LETTER FROM ROME — JULY, A.D. 80

Greetings to my dear brother Eumenes, his family, and all the workers of The Pergamum Publishers.

I regret that my letter of last month was so brief—and not very cheerful. All I can say is that I had my hands full every waking moment and could only stop long enough to apprise you of the fire and why you had received no shipment.

The irony is that our letters must have crossed in the seas, for yours is so full of good news from Pergamum. The best of it is that you are already experimenting with various parchment sizes for the new codex process and that the parchment makers guild has received the idea so well. I am also glad to learn that the travel book on Rome and the smaller one on the Temple of Jupiter Capitoline have attracted such interest.

You had better sell the books fast, however, because we will soon need entirely new ones about this city, which seems not so "eternal" after all. I am making bad jokes, so I will get to the sad point. The fire I described so briefly last month turned out to be almost on a level with the one that took out ten of Rome's precincts during Nero's day. This one was not as widespread, but what made it so deadly was the plague that followed.

I will first address the things that I'm sure concern you the most. The fire swept through a goodly portion of the Argiletum and did not spare the Street of Book-

sellers. I would say that about one-third of our inventory was destroyed—including, I'm afraid, all of the scrolls in the scriptorium that dealt with the new Flavian Amphitheater. All 30 were piled up on the same shelf and all perished together—a stupidity I shall never repeat.

Alas, it isn't as if the remaining book inventory is exactly intact, either. If this were a glassworks we could toss out the charred or melted inventory and polish up what was left. But our inventory is books, and much of what's left has burn marks around the edges or smells like smoke. I am just hoping that buyers will understand.

Why didn't I rescue more? Because my purse doesn't match that of the Sosius Brothers and their ilk. When the firefighters came, they went straight to the Sosius bookstore because they knew they could get the highest fee. By the time they got down to our end of the street, much of the water in their engines was already used up and the brigade leader (I should say brigand *leader) wanted 4,000 sesterces before his men would pump a drop. I offered 1,000 right then (which is all I could muster) and 1,000 in a week. He glared at me in silence and for a moment I thought we wouldn't get a thing. He disappeared and after a couple of long minutes a bunch of haggard men came back, pulling one of the sorriest old fire engines I ever saw. Its water level was already so low that you could hear the pistons sucking air as they pumped.*

We got enough to put out the flames that destroyed the books in the first floor showroom. I didn't let the so-called firefighters upstairs into the scriptorium because heaven knows how much damage they would have done. Instead, a few of us passed buckets up. Then we stood guard all night with the few buckets of water and sand that they left us, hoping that the wind wouldn't change and send the fire roaring back through the Argiletum.

What I'm trying to say, Eumenes, was that this was more serious than the first reports you received—including my own. The fire burned one part of Rome or another for three days and three nights. The skin on my badly-burned left arm is just now starting to grow back (at least I hope it will) and I am still unable to inhale deeply without starting a painful coughing fit. But maybe the most dramatic way to

make my point is that the fire destroyed the famous Pantheon (you'd better sell out those books, too!), the Baths of Agrippa, the Theater of Balbus, the stage area in Pompey's Theater, the Temple of Neptune, the Temple of Serapis, the Temple of Isis, and—so soon after its magnificent restoration by Vespasian—the Temple of Jupiter Capitoline and many of its surrounding buildings.

And more books were lost than just ours, dear cousin. Would you believe the Octavian Library, with all those rare volumes that I myself spent so many hours handling and copying? And finally, you won't be hearing about the exploits of the Green and Blue anytime soon. The fire ravaged the grandstands on both lengths of the Circus Maximus.

I still find it hard to accept its happening so soon after the tragedy that Mount Vesuvius rolled down on the people of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In fact, Titus was still in Campania supervising repairs when he got word of the tragedy in Rome. His leadership and generosity were noble indeed. He opened his own gardens and all the buildings in the Field of Mars to the homeless. As the rebuilding of temples has begun, the emperor has emptied the palace of his own statues and artwork to help restore their glory.

