

## CHAPTER XVII

### NERO.

FROM A. D. 51 TO A. D. 67

STRIFE BETWEEN NERO AND HIS MOTHER.—MURDER OF BRITANNICUS.—ATTEMPT TO MURDER AGRIPPINA.—HER ESCAPE.—EFFECTUAL PLAN FOR HER MURDER.—REMARK OF TACITUS.—WAR IN BRITAIN.—HORRIBLE LAW OF SLAVERY.—ITS EXECUTION.—REPUDIATION AND DEATH OF OCTAVIA.—THE FESTIVAL.—NERO SETS FIRE TO ROME.—THE CHRISTIANS FALSELY ACCUSED.—THEIR PERSECUTION.—THE INSURRECTION OF GALBA.—TERROR OF NERO.—HE COMMITS SUICIDE.—GALBA CHOSEN EMPEROR.—HIS ASSASSINATION.

NERO, alarmed lest his mother, with her boundless wealth, her influence, and her peculiar sagacity, might be able to wrest the scepter from him and place it in the hands of Britannicus, who, as the son of Claudius, had a more legitimate right to the throne than he had himself, plotted the death of Britannicus. In those days it was necessary for every conspicuous man to guard incessantly, and with the utmost vigilance, against poison and the dagger. Neither princes nor their children, allowed themselves to partake of any food until it was first tasted by a special officer. A cup of drink, yet harmless, was presented to Britannicus by his taster, but so hot that he handed it back to be cooled. Cold water containing poison was then poured in. He drank, fell back in convulsions, and died in the arms of Agrippina, who, with Nero, was present. Nero reclined upon a sofa in apparent unconcern as the prince was struggling in the agonies of death, and remarked that he did not think that much was the matter with Britannicus, but that from childhood he had been accustomed to such fainting fits. The body of the poisoned prince was removed, and the festive banquet went

on undisturbed. Agrippina understood the matter full well, but, with policy, affected to be deceived, and to regard the death of Britannicus as natural. The very night of his murder, in a storm of wind and rain, the body of the murdered prince was burnt on a funeral pile in the Campus Martius. Such were the achievements of a Roman emperor at the commencement of his reign, when but little more than seventeen years of age. There were then one hundred and fifty millions of people subjected to the despotism of this one monster. How strange the power of circumstances, which can confer upon one depraved, contemptible boy such unlimited dominion, and which can reduce so many millions to such utter helplessness!

The vast property of Britannicus was distributed by Nero among his own partisans, and thus their support was purchased. But Agrippina, in whose bosom maternal milk had been converted into venom, slowly, cautiously, determinedly prepared to wreak vengeance upon her detested son. She laid aside vast treasures, as the resources for bribery or war. She courted the friendship of able men, whose coöperation she hoped to enlist; and held frequent conferences with them in secret. But the eye of Nero was sleeplessly upon her; and though they both, in their social intercourse, affected the most cordial relations, and addressed each other with the most endearing epithets, neither of them was blind to the fact that they were engaged in a conflict of life or death. The mother and the son occupied palaces but a short distance from each other, and were each surrounded by numerous retainers, who officiated as guards of honor. Nero, by his imperial power, withdrew from Agrippina her retainers, and she was left almost in the condition of a private lady. Fears of his frown prevented also any of the courtiers from approaching her but in secret.

Nero was soon informed that his mother was plotting to effect his assassination, and to place one Rubellius Plautus

upon the throne, a relative of the deified Augustus. Nero, who, like most guilty men, lived in a state of constant terror, was now anxious to secure as speedily as possible, the death of both his mother and Plautus. But Agrippina was too powerful to be stricken down by an open blow. Caution and cunning were requisite. The almost incredible story is related by the ancient historians, Tacitus repeating it after Cluvius and Rusticus, that Agrippina, in order to blind her son, would present herself before him, in the most wanton attire, when he was intoxicated, and would so inflame his passions by kisses and caresses, as to lure him to incest; and this so openly, that the matter was talked of freely throughout the palace and among the soldiers.

All this time, and through all this unparalleled infamy, both mother and child were watching for an opportunity to murder each other. The following ingenious plan, for the accomplishment of his end, was at length adopted by Nero. He had a vessel so constructed that by withdrawing a few bolts, at sea, it would easily fall to pieces. Agrippina was to be enticed on board this ship for a pleasure voyage, and then was to be left to perish as if by the ordinary casualties of wind and wave. Assuming a very affectionate air he invited his mother to accompany him to a festival at Baiæ, near Naples, on the sea shore. Taking her arm he conducted her to the beach, and showed her the beautiful galley, richly decorated, which he had prepared expressly for her pleasure. There were many other regal barges floating upon the wave, but none which could compare with that devoted to Agrippina. It appears that the mother was quite deceived by her guileful son. A rich banquet was prepared, and after much feasting and merriment, during which Nero leaned upon the bosom of his mother very lovingly, he accompanied her to the shore, that she might embark in the treacherous barge for her country-seat at Antium, near Rome. Conducting her

to her luxurious seat he kissed her affectionately and bade her adieu.

