

Nero Chapter 1

A piece of advice before we start. Don't believe those fools who preach that death is a friend, or worse, like Paullus and his crew of fanatics, the happy gateway to a better and fuller existence. It's nothing of the sort. Death, gentle reader, is nothing but a necessary bore, and you can tell it I said so. There, now.

I, Titus Petronius Niger, aesthete, author and erstwhile Adviser on Taste to Nero Claudius Caesar (the gods rot the little bugger) have reached a climacteric in my existence; I might say two climacterics, for although autobiography and suicide aren't normal bedfellows they're both pretty final, and I've no intention of rushing either to oblige anyone; certainly not by poking a sword through my own gut, which may be the traditional recourse of the Roman gentleman but is, in my view, hopelessly crude, not to say extremely messy and hell on the upholstery. No. I will bleed to death in comfort, like a civilised being. If done in a leisurely fashion by tightening and loosening the wrist-tourniquets (as I will do it), opening one's veins allows one to hang up one's clogs at a decent pace. If I really have to die before my time (and needs must, ho hum, when the emperor drives, even when the emperor is poor loopy Lucius) then I intend to savour every minute of the process. Even if it kills me.

Dion is smiling. Dion is my secretary and, currently, my right-hand man. That, my dears, should you need such things pointing out to you, is a pun, albeit one in execrable taste. What you are reading now is all Dion's work, and Titus Petronius Niger is merely a voice: refreshed, let it be said, by the fine wines and exquisite delicacies which lade the groaning table beside his couch. Nevertheless, when the time comes for us to part I will endeavour to sign my own name across the page before I finally dispense with the tourniquets and allow greedy nature to run (oh, my!) her liquid course.

A disagreeable prospect, you will admit; but then we have a long way to go together first. Oh, yes, my gentle friends. Lucius's men will not arrive to inspect my corpse before morning. The night is still young, these Baian crayfish are excellent, and Dion is supplied with plenty of ink and paper. So.

What exactly is this great work that we're embarked on? Not, as you might expect, a hatchet job on the man responsible for my death, the quondam Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, whom history will remember (unless she's lucky enough to forget him altogether) as Nero Claudius Caesar, Rome's fifth emperor (not counting old Julius), darling of the muses and self-styled theatrical genius. Oh, and of course the world's most illustrious pyromaniac; I doubt if history will forget that little nugget of scandal. Certainly Lucius - I'll call him that, by the way, since it's all the nomenclature the poor dear deserves - provides scope and to spare for character assassination, and at present, as you'll readily understand, my feelings towards him aren't exactly friendly. All the same, I can't bring myself to hate the lad, however much of a monster he's become; in fact if truth be told I feel more sorry for him than anything else (a sentiment that would have the crack-brained old Jewish humbug Paullus nodding in approval). After all, it isn't altogether poor Lucius's fault that he's in the wrong job, and he has tried his best. Being three tiles short of a watertight roof hasn't helped much, either.

So, my dears, this is no kick in the imperial teeth. Call it a most lamentable comedy. Or possibly a mirthful tragedy. And because Lucius is who he is, and I am who I am, there will also, I'm sorry to say, be a fair amount of dirt to be dug...

Dion is frowning, and I don't much blame him. Dion may be a slave, but the lad is no mean judge of style, and I am rambling. Petronius, you bore, you grow inelegant. Stop it at once and begin your tale.

Heigh ho and off we go. End of prologue. Let me introduce you to my coy mistress Silia.

1. AD 50

We met in the Danaid Porch. Perhaps you know it, part of Apollo's temple on the Palatine? Its statues of the forty-nine married ladies who killed their husbands on the wedding night have made it the most popular place of assignation in Rome for (let's not be hypocritical about this) would-be adulterers and adulteresses like ourselves. She was standing with her maid studying the artwork, I was lurking beside one of the pillars a few feet away, studying her breasts.

By any standards she was beautiful: late twenties (my own age), dark hair carefully coiffeured and masked by the thinnest of veils, a perfect profile and a body richly curved beneath an impeccably arranged Coan silk mantle. She had seen me, of course, in her turn, and we watched each other covertly for a while, sizing each other up as one does on these occasions. After a decent interval I moved in for the kill.

She glanced directly at me and remarked to her maid: 'A poor thing, Lalage, isn't she? Condemned to eternal torment just for getting rid of a boring husband.'

An invitation if I ever heard one. The maid giggled. I moved closer.

'Your poor thing would hardly have had enough time to be bored, lady.' I leaned across and set my hand next to hers on the statue's cheek, noting as I did so the ring on her third finger. 'Hours, at most.'

She smiled at me. Her teeth were pearls.

'Oh, that's quite enough time for it,' she said. 'Husbands are like tunnyfish, darling, they go off terribly quickly. Especially if they aren't fresh to begin with.'

We both laughed. In that exchange the contract had been, so to speak, proposed, drawn up and signed by both parties. Negotiations in the Danaid Porch are like that, short and sweet and to the point, with no time wasted on inessentials. Patting the stone face in farewell, she turned to her maid.

