JACOB ABBOTT

NERO

Jacob Abbott

Nero

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Содержание

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Environs of Rome.

PREFACE

In writing the series of historical narratives to which the present work pertains, it has been the object of the author to furnish to the reading community of this country an accurate and faithful account of the lives and actions of the several personages that are made successively the subjects of the volumes, following precisely the story which has come down to us from ancient times. The writer has spared no pains to gain access in all cases to the original sources of information, and has confined himself strictly to them. The reader may, therefore, feel assured in perusing any one of these works, that the interest of it is in no degree indebted to the invention of the author. No incident, however trivial, is ever added to the original account, nor are any words even, in any case, attributed to a speaker without express authority. Whatever of interest, therefore, these stories may possess, is due solely to the facts themselves which are recorded in them, and to their being brought together in a plain, simple, and connected narrative.

Chapter I
Nero's Mother
A.D. 37

Roman country seats.

In ancient times, when the city of Rome was at the height of its power and splendor, it was the custom, as it is in fact now with the inhabitants of wealthy capitals, for the principal families to possess, in addition to their city residences, rural villas for summer retreats, which they built in picturesque situations, at a little distance from the city, sometimes in the interior of the country, and sometimes upon the sea-shore. There were many attractive places of resort of this nature in the neighborhood of Rome. Among them was Antium.

Antium.
Situation of the promontory of Antium.

Antium was situated on the sea-coast about thirty miles south of the Tiber. A bold promontory here projects into the sea, affording from its declivities the most extended and magnificent views on every side. On the north, looking from the promontory of Antium, the eye follows the line of the coast away to the mouth of the Tiber; while, on the south, the view is terminated, at about the same distance, by the promontory of Circe, which is the second cape, or promontory, that marks the shore of Italy in going southward from Rome. Toward the interior, from Antium, there extends a broad and beautiful plain, bounded by wooded hills toward the shore, and by ranges of mountains in the distance beyond. On the southern side of the cape, and sheltered by it, was a small harbor where vessels from all the neighboring seas had been accustomed to bring in their cargoes, or to seek shelter in storms, from time immemorial. In fact, Antium, in point of antiquity, takes precedence, probably, even of Rome.

The beauty and the salubrity of Antium made it a very attractive place of summer resort for the people of Rome; and in process of time, when the city attained to an advanced stage of opulence and luxury, the Roman noblemen built villas there, choosing situations, in some instances, upon the natural terraces and esplanades of the promontory, which looked off over the sea, and in others cool and secluded retreats in the valleys, on the land. It was in one of these villas that Nero was born.

Account of Nero's parentage.
Brazenbeard.

Nero's father belonged to a family which had enjoyed for several generations a considerable degree of distinction among the Roman nobility, though known by a somewhat whimsical name. The family name was Brazenbeard, or, to speak more exactly, it was Ahenobarbus, which is the Latin equivalent for that word. It is a question somewhat difficult to decide, whether in speaking of Nero's father at the present time, and in the English tongue, we should make use of the actual Latin name, or translate the word and employ the English representative of it; that is, whether we shall call him Ahenobarbus or Brazenbeard. The former seems to be more in harmony with our ideas of the dignity of Roman history; while the latter, though less elegant, conveys probably to our minds a more exact idea of the import and expression of the name as it sounded in the ears of the Roman community. The name certainly was not an attractive one, though the family had contrived to dignify it some degree by assigning to it a preternatural origin. There was a tradition that in ancient times a prophet appeared to one of the ancestors of the line, and after foretelling certain extraordinary events which were to occur at some future period, stroked down the beard of his auditor with his hand, and changed it to

the color of brass, in miraculous attestation of the divine authority of the message. The man received the name of Brazenbeard in consequence, and he and his descendants ever afterward retained it.

Nero's father.
Agrippina his mother.

The family of the Brazenbeards was one of high rank and distinction, though at the time of Nero's birth it was, like most of the other prominent Roman families, extremely profligate and corrupt. Nero's father, especially, was a very bad man. He was accused of the very worst of crimes, and he led a life of constant remorse and terror. His wife, Agrippina, Nero's mother, was as wicked as he; and it is said that when the messenger came to him to announce the birth of his child, the hero of this narrative, he uttered some exclamation of ill-humor and contempt, and said that whatever came from him and Agrippina could not but be fraught with ruin to Rome.

Agrippina's brother Caligula.
Roman emperors.

The rank and station of Agrippina in Roman society was even higher than that of her husband. She was the sister of the emperor. The name of the emperor, her brother, was Caligula. He was the third in the series of Roman emperors, Augustus Cæsar, the successor of Julius Cæsar, having been the first. The term emperor, however, had a very different meaning in those days, from its present import. It seems to denote now a sovereign ruler, who exercises officially a general jurisdiction which extends over the whole government of the state. In the days of the Romans it included, in theory at least, only *military* command. The word was *imperator*, which meant *commander*; and the station which it denoted was simply that of general-in-chief over the military forces of the republic.

Regulations in respect to the Roman armies.

In the early periods of the Roman history, every possible precaution was taken to keep the military power in a condition of very strict subordination to the authority of the civil magistrate and of law. Very stringent regulations were adopted to secure this end. No portion of the army, except such small detachments as were required for preserving order within the walls, was allowed to approach the city. Great commanders, in returning from their victorious campaigns, were obliged to halt and encamp at some distance from the gates, and there await the orders of the Roman Senate. The *Senate* was, in theory, the great repository of political power. This Senate was not, however, as the word might seem in modern times to denote, a well-defined and compact body of legislators, designated individually to the office, but rather a class of hereditary nobles, very numerous, and deriving their power from immemorial usage, and from that strange and unaccountable feeling of deference and awe with which the mass of mankind always look up to an established, and especially an ancient, aristocracy. The Senate were accustomed to convene at stated times, in assemblages which were, sometimes, conducted with a proper degree of formality and order, and sometimes on the other hand, exhibited scenes of great tumult and confusion. Their power, however, whether regularly or irregularly exercised, was supreme. They issued edicts, they enacted laws, they allotted provinces, they made peace, and they declared war. The armies, and the generals who commanded them, were the *agents* employed to do their bidding.

Description of the Roman armies.
Encampments of the legions.

The Roman armies consisted of vast bodies of men which, when not in actual service, were established in permanent encampments in various parts of the empire, wherever it was deemed necessary that troops should be stationed. These great bodies of troops were the celebrated Roman legions, and they were renowned throughout the world for their discipline, their admirable organization, the celerity of their movements, and for the indomitable courage and energy of the

men. Each legion constituted, in fact, a separate and independent community. Its camp was its city. Its general was its king. In time of war it moved, of course, from place to place, as the exigencies of the service required; but in time of peace it established itself with great formality in a spacious and permanent encampment, which was laid out with great regularity, and fortified with ramparts and fosses. Within the confines of the camp the tents were arranged in rows, with broad spaces for streets between them; and in a central position, before a space which served the purpose of a public square, the rich and ornamented pavilions of the commander and chief, and of the other generals, rose above the rest, like the public edifices of a city. The encampment of a Roman legion was, in fact, an extended and populous city, only that the dwellings consisted of tents instead of being formed of solid and permanent structures of wood or stone.

Their stations.
Useful functions of the Roman armies.
Effects produced.
Mode of producing them.
Ancient narratives.

