days later, at dinner, Tigellinus was saying, "The temple of Janus will soon be closed. The Jewish War will soon be over. Thanks to our Nero Caesar peace reigns throughout the Empire."

"But it angers the patricians," answered Petronius, "and the financiers."

Nero looked round with an amused look. "I am certainly proud of it, my friends. Posterity will remember me as the second Augustus. But they will also remember me for my triumphs in Greece! We shall leave for Greece within three days, my friends!"

It was the end of the year 66.

**THE LAST OF THE CAESARS**



THE LAST OF THE CAESARS

I

FROM the letters of Petronius to his friend Marcus Valerius:

“ We left, as you know, when the weather was bad enough in Rome to freeze anyone’s enthusiasm. I had no idea that we were taking with us such an enormous and incredible train. You know that our divine Nero never travels with less than a thousand luggage-carts; but this time our train, which was waiting for us near Preneste, was big enough for an expedition to the Indies. Of course, we carried not arms but musical instruments and theatrical props.\*

“ I will pass over the crossing from Brindisi. Touching at Cassiope in the Isle of Corcira, our Divine sang in the temple of Jupiter Cassius. I think it was both to exorcise the God and to try his voice in the clearer air of Greece. From this ancient spot Aenobarbus announced in the most solemn terms, in case we did not know it, that his artistic tour was now beginning.

“ I must say, in all truth, that on the whole the tour is quite a success. Everywhere Nero is being crowned the victor. Of course, it is a crazy mixture of pretence and servility. He is performing in all the public Games of the various cities, and he changes their dates to make them fall within the compass of his tour; and those Games which have already taken place he orders to be repeated in his honour, ‘ to give these loyal subjects the opportunity of hearing my golden voice! ’ Our dear friend

\* See also Dio Cassius, LXIII.

and Consular personage Cluvius Rufus goes ahead of our party announcing the Emperor's victories: 'Nero Caesar, Victor in the competition of Music and Poetry, crowns with this victory the Roman People and the whole world! '\*

"You should see with what anxiety our Nero Caesar engages in these contests, and with what keen desire to win the prize. His awe of the judges is scarcely to be believed. As if his adversaries were on a level with himself, at least as far as the winning is concerned, he watches them narrowly, and makes fun of those who are obviously inferior, those above him he fusses over; he even tries with generous gifts to induce them to withdraw from the competition. Sometimes, upon meeting them, he rails at them in scurrilous language, or defames them behind their backs. Yesterday he said to me, 'Ah, do not reproach me for this pettiness for it is in the blood of us singers to speak evil of one another!'

"He always addresses the judges with the most profound respect, telling them, 'I have done everything that was necessary, but the issue of this contest is in the hands of fortune; and you, as wise and expert judges, ought to pass over things that are merely accidental.' Upon which the judges encourage him to be of good heart; and he feels quite cheered-up.

"The other day it happened that, while waiting for his turn during the second part of the programme, he dropped his sceptre, which went rolling on the boards while he chased it, and he was in a great fright lest the accident would count as a bad mark. Later on, his stage manager had to swear to him that amidst the public acclamations no one had noticed it.

\* See also Dio Cassius, LXIII.

“ When he sings alone he accompanies himself with the lyre, and around him stand, as usual, all the Palace officials. And among the audience there is the Legion of the Augustals, no less than five thousand strong. As the last note is trembling upon Nero’s lips, the Augustals from all sections of the theatre break in with thunderous applause. It is indeed a marvellous claque. At times in the vast silence one hears a solitary ‘ Bravo!’ or a muffled clap in the stalls; more often loud applause from the pit. Nevertheless, in Greece the Augustals have had to modify their technique. The fact is that the Greeks are too subtle and accustomed to free opinion in the matter of stage and music. Sometimes the audience take sides with a favourite artist against the Emperor.

“ Most of the competitors, feeling that they are being deprived of their prizes by the Emperor’s entry, do swear at him. Indeed, we have had some bad episodes. In the Isthmic Games a singer from Epirus, who had a splendid voice, entered the competition with great ardour, letting it be known that he would retire only for an indemnity of ten talents. A band of Augustals seized the fellow and made short work of him. A bitter joke goes round that the Emperor takes the last breath out of his competitors.

“ I must tell you a funny bit about Greek audiences. You know that during the performance nobody is allowed to go out of the theatre upon any account. Well, many spectators being wearied with hearing and applauding our Nero, and finding that the gates were shut, slipped away over the walls; some even feigned to be dead and were carried away for their funeral!

“ Last night I dined very pleasantly at the house of some friends of my banker, Musonius, who had given me letters for them. The conversation was witty and the

table excellent. The main topic was Nero Caesar's voice and his performances as a professional singer. And I heard this opinion: 'Nero Caesar is neither admirable nor ridiculous. He has an average voice, quite passable. But he makes it sound croaky because he thinks that he can give it a dramatic effect by contracting his gizzard; and this is why his singing sounds rather like a buzzing or humming. Yet he now and then produces sweet notes when he does not suffer from over-assurance. He is quite good in the melopoeia, in the quaver and in his accompaniment with the cetra. He moves gracefully and rhythmically on the stage; but he is completely ridiculous when he stands on his toes and shakes his head and puffs out his chest as great singers do.'

"By the way, before going on the stage he throws a pearl into his wine cup. He says that the pearl enriches his soul and fills his eyes with the brilliance and glow of mother-of-pearl . . .

"I must tell you that Nero has taken great care not to visit Sparta or Athens. He is afraid of the rudeness of the Spartans and no less suspicious of the Athenians' wit!

