

LXXX. THE CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED.

AT first, Nero was rather frightened at his own crimes. The Romans, however, did not resent the murder of Agrippina, but gave public thanks because the emperor's life had been spared; and when Nero heard of this he was quite reassured. Shortly afterwards, the gentle Octavia died too, and then Nero launched forth into a career of extravagance as wild as that of Caligula.

Always fond of gladiatorial combats and games of all kinds, Nero himself took part in the public chariot races. Then, too, although he had a very poor voice, he liked to go on the stage and perform and sing before his courtiers, who told him that he was a great actor and a very fine singer.

Encouraged by these flatterers, Nero grew more conceited and more wild. To win his favor, many great people followed his example; and noble ladies soon appeared on the stage, where they sought the applause of the worst class in Rome.

The poor people were admitted free of charge at these games, provided that they loudly applauded Nero and his favorites. As they could not attend to their work, owing to the many festivities, the emperor ordered that they should be fed at the expense of the state; and he made lavish gifts of grain.

A comet having appeared at this time, some of the superstitious Romans ventured to suggest that it was a sign of a new reign. These words were repeated to Nero, and displeased him greatly; so he ordered that all the people who spoke of it should be put to death, and that their property should be confiscated for his use.

Some of these unfortunate Romans took their own lives in order to escape the tortures which awaited them. There were others whom the emperor did not dare to arrest openly, lest the people should rise up against him; and these received secret orders to open their veins in a bath of hot water, and thus bleed to death.

For the sake of the excitement, Nero used to put on a disguise and go out on the highways to rob and murder travelers. On one occasion he attacked a senator, who, failing to recognize him, struck him a hard blow. The very next day the senator found out who the robber was, and, hoping to disarm Nero's rage, went up to the palace and humbly begged his pardon for striking him.

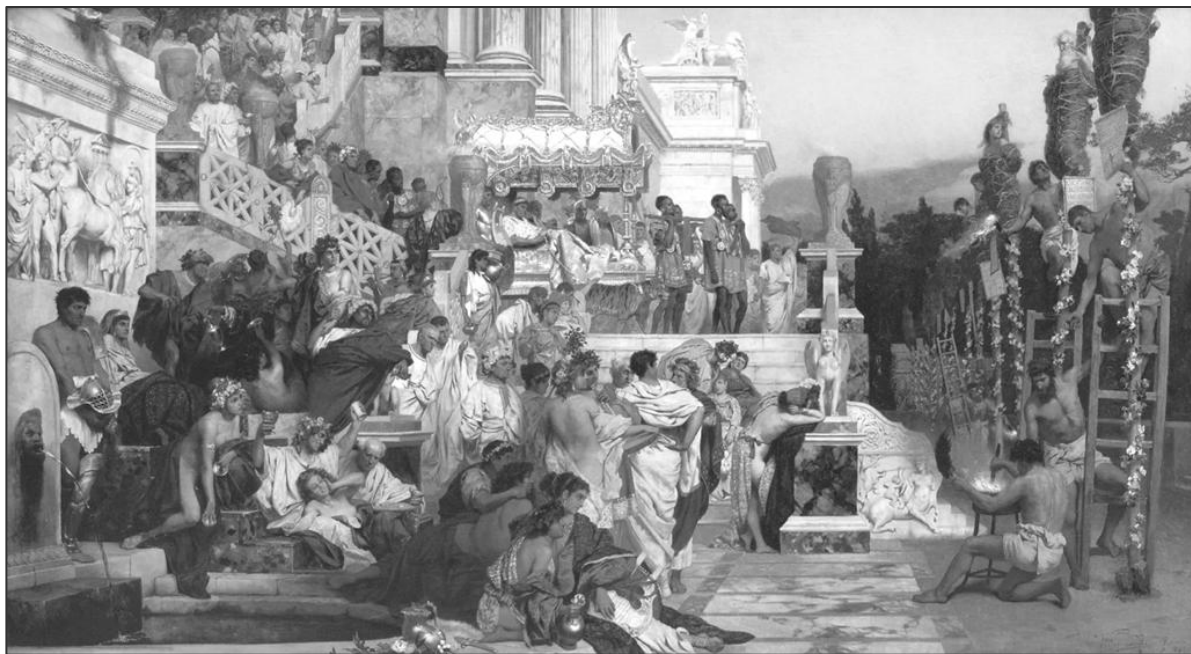
Nero listened to the apologies in haughty silence, and then exclaimed: “What, wretch, you have struck Nero, and are still alive?” And, although he did not kill the senator then and there, he nevertheless gave the man strict orders to kill himself; and the poor senator did not dare to disobey.

Nero had received a very good education, and so he was familiar with the great poem of Ho´mer which tells about the war of Troy. He wished to enjoy the sight of a fire, such as Homer describes befell that city. He therefore, it is said, gave orders that Rome should be set afire, and sat up on his palace tower, watching the destruction, and singing the verses about the fall of Troy, while he accompanied himself on his lyre.

A great part of the city was thus destroyed, many lives were lost, and countless people were made poor; but the sufferings of others did not trouble the monster Nero, who delighted in seeing misery of every kind.

Ever since the crucifixion of our Lord, during the reign of Tiberius, the apostles had been busy preaching the Gospel. Peter and Paul had even visited Rome, and talked to so many people that there were by this time a large number of Roman Christians.

The Christians, who had been taught to love one another, and to be good, could not of course approve of the wicked Nero’s conduct. They boldly reprovved him for his vices, and Nero soon took his revenge by accusing them of having set fire to Rome, and by having them seized and tortured in many ways.



Nero's Torches. Painting by Henryk Siemiradzki, 1876.

Some of these Christians were beheaded, some were exposed to the wild beasts of the circus, and some were wrapped up in materials which would easily catch fire, set upon poles, and used as living torches for the emperor's games. Others were plunged in kettles of boiling oil or water, or hunted like wild beasts.

All of them, however, died with great courage, boldly confessing their faith in Christ; and because they suffered death for their religion, they have ever since been known as Mar'tyrs. During this first Roman persecution, St. Paul was beheaded, and St. Peter was crucified. St. Peter was placed on the cross head downward, at his own request, because he did not consider himself worthy to die as his beloved Master had died.



LXXXI. NERO'S CRUELTY.

AS Rome had been partly destroyed, Nero now began to rebuild it with great magnificence. He also built a palace for his own use, which was known as the Golden Palace, because it glittered without and within with this precious metal.

Nero was guilty of many follies, such as worshiping a favorite monkey, fishing with a golden net, and spending large sums in gifts to undeserving courtiers; and he is said never to have worn the same garment twice.

Of course so cruel and capricious a ruler as Nero could not be loved, and you will not be surprised to hear that many Romans found his rule unbearable, and formed a conspiracy to kill him. A woman named E-pich'a-ris took part in the plot; but one of the men whom she asked to help her proved to be a traitor.

Instead of keeping the secret, this man hastened to Nero and told him that Epicharis knew the names of all the conspirators. So the emperor had her seized and cruelly tortured, but she refused to speak a word, although she suffered untold agonies. Then, fearing that she would betray her friends when too long suffering had exhausted her courage, Epicharis strangled herself with her own girdle.

As Nero could not discover the names of the conspirators, he condemned all the Romans whom he suspected of having been in the secret, and forced them to kill themselves. Even his tutor Seneca obeyed when ordered to open his veins in a warm bath; and he died while dictating some of his thoughts to his secretary.