

THE BURNING OF ROME

----- *Tacitus* -----

And now came a calamitous fire—whether it was accidental or purposely contrived by the Emperor remains uncertain: for on this point authorities are divided—more violent and more destructive than any that ever befell our city. It began in that part of the Circus which adjoins the Palatine and Caelian hills. Breaking out in shops full of inflammable merchandise, it took hold and gathered strength at once; and, being fanned by the wind, soon embraced the entire length of the Circus, where there were no mansions with protective walls, no temple enclosures, nor anything else to arrest its course. Furiously the destroying flames swept on, first over the level ground, then up the heights, then again plunging into the hollows, with a rapidity that outstripped all efforts to cope with them, the ancient city lending itself to their progress by its narrow, tortuous streets and its misshapen blocks of buildings. The shrieks of panic-stricken women; the weakness of the aged and the helplessness of the young; the efforts of some to save themselves, of others to help their neighbors; the hurrying of those who dragged their sick along, the lingering of those who waited for them—all made up a scene of inextricable confusion.

Many persons, while looking behind them, were enveloped from the front or from the side; or, having escaped to the nearest place of safety, found this too in possession of the flames, and even places which they had thought beyond their reach in the same plight with the rest. At last, not knowing where to turn or what to avoid, they poured into the roads or threw themselves down in the fields: some having lost their all, not having even food for the day; others, though with means of escape open to them, preferring to perish for love of the dear ones whom they could not save. And none dared to check the flames; for there were many who threatened and forced back those who would extinguish them, while others openly flung in torches, saying that they had their orders—whether it was really so or only that they wanted to plunder undisturbed.

At this moment Nero was at Antium. He did not return to the city until the flames were approaching the mansion which he had built to connect the Palatine with the Gardens of Maecenas, nor could they be stopped until the whole Palatine, including the palace and everything around it, had been consumed. Nero assigned the Campus Martius and the Agrippa monuments for the relief of the fugitive and houseless multitude. He threw open his own gardens also and put up temporary buildings for the accommodation of the destitute; he brought up provisions from Ostia and the neighboring towns; and he reduced the price of corn to three sesterces the peck. But popular as these measures were, they aroused no gratitude;

for a rumor had got abroad that at the moment when the city was in flames, Nero had mounted upon a stage in his own house and, by way of likening modern calamities to ancient, had sung the tale of the sack of Troy.

Not until the sixth day was the fire got under, at the foot of the Esquiline hill, by demolishing a vast extent of buildings, so as to present nothing but the ground—and, as it were, the open sky—to its continued fury. But scarcely had the alarm subsided or the populace recovered from their despair when it burst out again in the more open parts of the city; and though here the loss of life was less, the destruction of temples and porticoes of pleasure was still more complete. And the scandal attending this new fire was the greater that it broke out in the property owned by Tigellinus, in the Aemilian quarter, the general belief being that Nero had the ambition to build a new city to be called after his own name. For of the fourteen regions into which Rome was divided only four remained intact. Three were burned to the ground; in the other seven, nothing remained save a few fragments of ruined and half-burned houses.

To count up the number of mansions, of tenements, and of temples that were destroyed would be no easy matter. Among the oldest of the sacred buildings burned was that dedicated by Servius Tullius of the Moon, and the Great Altar and fane raised by Evander to the Present Hercules. The temple vowed by Romulus to Jupiter, the Stayer of Flight; the Royal Palace of Numa; the Temple of Vesta, with the household gods of the Roman people, were all destroyed; added to these were the treasures won in numerous battles, and masterpieces of Greek art, as well as ancient and genuine monuments of Roman genius which were remembered by the older generation amid all the splendor of the restored city, and which could never be replaced. Some noted that the nineteenth of July, the day on which the fire began, was also the day on which the Senonian Gauls had taken and burned the city; others were so curious in their calculations as to discover that the two burnings were separated from one another by exactly the same number of years, of months, and of days.

Nero profited by the ruin of his country to erect a palace in which the marvels were not to be gold and jewels, the usual and commonplace objects of luxury, so much as lawns and lakes and mock wildernesses, with woods on one side and open glades and vistas on the other. His engineers and masters-of-works were Severus and Celer, men who had the ingenuity and the impudence to fool away the resources of the empire in the attempt to provide by art what nature had pronounced impossible.

For these men undertook to dig a navigable canal, along the rocky shore and over the hills, all the way from Lake Avernus to the mouths of the Tiber. There was no other water for supplying such a canal than that of the Pontine marshes, and even if practicable, the labor would have been prodigious, and no object served. But Nero had a thirst for the incredible, and traces of his vain attempt to excavate the heights adjoining Lake Avernus are to be seen to this day.

The parts of the city unoccupied by Nero's palace were not built over without divisions, or indiscriminately, as after the Gallic fire, but in blocks of regular dimensions, with broad streets between. A limit was placed to the height of houses; open spaces were left; and colonnades were added to protect the fronts of tenements, Nero undertaking to build these at his own cost and to hand over the building sites, cleared of rubbish, to the proprietors. He offered premiums also, in proportion to the rank and means of the owners, on condition of mansions' or tenements' being completed within a given time; and he assigned the marshes of Ostia for the reception of the rubbish, which was taken down the Tiber in the same vessels which had brought up the corn. Certain parts of the houses were to be built without beams and of solid stone, Gabian or Alban, those stones being impervious to fire. Then, as water had often been improperly intercepted by individuals, inspectors were appointed to secure a more abundant supply, and over a larger area, for public use; owners were required to keep appliances for quenching fire in some open place; party walls were forbidden, and every house had to be enclosed within walls of its own.

These useful measures added greatly to the appearance of the new city; and yet there were not wanting persons who thought that the plan of the old city was more conducive to health, as the narrow streets and high roofs were a protection against the rays of the sun, which now beat down with double fierceness upon broad and shadeless thoroughfares.

Such were the measures suggested by human counsels; after which means were taken to propitiate the Gods. The Sibylline Books were consulted, and prayers were offered, as prescribed by them, to Vulcan, to Ceres, and to Proserpine. Juno was supplicated by the matrons, in the Capitol first and afterwards at the nearest point upon the sea, from which water was drawn to sprinkle the temple and image of the goddess; banquets to the goddesses and all-night festivals were celebrated by married women.

But neither human aid nor imperial bounty nor atoning offerings to the gods could remove the sinister suspicion that the fire had been brought about by Nero's order. To put an end, therefore, to this rumor, he shifted the charge on to others and inflicted the most cruel tortures upon a body of men detested for their abominations and popularly known by the name of Christians. This name came from one Christus, who was put to death in the reign of Tiberius by the Procurator Pontius Pilate; but though checked for the time, the detestable superstition broke out again, not in Judea only, where the mischief began, but even in Rome, where every horrible and shameful iniquity, from every quarter of the world, pours in and finds a welcome.

First those who acknowledged themselves of this persuasion were arrested; and upon their testimony a vast number were condemned, not so much on the charge of incendiarism as for their hatred of the human race. Their death was turned into a diversion. They were clothed in the skins of wild beasts and torn to by dogs; they were fastened to crosses, or set up to be burned so as to serve the purpose of lamps

when daylight failed. Nero gave up his own gardens for this spectacle; he provided also Circensian games, during which he mingled with the populace or took his stand upon a chariot, in the garb of a charioteer. But guilty as these men were and worthy of direst punishment, the fact that they were being sacrificed for no public good, but only to glut the cruelty of one man, aroused a feeling of pity on their behalf.

c. A.D. 117