"During this trip we have visited all that deserves the attention of a pious lover of Nature and Art. Passing near the Lake Alcyon, in the Peloponnese, our Divine decided to measure the depth that no one has ever known. He ordered ropes to be made more than a stadium long, had a great weight attached to their end and let them down. The bottom was never reached. The surface of the Alcyon is always calm and clear; but he who dares to bathe in it is sucked down and reappears no more.

"At Thespis we have taken away the statue of *Love* by Praxiteles, but in Mycenae we have presented a golden crown to Juno and a purple robe. At Pisa, near Olynpia,

Nero took away the statue of *Ulysses* from the group representing the Greek Captains deciding which of them should accept the challenge of Hector.

“As you have heard, Pisa has no other theatre but the stadium for horse-races, and the contests are solely athletic. Nero introduced a competition in music and poetry. In this famous arena, the simple crown of olive-leaves has always been considered a kind of Consulship, for a victory at Olympia is greater for the Greeks than a military triumph for our people in Rome. Nero decided therefore to accomplish something prodigious before the Jupiter of Phidias.

“It is a most beautiful stadium, and the setting is spectacular. Set just below the crest of the mountain, one has the impression that when the race is finished the charioteers have driven their steeds over the ridge and into the blue. The atmosphere is supernatural, intoxicating to the point of madness. Everything that is extraordinary and miraculous gathers here in the Games that seem held in the clouds.

“The stadium is adorned with fine statues and monuments, and a great wood of olive trees and several small temples surround the arena. At the entry to the hippodrome, the barriers where the competitors meet before the race form a great courtyard enclosed by splendid buildings. There, in lodges chosen by the drawing of lots, the competitors instal themselves with their horses and chariots, to await the day of the races. This section is divided from the stadium by a portico which is shaped like a prow, jutting into the lists like a ship in the sea. Above this prow stands a bronze dolphin that dominates the arena, and behind the dolphin, in the centre of the court preceding the arena, there is an eagle whose open wings shine

above an altar. At the first signal for the races, by releasing some springs, the dolphin descends to the ground and disappears, while the eagle rises in the air almost as if it were flying above the crowd. The chariots come out of the boxes arranged around the barrier, move towards the portico at the entry of the stadium, take up position, and at the drop of the flag they start the race.

“Races at Olympia are run anti-clockwise, along an artificial bank. The horses pass in front of the judges, then fly before the statue of Hippodamia, and reach a round altar consecrated to a local Geni named Taraxippus. This altar is the terror of all competitors, for many horses shy and the chariots are overturned. I must add that this altar stands a few yards from the turning point at the end of the stadium, near the tomb of Endymion; and there many racers lose control. In the stadium of Nemea the difficult obstacle is after the turning point: a red rock, the brightness of which terrifies the horses. At Olympia the second part of the field has a slight elevation, well suited for a race.

“Nero entered the stadium on a chariot drawn by ten horses. The animals started with such dash that the chariot overturned in the dust. Nero insisted on continuing; but the shaking of the ten horses was such that he could not finish the course. At last he had to get down from his chariot; and was nevertheless acclaimed the victor.

“And here I must tell you a funny thing. Many spectators were puzzled why the horses had taken such fright. Only afterwards the rumour went around that some field attendants had assembled in the cellars that are underneath the artificial terrace at the point where the racers approach the altar of Taraxippus, and from their subter-

anean hide-out had made noises that frightened the horses. It was a Greek vengeance on the Emperor for his having robbed the temples of the finest statues.

“In Attica our Divine did not dare to visit either the small mysteries of Agra, on the border of the Ilissus, or the great mysteries of Eleusis. The last initiation ceremony was opened at night by a herald announcing the exclusion of the uninitiated and of those who had sullied themselves with crime.

“Nero was terrified of this voice. Maybe the Greeks would have terrified him at Eleusis as they had tricked him at Olympia.

“On the other hand, in Delphi he consulted the oracle, and was delighted with Apollo. He has indeed done so much for Apollo that the God showed himself benevolent and forecast a long reign for him! But later on the Sybil changed her tune and she classed him with Alcmaeon and Orestes. Our Caesar was mightily annoyed. Without more ado he purchased the territory of Cirrha that belongs to the temple, and in order to destroy the oracle he contaminated the exhalations that evoke the sibyl, by having some men butchered on the spot. The hole from which the mysterious smoke rose was filled with the blood and the corpses, whereupon Nero defied the God to resist such profanation.

“I have heard it said that the Greeks cannot but feel delighted at the result of this Imperial tour, for Nero has granted Greece the only gift that could console her people for their lost glory. He has rendered freedom to Greece, whatever that means.

“Our Consul had the proclamation read by the Heralds and Nero himself announced it from the middle of the stadium during the Isthmic Games.

“Great news. Nero Caesar decided to cut the Isthmus of Corinth. It was a plan that already Demetrius, Julius Caesar and Caligula had had in mind to execute, but people say that that was the mysterious cause of their tragic end. Superstition has it that when the first pick-axe struck the ground, blood spurted from the earth, and terrible moans and lamentations were heard.\*

“On the appointed day our Divine walked out of his golden tent singing the hymns of Amphitrite and of Neptune and reciting lines in honour of Melicertes and Leucothea. The Governor of Acaia presented him with a golden axe engraved with the date of the ceremony, and amidst the plaudits of the crowd (duly interspersed with Augustals) our Caesar struck the ground three times. No moans or lamentations were heard, no blood spurted from the ground; and Nero carried away a gilt basketful of earth upon his shoulder.

“The work went on for a few days, but yesterday from Corinth, where we are staying, we sent orders to stop the work. The fact is that a courier has arrived from Helius, our dear Legate in Rome, with letters informing Nero Caesar that a new conspiracy is afoot and begging him to return at once. So far he has replied that the pursuit of glory is more pressing than any conspiracy; but it seems that Helius is on the way in person post-haste. Have you any idea who is in this conspiracy?”