Roman legions were encamped in this way in various places throughout the empire, wherever the Senate thought proper to station them. There were some in Syria and the East; some in Italy; some on the banks of the Rhine; and it was through the instrumentality of the vast force thus organized, that the Romans held the whole European world under their sway. The troops were satisfied to yield submission to the orders of their commanders, since they received through them in return, an abundant supply of food and clothing, and lived, ordinarily, lives of ease and indulgence. In consideration of this, they were willing to march from place to place wherever they were ordered, and to fight any enemy when brought into the field. The commanders obtained food and clothing for them by means of the tribute which they exacted from conquered provinces, and from the plunder of sacked cities, in times of actual war. These armies were naturally interested in preserving order and maintaining in general the authority of law, throughout the communities which they controlled; for without law and order the industrial pursuits of men could not go on, and of course they were well aware that if in any country production were to cease, tribute must soon cease too. In reading history we find, indeed, it must be confessed, that a fearful proportion of the narrative which describes the achievements of ancient armies, is occupied with detailing deeds of violence, rapine, and crime; but we must not infer from this that the influence of these vast organizations was wholly evil. Such extended and heterogeneous masses of population as those which were spread over Europe and Asia, in the days of the Romans, could be kept subject to the necessary restraints of social order only by some very powerful instrumentality. The legions organized by the Roman Senate, and stationed here and there throughout the extended territory, constituted this instrumentality. But still, during far the greater portion of the time the power which a legion wielded was power in repose. It accomplished its end by its simple presence, and by the sentiment of awe which its presence inspired; and the nations and tribes within the circle of its influence lived in peace, and pursued their industrial occupations without molestation, protected by the consciousness which everywhere pervaded the minds of men, that the Roman power was at hand. The legion hovered, as it were, like a dark cloud in their horizon, silent and in repose; but containing, as they well knew, the latent elements of thunder, which might at any time burst upon their heads. Thus, in its ordinary operation, its influence was good. Occasionally and incidentally periods of commotion would occur, when its action was violent, cruel, and mercilessly evil. Unfortunately, however, for the credit of the system in the opinion of mankind in subsequent ages, there was in the good which it effected nothing to narrate; while every deed of violence and crime which was perpetrated by its agency, furnished materials for an entertaining and exciting story. The good which was accomplished extended perhaps through a long, but monotonous period of quiescence and repose. The evil was brief, but was attended with a rapid succession of events, and

varied by innumerable incidents; so that the historian was accustomed to pass lightly over the one, with a few indifferent words of cold description, while he employed all the force of his genius in amplifying and adorning the narratives which commemorated the other. Thus, violent and oppressive as the military rulers were, by whom in ancient times the world was governed, they were less essentially and continuously violent and oppressive than the general tenor of history makes them seem; and their crimes were, in some degree at least, compensated for and redeemed, by the really useful function which they generally fulfilled, of restraining and repressing all disorder and violence except their own.

The civil authorities.
The progress of the military power.

The Roman legions, in particular, were for many centuries kept in tolerable subjection to the civil authorities of the capitol; but they were growing stronger and stronger all the time, and becoming more and more conscious of their strength. Every new commander who acquired renown by his victories, added greatly to the importance and influence of the army in its political relations. The great Julius Cæsar, in the course of his foreign conquests, and of his protracted and terrible wars with Pompey, and with his other rivals, made enormous strides in this direction. Every time that he returned to Rome at the head of his victorious legions, he overawed the capitol more and more. Octavius Cæsar, the successor of Julius, known generally in history by the name of Augustus, completed what his uncle had begun. He made the military authority, though still nominally and in form subordinate, in reality paramount and supreme. The Senate, indeed, continued to assemble, and to exercise its usual functions. Consuls and other civil magistrates were chosen, and invested with the insignia of supreme command; and the customary forms and usages of civil administration, in which the subordination of the military to the civil power was fully recognized, were all continued. Still, the actual authority of the civil government was wholly overawed and overpowered; and the haughty *imperator* dictated to the Senate, and directed the administration, just as he pleased.

Disposition of men to submit to established power.

It required great genius in the commanders to bring up the army to this position of ascendency and power; but once up, it sustained itself there, without the necessity of ability of any kind, or of any lofty qualities whatever, in those subsequently placed at the head. In fact, the reader of history has often occasion to be perfectly amazed at the lengths to which human endurance will go, when a governmental power of any kind is once established, in tolerating imbecility and folly in the individual representatives of it. It seems to be immaterial whether the dominant power assumes the form of a dynasty of kings, a class of hereditary nobles, or a line of military generals. It requires genius and statesmanship to instate it, but, once instated, no degree of stupidity, folly or crime in those who wield it, seems sufficient to exhaust the spirit of submission with which man always bows to established power – a spirit of submission which is so universal, and so patient and enduring, and which so transcends all the bounds of expediency and of reason, as to seem like a blind instinct implanted in the very soul of man by the Author of his being – a constituent and essential part of his nature as a gregarious animal. In fact, without some such instinct, it would seem impossible that those extended communities could be formed and sustained, without which man, if he could exist at all, could certainly never fully develop his capacities and powers.

Great capacity of the early emperors.
Roman armies.

However this may be in theory, it is certain in fact, that the work of bringing up the military power of ancient Rome to its condition of supremacy over all the civil functions of government, was the work of men of the most exalted capacities and powers. Marius and Sylla, Pompey and Cæsar, Antony and Augustus, evinced, in all their deeds, a high degree of sagacity, energy, and greatness of soul. Mankind, though they may condemn their vices and crimes, will never cease to admire

the grandeur of their ambition, and the magnificence, comprehensiveness, and efficiency of their plans of action. The whole known world was the theater of their contests, and the armies which they organized and disciplined, and which they succeeded at length in bringing under the control of one central and consolidated command, formed the most extended and imposing military power that the world had ever seen. It was not only vast in extent, but permanent and self-sustaining in character. A wide and complicated, but most effectual system was adopted for maintaining it. Its discipline was perfect. Its organization was complete. It was equally trained to remain quietly at home in its city-like encampments, in time of peace, or to march, or bivouac, or fight, in time of war. Such a system could be formed only by men possessed of mental powers of the highest character; but, once formed, it could afterward sustain itself; and not only so, but it was found capable of holding up, by its own inherent power, the most imbecile and incompetent men, as the nominal rulers of it.

Character of Caligula.
His desperate malignity.
Examples of his cruelty.
Feeding wild beasts with men.
Branding.

Caligula, for example, the brother of Agrippina, and the reigning emperor at the time of Nero's birth, was a man wholly unfit to exercise any high command. He was elevated to the post by the influence of the army, simply because he was the most prominent man among those who had hereditary claims to the succession, and was thus the man whom the army could most easily place in the office of chieftain, and retain most securely there. His life, however, in the lofty station to which accident thus raised him, was one of continual folly, vice and crime. He lived generally at Rome, where he expended the immense revenues that were at his command in the most wanton and senseless extravagance. In the earlier part of his career the object of much of his extravagance was the gratification of the people; but after a time he began to seek only gratifications for himself, and at length he evinced the most wanton spirit of malignity and cruelty toward others. He seemed at last actually to hate the whole human species, and to take pleasure in teasing and tormenting men, whenever an occasion of any kind occurred to afford him the opportunity. They were accustomed in those days to have spectacles and shows in vast amphitheaters which were covered, when the sun was hot, with awnings. Sometimes when an amphitheater was crowded with spectators, and the heat of the sun was unusually powerful, Caligula would order the awnings to be removed and the doors to be kept closed so as to prevent the egress of the people; and then he would amuse himself with the indications of discomfort and suffering which so crowded a concourse in such an exposure would necessarily exhibit. He kept wild animals for the combats which took place in these amphitheaters, and when it was difficult to procure the flesh of sheep and oxen for them, he would feed them with men, throwing into their dens for this purpose criminals and captives. Some persons who offended him, he ordered to be branded in the face with hot irons, by which means they were not only subjected to cruel torture at the time, but were frightfully disfigured for life. Sometimes when the sons of noble or distinguished men displeased him, or when under the influence of his caprice or malignity he conceived some feeling of hatred toward them, he would order them to be publicly executed, and he would require their parents to be present and witness the scene. At one time after such an execution he required the wretched father of his victim to come and sup with him at his palace; and while at supper he talked with his guest all the time, in a light, and jocular, and mirthful manner, in order to trifle with and insult the mental anguish of the sufferer. At another time when he had commanded a distinguished senator to be present at the execution of his son, the senator said that he would go, in obedience to the emperor's orders, but humbly asked permission to shut his eyes at the moment of the execution, that he might be spared the dreadful anguish of witnessing the dying struggles of his son. The emperor in reply immediately condemned the father to death for daring to make so audacious a proposal.

Agrippina is implicated in a conspiracy.
She is banished with her sister to Pontia.