But even all the gold and palaces of the greatest emperor are no match when a plague strikes—and this is what crippled Rome in the weeks that followed. Nothing is so cruel and frustrating as seeing people drop over from a cause they can't see or fight. Yet, they say that on some days 10,000 persons have died of it. Why do plagues seem to follow great fires and natural disasters? Why do they seem to strike hardest at those who live in the poorest, most crowded conditions? Does something get into the water supply? Do fires stir up some mysterious vapors? Do dead bodies give off some disease?

If it had to do with breathing smoke, I surely would have succumbed by now. However, the plague has subsided and I am now starting to regard myself as one of the more fortunate. My apartment house in the Subura was untouched and for over a month now I have two whole burned-out families sleeping everywhere in my love-

ly living room and dining area. And if you must know, a few occupy the bookstore as well, which is another reason for all the production delays. All of them are of good cheer during this adversity and share what they have, for, yes Eumenes, they are Christians. And just now when I told them whom I was writing, they asked me to send you God's blessings!

Added to the many ironies that seem to occupy this letter is that so soon after all this disruption and misery, Romans have been enthralled by a new wonder. I'm referring, as you might guess, to the opening at long last of the Flavian Amphitheater, or more popularly, The Hunting Place. This monstrosity isn't entirely finished, but Titus has already held ten straight days of shows. They say he will give 100 consecutive days of games before they finish for the year.

That there would be enough beasts or men in all the realm to do so is difficult to fathom based on what has gone on so far. I will start by explaining that a stream flows through the base of the Flavian Amphitheater—the same one that was once dammed up to create the lake at Nero's Golden House. Just before the opening, this body of water was covered over with a platform of planks. On the first day no fewer than 400 wild animals were slain, with even women taking part in dispatching them. People are still talking about a raging battle between four elephants, but during the day men also fought in single and group combat, with about 40 men being dragged off dead before it was over.

The second day featured horse races. Then the next day the wooden floor was removed and the whole arena flooded with the waters of the dammed-up stream that had once provided Nero with his lake. Suddenly the crowd was treated to the sight of manned ships floating through the main entrance. Some 3,000 armed men fought a vigorous sea battle, followed by an infantry battle between the "Athenians" and the "Syracusans." In this case the Athenians landed on an artificial island and assaulted a wall that had been constructed around a Syracusan monument. Then there followed a novel entertainment in which horses, bulls and other large animals were put afloat in the water to see how they managed to swim and fight at the same time.

Meanwhile, at any given time during these days Titus would rise and scatter into the audience little wooden balls that would set the people scrambling. Each ball had on it a symbol of a useful prize they could redeem—perhaps a silver vessel, a horse, a slave or pack animal.

Once the naval displays were over, Titus ordered the stream to the amphitheater diverted again so that the vast labyrinth of underground chambers could be utilized for future shows.

I know your tongue must be hanging out by now and you are saying, "If I couldn't go, did my cousin Attalos?" Yes, Attalos went. I regarded it as part of my duty in writing the book on the amphitheater. But I reasoned that since any one of 70,000 persons could sit in the audience, a writer might gain a unique perspective by seeing what took place below the arena floor. This was not difficult to arrange, for you must understand that probably one-third of all the men who live here in the Subura have either taken part in some phase of the construction project over the last ten years or are currently working on its maintenance. The White Crane, my favorite tavern, is but three furlongs from the amphitheater; and if you go there any time after sundown you'll find a crowd who just came from working there. One of them is a burly Gaul named Curtius, a fellow freedman who built the system of pulleys and levers that makes platforms of men and animals rise from the holding areas to the arena floor. In fact, the wily Curtius made the system so intricate that only he can oversee its operation!

I bought Curtius some wine and told him I wanted to extol his achievements in our book. So it was that on the fifth day of the shows, I walked to work with him about two hours before the games were to begin. Rather than go through the spectator entrances, we went to the rear of the gladiatorial school, where everyone seemed to know Curtius. Just inside the outer wall you can descend into the underground tunnel that takes gladiators on a gradual incline right onto the arena floor. So, as we approached the light at the end of the tunnel, I imagined myself wearing a helmet and holding a sword and shield.