## II

CLAUDIUS HELIUS and Polyclete, the two Regents in Nero's absence, had interpreted their powers as a means

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\* See also Dio Cassius, LXIII.

to proscribe the wealthiest citizens and despoil them. More serious things, however, were disturbing the politicians in Rome. During his Greek tour Nero had put to death one of his best-serving Generals, Corbulo. He had summoned Corbulo with a letter in almost filial terms; but as soon as the General landed at Cenchreae, one of the three harbours of Corinth, he found an order to commit suicide. Struck by this black ingratitude, the old soldier bitterly regretted his devotion to the Emperor. Even more he regretted not having answered the call to redress the course of events, and letting himself fall upon his battle-sword, he uttered only one word: "*Dignus*"—I have deserved it.\*

News of Corbulo's death reached Rome simultaneously with news from Judaea, where the Jewish war was proving a tougher job than anticipated. Helius, therefore, felt that the Emperor was wrong not to listen to him when he had pressed him to see the Jewish War through before setting out for Greece.

When news reached Rome that the Palace in Tiberias was sacked by the Jews, Helius called a meeting of the Cabinet. The Ministers were no longer Romans but Greek and Orientals, sons and grandsons of former slaves, and for all their efforts to show the calm and dignity of Roman Senators, they did not really care one way or another about the events in the East. As for himself, the handsome Claudius Helius knew that it was very rash of the Emperor to continue his fantastic tour of Greece; but Helius now carried the Imperial seal. He thought that he too might be fated to die young and that cutting his wrists or inhaling gold-foil was not too dear a price for the experience of ruling the Empire *pro tem*. Still, it was

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\* Dio Cassius, LXIII.

wiser and dutiful to press the Emperor to return and he dispatched a new courirer, this time carrying not a garland of laurel on his spear for good omen, but the feather which foretold of bad news.

Nero was at Corinth, busy in rehearsing his drama *Danae*. The news about Judaea was a great bother; perhaps it might be better to appoint someone who would use a firmer hand.

Work on the Isthmus was stopped. As official reason it was announced that the Egyptian geometers had let it be known that great evils would occur if the Canal were opened. Reluctantly the Emperor made his departure for Rome. In Greece people laughed, but in Rome everybody was glad to learn that the Emperor was returning. The Senate surpassed itself in adulation, and voted such a number of religious celebrations and offerings to the Gods that the whole year would not see them through.

The Senate, however, did not realize that Nero's popularity was on the wane. What had made the people change their heart? It seems quite difficult to explain it when the circumstances of Nero's immense popularity are borne in mind; but the truth is that the people of Rome, who had forgiven Nero anything, were not prepared to forgive him the sullyng of his Imperial dignity in the eyes of foreigners, and of Greeks at that. What was permissible in Rome should not be done in the Colonies. The patricians were indignant at the idea of a Caesar clambering upon the stage to beg a crown of laurel and the plaudits of a foreign crowd. The populace were hurt that the Emperor should go and court the favour of an alien people. The love of the people of Rome should have been enough for him.

No one knew who put it into circulation, but the general

talk was, "The Emperor has not realized that it was better to vaunt his power rather than bring it into contempt." The visit to Greece had been a big mistake.

As soon as he landed in Italy, the Emperor met with a conspiracy at Beneventum. It was not a very serious affair, but it was symptomatic. Nero proceeded towards Rome, intending to celebrate a triumph no less solemn than those of Paulus Emilius and of the brothers Scipio. The Senate encouraged him in this hope. The voyage to Rome was one long ovation. The Emperor seemed anxious to show himself in all the places that were dear to him. He entered Naples by a special gate and upon a chariot drawn by six white horses, for Naples had seen his debut as a singer. He visited Anzio, his native town, and Alba, sanctuary of Jupiter Latial.

Rome gave him the pomp and splendour of a great triumph. Nero entered the City upon the carriage that had been used by Augustus, wearing a purple robe edged with gold, and upon his shoulders an azure cloak bespattered with golden stars. The crown of the Olympic Games, made of a wild olive branch, rested upon his head, and in his right hand he carried the prize of the Pythian Games, a branch of laurel. Before him marched eighteen hundred heralds, each carrying a crown, and above each crown was a board giving the name of the Game and the place in which the prize was won. Nero had associated in his triumph the musician Doriphore, who rode now with the Emperor upon his Imperial coach. Behind the Emperor came the Legion of the Claque, delighted to shout that they were the partners of the Emperor's success and the legionaries of his artistic campaign. In lieu of the fierce and weatherbeaten campaigners of the first Caesar, shouting their insults to the

vanquished and their ribald jests to the victorious General, there came instead the Knights and the effete Senate, chanting, like a chorus, the acclamations that had been carefully prepared and rehearsed: "Ah, Olympic Victor! Ah, Pythian Conqueror! New Augustus, new Augustus, O Nero Apollo! Ah, Sacred Voice!"\*

Nero was overwhelmed with pride and joy. He felt that he had covered himself with an incomparable glory. One arch of the Circus Maximus was taken down, to enable the Emperor to pass through the breach and proceed along the Velabrum and the Forum. All along the route the streets were covered with saffron, rare birds were released, cakes and sweets were thrown to the populace, with ribbons and flowers and at night the whole City was illuminated, garlanded with flowers and perfumed with frankincense from a hundred burners. At every crossway perfumes were burnt, and upon every altar. When the triumphal chariot passed a temple, beautiful beasts were slain as offerings.