Of course the connection of Agrippina, the mother of Nero, with such a sovereign as this, while it gave her a very high social position in the Roman community, could not contribute much to her happiness. In fact all who were connected with Caligula in any way lived in continual terror, for so wanton and capricious was his cruelty, that all who were liable to come under his notice at all were in constant danger. Agrippina herself at one time incurred her brother's displeasure, though she was fortunate enough to escape with her life. Caligula discovered, or pretended to discover, a conspiracy against him, and he accused Agrippina and another of his sisters named Livilla of being implicated in it. Caligula sent a soldier to the leader of the conspiracy to cut off his head, and then he banished his sisters from Rome and shut them up in the island of Pontia, telling them when they went away, to beware, for he had swords for them as well as islands, in case of need.

At length Caligula's terrible tyranny was brought to a sudden end by his assassination; and Agrippina, in consequence of this event was not only released from her thraldom but raised to a still higher eminence than she had enjoyed before. The circumstances connected with these events will be related in the next chapter.

Chapter II
The Assassination of Caligula
A.D. 40-41

The emperor Caligula came to his death in the following manner:

Plots against Caligula.

Of course his wanton and remorseless tyranny often awakened very deep feelings of resentment, and very earnest desires for revenge in the hearts of those who suffered by it; but yet so absolute and terrible was his power, that none dared to murmur or complain. The resentment, however, which the cruelty of the emperor awakened, burned the more fiercely for being thus restrained and suppressed, and many covert threats were made, and many secret plots were formed, from time to time, against the tyrant's life.

Cassius Chærea.
Chærea's bravery.
His legion mutinies.
Chærea escapes the mutineers.

Among others who cherished such designs, there was a man named Cassius Chærea, an officer of the army, who, though not of high rank, was nevertheless a man of considerable distinction. He was a captain, or, as it was styled in those days, a centurion. His command, therefore, was small, but it was in the prætorian cohort, as it was called, a sort of body-guard of the commander-in-chief, and consequently a very honorable corps. Chærea was thus a man of considerable distinction on account of the post which he occupied, and his duties, as captain in the life-guards, brought him very frequently into communication with the emperor. He was a man of great personal bravery, too, and was on this account held in high consideration by the army. He had performed an exploit at one time, some years before, in Germany, which had gained him great fame. It was at the time of the death of Augustus, the first emperor. Some of the German legions, and among them one in which Chærea was serving, had seized upon the occasion to revolt. They alledged many and grievous acts of oppression as the grounds of their revolt, and demanded redress for what they had suffered, and security for the future. One of the first measures which they resorted to in the frenzy of the first outbreak of the rebellion, was to seize all the centurions in the camp, and to beat them almost to death. They gave them sixty blows each, one for each of their number, and then turned them, bruised, wounded, and dying, out of the camp. Some they threw into the Rhine. They revenged themselves thus on all the centurions but one. That one was Chærea. Chærea would not suffer himself to be taken by them, but seizing his sword he fought his way through the midst of them, slaying some and driving others before him, and thus made his escape from the camp. This feat gained him great renown.

His appearance.

One might imagine from this account that Chærea was a man of great personal superiority in respect to size and strength, inasmuch as extraordinary muscular power, as well as undaunted courage, would seem to be required to enable a man to make his way against so many enemies. But this was not the fact. Chærea was of small stature and of a slender and delicate form. He was modest and unassuming in his manners, too, and of a very kind and gentle spirit. He was thus not only honored and admired for his courage, but he was generally beloved for the amiable and excellent qualities of his heart.

His just dealings displease the emperor.

The possession of such qualities, however, could not be expected to recommend him particularly to the favor of the emperor. In fact, in one instance it had the contrary effect. Caligula assigned to the centurions of his guard, at one period, some duties connected with the collection of taxes. Chærea, instead of practicing the extortion and cruelty common on such occasions, was merciful and considerate, and governed himself strictly by the rules of law and of justice in his collections. The consequence necessarily was that the amount of money received was somewhat diminished, and the emperor was displeased. The occasion was, however, not one of sufficient importance to awaken in the monarch's mind any very serious anger, and so, instead of inflicting any heavy punishment upon the offender, he contented himself with attempting to tease and torment him with sundry vexatious indignities and annoyances.

Passwords given by Caligula to Chærea.

It is the custom sometimes, in camps, and at other military stations, for the commander to give every evening, what is called the *parole* or password, which consists usually of some word or phrase that is to be communicated to all the officers, and as occasion may require to all the soldiers, whom for any reason it may be necessary to send to and fro about the precincts of the camp during the night. The sentinels, also, all have the password, and accordingly, whenever any man approaches the post of a sentinel, he is stopped and the parole is demanded. If the stranger gives it correctly, it is presumed that all is right, and he is allowed to pass on, – since an enemy or a spy would have no means of knowing it.

Now, whenever it came to Chærea's turn to communicate the parole, the emperor was accustomed to give him some ridiculous or indecent phrase, intended not only to be offensive to the purity of Chærea's mind, but designed, also, to exhibit him in a ridiculous light to the subordinate officers and soldiers to whom he would have to communicate it. Sometimes the password thus given was some word or phrase wholly unfit to be spoken, and sometimes it was the name of some notorious and infamous woman; but whatever it was, Chærea was compelled by his duty as a soldier to deliver it to all the corps, and patiently to submit to the laughter and derision which his communication awakened among the vile and wicked soldiery.

Accusation of Propedius.
Quintilia's testimony.

If there was any dreadful punishment to be inflicted, or cruel deed of any kind to be performed, Caligula took great pleasure in assigning the duty to Chærea, knowing how abhorrent to his nature it must be. At one time a senator of great distinction named Propedius, was accused of treason by one of his enemies. His treason consisted, as the accuser alledged, of having spoken injurious words against the emperor. Propedius denied that he had ever spoken such words. The accuser, whose name was Timidius, cited a certain Quintilia, an actress, as his witness. Propedius was accordingly brought to trial, and Quintilia was called upon before the judges to give her testimony. She denied that she had ever heard Propedius utter any such sentiment as Timidius attributed to him. Timidius then said that Quintilia was testifying falsely: he declared that she had heard Propedius utter such words, and demanded that she should be put to the torture to compel her to acknowledge it. The emperor acceded to this demand, and commanded Chærea to put the actress to the torture.

Chærea alarmed.
Quintilia's private signal.

It is, of course, always difficult to ascertain the precise truth in respect to such transactions as those that are connected with plots and conspiracies against tyrants, since every possible precaution is, of course, taken by all concerned to conceal what is done. It is probable, however, in this case, that Propedius had cherished some hostile designs against Caligula, if he had not uttered injurious words, and that Quintilia was in some measure in his confidence. It is even possible that Chærea

may have been connected with them in some secret design, for it is said that when he received the orders of Caligula to put Quintilia to the torture he was greatly agitated and alarmed. If he should apply the torture severely, he feared that the unhappy sufferer might be induced to make confessions or statements at least, which would bring destruction on the men whom he most relied upon for the overthrow of Caligula. On the other hand, if he should attempt to spare her, the effect would be only to provoke the anger of Caligula against himself, without at all shielding or saving her. As, however, he was proceeding to the place of torture, in charge of his victim, with his mind in this state of anxiety and indecision, his fears were somewhat relieved by a private signal given to him by Quintilia, by which she intimated to him that he need feel no concern, – that she would be faithful and true, and would reveal nothing, whatever might be done to her.

Quintilia is put to the torture in vain.

This assurance, while it allayed in some degree Chærea's anxieties and fears, must have greatly increased the mental distress which he endured at the idea of leading such a woman to the awful suffering which awaited her. He could not, however, do otherwise than to proceed. Having arrived at the place of execution, the wretched Quintilia was put to the rack. She bore the agony which she endured while her limbs were stretched on the torturing engine, and her bones broken, with patient submission, to the end. She was then carried, fainting, helpless, and almost dead, to Caligula, who seemed now satisfied. He ordered the unhappy victim of the torture to be taken away, and directed that Propedius should be acquitted and discharged.