And suddenly there we were, standing at the large entrance, looking up into the four tiers of seats that encircle the arena. I'm sure you would have shouted for them to bring on a few tigers. I admit my own reaction was of frozen terror at knowing what took place there. The seats were empty, but clusters of workers were going about their business quietly. On the arena floor crews of stage equipment handlers were struggling to set in place the statue of a pharaoh, for the morning's theme was to be an animal hunt in the hills around the Upper Nile. So as I looked about I beheld the fallen columns of an Egyptian temple, steep hills, giant boulders and several palm trees—all of it built by the carpenters of the amphitheater and stored below.

Yet the most fascinating thing of all was getting to see the unfurling of the velarium. I think I wrote you before about this canopy that protects spectators from the sun. Rather than a single "tent," as you might imagine, it consists of a hundred or more long, thin pieces of canvas. So intricate is the whole operation of raising and lowering these "sails" that it requires a special unit of 100 men from the fleet to come up from Misenum each time the games are held.

We happened to walk in just as they were at work, and I could quickly see why only sailors could do the job. Protruding from the top of the amphitheater all around its circumference are large timbers, almost like the masts of ships. From these are suspended a spider-like network of ropes, which are drawn taut by pulling on them from ground level and fastening them to large winches. The marines fasten the ends of the rolled-up pieces of canvas canopy to the vertical timbers and then allow the rolls to unravel downward atop their rope supports. At that point the most nimble of the sailors climbs out to the central ring at the end and ties all the pieces of canvas together. This leaves a perfect circular gap in the center, through which the wind can pass.

There are two main entrances to the floor of the arena. There is the one for gladiators that we arrived by, then another for the unfortunate. Located at the opposite

end, it is called the Libitinarian gate (yes, after the god of funerals), and is used to cart off dead beasts and gladiators.

But there are many smaller entrances around the perimeter as well, and here is where my friend Curtius comes in. Each of these small gates is connected inside to a platform which is raised and lowered to bring forth animals.

Going into the lower regions of the amphitheater was quite another experience—more like what I imagine a visit to Hades would be like. It is hardly what one would put in a tourist book, but I will complete my report to you nonetheless. The first thing that strikes one beyond all else is the overpowering and unforgettable stench of men and animals: sweat, urine, shit, hay, rotting meat and death. The next thing is the terrifying mixture of animal sounds. It is frightfully dark in there and the passageways twist about so narrowly that my constant fear of suddenly walking into an escaped lion at the next turn was scarcely calmed by Curtius' assurance that all are safely caged. It is also wet and dank. The drainage from the naval battles isn't complete and the wetness may never go away because the underground stream continues to seep through here and there.

Curtius could sense my discomfort and seemed bent on diverting my attention by lecturing me about the huge pulleys, winches and gears used to work the elevators. But in truth I listened to only half of it, for my eyes kept going to the cages of all these unfortunate creatures that had been captured and brought to this place for the amusement of man, the most bloodthirsty animal of all. At one point, as Curtius was showing off some piece of equipment, I kept staring at a giant bear who was pinned inside a cage so small that he could scarcely have stood upright. Flies crawled all over his matted hair, yet he had not even enough room to swat them. I could not think of the glory or excitement humans would feel at what would soon take place. All I could think of was that bear. I actually prayed for him and all the animals and men who would lose their lives that day. I know you are already squirming at what a fool your cousin is, but I even prayed that they might comfort

themselves with visions of running freely through the cool, green forests and mountains that they were snatched away from.