After traversing the Forum the procession did not go up to the Capitol to render thanks to Jupiter as tradition demanded, but turned right and went up to the Palatine, along the Victory Road. After passing the altar of Mars the Imperial chariot halted at the temple of Apollo, the one that was built by Augustus near the Palace after the battle of Actium. It was indeed a fad of the Julian Family to show preference to Apollo rather than Jupiter. Besides, Nero did not feel the piety which led Julius Caesar and Claudius to climb the one hundred steps up to the Capitol; and no temple was more suitable than Apollo's for an Emperor who was returning from an artistic tour of Greece.

\* Dio Cassius, LXIII.

The atrium of Apollo's temple on the Palatine was a square courtyard flanked by a peristyle supported by slender pillars of yellow marble. Fifty equestrian statues of Corinthian brass, representing the children of Egypt, were ranged around the peristyle, and the frontage of the temple rose in the middle of the courtyard. Between the columns were fifty marble statues of the fifty daughters of Danaus, all standing. The front had six fluted columns of Parian marble, resting upon a range of eleven steps, which added to the elegance and majesty of the building. There was something grand and solemn in the array of statues standing around the temple, and in the quadriga of brass, upon which was represented Apollo himself, the God of Light, thus dominating the Eternal City.

The brilliant procession moved into the atrium of Apollo. Nero greeted the God more with pride than devotion, calling him brother; then he brought his eighteen hundred crowns into the Golden House, without offering a single one to the God. He said Apollo was jealous of him. All around his private rooms and above his bed he hung the crowns he had won in the sacred contests. The others were taken into the Neronian Circus to add splendour to the Games he was going to give and the Egyptian obelisk which stood in the middle of the arena was completely covered with crowns. Without delay, artists were ordered to model statues of Nero Caesar in the attire of a harper and medals to be struck showing him in the same attire.

After this the Emperor was so concerned in preserving his voice that he kept a singing master standing by him all the time to caution him against overstraining his vocal chords.

## III

SOON after came Petronius's death. The fact was that Rome's Clubs were tittering over the *Satyricon*. Nero was half inclined to ask his friend to read to him the manuscript of the saucy novel himself. From one artist to another, it might be nothing more than a clever joke. But Tigellinus was itching to be rid of the only rival that he really feared. Had not the Emperor told him, a few days earlier, that in Rome there were only two really clever men—and while Tigellinus was already savouring the pleasure of hearing his name, the Emperor had added in his most bantering way, "Myself and Petronius."

The *Arbiter Elegantiarum* listened blandly to the Centurion who brought the fateful message. Petronius possessed so much composure and such haughty serenity that resignation to die cost him no effort. There was nothing tragic or sorrowful in dying. He prepared his end with care, in no haste, without the slightest irritation. The elegant Petronius kept his sense of humour even in death.

Money had bought the treachery of a slave. The loyal friendship that had existed between Petronius and Scevinus, at the time of Piso's conspiracy, was brought up against Petronius. When Petronius was told, he merely remarked, "I am losing Nero's favour by the same negligence with which I obtained it." The Imperial order reached him while he was journeying to join the Emperor at Cuma. The order was to stop and wait. Already Petronius's slaves and servants in Rome had been arrested. When told of it, Petronius smiled and turned to his friends, and made ready to die. As it was the usual practice, he first had his veins opened, but after an abundant

loss of blood he asked his doctor to close the wound, and he took some sleep. Then he rose, walked a while, chatted gaily with his friends, laughed at some witty jests. He distributed his properties among his friends; gave gifts of money to his servants, and proffered his arms again to the lancet.

When death was near, he asked his most intimate friends to come closer to the bed, added a few codicils to his Will, but avoided addressing vulgar flatteries to the Emperor. From a casket he took out a roll, and read to his friends some passages from the *Satyricon*: "I am leaving this copy to Nero, but my Publishers have already more than one hundred copies ready for distribution."

When Nero heard that Petronius was dead, he asked with anxious face what had become of "the cup." It was one of the most beautiful *murrinae* cups. All Rome envied Petronius that cup, and Nero himself had often complained that he did not own such a rare goblet. Nero was told that Petronius had drunk a last toast to his friends and to Life, then he had let the cup fall upon the marble floor.

Nero opened the roll of the *Satyricon*, but only at night, in his room. Petronius's writings deserved close attention. After reading a few passages Nero frowned. Who was that gross and ridiculous Trimalcion, the principal character of the satirical novel? Who had told Petronius the secrets of the Emperor's private orgies? Nero's suspicion fell upon the Lady Silia. The lady was exiled.

## IV

Now the Emperor was concerned with nothing else but to preserve his voice. Continuously he pressed a handker-

chief to his lips to breathe more sweetly ; no longer did he harangue the Praetorian Guards. A Consular person read Nero's speeches whenever the Emperor should speak in public.

His greatest concern was to have a marble or bronze statue representing him in the dress of his triumph, like a musician who had won a competition. He spoke of this statue and he asked the most famous sculptors to submit sketches. He said, "Chance made me Emperor, but I was really born to be an artist."

His mind seemed to be affected. He announced that having surpassed Apollo, he must now emulate Hercules : he announced that he would appear in the arena armed with a clava, fighting a lion.

But Fate decreed otherwise.

The new Consuls had just been appointed : Silius Italicus, a poetaster, and a cheap orator, Trachalus by name. It was the year 68. At the beginning of March, Nero went to Naples. After so many contests and great shows, he felt he needed a rest.

Also, his voice was causing him deep concern. He was now playing only small parts in comedies, while preparing for other triumphs as a singer. Affairs of State bored him to death. Why did they not let him pursue in peace his artistic career?