Anger of Chærea.

Of course while passing through this scene the mind of Chærea was in a tumult of agitation and excitement, – the anguish of mind which he must have felt in his compassion for the sufferer, mingling and contending with the desperate indignation which burned in his bosom against the author of all these miseries. He was wrought up, in fact, to such a state of frenzy by this transaction, that as soon as it was over he determined immediately to take measures to put Caligula to death. This was a very bold and desperate resolution. Caligula was the greatest and most powerful potentate on earth. Chærea was only a captain of his guard, without any political influence or power, and with no means whatever of screening himself from the terrible consequences which might be expected to follow from his attempt, whether it should succeed or fail.

His determination to destroy Caligula.
Conspiracy formed.

So thoroughly, however, was he now aroused, that he determined to brave every danger in the attainment of his end. He immediately began to seek out among the officers of the army such men as he supposed would be most likely to join him, – men of courage, resolution, and faithfulness, and those who, from their general character or from the wrongs which they had individually endured from the government, were to be supposed specially hostile to Caligula's dominion. From among these men he selected a few, and to them he cautiously unfolded his designs. All approved of them. Some, it is true, declined taking any active part in the conspiracy, but they assured Chærea of their good wishes, and promised solemnly not to betray him.

The confederates.
Various opinions.

The number of the conspirators daily increased. There was, however, at their meetings for consultation, some difference of opinion in respect to the course to be pursued. Some were in favor of acting promptly and at once. The greatest danger which was to be apprehended, they thought, was in delay. As the conspiracy became extended, some one would at length come to the knowledge of it, they said, who would betray them. Others, on the other hand, were for proceeding cautiously and

slowly. What they most feared was rash and inconsiderate action. It would be ruinous to the enterprise, as they maintained, for them to attempt to act before their plans were fully matured.

Various plans proposed for destroying Caligula.

Chærea was of the former opinion. He was very impatient to have the deed performed. He was ready himself, he said, to perform it, at any time; his personal duties as an officer of the guard, gave him frequent occasions of access to the emperor, and he was ready to avail himself of any of them to kill the monster. The emperor went often, he said, to the capitol, to offer sacrifices, and he could easily kill him there. Or, if they thought that that was too public an occasion, he could have an opportunity in the palace, at certain religious ceremonies which the emperor was accustomed to perform there, and at which Chærea himself was usually present. Or, he was ready to throw him down from a tower where he was accustomed to go sometimes for the purpose of scattering money among the populace below. Chærea said that he could easily come up behind him on such an occasion, and hurl him suddenly over the parapet down to the pavement below. All these plans, however, seemed to the conspirators too uncertain and dangerous, and Chærea's proposals were accordingly not agreed to.

Final determination.
The three days festival.

At length, the time drew near when Caligula was to leave Rome to proceed to Alexandria in Egypt, and the conspirators perceived that they must prepare to act, or else abandon their design altogether. It had been arranged that there was to be a grand celebration at Rome previous to the emperor's departure. This celebration, which was to consist of games, and sports, and dramatic performances of various kinds, was to continue for three days, and the conspirators determined, after much consultation and debate, that Caligula should be assassinated on one of those days.

After coming to this conclusion, however, in general, their hearts seemed to fail them in fixing the precise time for the perpetration of the deed, and two of the three days passed away accordingly without any attempt being made. At length, on the morning of the third day, Chærea called the chief conspirators together, and urged them very earnestly not to let the present opportunity pass away. He represented to them how greatly they increased the danger of their attempts by such delays, and he seemed himself so full of determination and courage, and addressed them with so much eloquence and power, that he inspired them with his own resolution, and they decided unanimously to proceed.

The emperor came to the theater that day at an unusually early hour, and seemed to be in excellent spirits and in an excellent humor. He was very complaisant to all around him, and very lively, affable, and gay. After performing certain ceremonies, by which it devolved upon him to open the festivities of the day, he proceeded to his place, with his friends and favorites about him, and Chærea, with the other officers that day on guard, at a little distance behind him.

Brief conversation.

The performances were commenced, and every thing went on as usual until toward noon. The conspirators kept their plans profoundly secret, except that one of them, when he had taken his seat by the side of a distinguished senator, asked him whether he had heard any thing new. The senator replied that he had not. "I can then tell you something," said he, "which perhaps you have not heard, and that is, that in the piece which is to be acted to-day, there is to be represented the death of a tyrant." "Hush!" said the senator, and he quoted a verse from Homer, which meant, "Be silent, lest some Greek should overhear."

The recess.
Chærea's duty.

It had been the usual custom of the emperor, at such entertainments, to take a little recess about noon, for rest and refreshments. It devolved upon Chærea to wait upon him at this time, and to

conduct him from his place in the theater to an adjoining apartment in his palace which was connected with the theater, where there was provided a bath and various refreshments. When the time arrived, and Chærea perceived, as he thought, that the emperor was about to go, he himself went out, and stationed himself in a passage-way leading to the bath, intending to intercept and assassinate the emperor when he should come along. The emperor, however, delayed his departure, having fallen into conversation with his courtiers and friends, and finally he said that, on the whole, as it was the last day of the festival, he would not go out to the bath, but would remain in the theater; and then ordering refreshments to be brought to him there, he proceeded to distribute them with great urbanity to the officers around him.

The plan seems likely to fail.

In the mean time, Chærea was patiently waiting in the passage-way, with his sword by his side, all ready for striking the blow the moment that his victim should appear. Of course the conspirators who remained behind were in a state of great suspense and anxiety, and one of them, named Minucianus, determined to go out and inform Chærea of the change in Caligula's plans. He accordingly attempted to rise, but Caligula put his hand upon his robe, saying, "Sit still, my friend. You shall go with me presently." Minucianus accordingly dissembled his anxiety and agitation of mind still a little longer, but presently, watching an opportunity when the emperor's attention was otherwise engaged, he rose, and, assuming an unconcerned and careless air, he walked out of the theater.

Chærea's ambuscade.
Minucianus.

He found Chærea in his ambuscade in the passage-way, and he immediately informed him that the emperor had concluded not to come out. Chærea and Minucianus were then greatly at a loss what to do. Some of the other conspirators, who had followed Minucianus out, now joined them, and a brief but very earnest and solemn consultation ensued. After a moment's hesitation, Chærea declared that they must now go through with their work at all hazards, and he professed himself ready, if his comrades would sustain him in it, to go back to the theater, and stab the tyrant there in his seat, in the midst of his friends. Minucianus and the others concurred in this design, and it was resolved immediately to execute it.

Adroit management of the conspirators.

The execution of the plan, however, in the precise form in which it had been resolved upon was prevented by a new turn which affairs had taken in the theater. For while Minucianus and the two or three conspirators who had accompanied him were debating in the passage-way, the others who remained, knowing that Chærea was expecting Caligula to go out, conceived the idea of attempting to persuade him to go, and thus to lead him into the snare which had been set for him. They accordingly gathered around, and without any appearance of concert or of eagerness, began to recommend him to go and take his bath as usual. He seemed at length disposed to yield to these persuasions, and rose from his seat; and then, the whole company attending and following him, he proceeded toward the doors which conducted to the palace. The conspirators went before him, and under pretense of clearing the way for him they contrived to remove to a little distance all whom they thought would be most disposed to render him any assistance. The consultations of Chærea and those who were with him in the inner passage-way were interrupted by the coming of this company.

The Asiatic boys.

Among those who walked with the emperor at this time were his uncle Claudius and other distinguished relatives. Caligula advanced along the passage, walking in company with these friends, and wholly unconscious of the fate that awaited him, but instead of going immediately toward the

bath he turned aside first into a gallery or corridor which led into another apartment, where there were assembled a company of boys and girls, that had been sent to him from Asia to act and dance upon the stage, and who had just arrived. The emperor took great interest in looking at these performers, and seemed desirous of having them go immediately into the theater and let him see them perform. While talking on this subject Chærea and the other conspirators came into the apartment, determined now to strike the blow.

Chærea strikes Caligula down.

