

1 1 In the consular year of Gaius Vipstanius and Gaius Fonteius, Nero postponed no further the long-contemplated crime: for a protracted term of empire had consolidated his boldness, and day by day he burned more hotly with love for Poppaea; who, hopeless of wedlock for herself and divorce for Octavia so long as Agrippina lived, plied the sovereign with frequent reproaches and occasional raillery, styling him "the ward, dependent on alien orders, who was neither the empire's master nor his own. For why was her wedding deferred? Her face, presumably, and her grandsires with their triumphs,¹ did not give satisfaction — or was the trouble her fecundity² and truth of heart? No, it was feared that, as a wife at all events, she might disclose the wrongs of the Fathers, the anger of the nation against the pride and greed of his mother! But, if Agrippina could tolerate no daughter-in-law but one inimical to her son, then let her be restored to her married life with Otho: she would go to any corner of earth³ where she could hear the emperor's ignominy rather than view it and be entangled in his perils." To these and similar attacks, pressed home by tears and adulterous art, no opposition was offered: all men yearned for the breaking of the mother's power; none credited that the hatred of the son would go the full way to murder.

2 1 It is stated by Cluvius⁴ that Agrippina's ardour to keep her influence was carried so far that at midday, an hour at which Nero was beginning to experience the warmth of wine and good cheer, she presented herself on several occasions to her half-tipsy son, coquettishly dressed and prepared for incest. Already lascivious kisses, and endearments that were the harbingers of guilt, had been observed by their intimates, when Seneca sought in a woman the antidote to female blandishments, and brought in the freedwoman Acte, who, alarmed as she was both at her own danger and at Nero's infamy, was to report that the incest was common knowledge, since his mother boasted of it, and that the troops would not submit to the supremacy of a sacrilegious emperor. According to Fabius Rusticus, not Agrippina, but Nero, desired the union, the scheme being wrecked by the astuteness of the same freedwoman. The other authorities, however, give the same version as Cluvius, and to their side tradition leans; whether the enormity was actually conceived in the brain of Agrippina, or whether the contemplation of such a refinement in lust was merely taken as comparatively credible in a woman who, for the prospect of power, had in her girlish years yielded to the embraces of Marcus Lepidus;⁵ who, for a similar ambition had prostituted herself to the desires of Pallas; and who had been inured to every turpitude by her marriage with her uncle.

3 1 Nero, therefore, began to avoid private meetings with her; when she left for her gardens or the estates at Tusculum and Antium, he commended her intention of resting; finally, convinced that, wherever she might be kept, she was still an incubus,^o p111 he decided to kill her, debating only whether by poison, the dagger, or some other form of violence. The first choice fell on poison. But, if it was to be given at the imperial table, then the death could not be referred to chance, since Britannicus had already met a similar fate. At the same time, it seemed an arduous task to tamper with the domestics of a woman whose experience of crime had made her vigilant for foul play; and, besides, she had herself fortified her system by taking antidotes in advance. Cold steel and bloodshed no one could devise a method of concealing: moreover, there was the

risk that the agent chosen for such an atrocity might spurn his orders. Mother wit came to the rescue in the person of Anicetus the freedman, preceptor of Nero's boyish years, and detested by Agrippina with a vigour which was reciprocated. Accordingly, he pointed out that it was possible to construct a ship, part of which could be artificially detached, well out at sea, and throw the unsuspecting passenger overboard:— "Nowhere had accident such scope as on salt water; and, if the lady should be cut off by shipwreck, who so captious as to read murder into the delinquency of wind and wave? The sovereign, naturally, would assign the deceased a temple and the other displays of filial piety."

4 1 This ingenuity commended itself: the date, too, was in its favour, as Nero was in the habit of celebrating the festival of Minerva⁶ at Baiae.⁷ Thither he proceeded to lure his mother, observing from time to time that outbreaks of parental anger had to be tolerated, and that he must show a forgiving spirit; his aim being to create a rumour of reconciliation, which Agrippina, with the easy faith of her sex in p113 the agreeable, would probably accept. — In due course, she came. He went down to the beach to meet her (she was arriving from Antium), took her hand, embraced her, and escorted her to Bauli,⁸ the name of a villa washed by the waters of a cove between the promontory of Misenum and the lake of Baiae.⁹ Here, among others, stood a more handsomely appointed vessel; apparently one attention the more to his mother, as she had been accustomed to use a trireme with a crew of marines. Also, she had been invited to dinner for the occasion, so that night should be available for the concealment of the crime. It is well established that someone had played the informer, and that Agrippina, warned of the plot, hesitated whether to believe or not, but made the journey to Baiae in a litter. There her fears were relieved by the blandishments of a cordial welcome and a seat above the prince himself. At last, conversing freely, — one moment boyishly familiar, the next grave-browed as though making some serious communication, — Nero, after the banquet had been long protracted, escorted her on her way, clinging more closely than usual to her breast and kissing her eyes;¹⁰ possibly as a final touch of hypocrisy, or possibly the last look upon his doomed mother gave pause even to that brutal spirit.