While he was thus resting, he received news of the revolt in Gaul. The Emperor took no heed. Indeed, for eight days he answered no letters. Strangely enough, the news had reached him on the nineteenth of March, the anniversary of his mother's death, nine years before. The Gauls, the message said, had risen at the instigation of a local leader called Vindex, a native of Aquitania. Vindex's father had been admitted by Claudius to the dignity of

the Senate. At his father's death Vindex succeeded him in the Senate, but the young man was intolerant of Nero's rule and mode of life. Before the order of death reached him, Vindex had deceived everybody by drinking a decoction of cumin which gave him such a pale air\* that the Court decided to let him die in peace.

Instead, Vindex took horse for far-away Gaul; his health demanded his native air. There he took in hand the revolt that was already brewing. And he offered the Empire to Galba.

Sulpicius Galba, Governor of Spain, was a man of simple tastes, with the reputation of an honest administrator. Tiberius, who was a shrewd ruler, had enlisted his services long ago and had him elected Consul. He had called Galba for an audience at Capri, and fixing upon him his owlish eyes, Tiberius had told him, "And you too, Galba, will taste the Imperial power!"† Some said that already Augustus had made the same forecast when one day he had caressed the chin of the infant Galba. Under Claudius those predictions had been rather inconvenient for Galba, when Agrippina was all-powerful; and under Nero, Galba had thought it wise to live quietly and accept the offices that had come his way.

But during the last few years he had affected to neglect the administration of Tarragona, so that his subjects had fallen under the depredations of Nero's protégés. In that way Galba had prepared his popularity with the natives, while all over Spain people sang scurrilous songs against the Emperor.

Vindex now confided to Galba his plans, and offered him the throne. Then he called a meeting of provincial

\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XX.

† Suetonius—*Tiberius*, LXVIII.

chiefs. Soon Vindex had on his side the Aquitainians, the Squani, the Arveni, and the Viennese. Only the people of Lyons remained loyal to Nero in gratitude for the help he had sent them after the fire that destroyed their city.

Now Vindex had under him one hundred thousand men. Feeling sure of success, he pressed Galba to take the lead.

When Vindex's envoys arrived, Galba was at Cartagena. At the same time he received a message from Nero's Lieutenant-General in Aquitania requesting him to march against Vindex. Galba therefore called a meeting of his councillors; his Lieutenant Vinius declared that the mere act of discussing whether to remain faithful to the Emperor or to desert him was already tantamount to a betrayal. Orders to kill Galba were already on the way. Whereupon Galba proclaimed himself against Nero.

At once the Governor of Lusitania, Salvius Otho, former husband of the late Empress Poppaea, supported Galba: and Otho found a bitter sweetness in having a chance to revenge himself for having been deprived of his wife. Moreover, he hoped to be adopted by Galba who was an old man and had no children.

Galba had the simple habits of an ancient Roman. Otho sent to him his majordomo with a chest full of beautiful table silver, telling him that it was necessary for the Prince to keep up a style suitable to his rank. But Galba did not appreciate the dinner service.

## V

IN NAPLES, Nero underestimated Vindex's revolt. He believed it was merely one of the common insurrections

in the Provinces, and continued his usual mode of life. The Provincial Governors received no reply.

Eight days were thus lost. Eight fatal days. Other news arrived. Vindex had called Nero "that poor harper Aenobarbus." This Nero could not stand. An Imperial letter was immediately sent to the Senate demanding that the Emperor should be placed in a position to revenge the injuries made to the person of Nero Caesar and to Rome. The letter ended with a few lines of apologies for a cold that compelled the Emperor to nurse his throat and his voice and prevented him from coming in person to address the Senate.

In the meanwhile, all Rome was agog with the grave news from Gaul. The Emperor must return at once to Rome. At last Nero agreed.

But on the way from Naples he stopped to view a new musical instrument, an organ operated by water, which, according to Vitruvius, had been invented by Ctesibus of Alexandria. It was like an oblong chest with the pipes above it, and one such organ is depicted on the reverse of a medallion of Caracalla.

Further on the way the Emperor saw upon a tomb the image of a Gaul being held down by a Roman cavalrman. With delight he cried that it was a good omen, and continued his voyage in high spirits.

So Nero arrived in Rome. Yet, instead of calling a meeting of the Senate he sent for the principal Senators for consultation. But the important subject in hand was disposed of in a few minutes, after which the Emperor showed the Senators the new marvellous hydraulic organ. "With Vindex's permission," he said, "we shall have a similar organ installed in the Circus." The Senators smiled obligingly. But all Rome was in a state of alarm.

Nero took up residence at the Golden House, and without worry he continued his usual life. He aimed in this way to reassure the people. But even more he wanted to deceive himself with a false sense of security.

The news of Galba's revolt came as a thunderbolt. Nero was at his midday meal when the message was brought to him, and he let the crystal cup drop from his hand.\* Then he tried to turn the news into a joke, "Well, well, the divinity is truly respected. Does not Galba claim to descend from Jupiter on his father's side and from Pasiphae on his mother's?"

But Nero knew that though Vindex's revolt might be only the expression of the discontent or independence of a Province, the self-proclamation of Galba as Emperor meant something very different and new. Galba was an important man, by his birth and by his services; Galba was in fact the avenger of the Senate and of Roman tradition. And Nero had retained a vague belief in virtue and divine laws, if it were only to consider himself their true embodiment.

Further news said that the Legions in Germany and Africa had revolted too, and that each claimed the right to choose an Emperor. The German troops wanted Fontenius Capito; the Africans, Claudius Macer. But Galba, supported by the troops of Spain and Gaul, was now marching hastily towards Italy, and his triumph seemed assured.

This latest news threw the Emperor into a state of despair. He cried and wept in the arms of his old nurse, like a child. Then, his dramatic spirit made him look upon it as an unrivalled tragedy, "My misfortune is unexampled! My Empire goes to another man and I am still alive!"

\* Pliny the Elder—*Historia Naturalis*, XXXVII.