Chærea advanced to the emperor, and asked him in the usual manner what should be the parole for that night. The emperor gave him in reply such an one as he had often chosen before, to insult and degrade him. Chærea instead of receiving the insult meekly and patiently in his usual manner, uttered words of anger and defiance in reply; and drawing his sword at the same instant he struck the emperor across the neck and felled him to the floor. Caligula filled the apartment with his cries of pain and terror; the other conspirators rushed in and attacked him on all sides; his friends, – so far as the adherents of such a man can be called friends, – fled in dismay. As for Caligula's uncle Claudius, it was not to have been expected that he would have rendered his nephew any aid, for he was a man of such extraordinary mental imbecility that he was usually considered as not possessed even of common sense; and all the others who might have been expected to defend him, either fled from the scene, or stood by in consternation and amazement, leaving the conspirators to wreak their vengeance on their wretched victim, to the full.

End of a despot.
General joy in the palace.
Savage exultation of the conspirators.

In fact though while a despot lives and retains his power, thousands are ready to defend him and to execute his will, however much in heart they may hate and detest him, yet when he is dead, or when it is once certain that he is about to die, an instantaneous change takes place and every one turns against him. The multitudes in and around the theater and the palace who had an hour before trembled before this mighty potentate, and seemed to live only to do his bidding, were filled with joy to see him brought to the dust. The conspirators, when the success of their plans and the death of their oppressor was once certain, abandoned themselves to the most extravagant joy. They cut and stabbed the fallen body again and again, as if they could never enough wreak their vengeance upon it. They cut off pieces of the body and bit them with their teeth in their savage exultation and triumph. At length they left the body where it lay, and went forth into the city where all was now of course tumult and confusion.

Cæsonia and her child.
They are murdered.

The body remained where it had fallen until late at night. Then some attendants of the palace came and conveyed it away. They were sent, it was said, by Cæsonia, the wife of the murdered man. Cæsonia had an infant daughter at this time, and she remained herself with the child, in a retired apartment of the palace while these things were transpiring. Distracted with grief and terror at the tidings that she heard, she clung to her babe, and made the arrangements for the interment of the body of her husband without leaving its cradle. She imagined perhaps that there was no reason for supposing that she or the child were in any immediate danger, and accordingly she took no measures toward effecting an escape. If so, she did not understand the terrible frenzy to which the conspirators had been aroused, and for which the long series of cruelties and indignities which they had endured from her husband had prepared them. For at midnight one of them broke into her apartment, stabbed the mother in her chair, and taking the innocent infant from its cradle, killed it by beating its head against the wall.

Supposed necessity for destroying the child.

Atrocious as this deed may seem, it was not altogether wanton and malignant cruelty which prompted it. The conspirators intended by the assassination of Caligula not merely to wreak their vengeance on a single man, but to bring to an end a hated race of tyrants; and they justified the murder of the wife and child by the plea that stern political necessity required them to exterminate the line, in order that no successor might subsequently arise to re-establish the power and renew the tyranny which they had brought to an end. The history of monarchies is continually presenting us with instances of innocent and helpless children sacrificed to such a supposed necessity as this.

Chapter III
The Accession of Claudius
A.D. 41-47

Ultimate design of the conspirators.

In the assassination of Caligula, the conspirators who combined to perpetrate the deed, had a much deeper design than that of merely gratifying their personal resentment and rage against an individual tyrant. They wished to effect a permanent change in the government, by putting down the army from the position of supreme and despotic authority which it had assumed, and restoring the dominion to the Roman Senate, and to the other civil authorities of the city, as it had been exercised by them in former years. Of course, the death of Caligula was the commencement, not the end, of the great struggle. The whole country was immediately divided into two parties. There was the party of the Senate, and the party of the army; and a long and bitter conflict ensued. It was for some time doubtful which would win the day.

Effect produced by the tidings of Caligula's death.

In fact, immediately after Caligula was killed, and the tidings of his death began to spread about the palace and into the streets of the city, a considerable tumult arose, the precursor and earnest of the dissensions that were to follow. Upon the first alarm, a body of the emperor's guards that had been accustomed to attend upon his person, and whom he had strongly attached to himself by his lavish generosity in bestowing presents and rewards upon them, rushed forward to defend him, or if it should prove too late to defend him, to avenge his death. These soldiers ran toward the palace, and when they found that the emperor had been killed, they were furious with rage, and fell upon all whom they met, and actually slew several men. Tidings came to the theater, and the word was spread from rank to rank among the people that the emperor was slain. The people did not, however, at first, believe the story. They supposed that the report was a cunning contrivance of the emperor himself, intended to entrap them into some expression of pleasure and gratification, on their part, at his death, in order to give him an excuse for inflicting some cruel punishment upon them. The noise and tumult in the streets soon convinced them, however, that something extraordinary had occurred; they learned that the news of the emperor's death was really true, and almost immediately afterward they found, to their consternation, that the furious guards were thundering at the gates of the theater, and endeavoring to force their way in, in order to wreak their vengeance on the assembly, as if the spectators at the show were accomplices of the crime.

Chærea and the conspirators secrete themselves.
The senate is convened.
Two parties formed.

In the mean time Chærea and the other chief conspirators had fled to a secret place of retreat, where they now lay concealed. As soon as they had found that the object of their vengeance was really dead, and when they had satisfied themselves with the pleasure of cutting and stabbing the lifeless body, they stole away to the house of one of their friends in the neighborhood, where they could lie for a time secreted in safety. The life-guards sought for them everywhere, but could not find them. The streets were filled with tumult and confusion. Rumors of every kind, false and true, spread in all directions, and increased the excitement. At length, however, the consuls, who were the chief magistrates of the republic, succeeded in organizing a force and in restoring order. They took possession of the forum and of the capitol and posted sentinels and guards along the streets. They compelled the emperor's guards to desist from their violence, and retire. They sent a herald clothed

in mourning into the theater, to announce officially to the people the event which had occurred, and to direct them to repair quietly to their homes. Having taken these preliminary measures they immediately called the Senate together, to deliberate on the emergency which had occurred, and to decide what should next be done. In the mean time the emperor's guards, having withdrawn from the streets of the city, retired to their camp and joined their comrades. Thus there were two vast powers organized – that of the army in the camp, and that of the Senate in the city – each jealous of the other, and resolute in its determination not to yield, in the approaching conflict.

In times of sudden and violent revolution like that which attended the death of Caligula, the course which public affairs are to take, and the question who is to rise and who is to fall, seem often to be decided by utter accident. It was strikingly so in this instance, in respect to the selection, on the part of the army, of the man who was to take the post of supreme command in the place of the murdered emperor. The choice fell on Claudius, Agrippina's uncle. It fell upon him, too, as it would seem, by the merest chance, in the following very extraordinary manner.

Account of Claudius.
His apparent imbecility.
Every one against him.
Mode of teasing him.

Claudius, as has already been said, was Caligula's uncle; and as Caligula and Agrippina were brother and sister, he was, of course, Agrippina's uncle too. He was at this time about fifty years of age, and he was universally ridiculed and contemned on account of his great mental and personal inferiority. He was weak and ill-formed at his birth, so that even his mother despised him. She called him "an unfinished little monster," and whenever she wished to express her contempt for any one in respect to his understanding, she used to say, "You are as stupid as my son Claudius." In a word, Claudius was extremely unfortunate in every respect, so far as natural endowments are concerned. His countenance was very repulsive, his figure was ungainly, his manners were awkward, his voice was disagreeable, and he had an impediment in his speech. In fact, he was considered in his youth as almost an idiot. He was not allowed to associate with the other Roman boys of his age, but was kept apart, in some secluded portion of the palace, with women and slaves, where he was treated with so much cruelty and neglect that what little spirit nature had given him was crushed and destroyed. In fact, by common consent all seemed to take pleasure in teasing and tormenting him. Sometimes, when he was coming to the table at an entertainment, the other guests would combine to exclude him from the seats, in order to enjoy his distress as he ran about from one part of the table to another, endeavoring to find a place. If they found him asleep they would pelt him with olives and dates, or awaken him with the blow of a rod or a whip; and sometimes they would stealthily put his sandals upon his hands while he was asleep, in order that when he awoke suddenly they might amuse themselves with seeing him rub his face and eyes with them.