5 1 A starlit night and the calm of an unruffled sea appeared to have been sent by Heaven to afford proof of guilt. The ship had made no great way,¹¹ and two of Agrippina's household were in attendance, Crepereius Gallus standing not far from the tiller, while Acerronia, bending over the feet of the recumbent princess, recalled exultantly the penitence of the son and the re-entry of the mother into favour. p115 Suddenly the signal was given: the canopy above them, which had been heavily weighted with lead, dropped, and Crepereius was crushed and killed on the spot. Agrippina and Acerronia were saved by the height of the couch-sides, which, as it happened, were too solid to give way under the impact. Nor did the break-up of the vessel follow: for confusion was universal, and even the men accessory to the plot were impeded by the large numbers of the ignorant. The crew then decided to throw their weight on one side and so capsize the ship; but, even on their own part, agreement came too slowly for a sudden emergency, and a counter-effort by others allowed the victims a gentler fall into the waves. Acerronia, however, incautious enough to raise the cry that she was Agrippina, and to demand aid for the emperor's mother, was despatched with poles, oars, and every nautical weapon that came to hand. Agrippina, silent and so not generally recognised, though she received one wound in the shoulder, swam until she was met by a few fishing-smacks, and so reached the Lucrine lake,¹² whence she was carried into her own villa.¹³

6 1 There she reflected on the evident purpose of the treacherous letter of invitation and the exceptional honour with which she had been treated, and on the fact that, hard by the shore, a vessel, driven by no gale and striking no reef, had collapsed at the top p117 like an artificial structure on land. She reviewed as well the killing of Acerronia, glanced simultaneously at her own wound, and realized that the one defence against treachery was to leave it undetected. Accordingly she sent the freedman Agermus to carry word to her son that, thanks to divine kindness and to his fortunate star, she had survived a grave accident; but that, however great his alarm at his mother's danger, she begged him to defer the attention of a visit: for the moment, what she needed was rest. Meanwhile, with affected unconcern, she applied remedies to her wound and fomentations to her body: Acerronia's will, she gave instructions was to be sought, and her effects sealed up, — the sole measure not referable to dissimulation.

7 1 Meanwhile, as Nero was waiting for the messengers who should announce the doing of the deed, there came the news that she had escaped with a wound from a light blow, after running just sufficient risk to leave no doubt as to its author. Half-dead with terror, he protested that any moment she would be here, hot for vengeance. And whether she armed her slaves or inflamed the troops, or made her way to the senate and the people, and charged him with the wreck, her wound, and the slaying of her friends, what counter-resource was at his own disposal? Unless there was hope in Seneca and Burrus! He had summoned them immediately: whether to test their feeling, or as cognizant already of the secret, is questionable. — There followed, then, a long silence on the part of both: either they were reluctant to dissuade in vain, or they believed matters to have reached a point at which Agrippina must be forestalled or Nero perish. After a time, p119 Seneca so far took the lead as to glance at Burrus and inquire if the fatal order should be given to the military. His answer was that the guards, pledged as they were to the Caesarian house as a whole, and attached to the memory of Germanicus, would flinch from drastic measures against his issue: Anicetus must redeem his promise. He, without any hesitation, asked to be given full charge of the crime. The words brought from Nero a declaration that that day presented him with an empire, and that he had a freedman to thank for so great a boon: Anicetus must go with speed and take an escort of men distinguished for implicit obedience to orders. He himself, on hearing that Agermus had come with a message from Agrippina, anticipated it by setting the stage for a charge of treason, threw a sword at his feet while he was doing his errand, then ordered his arrest as an assassin caught in the act; his intention being to concoct a tale that his mother had practised against the imperial life and taken refuge in suicide from the shame of detection.