In time one could hear the sound above us building above to thunderous proportions. Curtius, who had already begun to supervise the loading of cages onto the elevators, said he could tell from the increased noise level that it was time for me to go up and grab a seat, for the amphitheater would be full again as it had been every day of the games. I asked instead that he merely lead me again to the end of the gladiatorial walkway so I could see what the place looked like with a full crowd. Soon I stood among a few of the workers who were loitering about and I felt that same sickness in the pit of my stomach as I looked above me. In the tier nearest the arena I could see the well-dressed personages of knights as they began emerging through the 14 entranceways reserved for each of their 14 orders. Just to my left was the red-cushioned pavilion reserved for the emperor and his party. It was still empty, but I faced it and tried to imagine myself forcing out the words: "Hail Cæsar. Those who are about to die salute you!"

At first I couldn't equate the loud roar I heard with the fact that the amphitheater was still only half full. Then I realized that most of it came from the sound of the wind rushing through the "sails" of the velarium. People have told me that this can be greater than the roar of a full crowd. But Curtius says there is still a more awesome sound—that the roar of a dozen lions is so chilling as to render a crowd silent and becalm the velarium.

I walked quickly back down the gladiatorial entrance. I knew that in Rome the gladiators don't fight until the afternoon show, but all I could think of was that a gang of them might come clattering right at me in the tunnel and sweep me along with them just for the hell of it.

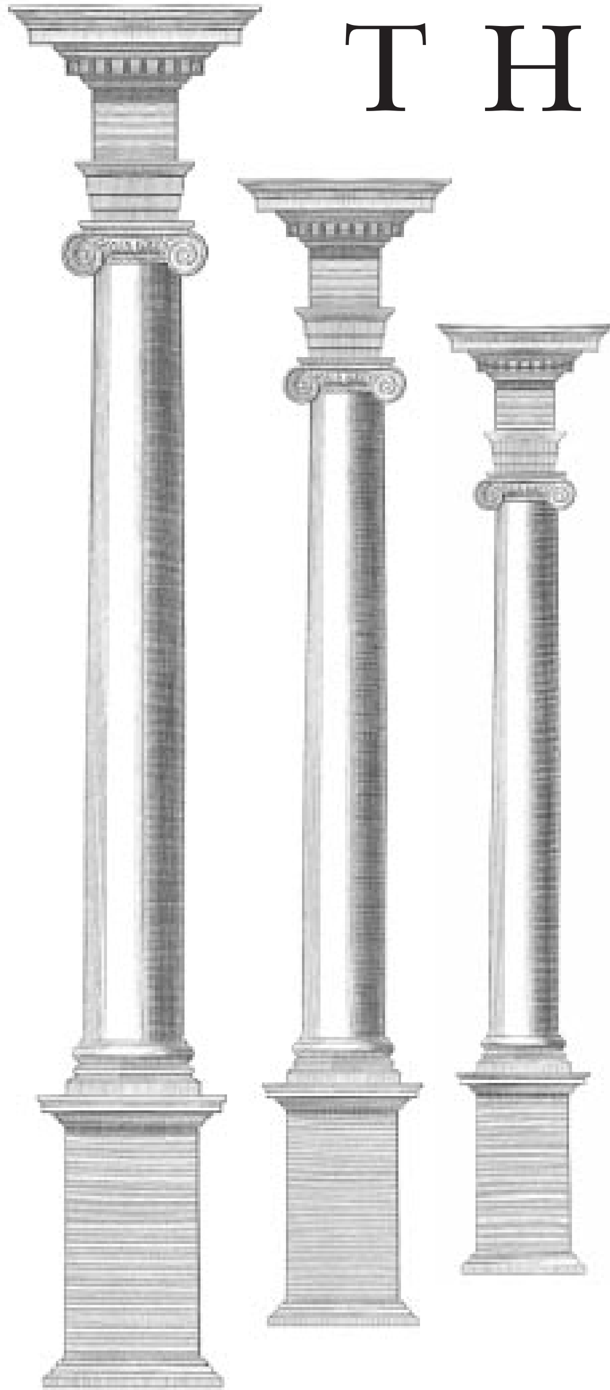
Yes, Eumenes, my step was as quick as I could make it the rest of the way. Outside, I could hear the crowd noise swelling as I walked back to the White Crane and ordered extra wine with my meal. But I could hardly taste either food or wine for the stench that remained in my nostrils.