His situation and position at court.
The wives of Claudius.
His son strangled by a pear.

After all, however, the inferiority of Claudius was not really so great as it seemed. He was awkward and ungainly, no doubt, to the last degree; but he possessed some considerable capacity for intellectual pursuits and attainments, and as he was pretty effectually driven away from society by the jests and ridicule to which he was subjected, he devoted a great deal of time in his retirement to study, and to other useful pursuits. He made considerable progress in the efforts which he thus made to cultivate his mind. He, however, failed to acquire the respect of those around him; and as he grew up he seemed to be considered utterly incapable of performing any useful function; and during the time when his nephew Caligula was emperor, he remained at court, among the other nobles, but still neglected and despised by all of them. It is said that he probably owed the preservation of his life

to his insignificance, as Caligula would probably have found some pretext for destroying him, if he had not thought him too spiritless and imbecile to form any ambitious plans. In fact, Claudius said himself afterward, when he became emperor, that a great part of his apparent simplicity was feigned, as a measure of prudence, to protect himself from injury. When Claudius grew up he was married several times. The wife who was living with him at the time of Caligula's death was his third wife; her name was Valeria Messalina. She was his cousin. Claudius and Messalina had one child – a daughter, named Octavia. Claudius had been extremely unhappy in his connection with the wives preceding Messalina. He had quarreled with them and been divorced from them both. He had had a daughter by one of these wives and a son by the other. The son was suddenly killed by getting choked with a small pear. He had been throwing it into the air and attempting to catch it in his mouth as it came down, when at last it slipped down into his throat and strangled him. As for the daughter, Claudius was so exasperated with her mother at the time of his divorce from her, that he determined to disown and reject the child; so he ordered the terrified girl to be stripped naked, and to be sent and laid down in that condition at her wretched mother's door.

Claudius terrified.
His hiding place.

Claudius, as has already been stated, was present with Caligula at the theater, on the last day of the spectacle, and followed him into the palace when he went to look at the Asiatic captives; so that he was present, or at least very near, at the time of his nephew's assassination. As might have been expected from what has been said of his character, he was overwhelmed with consternation and terror at the scene, and was utterly incapacitated from taking any part, either for or against the conspirators. He stole away in great fright and hid himself behind the hangings in a dark recess in the palace. Here he remained for some time, listening in an agony of anxiety and suspense to the sounds which he heard around him. He could hear the cries and the tumult in the streets, and in the passages of the palace. Parties of the guards, in going to and fro, passed by the place of his retreat from time to time, alarming him with the clangor of their weapons, and their furious exclamations and outcries. At one time peeping stealthily out, he saw a group of soldiers hurrying along with a bleeding head on the point of a pike. It was the head of a prominent citizen of Rome whom the guards had intercepted and killed, supposing him to be one of the conspirators. This spectacle greatly increased Claudius's terror. He was wholly in the dark in respect to the motives and the designs of the men who had thus revolted against his nephew, and it was of course impossible for him to know how he himself would be regarded by either party. He did not dare, therefore, to surrender himself to either, but remained in his concealment, suffering great anxiety, and utterly unable to decide what to do.

He is discovered by a soldier.
Claudius proclaimed emperor.
His surprise.

At length, while he was in this situation of uncertainty and terror, a common soldier of the guards, named Epirius, who happened to pass that way, accidentally saw his feet beneath the hangings, and immediately, pulling the hangings aside, dragged him out to view. Claudius supposed now, of course, that his hour was come. He fell on his knees in an agony of terror, and begged the soldier to spare his life. The soldier, when he found that his prisoner was Claudius, the uncle of Caligula, raised him from the ground and saluted him emperor. As Caligula left no son, Epirius considered Claudius as his nearest relative, and consequently as the heir. Epirius immediately summoned others of the guard to the place, saying that he had found the new emperor, and calling upon them to assist in conveying him to the camp. The soldiers thus summoned procured a chair, and having placed the astonished Claudius in it, they raised the chair upon their shoulders, and began to convey it away. As they bore him thus along the streets, the people who saw them supposed that they were taking him to

execution, and they lamented his unhappy fate. Claudius himself knew not what to believe. He could not but hope that his life was to be saved, but then he could not wholly dispel his fears.

He is borne to the camp and proclaimed emperor.

In the mean time, the soldiers went steadily forward with their burden. When one set of bearers became fatigued, they set down the chair, and others relieved them. No one molested them, or attempted to intercept them in their progress, and at length they reached the camp. Claudius was well received by the whole body of the army. The officers held a consultation that night, and determined to make him emperor. At first he was extremely unwilling to accept the proffered honor, but they urged it upon him, and he was at length induced to accept it. Thus the army was once more provided with a head, and prepared to engage anew in its conflict with the civil authorities of the city.

The particulars of the conflict that ensued we can not here describe. It is sufficient to say that the army prevailed, and that Claudius soon found himself in full possession of the power from which his nephew had been so suddenly deposed.

Agrippina recalled.

One of the first measures which the new emperor adopted, was to recall Agrippina from her banishment at Pontia, where Caligula had confined her, and restore her to her former position in Rome. Her husband, Brazenbeard, died about this time, and young Brazenbeard, her son, afterward called Nero, the subject of this history, was three years old. Octavia, the daughter of Claudius and Messalina, was a little younger.

Messalina.

Messalina, the wife of Claudius, hated Agrippina, considering her, as she did, her rival and enemy. The favor which Claudius showed to Agrippina, in recalling her from her banishment, and treating her with consideration and favor at Rome, only inflamed still more Messalina's hatred. She could not, however, succeed in inducing Claudius to withdraw his protection from his niece; for Claudius, though almost entirely subject to the influence and control of his wife in most things, seemed fully determined not to yield to her wishes in this. Agrippina continued, therefore, to live at Rome, in high favor with the court, for several years, – her little son advancing all the time in age and in maturity, until at length he became twelve years old. At this time, another great change took place in his own and his mother's condition. Messalina became herself, by her wickedness and infatuation, the means of raising her rival into her own place as wife of the emperor. The result was accomplished in the following manner.

Messalina's intrigues.
Her hatred of Silanus.

Messalina had long been a very dissolute and wicked woman, having been accustomed to give herself up to criminal indulgences and pleasures of every kind, in company with favorites whom she selected from time to time among the courtiers around her. For a time she managed these intrigues with some degree of caution and secrecy, in order to conceal her conduct from her husband. She gradually, however, became more and more open and bold. She possessed a great ascendency over the mind of her husband, and could easily deceive him, or induce him to do whatever she pleased. She persuaded him to confer honors and rewards in a very liberal manner upon those whom she favored, and to degrade, and sometimes even to destroy, those who displeased her. She would occasionally resort to very cunning artifices to accomplish her ends. For example, she conceived at one time a violent hatred against the husband of her mother. His name was Silanus. He was not the father of Messalina, but a second husband of Messalina's mother; and, being young and attractive in person, Messalina at first loved him, and intended to make him one of her favorites and companions. Silanus, however, would not accede to her wishes, and her love for him was then changed into hatred and thirst

for revenge. She accordingly determined on his destruction; but as she knew that it would be difficult to induce Claudius to proceed to extremities against him, on account of his intimate relationship to the family, she contrived a very artful plot to accomplish her ends. It was this:

Plan for destroying Silanus.

She sent word to Silanus, on a certain evening, that the emperor wished him to come to the palace, to his private apartment, the next morning, at a very early hour. The emperor wished to see him, the messenger said, on business of importance.

Narcissus's pretended dream.
Messalina's confirmation of it.