Better news arrived. Nero at once gave a banquet, and composed satirical verses against the rebels and ordered that they should be sung in the musical shows.

Crises of deep depression seized him. He remembered that at Delphi the prophecies had told him to beware of the seventieth year. He had then taken it to mean that he would die at that age, and had waved his hand deprecatingly, "O Divine Apollo, spare me from my own senility!" But the Sybil meant the age of Galba—who was seventy-three.

When the news grew worse the Emperor gave vent to strange and monstrous ideas. He spoke of massacring all the Gauls resident in Rome and of abandoning the entire Province of Gaul to the plunder of the armies. He talked of poisoning the whole Senate at a great feast.

But actually he confined himself to removing the two Consuls from office and assumed the Consulship himself without a colleague. Upon taking the fasces, emblem of the Consulship, he gave an entertainment at the Palace. As he walked out of the room on the arms of two friends, he said that as soon as he would arrive in Gaul he would present himself to the troops, not in arms but in tears: "They shall be moved by my pathetic appearance—you see the advantage of being a great actor!" And the following day he would celebrate their repentance and sing a song of triumph, "In fact, I must apply myself to composing it right away."

The Emperor summoned the City Tribes to enlist, but as nobody volunteered, he ordered all masters to send a certain number of slaves. He decreed an immediate levy on all estates; all owners of houses and mansions must pay one year's rent into the Exchequer: but only new

coins of the purest silver and gold would be acceptable! Everywhere the people said that Nero had gone completely mad.

It happened that at that time a shortage of corn occurred. At last a ship arrived from Alexandria, but alas, it carried not a cargo of grain but of yellow sand for the wrestlers, the so-called golden sand in which the wrestlers rolled their bodies slippery with oil and perspiration, and which gave them a wonderful glimmer. The people went frantic with rage. Upon one of the Emperor's statues a hand placed a small chariot with a Greek inscription, "Now indeed he has a race to run; let him be gone!" To another statue a little bag was tied, with these words, "Truly you have deserved the bag." It was a menacing allusion to the murder of his mother, the emblem of the ancient punishment of the matricide, who was sewed up in a sack, with a goat, a cock, a viper and an ape, and thrown into the sea or a deep river to die. And upon the pillars in the Forum a jesting hand wrote: "With his poor singing he has even enraged the *Gallos*," which meant both the cocks and the Gauls.\*

At night the Emperor had terrifying dreams. "I never used to have bad dreams till my mother died." But now the frightening dreams which had troubled his nights after Agrippina's death came to haunt him again. One night he fancied that he was steering a ship and the rudder was forced from him; the ghost of that slip of a girl that was his wife Octavia was dragging him into a terrifying dark place. Another night he dreamed that he was attacked by a huge swarm of winged ants. And that a Spanish jennet he was fond of had taken the shape of an ape with only its head left unaltered, and it neighed

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLV.

at him ominously.\* He dreamed that he saw the doors of the mausoleum of Augustus fly open, and there issued from the great tomb a stertorous voice, calling him by name. Another night he dreamt that he was on the way to the Theatre of Pompey, but the statues of the Nations of the Empire, which were arrayed before the Theatre's entrance, barred him the way.

All sorts of bad omens occurred. The Lares of the Palace, being adorned with fresh garlands, fell during the preparations. When the representatives of the civic orders were assembling for the ceremony of making vows to the Gods, the keys of the Capitol could not be found. And the last time the Emperor sang on the stage the piece he had chosen was *Oedipus in Exile*, and he fell upon the boards while he was singing the line

*Wife, mother, father, all force me to my end . . . †*

But there were worse occurrences than dreams and omens. Huge crowds paraded the streets, calling with great cries: "Vindex! Vindex!" And the name was ominous in itself.

## VI

At the Emperor's request the Senate proclaimed Galba a public enemy. His estate was sold and upon his head was placed a price. But in his turn, Galba sold up all Nero's properties in Spain. When Vindex heard that there was a price upon his head, he answered, "Nero offers ten million sesterces for my head; I am ready to give my own head to whomsoever will bring me Nero's!"

The Emperor made frantic efforts to appear calm and conduct business. He summoned a Privy Council at the

\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLVI.

† Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLVI.

Palace, and to the few faithful councillors he outlined his plans. "We must dismiss all Provincial Governors. Let them be arrested forthwith and brought to Rome. Tomorrow we shall take into custody all foreigners, and put to death all the Gauls and Spaniards in Rome. If the Senate disagrees, I shall dismiss the Senate. We may as well put all the Senators to death. What we need is a dictatorship."

He ordered the recruiting of a Legion of Marines, recalled detachments from Illyria and despatched troops to Gaul. Perhaps if he had put himself at the head of three Legions taking with him the Praetorian Guards he might have crushed the rebellion. But he did nothing.

Had his brain snapped altogether? With the funds supplied by the landowners he enrolled the professional prostitutes, dressed them splendidly, and called them his Company of Amazons. An army train was made ready to transport his musical instruments to the front. To his dismayed friends he declared, "What matters? An artist will always survive."

A proclamation was prepared for the people: it announced that Nero would conquer the enemy with the charm of his singing. When dissuaded from issuing such a mad document, he said, "I shall nevertheless arrive in Gaul, and I will, all alone, go to the front line and show the rebels my face, pale, washed by tears, the very image of sorrow and despair. That will move them and turn them again to Rome." Then he added, "And if this does not succeed, I will attempt a new wonderful effort to save the Empire—I shall play the organ!"

While Nero's mind was thus meandering towards complete folly, serious things were happening in the Provinces. In Africa, Claudius Macer wanted to be independent for

he recognized neither Nero nor Galba. In Upper Germany, Virginius Rufus refused to submit to Galba; and although he openly repudiated Nero, he marched into Gaul against Vindex as a punishment for his impudence in appointing an Emperor of his own choice.