It was then past midnight as the festival had been protracted to this late hour. The night was wonderfully fine, the stars shinning brilliantly, and not a breeze rippling the surface of the Mediterranean. Seamen manning the three banks of oars with lusty sinews, drove the barge over the glassy sea, when suddenly the canopy which overarched Agrippina fell with a fearful crash. It had been so loaded with lead that no doubt had been entertained that it would effect certain destruction. The attendant who reclined at Agrippina's feet was instantly crushed, but one of the partitions fell in such a way as to protect Agrippina, though she was slightly wounded. The boat, however, filled and sank, many perished, others escaped by swimming to the shore. The agents of Nero, on board, who had made provision for their own safety, supposed that they had effected their purpose, and that their victim, mangled, and enclosed in a winding sheet of lead was sunk to the bottom of the sea.

But Agrippina, floating upon a part of the wreck had sufficient fortitude and sagacity to keep silent. In the early dawn she was picked up by a small boat and conveyed to her villa. Though she perfectly comprehended the treachery from which she had escaped, she shrewdly pretended to regard it all as an accident. She immediately dispatched a courier to inform her affectionate son that, through the mercy of the gods, she had escaped fearful peril, but entreating him not to be needlessly alarmed, as she had received but a slight wound, and would probably soon be quite restored. Nero was impatiently waiting to receive the news that his mother had gone down to her watery tomb, when he was thunderstruck with the intelligence of this utter failure of the plot. He knew his mother too well to imagine that her eyes could be blinded to the stratagem from which she had so wonderfully escaped, and he doubted not that she would immediately resort to some desperate mea-

sure, in self-defense, to secure his assassination. His only hope, then, was to strike a blow before his mother could strike the one she was doubtless premeditating.

Immediately he summoned one of his most efficient partisans, in whose depravity and efficiency he could place reliance, ordered him to take a strong body of picked men, hasten to the villa of Agrippina, break into the room, cutting down all opposition, and kill her *thoroughly*. Anicetus, the executor of this order, with his band of assassins, was soon on the march. Unannounced and unexpected they burst into the villa. The slaves, and feeble guard fled in all directions. It was midnight. Agrippina was in her chamber with but one maid, and a single lamp was dimly burning. Hearing the noise the maid fled. Agrippina, alarmed, raised her head from the pillow, when the assassins rushed in, and one blow from a club, upon her head, followed by thrusts of swords and javelins which pierced her body, dispatched her so effectually, that Nero declared that the mission was accomplished to his perfect satisfaction.

There was a law enacted by the Roman slaveholders, that if any master should be murdered by a slave, every slave belonging to that household, male and female, young and old, should be put to death. The object of the law was to protect the life of the master, by rendering every member of his household responsible, with his life, for his master's safety. A slave in revenge for some injury which he had received from his master, Pedanius Secundus, struck him dead. The law doomed the whole family of slaves, four hundred in number to capital punishment. There were in this doomed household old men, babes, boys, and maidens. The deed was perpetrated by one man, maddened by outrage, and it was clear that all the rest were innocent. These slaves were not negroes, but men and women of the same blood with their master.

The sympathies of the populace were excited in their behalf, and with a spirit which was then deemed radical and

fanatic, they appealed to a *higher law* than that of the tyrants of Rome, to the law of immutable justice, and declared that these innocent people ought not to be, and should not be beheaded. The question created great agitation, and there were indications of seditious resistance to the execution of the law. Even some of the senators espoused the popular cause, and declared the law to be inhuman, contrary to justice, and that it ought not to be executed.

The conservatist party, however, cried out vehemently against the fanaticism of this spirit of innovation. Tacitus has given us the speech of Caius Cassius, one of the slaveholding senators, demanding the execution of the law :

"When a man of consular rank," said Cassius, "has been murdered by his slaves, a crime which none prevented, none disclosed, what security can any man feel! Are we to hunt up arguments against a decision of law, long since weighed and determined by our wiser ancestors? Do you believe that a slave could murder his master without one menace, one incautious word betraying his design? Grant that he concealed his purpose, that secretly he obtained his weapon, could he pass the guard at the chamber door, and perpetrate the murder unknown to all? Our ancestors regarded with suspicion even those slaves who were born in their own houses, and who, from infancy, had partaken of their kindness. But we have slaves from various nations, with rites and customs differing from our own; and it is impossible to curb such a rabble without the terms of law. Under this act, some who are innocent must doubtless perish with the guilty. But of a routed army, when every tenth man is struck down with a club, the brave must fall as well as the cowards. Every great judicial warning involves somewhat of injustice to individuals, which is compensated by the general benefit."