8 1 In the interval, Agrippina's jeopardy, which was attributed to accident, had become generally known; and there was a rush to the beach, as man after man learned the news. Some swarmed up the sea-wall,¹⁴ some into the nearest fishing-boats: others were wading middle-deep into the surf, a few standing with outstretched arms. The whole shore rang with lamentations and vows and the din of conflicting questions and vague replies. A huge multitude streamed up with lights, and, when the knowledge of her safety spread, set out to offer congratulations; until, at the sight of an armed and threatening column, they were forced to scatter. p121 Anicetus drew a cordon around the villa, and, breaking down the entrance, dragged off the slaves as they appeared, until he reached the bedroom-door. A few servants were standing by: the rest had fled in terror at the inrush of men. In the chamber was a dim light and a single waiting-maid; and Agrippina's anxiety deepened every instant. Why no one from her son — nor even Agermus? Had matters

prospered, they would have worn another aspect. Now, nothing but solitude, hoarse alarms, and the symptoms of irremediable ill! Then the maid rose to go. "Dost thou too forsake me?" she began, and saw Anicetus behind her, accompanied by Herculeius, the trierarch, and Obaritus, a centurion of marines. "If he had come to visit the sick, he might take back word that she felt refreshed. If to do murder, she would believe nothing of her son: matricide was no article of their instructions." The executioners surrounded the couch, and the trierarch began by striking her on the head with a club. The centurion was drawing his sword to make an end, when she proffered her womb to the blow. "Strike here," she exclaimed, and was despatched with repeated wounds.

9 1 So far the accounts concur. Whether Nero inspected the corpse of his mother and expressed approval of her figure is a statement which some affirm and some deny.¹⁵ She was cremated the same night, on a dinner-couch, and with the humblest rites; nor, so long as Nero reigned, was the earth piled over the grave or enclosed. Later, by the care of her servants, she received a modest tomb, hard by the road to Misenum and that villa of the dictator Caesar which looks from its dizzy height to the p123 bay outspread beneath. As the pyre was kindled, one of her freedmen, by the name of Mnester, ran a sword through his body, whether from love of his mistress or from fear of his own destruction remains unknown. This was that ending to which, years before, Agrippina had given her credence, and her contempt. For to her inquiries as to the destiny of Nero the astrologers answered that he should reign, and slay his mother;¹⁶ and "Let him slay," she had said, "so that he reign."

10 1 But only with the completion of the crime was its magnitude realized by the Caesar. For the rest of the night, sometimes dumb and motionless, but not rarely starting in terror to his feet with a sort of delirium, he waited for the daylight which he believed would bring his end. Indeed, his first encouragement to hope came from the adulation of the centurions and tribunes, as, at the suggestion of Burrus, they grasped his hand and wished him joy of escaping his unexpected danger and the criminal enterprise of his mother. His friends in turn visited the temples; and, once the example had been given, the Campanian towns in the neighbourhood attested their joy by victims and deputations. By a contrast in hypocrisy, he himself was mournful, repining apparently at his own preservation and full of tears for the death of a parent. But because the features of a landscape change less obligingly than the looks of men, and because there was always obtruded upon his gaze the grim prospect of that sea and those shores, — and there were some who believed that he could hear a trumpet,¹⁷ calling in the hills that rose around, and lamentations at his mother's grave, — he withdrew to Naples and forwarded to the senate p125 a letter, the sum of which was that an assassin with his weapon upon him had been discovered in Agermus, one of the confidential freedmen^o of Agrippina, and that his mistress, conscious of her guilt, had paid the penalty of meditated murder.

11 1 He appended a list of charges drawn from the remoter past:— "She had hoped for a partnership in the empire; for the praetorian cohorts to swear allegiance to a woman; for the senate and people to submit to a like ignominy. Then, her ambition foiled, she had turned against the soldiers, the Fathers and the commons; had opposed the donative and the largess, and had worked for the ruin of eminent citizens. At what cost of labour had he succeeded in preventing her from forcing the door of the senate and delivering her answers to foreign nations!" He made an indirect attack on the Claudian period also, transferring every scandal of the reign to the account of his mother, whose removal he ascribed to the fortunate star of the nation. For even the

wreck was narrated: though where was the folly which could believe it accidental, or that a shipwrecked woman had despatched a solitary man with a weapon to cut his way through the guards and navies of the emperor? The object, therefore, of popular censure was no longer Nero — whose barbarity transcended all protest — but Seneca, who in composing such a plea had penned a confession.