Just before the time which had been appointed for Silanus to appear, a certain officer of the household, named Narcissus, whom Messalina had engaged to assist her in her plot, came into the emperor's apartment, with an anxious countenance, and in a very hurried manner, and said to Claudius, whom he waked out of sleep by his coming, that he had had a very frightful dream – one which he deemed it his duty to make known to his master without any delay. He dreamed, he said, that a plot had been formed for assassinating the emperor; that Silanus was the contriver of it, and that he was coming early that morning to carry his design into effect. Messalina, who was present with her husband at the time, listened to this story with well-feigned anxiety and agitation, and then declared, with a countenance of great mysteriousness and solemnity, that she had had precisely the same dream for two or three nights in succession, but that, not being willing to do Silanus an injury, or to raise any unjust suspicions against him, she had thus far forborne to speak of the subject to her husband. She was, however, now convinced, she said, that Silanus was really entertaining some treasonable designs, and that the dreams were tokens sent from heaven to warn the emperor of his danger.

Claudius alarmed.
Silanus is executed.

Claudius, who was of an extremely timid and nervous temperament, was very much alarmed by these communications; and his terrors were greatly increased by the appearance of a servant who announced to him at that moment that Silanus was then coming in. The coming of Silanus to the palace at that unseasonable hour was considered by the emperor as full confirmation of the dreams which had been related to him, and as proof of the guilt of the accused; and under the impulse of the sudden passion and fear which this conviction awakened in his mind, he ordered Silanus to be seized and led away to immediate execution. These commands were obeyed. Silanus was hurried away and dispatched by the swords of the soldiers, without ever knowing what the accusation was that had been made against him.

Unbounded influence of Messalina.

Thus Messalina succeeded by artifice and cunning in accomplishing her ends, in cases where she could not rely on her direct influence upon the mind of the emperor. In one way or the other she almost always effected whatever she undertook, and gradually came to exercise almost supreme control. Whom she would she raised up, and whom she would she put down. In the mean time she lived herself, a life of the most guilty indulgence and pleasure. For a long time she concealed her wickedness from the emperor. He was very easily deceived, and though Messalina's character was perfectly well known to others, he himself continued blind to her guilt. At length, however, she began to grow more and more bold. She became satiated, as one of her historians says of her, with the common and ordinary forms of vice, and wished for something new and unusual to give piquancy and life to her sensations. At length, however, she went one step too far, and brought upon herself in consequence of it a terrible destruction.

Caius Silius.

Messalina's attachment to him.
Hesitation of Silius.
His decision.

It was about seven years after the accession of Claudius that the event occurred. The favorite of Messalina at this time was a young Roman senator named Caius Silius. Silius was a very distinguished young nobleman, and a man of handsome person and of very graceful and accomplished manners and address. He was in fact a very general favorite, and Messalina, when she first saw him, conceived a very strong affection for him. He was, however, already married to a beautiful Roman lady named Junia Silana. Silana had been, and was still at this time, an intimate friend of Agrippina, Nero's mother; though in subsequent times they became bitter enemies. Messalina made no secret of her love for Silius. She visited him freely at his house, and received his visits in return; she accompanied him to public places, evincing everywhere her strong regard for him in the most undisguised and open manner. At length she proposed to him to divorce his wife, in order that she herself might enjoy his society without any limitation or restraint. Silius hesitated for a time about complying with these proposals. He was well aware that he must necessarily incur great danger, either by complying or by refusing to comply with them. To accede to the empress's proposals, would be of course to place himself in a position of extreme peril; and the fate of Silanus was a warning to him of what he had to fear from her wrath, in case of a refusal. He concluded that the former danger was on the whole the least to be apprehended, and he accordingly divorced his wife, and gave himself up wholly to Messalina's will.

Claudius.
Public works at Ostia.
The obelisk.
Immense ship.

This arrangement being made, all things for a time went on smoothly and well. Claudius himself lived a very secluded life, and paid very little attention to his wife's pursuits or pleasures. He lived sometimes in retirement in his palace, devoting his time to his studies, or to the plans and measures of government. He seems to have honestly desired to promote the welfare and prosperity of the republic, and he made many useful regulations and laws which promised to be conducive to this end. Sometimes he was absent for a season from the city, – visiting fortresses and encampments, or inspecting the public works, such as aqueducts and canals, which were in progress of construction. He was particularly interested in certain operations which he planned and conducted at the mouths of the Tiber for forming a harbor there. The place was called Ostia, that word in the Latin tongue denoting *mouths*. To form a port there he built two long piers, extending them in a curvilinear form into the sea, so as to inclose a large area of water between them, where ships could lie at anchor in safety. Light-houses were built at the extremities of these piers. It is a curious circumstance that in forming the foundation of one of these piers, the engineers whom Claudius employed sunk an immense ship which Caligula had formerly caused to be built for the purpose of transporting an obelisk from Egypt to Rome, – the obelisk which now stands in front of St. Peter's Church, and is the admiration and wonder of all visitors to Rome. As the obelisk was formed of a single stone, a vessel of a very large size and of an unusual construction was necessary for the conveyance of it; and when this ship had once delivered its monstrous burden, it had no longer any useful function to perform on the surface of the sea, and the engineers accordingly filled it with stones and gravel, and sunk it at the mouth of the Tiber, to form part of the foundation of one of Claudius's piers. As it is found that there is no perceptible decay, even for centuries, in timber that is kept constantly submerged in the water of the sea, it is not impossible that the vast hulk, unless marine insects have devoured it and carried it away, lies imbedded where Claudius placed it, still.

Messalina continues her wicked career.

Silius intoxicated with his elevation.

While the emperor was engaged in these and similar pursuits and occupations, Messalina went on in her career of dissipation and indulgence from bad to worse, growing more and more bold and open every day. She lived in a constant round of entertainments and of gayety – sometimes receiving companies of guests at her own palace, and sometimes making visits with a large retinue of attendants and friends, at the house of Silius. Of course, every one paid court to Silius, and assumed, in their intercourse with him, every appearance that they entertained for him the most friendly regard. It is always so with the favorites of the great. While in heart they are hated and despised, in form and appearance they are caressed and applauded. Silius was intoxicated with the emotions that the giddy elevation to which he had arrived so naturally inspired. He was not, however, wholly at his ease. He could not but be aware that lofty as his position was, it was the brink of a precipice that he stood upon. Still he shut his eyes in a great measure to his danger and went blindly on. The catastrophe, which came very suddenly at last, will form the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter IV
The Fate of Messalina
A.D. 48

Silius forms a scheme for making himself emperor.

As might naturally have been expected, there were two very different emotions awakened in the mind of Silius by the situation in which he found himself placed with Messalina, – one was ambition, and the other was fear. Finding himself suddenly raised to the possession of so high a degree of consideration and influence, it was natural that he should look still higher, and begin to wish for actual and official power. And then, on the other hand, his uneasiness at the dangers that he was exposed to by remaining as he was, increased every day. At length a plan occurred to him which both these considerations urged him to adopt. The plan was to murder Claudius, and then to marry Messalina, and make himself emperor in Claudius's place. By the accomplishment of this design he would effect, he thought, a double object. He would at once raise himself to a post of real and substantial power, and also, at the same time place himself in a position of security. He resolved to propose this scheme to Messalina.

He proposes his plan to Messalina.

Accordingly, on the first favorable opportunity, he addressed the empress on the subject, and cautiously made known his design. "I wish to have you wholly mine," said he "and although the emperor is growing old, we can not safely wait for his death. We are, in fact, continually exposed to danger. We have gone quite too far to be safe where we are, and by taking the remaining steps necessary to accomplish fully our ends we shall only be completing what we have begun, and by so doing, far from incurring any new penalties, we shall be taking the only effectual method to protect ourselves from the dangers which impend over us and threaten us now. Let us, therefore, devise some means to remove the emperor out of our way. I will then be proclaimed emperor in his place, and be married to you. The power which you now enjoy will then come back to you again, undiminished, and under such circumstances as will render it permanently secure to you. To accomplish this will be very easy; for the emperor, superannuated, infirm, and stupid as he is, can not protect himself against any well-planned and vigorous attempt which we may make to remove him; though, if we remain as we are, and any accidental cause should arouse him from his lethargy, we may expect to find him vindictive and furious against us to the last degree."

Messalina's reply.
Her motives.
Her proposal.