This reasoning carried the majority of the Roman senate, and it was decreed that the law must be executed; and though there were a few remonstrating voices, all these guiltless people

were adjudged to death. But the popular heart was aroused. Tumultuous throngs were assembled to rescue the condemned. Nero, espousing with all his energy the cause of what was then called the "law and order" party, lined the streets of Rome with his armed legions, and with a guard of troops conducted the whole band to their execution. There is comfort in the thought that there is another tribunal where the oppressed will have a more impartial hearing.

One wearies of the task of describing the individual assassinations which Nero perpetrated. Favorite after favorite, passing into disgrace, drank the poisoned cup, or was pierced by the dagger. His wife, Octavia, whose life was but a lingering martyrdom, he repudiated, and then he married his concubine, Poppæa. The maids of Octavia were put to the rack to compel them to accuse their mistress of crime as an excuse for the repudiation. But even all the intolerable agony of quivering nerves and crushed bones, could extort no evidence against Octavia. But Nero was resolved to put her to death. He called Anicetus, the assassin who had murdered Agrippina, and making him a magnificent present, requested him to swear that he had held adulterous intercourse with Octavia. The tool was pliant.

The tyrant then in an edict announcing her guilt banished her to the island Pandataria. Here this unhappy princess, the daughter of the emperor Claudius, and both half sister and wife of Nero, and sister of the assassinated Britannicus, but twenty years of age, was bound hand and foot, and her veins opened under every important joint in her body. As, through excess of terror it is stated, the blood coagulated and would not flow freely, she was placed in a vapor bath, very highly heated. She soon fainted and died, and her head was cut off and carried to Poppæa to satisfy her that she had nothing more to fear from her rival. Amazing as it may seem, the degraded Roman senate decreed thanksgiving to the gods on account of the execution of Octavia.

Tacitus describes one of the festivals of Nero, in Rome, which he says he gives merely as a specimen of all. Revolting as the description is, we give it to show what were the morals of ancient Rome. This banquet in honor of the emperor was given by Tigellinus:

"He built," said Tacitus, "in the lake of Agrippa, a raft, which supported the banquet, it being moved to and fro, by other vessels drawing it after them. The vessels were striped with gold and ivory and were rowed by bands of *pathics*—beautiful boys devoted to the most infamous purposes—who were ranged according to their age and accomplishments in the science of debauchery. Upon the margin of the lake were brothels, filled with ladies of distinction. Over against them nude harlots were exposed to view. Now were beheld obscene gestures, and, as soon as darkness came on, all the neighboring groves and circumjacent dwellings resounded with music and glared with lights. Nero, wallowed in all sorts of defilements, lawful and unlawful; and seemed to leave no atrocity which could add to his pollution, till a few days afterward he married, as a woman, one of his contaminated herd of boys, named Pythagoras, with all the solemnities of wedlock. The Roman emperor put on the nuptial veil. The augurs, the portion, the bridal bed, the nuptial torches were all seen."

One day some one repeated in conversation, in the presence of Nero, the line, "When I am dead let fire devour the world." Nero replied, "It shall be said, 'When I am living, let fire devour the world.'" Rome then contained four million of inhabitants, dwelling in very close, narrow, winding streets. Nero ordered his secret emissaries to fire the city while he, from a neighboring tower, watched the progress of the flames. The buildings were mostly of wood, and the conflagration was such as this world had never witnessed before and has not seen since. It is said that Nero, during the conflagration, in his private theater, played and sang the

‘Destruction of Troy.’ The motives which led to this diabolical deed were probably complex, including love of novelty and excitement; a desire to behold the sublimity of the scene in which the dwellings of four millions of people were wrapt in flames—the dismay of the sufferers—their frantic endeavors to save life and property—and the picturesque exhibition of the millions of the homeless and the perishing, the aged, the sick, parents, children, matrons, maidens, wandering, wailing, dying in the fields. The picture possessed rare attractions in Nero’s eyes. The wail of concentrated millions was music which but few mortals had been privileged to hear. It is also said that Nero wished to glorify himself by rebuilding the city on a scale of far greater magnificence than before. It is estimated that the population of the whole Roman empire, at this time, was one hundred and fifty millions. By robbing these mercilessly, funds could easily be obtained, to rear a new Rome, which should be the pride of the world.