'Lalage, walk behind us, please,' she said. 'And not too closely, there's a dear.'

We made love in her bedroom, on top of a silk coverlet thickly embroidered with gold and purple beasts: it had come from China along the spice route, and must have cost a fortune. I taught her the lips and tongue trick I'd learned from a courtesan in Damascus (once, or so she told me, the mistress of Herod Agrippa himself. If so then the Jewish king had taste); she provided me with a delightful variation on the Alexandrian String of Pearls which she claimed to have invented - no mean feat, if true. All in all a pleasant and exhausting afternoon, and highly educational. Afterwards we bathed in rose water, and Lalage brought us

cups of snow-cooled wine and a dish of dried figs. Then I watched while Silia dressed and the maid repaired her hair.

'You will stay for dinner, won't you?' She was holding still as the girl applied Egyptian cosmetic to her eyelashes with a fine brush. 'Gnaeus won't be back until late.'

'Gnaeus?'

'Don't be obtuse, dear. My husband.'

'Oh.' Oh yes, of course. The ring on the finger, the skull at the feast. The inevitable skull. One can no more avoid the Gnaeuses of this world than one can expect a Suburan cookhouse not to have cockroaches in the kitchen. 'Tell me about Gnaeus.'

'He's a darling,' Silia said, flicking the lashes to dry them and inspecting the effect in the mirror. 'You'd like him.'

'No doubt. But mutual compatibility wasn't exactly what I had in mind.'

She laughed. 'Titus, dear, don't look so worried. We have an arrangement. Besides, he's into boys at the moment. Or rather one boy in particular. A pretty little thing called Theorus.'

'Oh, that Gnaeus!' I had the man placed now: Gnaeus Arruntius, a paunchy middle-aged roué who'd been one of Caligula's set. Not a bad sort, although badly gone to seed since he'd helped the conspirators ventilate the godling's belly nine years previously and given us all over to idiot Claudius. He had, if I remembered rightly, an appalling taste in hair oil.

'Indeed.' Silia held her cheek out for the maid to powder, and the air was suddenly full of the delicious scent of perfumed talc. 'I really can't imagine what he sees in Theorus. The child's a pain, and he's costing poor Gnaeus a fortune.'

'So I've heard.' I sipped my wine and savoured its hint of myrtle. 'But then boys always do, my dear. Even to hire one's pricey.'

Silia laughed. 'Oh, I know! It's an absolute scandal!' Her freshly made-up eyes sparkled. 'Speaking of which, Smaractus has some nice little Syrians just in.'

'Does he, now?' That was interesting: Smaractus's was one of the city's oldest-established houses, with a name for quality. 'Since when?'

'They arrived this morning. We could have one later if you're not too tired.'

'You promised me a meal.'

'I don't think we have much for dessert.'

'You'd have to hurry, madam. The dinner's nearly ready.' Lalage was packing away the cosmetics. 'It's sows' wombs with crackling, spare ribs and trotters.'

'Ah, well, maybe some other time.' Silia sighed. 'The best ones'll have gone by now anyway.'

To tell the truth, I wasn't too disappointed. I find Syrians overrated and consequently overpriced. Hiring one, as I would have felt obliged to do if Silia had insisted, would have been a chore rather than a pleasure and spoiled what promised to be a charming evening. Besides, the String of Pearls gives one an appetite. I was looking forward to the sows' wombs; indeed, at that moment I could have eaten a horse. Served perhaps with caraway-oregano sauce, with just a touch of lovage to give it depth.

We'd polished off the main course and were tucking in to the nuts and fruit when Silia's husband walked in. I almost swallowed my wine-cup.

Silia was marvellous. Not an eyelid did she bat.'

'Gnaeus, dear,' she said with a smile. 'I thought you had a late meeting.'

'We broke up early. Blaesus's gout was playing him up.' Arruntius stretched out on the third couch. I'd been right about the hair oil. The scent put me in mind of perfumed goat-sick. 'Evening, Petronius. You've just dropped by, have you?'

Not trusting my voice, I nodded and buried my face in my wine. Arrangement or not, the situation was acutely embarrassing. I was well and truly caught, and genuinely complacent husbands are rare as Arabian truffles in November.

Silia passed him a plate of cinnamon cakes.

'Titus and I were just discussing the imperial adoption, darling,' she said smoothly. A lie, of course, but a plausible one: the whole of Rome was talking about our new princeling. 'Lucius Domitius is such a nice boy. Or I suppose we should call him Nero Caesar now.'

Arruntius ignored the cakes and selected an apple. His heavy jaws closed on it with an audible crunch. He chewed and spoke between swallows.

'Nero's all right. Wet as hell, mind, but a nice enough lad. It's his mother I can't stand. Agrippina's a horror. God knows why Claudius married her. You'd've thought the old idiot would've learned his lesson.'

We were alone, of course, but I still glanced over my shoulder to make sure no-one was listening. Arruntius noticed, and laughed.