Rome listened to the rumble of the approaching armies. From the Golden House Nero issued order upon order. The Court smiled complacently and no order was executed.

If Nero had still been capable of controlling his emotions, his very inaction might have saved him. The defeat of Vindex at the hands of Virginius Rufus, and the new quarrel between Rufus and Galba could have been exploited to the Emperor's advantage. But Nero let anyone and everyone see that he considered himself utterly lost.

He was at dinner when news arrived that the rest of the armies had revolted. He tore the letter to pieces, overthrew the table, and smashed two favourite cups which he called Homer's because they were engraved with lines from Homer. Then, clutching in his hand a small gold box in which was a strong poison prepared by Locusta, he retired to the Gardens of Servilius.

But he was reluctant to die. He thought of making submission to Galba; of applying to King Tiridates for protection. Or of appearing upon the rostra dressed in mourning and beg the Roman people to leave him at least the government of Egypt. He prepared the speech—it was afterwards found in his writing-case.

Or it might have been simpler to take flight to Alexandria. A trusted freedman was sent to Ostia to prepare a small fleet. Then Nero tried to win to this plan the officers of the Guards. The Praetorians would have

followed him in war, but they declined to take flight from Rome. One of the officers replied with Virgil's line: "Is it so sad to die?"\*

There was a terrible irony in this, for this line is upon the lips of Turnus when he decides to have a mortal combat with his enemy. Instead, Nero told the Court that he would dance the ballet *Turnus* for his last night in Rome.

## VII

THE Palace was now quite deserted. The Senators no longer obeyed a summons to an audience. Amidst general laughter the Company of Amazonian Prostitutes had taken flight, for the safety of their tresses.

Near the Emperor was left only a small group of old slaves, who had been Nero's personal attendants since his childhood, his nurses Ecloga and Alexandra, his freedmen Phaon and Sporus and his secretary Epaphroditus. And there was the faithful Acte. She still loved "her Prince with the auburn hair." She still believed he was her young Lucius Domitius, just a little mad in the head, but that one could make him go straight if only one knew how to handle him. She still loved him with a devotion that was almost pious.

The last traitor was the man Nymphidius who pretended to have been born of Caligula and a courtesan. Nero had made him a Tribune at the time of Piso's conspiracy, and later Praefect of the Praetorium with Tigellinus. But Nymphidius had conceived a furious passion for the freak Sporus; and now he told the Centurions and the Guards that Nero had already fled from Rome. As Nero was in hiding, the lie sounded true. The Praetorian

\* Virgil—*Aeneis* XII, and Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLVII.

Guards felt highly indignant, for they considered themselves deserted by the Emperor. When the Guards assembled in the field, Nymphidius proposed to them to acclaim Galba Emperor, and promised them a prize of one thousand sesterces to each man and six hundred for each Legionary. No one could pay such an extravagant bonus, and in view of Galba's avarice it could be taken for sure that he would discount the promise. Nymphidius therefore obtained a satanic double result—to alienate the Praetorians from Nero without making them loyal to Galba.

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It was the night of the 10th of June, the year 68.

The troops were marching on Rome. In the City the people considered Nero as already dismissed. There was in the air the tension that precedes a revolution.

After endless discussion with his friends, sick with fatigue and still convinced that Fortune would assist him, Nero postponed all decisions till the morrow.

At night-time, before taking leave of him, his secretary Epaphroditus and the minion Sporus told Nero that they considered it advisable that he should quit Rome without delay. Anything, they said, might happen now, at any moment. Vindex's troops were already entering the City. This night there was not too much moon, they could travel unobserved. If they could reach Ostia before daybreak there was a trusted ship that would take them all away.

“Must I really take flight?” Nero queried plaintively, forgetful that he himself had planned to have ships in readiness at Ostia. “Must the master of the world escape like a thief in the night, his nose in his mantle?”

My friends, I will climb the rostra and address the people. I will announce to Rome that I am leaving for the East where a new Empire is waiting for me!"

"Don't do it," said Epaphroditus. "If the people see you they will kill you."

"Do they hate me so?"

"No, they don't hate you. But they have had enough of you."

Yet Nero still insisted. "Let us wait until tomorrow." Alone he reached his bedchamber, and went to sleep.

But about midnight he awoke full of terror. He had the feeling of being alone in the immense Palace, the feeling of finding himself completely abandoned.

He leapt out of bed and called for his servants. But none came. He left the room, where his most precious treasures and collections, and all the worthless prizes and crowns that he had won at the singing contests were assembled, and he walked to the terrace. No one was mounting guard at his door. Only a few servants were still about, scurrying and pilfering. Nero called aloud for his friends. He received no answer. Dejectedly he returned to his rooms where happily there was now Epaphroditus with Sporus and the freedman Phaon, who suggested that they should take shelter at his country-house.

The four returned to the pavilion in the Garden of Servilius. Here a new surprise awaited Nero. The golden box with the poison prepared by Locusta was no longer in its place. Nor was the bracelet made of a snake's skin which Agrippina had given him and which he had worn since he was a boy as a lucky charm.

Four horses were in readiness. Barefoot and clad only in his tunic over which he slipped an old soiled cloak, the

Emperor mounted a horse, with his head muffled up and a handkerchief over his face. The four left the Palace grounds. Suddenly a flash of lightning lit up Nero's face. He was struck with terror, for it was a bad omen. From a neighbouring camp came the cries of the troops, who were hailing the name of Galba.