For nine days and nights the fire raged with quenchless fury. Multitudes, which have never been counted, caught in the narrow streets, perished miserably in the flames. Temples, libraries, palaces, priceless works of art, all were consumed. Of the fourteen sections of which Rome was composed, ten were left but a pile of smoldering ruins. The most extortionate taxes were levied immediately upon the provinces, and with the immense sum thus obtained Nero, commenced rebuilding the city. But the cry of millions plunged into poverty and misery could not be stifled. The tyrant, alarmed in view of the execrations which rose loud and deep around his palace, and which the bristling spears of his petted guards could not exclude, endeavored to shield himself from obloquy by accusing the innocent Christians of the crime, and punishing them with the most terrible severity.

“Not all the relief,” writes Tacitus, “that could come from man; not all the bounties that the prince could bestow,

nor all the atonements which could be presented to the gods, availed to relieve Nero from the infamy of being believed to have ordered the conflagration. Hence, to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons called Christians.”

Soon after the death of Christ, persecution in Judea scattered the Jews all over the Roman empire. Christianity was probably thus carried to Rome. Paul was soon taken to the imperial city, a prisoner, in chains, and there, for two years, he preached the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, even in the palace of the Cæsars. A large and flourishing church was ere long established there, and on no page of holy writ does the light of inspiration beam more brightly, than in Paul’s epistle to the Romish church. The purity of the religion of Jesus Christ, denouncing in language the most impressive which inspiration could frame, adultery, slavery, extortion—declaring God to be the common Father of the whole human family, and that every man should see in his fellow-man a brother, whom he should regard with brotherly love; proclaiming that God looked with indignation upon idolatry, that He would avenge all wrong, and that a day was coming when all the world should stand at God’s tribunal—emperor and slave on the same footing—and that every man should receive according to his deeds—such a religion, such doctrines, roused Nero, and his courtiers, and all the nameless pollution of pagan Rome to a frenzy of rage.

To crush this rising faith the most atrocious libels were fabricated. Infants were taken to the church to be baptized. Pagan slanderers affirmed that they were offered in bloody sacrifice. Wine was drank at the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, and bread eaten in commemoration of our Saviour’s broken body and shed blood. The pagans declared that the Christians, in midnight feasts, having murdered a man, ate his flesh, like cannibals, and drank his blood. Thus, a terrible prejudice was created against the Christians. Many believed these stories, who would, perhaps, have joined the Christians

had they known the truth. Tacitus, the renowned pagan historian, who seems to have been a man of much candor, and of much appreciation of right and wrong, was manifestly under the influence of these gross libels, for in the following terms he describes this first persecution of the Christians at Rome by Nero:

“Christ, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius. But the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly, first those were seized who confessed that they were Christians. Next, on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of hating the human race. And in their deaths they were also made the subjects of sport, for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when day declined, burned to serve for nocturnal lights. Nero offered his own gardens for that spectacle, and exhibited a circensian game, indiscriminately mingling with the common people in the habit of a charioteer, or else standing in his chariot. Whence a feeling of compassion rose toward the sufferers, though guilty and deserving to be made examples of by capital punishment, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but victims to the ferocity of one man.”

It would seem that the whole Roman empire was plundered by Nero to obtain money to rebuild Rome. The temples were pillaged; and the tax-gatherer, with his armed bands, penetrated the remotest provinces, not a nook even of Greece and remote Asia escaping his extortionate visits. But at length human nature could endure the monster no longer

Servius Galba, governor of Spain, a man of meditative, pensive mind, and of courage which no peril could daunt, resolved at whatever hazard to rid the world of Nero. Disdaining the insidious movements of the assassin, and believing that public indignation was ripe for revolt, he summoned his willing legions, declared war against Nero, and commenced a march upon Rome.

The spark had fired the train. With electric speed the insurrection spread, outstripping the forced marches of the battalions of Galba; and the tidings reached Rome, rousing the whole city to enthusiasm, even before the tramp of the avenging army was heard upon the southern slopes of the Alps. Nero was seated at the supper table, with one of his boy concubines, dressed in women's robes, at his side, when at the same moment the intelligence of the march of Galba, and the insurrection in the streets, reached his ear. The brutal, cowardly monster was so struck with dismay, that he sprang from his seat so suddenly as to overturn the table, breaking two vases of immense value. He rent his clothes and beat his forehead, crying like a madman, “I am ruined. I am ruined.”

He called for poison, but he had not even courage to do that weakest of all deeds—drink of the cup. He valiantly called for a dagger, looked at its sharp, glittering point, and, afraid of the prick, laid it aside. He rushed from the palace, heroically resolved to throw himself into the Tiber, but as soon as he saw the dark rolling tide, his resolution vanished, and he stopped. One of his companions urged that they should flee to his country-seat, about four miles from Rome, and conceal themselves. Nero, insane with terror, bare-headed, with his long locks floating in the wind, his clothes disordered, and covering his face with his handkerchief, leaped upon a horse, and with four attendants, through innumerable perils, hearing every where around him the execrations of the multitude, by whom he was not recog-