Messalina listened to this proposal with great attention and interest, but so far as related to the proposed assassination of the emperor she did not seem inclined to assent to it. Her historian says that she was not influenced in this decision by any remaining sentiments of conjugal affection, or by conscientious principle of any kind, but by her distrust of Silius, and her unwillingness to commit herself so entirely into his power. She preferred to keep him dependent upon her, rather than to make herself dependent upon him. She liked the plan, however, of being married to him, she said, and would consent to that, even while the emperor remained alive. And so if Silius would agree to it, she was ready, she added, the next time that the emperor went to Ostia, to have the ceremony performed.

Audacity of Messalina in this proposal.

That a wife and a mother, however unprincipled and corrupt, should make, under such circumstances, a proposal like this of Messalina's, is certainly very extraordinary; and to those who do not know to what extremes of recklessness and infatuation, the irresponsible despots that have arisen from time to time to rule mankind, have often pushed their wickedness and crime, it must seem wholly incredible. The Roman historian who has recorded this narrative, assures us, that it was the very audacity of this guilt that constituted its charm in Messalina's eyes. She had become weary of, and satiated with, all the ordinary forms of criminal indulgence and pleasure. The work of deceiving and imposing upon her husband, in order to secure for herself the gratifications which she sought, was for a time sufficient to give zest and piquancy to her pleasures. But he was so easily deceived, and she had been accustomed to deceive him so long, that it now no longer afforded to her mind any stimulus or excitement to do it in any common way. But the idea of being actually married to another man while he was absent at a short distance from the city, would be something striking and new, which would vary, she thought, the dull monotony of the common course of sin.

The false marriage is celebrated.

The proposed marriage was finally determined upon, and the mock ceremony, for such a ceremony could, of course, have no legal force, was duly performed at a time when Claudius was absent at Ostia, inspecting the works which were in progress there. How far the pretended marriage was open and public in the actual celebration of it, is not very certain; but the historians say that it was conducted with all the usual ceremonies, and was attended by the usual witnesses. The service was performed by the *augur*, a sort of sacerdotal officer, on whom the duty of conducting such solemnities properly devolved. Messalina and Silius, each in their turn, repeated the words pertaining respectively to the bridegroom and the bride. The usual sacrifice to the gods was then made, and a nuptial banquet followed, at which there passed between the new married pair the caresses and endearments usual on such occasions. All things in a word were conducted, from the beginning to the end, as in a real and honest wedding, and whether the scene thus enacted was performed in public as a serious transaction, or at some private entertainment as a species of sport, it created a strong sensation among all who witnessed it, and the news of it soon spread abroad and became very generally known.

Indignation of the emperor's friends.

The more immediate friends of Claudius were very indignant at such a proceeding. They conferred together, uttering to each other many murmurings and complaints, and anticipating the worst results and consequences from what had occurred. Silius, they said, was an ambitious and dangerous man, and the audacious deed which he had performed was the prelude, they believed, to some deep ulterior design. They feared for the safety of Claudius; and as they knew very well that the downfall of the emperor would involve them too in ruin, they were naturally much alarmed. It was, however, very difficult for them to decide what to do.

If they were to inform the emperor of Messalina's proceedings, they considered it wholly uncertain what effect the communication would have upon him. Like almost all weak-minded men, he was impulsive and capricious in the extreme; and whether, on a communication being made to him, he would receive it with indifference and unconcern, or, in case his anger should be aroused, whether it would expend itself upon Messalina or upon those who informed him against her, it was wholly impossible to foresee.

Plot formed for Messalina's destruction.

At length, after various consultations and debates, a small number of the courtiers who were most determined in their detestation of Messalina and her practices, leagued themselves together, and resolved upon a course of procedure by which they hoped, if possible, to effect her destruction. The leader of this company was Callistus, one of the officers of Claudius's household. He was one of the men who had been engaged with Chærea in the assassination of Caligula. Narcissus was another. This

was the same Narcissus that is mentioned in the last chapter, as the artful contriver, with Messalina, of the death of Silanus. Pallas was the name of a third conspirator. He was a confidential friend and favorite of Claudius, and was very jealous, like the rest, of the influence which Silius, through Messalina, exercised over his master. These were the principal confederates, though there were some others joined with them.

Plans and arrangements of the conspirators.

The great object of the hostility of these men, seems to have been Silius, rather than Messalina. This, in fact, would naturally be supposed to be the case, since it was Silius rather than Messalina who was their rival. Some of them appear to have hated Messalina on her own account, but with the others there was apparently no wish to harm the empress, if any other way could be found of reaching Silius. In fact, in the consultations which were held, one plan which was proposed was to go to Messalina, and without evincing any feelings of unkindness or hostility toward her, to endeavor to persuade her to break off her connection with her favorite. This plan was, however, soon overruled. The plotters thought that it would be extremely improbable that Messalina would listen to any such proposition, and in case of her rejection of it, if it were made, her anger would be aroused strongly against them for making it: and then, even if she should not attempt to take vengeance upon them for their presumption, she would at any rate put herself effectually upon her guard against any thing else which they should attempt to do. The plan of separating Messalina and Silius was, therefore, abandoned, and the determination resolved upon to take measures for destroying them both together.

Their hesitation.
Calpurnia.
Motives addressed to her.

The course which the confederates decided to pursue in order to effect their object, was to proceed to Ostia, where Claudius still remained, and there make known to him what Messalina and Silius had done, and endeavor to convince him that this audacious conduct on their part was only the prelude to open violence against the life of the emperor. It would seem, however, that no one of them was quite willing to take upon himself the office of making such a communication as this, in the first instance, to such a man. They did not know how he would receive it, – or against whom the first weight of his resentment and rage would fall. Finally, after much hesitation and debate, they concluded to employ a certain female for the purpose, – a courtesan named Calpurnia. Calpurnia was a favorite and companion of Claudius, and as such they thought she might perhaps have an opportunity to approach him with the subject under such circumstances as to diminish the danger. At any rate, Calpurnia was easily led by such inducements as the conspirators laid before her, to undertake the commission. They not only promised her suitable rewards, but they appealed also to the jealousy and hatred which such a woman would naturally feel toward Messalina, who, being a wife, while Calpurnia was only a companion and favorite, would of course be regarded as a rival and enemy. They represented to Calpurnia how entirely changed for the better her situation would be, if Messalina could once be put out of the way. There would then, they said, be none to interfere with her; but her influence and ascendency over the emperor's mind would be established on a permanent and lasting footing.

Calpurnia and Cleopatra undertake their task.

Calpurnia was very easily led by these inducements to undertake the commission. There was another courtesan named Cleopatra, who, it was arranged, should be at hand when Calpurnia made her communication, to confirm the truth of it, should any confirmation seem to be required. The other conspirators, also, were to be near, ready to be called in and to act as occasion might require, in case Calpurnia and Cleopatra should find that their statement was making the right impression. Things being all thus arranged the party proceeded to Ostia to carry their plans into execution.

Messalina's festival in the palace gardens.

In the mean time Messalina and Silius, wholly unconscious of the danger, gave themselves up with greater and greater boldness and unconcern to their guilty pleasures. On the day when Callistus and his party went to Ostia she was celebrating a festival at her palace with great gayety and splendor. It was in the autumn of the year, and the festival was in honor of the season. In the countries on the Mediterranean the gathering of grapes and the pressing of the juice for wine, is the great subject of autumnal rejoicings; and Messalina had arranged a festival in accordance with the usual customs, in the gardens of the palace. A wine-press had been erected, and grapes were gathered and brought to it. The guests whom Messalina had invited were assembled around; some were dancing about the wine-press, some were walking in the alleys, and some were seated in the neighboring bowers. They were dressed in fancy costumes, and their heads were adorned with garlands of flowers. There was a group of dancing girls who were engaged as performers on the occasion, to dance for the amusement of the company, in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine. These girls were dressed, so far as they were clothed at all, in robes made of the skins of tigers, and their heads were crowned with flowers. Messalina herself, however, was the most conspicuous object among the gay throng. She was robed in a manner to display most fully the graces of her person; her long hair waving loosely in the wind. She had in her hand a symbol, or badge, called the *thyrsus*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.