Tacitus *Annals* 15.37-44 (the great fire)

37 1 He himself, to create the impression that no place gave him equal pleasure with Rome, began to serve banquets in the public places and to treat the entire city as his palace. In point of extravagance and notoriety, the most celebrated of the feasts was that arranged by Tigellinus; which I shall describe as a type, instead of narrating time and again the monotonous tale of prodigality. He constructed, then, a raft on the Pool of Agrippa,⁸ and superimposed a banquet, to be set in motion by other craft acting as tugs. The vessels were gay with gold and ivory, and the oarsmen were catamites marshalled according to their ages and their libidinous attainments. He had collected birds and wild beasts from the ends of the earth, and marine animals from the ocean itself. On the quays of the lake stood brothels, filled with women of high rank; and, opposite, naked harlots met the view. First came obscene gestures and dances; then, as darkness advanced, the whole of the neighbouring grove, together with the dwelling-houses around, began to echo with song and to glitter with lights. Nero himself, defiled by every natural and unnatural lust had left no abomination in reserve with which to crown his vicious existence; except that, a few days later, he became, with the full rites of legitimate marriage, the wife of one of that herd of degenerates,⁹ who bore the name of Pythagoras. The veil was drawn over the imperial head, witnesses were despatched to the scene; the dowry, the couch of wedded love, the nuptial torches, were there: everything, in fine, which night enshrouds even if a woman is the bride, was left open to the view.

38 1 There followed a disaster, whether due to chance or to the malice of the sovereign is uncertain — for each version has its sponsors¹⁰ — but graver and more terrible than any other which has p273 befallen this city by the ravages of fire. It took its rise in the part of the Circus touching the Palatine and Caelian Hills; where, among the shops packed with inflammable goods, the conflagration broke out, gathered strength in the same moment, and, impelled by the wind, swept the full length of the Circus: for there were neither mansions screened by boundary walls, nor temples surrounded by stone enclosures, nor obstructions of any description, to bar its progress. The flames, which in full career overran the level districts first, then shot up to the heights, and sank again to harry the lower parts, kept ahead of all remedial measures, the mischief travelling fast, and the town being an easy prey owing to the narrow, twisting lanes and formless streets typical of old Rome.¹¹ In addition, shrieking and terrified women; fugitives stricken or immature in years; men consulting their own safety or the safety of others, as they dragged the infirm along or paused to wait for them, combined by their dilatoriness or their haste to impede everything. Often, while they glanced back to the rear, they were attacked on the flanks or in front; or, if they had made their escape into a neighbouring quarter, that also was involved in the flames, and even districts which they had believed remote from danger were

found to be in the same plight. At last, irresolute what to avoid or what to seek, they crowded into the roads or threw themselves down in the fields: some who had lost the whole of their means — their daily bread included — chose to die, though the way of escape was open, and were followed by others, through love for the relatives whom they had proved unable to rescue. None ventured to combat the fire, as there were p275 reiterated threats from a large number of persons who forbade extinction, and others were openly throwing firebrands¹² and shouting that "they had their authority" — possibly in order to have a freer hand in looting, possibly from orders received.

39 1 Nero, who at the time was staying in Antium, did not return to the capital until the fire was nearing the house by which he had connected the Palatine with the Gardens of Maecenas.¹³ It proved impossible, however, to stop it from engulfing both the Palatine and the house and all their surroundings. Still, as a relief to the homeless and fugitive populace, he opened the Campus Martius, the buildings¹⁴ of Agrippa, even his own Gardens, and threw up a number of extemporized shelters to accommodate the helpless multitude. The necessities of life were brought up from Ostia and the neighbouring municipalities, and the price of grain was lowered to three sesterces. Yet his measures, popular as their character might be, failed of their effect; for the report had spread that, at the very moment when Rome was aflame, he had mounted his private stage,¹⁵ and typifying the ills of the present by the calamities of the past, had sung the destruction of Troy.

40 1 Only on the sixth day, was the conflagration brought to an end at the foot of the Esquiline, by demolishing the buildings over a vast area and p277 opposing to the unabated fury of the flames a clear tract of ground and an open horizon. But fear had not yet been laid aside, nor had hope yet returned to the people, when the fire resumed its ravages; in the less congested parts of the city, however; so that, while the toll of human life was not so great, the destruction of temples and of porticoes dedicated to pleasure was on a wider scale. The second fire produced the greater scandal of the two, as it had broken out on Aemilian property¹⁶ of Tigellinus and appearances suggested that Nero was seeking the glory of founding a new capital and endowing it with his own name.¹⁷ Rome, in fact, is divided into fourteen regions, of which four remained intact, while three were laid level with the ground: in the other seven nothing survived but a few dilapidated and half-burned relics of houses.¹⁸

41 1 It would not be easy to attempt an estimate of the private dwellings, tenement-blocks, and temples, which were lost; but the flames consumed, in their old-world sanctity, the temple dedicated to Luna by Servius Tullius, the great altar and chapel of the Arcadian Evander to the Present Hercules, the shrine of Jupiter Stator vowed by Romulus, the Palace of Numa, and the holy place of Vesta with the Penates of the Roman people.¹⁹ To these must be added the precious trophies won upon so many fields, the glories of Greek art, and yet again the primitive and uncorrupted memorials of literary genius;²⁰ so that, despite the striking beauty of the p279 rearsen city, the older generation recollects much that it proved impossible to replace. There were those who noted that the first outbreak of the fire took place on the nineteenth of July, the anniversary of the capture and burning of Rome by the Senones: others have pushed their researches so far as to resolve the interval between the two fires into equal numbers of years, of months, and of days.