'Come on, Petronius! I'm no traitor, and I'll say what I like in my own house. The woman's pure poison. We were better off with Messalina. At least with her we knew where we stood. Or lay, rather. Am I wrong?'

Claudius's last wife had been executed two years previously for adultery. Her eventual successor Agrippina was presently engaged in devouring the emperor as a female spider devours its mate. Arruntius wasn't wrong, but all the same he'd spoken a bit too frankly for my taste. I drank my wine and said nothing.

'Mind, it's the other kid I feel most sorry for.' Arruntius was digging between two teeth with a fingernail for a fragment of apple peel. 'Young Britannicus.' Britannicus was Messalina's -

and Claudius's - nine-year-old son. 'With a stepmother like that the lad's in trouble. Deep trouble.'

'You think so?' I said.

'I'll give him two years. Maybe three. Certainly he'll never put on his adult mantle.' Arruntius spoke quite dispassionately; we might've been talking about the Blues' chances at the next racetrack meet. 'A pity. He's the best of the bunch.'

'Gnaeus.' Silia had been listening to all this with perfect equanimity. 'Do have a cup of wine, dear, and be a little more civilised. I'm sure Titus appreciates politics just as little as I do.'

Arruntius set the apple core down with a smile.

'All right, darling,' he said. 'Perhaps we could talk about Titus himself.' He turned to me. 'Just why did you drop by, Petronius?'

Oh, Priapus! The front door was miles away, I wasn't particularly fast on my feet, and besides I had for the past hour been getting quietly but thoroughly stewed. My brain (and other parts of me) went suddenly numb.

'I...ah...'

While I stammered incoherently Arruntius leaned over and punched me gently in the ribs.

'Joke, boy,' he chuckled.

I subsided in some confusion. Silia was watching with grave amusement.

'And how is Theorus, darling?' she said, slitting a pear.

Arruntius settled back on his couch with a grunt.

'Thriving,' he said. 'And getting greedy as hell, the little brat.'

'Such a shame. But then I've always thought he looked a grabber. His eyes are too close together.'

'Nonsense.' Arruntius picked up his wine-cup - filled with the last of our post-coital snow-cooled wine - drank and made a face. 'What is this stuff, Silia? Rats' piss?'

'Ariusian, dear. Ten years old. Don't you like it?'

'Who bought it?'

'No-one, darling. It was a gift from one of your clients. The man with the ships.'

'Oh, yes?' Heaving himself up on his couch, Arruntius bellowed, 'Philip!'

The head table slave put his head round the door. He looked grey, as well he might: I wasn't the only one to distrust husband and wife arrangements.

Arruntius handed him the jug. 'Take this Greek muck away and bring us some decent Setinian. You hear me?' Philip shot off as if he had been greased. 'My apologies, Petronius. Bastard clients think they can palm off any old rubbish on a patron these days.'

'What was your meeting about?' I asked. The numbness was wearing off and I was feeling more myself again.

Arruntius settled down again and kneaded his belly - like Claudius he was subject to heartburn. 'Drafting a speech of congratulation to the emperor on the new addition to his family. Just pro forma, but you've got to go through the motions.'

'What's he like? The boy, I mean.' I'd only seen Lucius once from the crowd at a public ceremony three years before. He'd been nine then, unassuming and a martyr to spots.

Arruntius belched.

'A pretty enough lad. Nice in his own way but nervous as hell and wouldn't say boo to a goose. He's not a patch on his father.'

'Hardly a point against the boy, dear,' Silia sniffed.

'You think not? At least he had character.'

'Ahenobarbus was a vicious, arrogant brute.'

'That's what I said. He had character.' Arruntius grinned; a fragment of apple peel clung to his left incisor. 'A bit of red blood in his veins. The man was a good old-fashioned damn-your-eyes Roman. Nero's been surrounded by women all his life and it's made him soft. Not good to be too much tied to the bloody apron strings. What he wants is toughening. A few good bouts in double-weighted armour with an ex-gadiator who won't take any nonsense, that's what he needs, and if he doesn't get them pretty quick he'll suffer for it later. We all will. You mark my words.'

A remarkably profound observation, you must agree in retrospect - but then Arruntius wasn't the bluff ingénu he appeared, and he'd mixed enough with the imperial family to know what was what. He was quite right, of course. We did suffer for it, although given Lucius's background it constantly amazes me that he grew up as sane as he did. Which isn't saying much, but you know what I mean.

Just then Philip reappeared with the wine, and Arruntius held out his cup.

'Some Setinian, Petronius?' he said when the slave had filled it. 'Come on, boy, your cup's empty! The evening's young, you're beautiful and we may as well make the most of both.'

I credit myself with a fair degree of insouciance, but - as I'm sure you can readily understand - I was finding this cosy domesticity far too wearing on the nerves for comfort. Even if

Arruntius's latter inducement wasn't wholly serious. I stayed only as long as politeness demanded. Then I made my excuses and left.