Phaon's house stood near the river Anio beyond the present Church of St. Agnes, on the Via Nomentana. The party left by the Salarian Road, which was so called because the old Sabine used it to fetch salt from the coast. It led out from Rome to the north, near the Gardens of Sallust, by a Gate called Salaria or Quirinalis. A little lower down the Salaria joined the Via Nomentana at a place called Heretum, on the Tiber. It was easy for the fugitive and his party to reach the Gate, and on issuing from it they had the Praetorian Camp close on their right hand.

Further on, a traveller, seeing the party bent upon their horses necks, shouted, "They are in pursuit of Nero Caesar!"\* Another enquired the latest news in the City. Nero's horse scented a corpse in the road, and shied with fright. The handkerchief fell from Nero's face, and an old soldier returning to the camp recognized him and saluted him by name.

When they came to the lane which led to Phaon's house, they dismounted and with difficulty wound their way along a track through a bed of rushes. As Nero was barefooted, his friends threw their cloaks on the ground for him.

At last they reached the wall that enclosed the small garden. Daylight was now breaking, and Phaon suggested to Nero that he go and hide himself in a sand

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLVIII.

quarry, in a hole which the workmen used for rest. "Do you want to bury me alive?" said Nero.\* "No, I will not go. Open me your house, let me enter like the Emperor, whatever the future may bring."

Yet he stood in the quarry a little time, while preparations were made for bringing him into the house without waking up the servants; and feeling thirsty he drank some water from a tank, in his cupped hands.

At last he crept into the house through a hole in the wall, and he lay down in a small closet, upon a pallet, with an old coverlet; and though he felt hungry, he could not bring himself to eat the coarse bread, but drank some warm water.

Now his friends pressed him to save himself from the indignities that would befall him if he were caught. Nero looked at them in astonishment. Then he told them to prepare a grave of his size, and to place around it some marble tablets if any could be found about the house, and to have water and wood ready for washing and burning his body.

Suddenly a noise was heard outside. Phaon rushed out and came back with the message that Nero had been recognized by a Praetorian and that the Senate was informed of his flight. There was no more hope. The frankincense was already burning in the temples for the new Emperor and Nero had been declared a public enemy and sentenced according to the Laws.

From his belt Nero pulled out a dagger and tried the point speculatively. He put it back in its golden scabbard saying, "The hour has not yet come."

Nevertheless he begged Sporus to begin the lamenta-

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLVIII.

tions of the dead, and asked Phaon to set an example by killing himself.

Again there was sound of horses approaching the house. Nero listened and uttered, in Greek, a line from the *Iliad* :

*The noise of swift-footed steeds assails my ears . . .\**

And suddenly he was no longer frightened. A slave appeared at the door saying that the house was surrounded. Nero put the dagger to his throat. His secretary Epaphroditus gave it a push. The dagger went in to the hilt.†

When the Centurion who had come to arrest Nero Caesar entered the room, the Emperor was still breathing. Hoping to be able to seize his prey alive, the Centurion cried that he had come to help him.

Nero looked up at the officer and his lips murmured :

*"What a great artist dies!"‡*

Thus he breathed his last, with his eyes wide open.

Some hours later, Acte reached the house, with the two old nurses who had reared with love the child Lucius Domitius. The corpse lay upon the floor, scarcely covered with the miserable cloak. The face had suddenly undergone a terrible change. It was a ravaged face, the image of dissolution and folly; so that Acte stared at the body in great surprise, and only by the auburn hair did she recognize the Emperor Nero.

## VIII

JULIUS, Galba's freedman, assented to a funeral fitting to a Roman Emperor.§ From the moment that news of

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\* Homer—*Iliad*, X and Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLIX.

† Dio Cassius, LXIII.

‡ Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLIX.

§ Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, XLIX.

Nero's death became known in Rome, the people's hate gave place to general consternation and regret. Popular favour protected his memory. The bed upon which Nero's body was carried to the pyre was covered with the white robes embroidered with gold which the Emperor had worn for the New Year. The body was burned in the Campus Martius, in the very *bustum* or private crematorium of the Caesars. The faithful Acte and the old nurses deposited his ashes in the tomb of the Domitii, which stood on top of the Gardens Hill, Collis Hortulorum, now the Pincio Gardens, so called from the name of a family that flourished under the lower Empire. It was a beautiful position, visible from the Campus Martius. And in the tomb there was a coffin of porphyry, with an altar of Luna marble over it, enclosed by a wall of grey stone from Thasos. The expenses of Nero's funeral amounted to two hundred thousand sesterces,\* and the people of Rome wept aloud, and for a long time afterwards they decked his tomb with flowers.

Nero's death, the last of the Caesars, left in Rome and in the whole Empire an immense void. Rome became the scene of terrible disorders. When Galba arrived, at the sight of the old man, who was a gouty miser, the people and the very Senate regretted the reign of Nero and his brilliant youth. The crimes of Galba's Ministers helped Otho's ambitions, and Otho deserted Galba and had him murdered with the sole result of being himself quickly supplanted by Vitellius, a man who was the embodiment of lewdness and who passed to history only for his unbelievable gluttony. His reign was a continuous and disgusting orgy. With an army of sixty thousand foreigners he sacked all Italy, distributing to his troops huge rations

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, L.

of meat such as were given to the gladiators, and sixty thousand batmen served the sixty thousand barbarous troops.

The memory of Nero became so dear to the people of Rome that the populace paraded the streets calling for the death of Tigellinus as the man who had perverted and ruined Nero Caesar. Under Galba, Otho and Vitellius, Rome saw nothing but horrors, licentious debauchery and civil war. And soon a legend arose, that Nero was not dead; and more than half a century after his death people whispered that Nero was alive and would return and again make happy the people of Rome.\* For such are the vagaries of human nature.

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\* Suetonius—*Nero Claudius Caesar*, LVII.