42 1 However, Nero turned to account the ruins of his fatherland by building a palace,²² the marvels of which were to consist not so much in gems and gold, materials long familiar and vulgarized by luxury, as in fields and lakes and the air of solitude given by wooded ground alternating with clear tracts and open landscapes. The architects and engineers were Severus and Celer, who had the ingenuity and the courage to try the force of art even against the veto of nature and to fritter away the resources of a Caesar. They had undertaken to sink a navigable canal²³ running from Lake Avernus to the mouths of the Tiber along a desolate shore or through intervening hills; for the one district along the route moist enough to yield a supply of water is the Pomptine Marsh;²⁴ the rest being cliff and sand, which could be cut through, if at all, only by intolerable exertions for which no p281 sufficient motive existed.²⁵ None the less, Nero, with his passion for the incredible, made an effort to tunnel the height nearest the Avernus, and some evidences of that futile ambition survive.

43 1 In the capital, however, the districts spared by the palace were rebuilt, not, as after the Gallic fire, indiscriminately and piecemeal, but in measured lines of streets, with broad thoroughfares, buildings of restricted height, and open spaces, while colonnades were added as a protection to the front of the tenement-blocks. These colonnades Nero offered to erect at his own expense, and also to hand over the building-sites, clear of rubbish, to the owners. He made a further offer of rewards, proportioned to the rank and resources of the various claimants, and fixed a term within which houses or blocks of tenement must be completed, if the bounty was to be secured. As the receptacle of the refuse he settled upon the Ostian Marshes, and gave orders that vessels which had carried grain up the Tiber must run down-stream laden with débris. The buildings themselves, to an extent definitely specified, were to be solid, untimbered structures of Gabine or Alban stone,²⁶ that particular stone being proof against fire. Again, there was to be a guard to ensure that the water-supply — intercepted by private lawlessness^a — should be available for public purposes in greater quantities and at more points; appliances for checking fire were to be kept by everyone in the open; there were to be no joint partitions between buildings, but each was to be surrounded by its own walls. These reforms, welcomed for their utility, were also beneficial to the appearance of the new capital. Still, there were p283 those who held that the old form had been the more salubrious, as the narrow streets and high-built houses were not so easily penetrated by the rays of the sun; while now the broad expanses, with no protecting shadows, glowed under a more oppressive heat.

44 1 So far, the precautions taken were suggested by human prudence: now means were sought for appeasing deity, and application was made to the Sibylline books; at the injunction of which public prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpine, while Juno was propitiated by the matrons, first in the Capitol, then at the nearest point of the sea-shore, where water was drawn for sprinkling the temple and image of the goddess. Ritual banquets and all-night vigils were celebrated by women in the married state. But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices,²⁷ whom the crowd styled Christians.²⁸ Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus,²⁹ and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and

find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers³⁰ were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race.³¹ And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

45 1 Meanwhile, Italy had been laid waste for contributions of money; the provinces, the federate communities, and the so-called free states, were ruined. The gods themselves formed part of the plunder, as the ravaged temples of the capital were drained of the gold dedicated in the triumphs or the vows, the prosperity or the fears, of the Roman nation at every epoch. But in Asia and Achaia, not offerings alone but the images of deity were being swept away, since Acratus and Carrinas Secundus had been despatched into the two provinces. The former was a freedman prepared for any enormity; the latter, as far as words went, was a master of Greek philosophy, but his character remained untinged by the virtues. Seneca, it was rumoured, to divert the odium of sacrilege from p287 himself, had asked leave to retire to a distant estate in the country, and, when it was not accorded, had feigned illness — a neuralgic affection, he said — and declined to leave his bedroom. Some have put it on record that, by the orders of Nero, poison had been prepared for him by one of his freedmen, Cleonicus by name; and that, owing either to the man's revelations or to his own alarms, it was avoided by Seneca, who supported life upon an extremely simple diet of field fruits and, if thirst was insistent, spring water.