No, little of this was in the books that burned up, nor will it be when we do the new ones. So why do I write about subterranean smells and the like? Well, you always want to know what I'm doing, and that's what I did. But maybe I report such things also to make you think about the nature of the world we live in and what other courses might be open to us while we still have hope of distinguishing man from beast. So as well might the manuscript that accompanies this letter. This is the final installment of the book I have been writing. I again entreat it to your safekeeping—especially this time because neither the scriptorium nor my apartment makes a fitting storage place with so many lodgers afoot and other disruptions taking place. This time I will refrain from begging you not to read it. Yea, I urge you to do so because it may open more insights to your cousin and the times he has lived in.

Diodoros is still with me—my rock in troubled times—and sends you fond greetings even though I know his presence in Pergamum made you uncomfortable.

Farewell, my cousin, and may at least one half of the Pergamum Publishers continue to prosper.

—— Attalos



THE REAPING

BOOK III

A. D. 64—65

Corruption and crumbling morals pervaded the empire. Could "good" people find shelter from it only in Christianity, or in the punctilious practice of Judaism? To say so would be to exclude the influence of many teachers, sages and philosophers. Admittedly, their influence was minimized by the fact that they tended to live spare lives of solitude. At most they might lead only a small circle of students. Nevertheless, many proved to be the ballast that kept whole nations from sinking when they lost their way in terrible storms.

I have decided to balance this story by telling of one philosopher who lived through the treacherous, tumultuous years that I am about to describe, when the Roman world probably came closer to destroying itself than at any other time in history. And as you watch this conflagration unfold, keep in mind that there were a few men who stood above the kings and conspirators and who remained reservoirs of reason when it was so desperately needed.

Apollonius of Tyana was such a man. As you will see, his insights and prophesies were to influence the three emperors of this period. However, I have also included Apollonius because I am fascinated by the fact that he was born around the same time as Paul and in a city not far from Tarsus. As did Paul, he studied briefly in Tarsus as a boy, then lived in Syrian Antioch for awhile and traveled through Asia Minor.

Apollonius was born of a wealthy family in Tyana. They say the child was not only beautiful to behold, but very early showed an astonishing ability to learn his letters. At 14, after going to study in Tarsus and finding the city too raucous and his teacher too Epicurean, he persuaded his father to send him to the quieter town of Ægæ to study in its Temple of Asclepius. There he could observe

the healing that took place while also studying Plato, Chrysippus and other philosophers.

But the special passion of Apollonius was Pythagoras. Imagining himself, like the ancient philosopher-poet from Samos, as driven by a higher spirit than pleasures of the flesh, Apollonius had decided by age 16 that he would live by different rules than other men. When asked when he began this departure, he answered: "At the point at which physicians begin; for the first thing they do is purge the bowels of their patients. Thus they prevent some from being ill at all, and heal others." So Apollonius thereafter rejected all forms of flesh because it was unclean and "made the mind gross." Wine he acknowledged to be clean because it was yielded by a carefully domesticated plant; but he rejected this, too, because it "endangers the mental balance" and "darkens the ether inside, which is the soul." Henceforth, said Apollonius, he would eat only bread, dried fruits and vegetables.

Nor would he dress the same as others. He took to walking without shoes and clad himself only in linen, declining to wear any animal product. He let his hair grow long and dwelled in whatever temple he happened to be studying in the course of his travels.

Some might think that such a demeanor would repulse those who dressed and acted otherwise. But as Apollonius continued to live at the temple of Asclepius for two more years, studying and assisting in the cure of patients, his reputation grew such that people flocked to see him from all over Cilicia.

Mostly, he was known for his common sense. A biographer reports of a wealthy young wastrel who beseeched the temple god to cure him of his dropsy, which had been brought on by gluttonous eating and drinking. Although the patient refused to relax his appetites, he would constantly offer sacrifices to Asclepius and pray for a cure. The young man grumbled that he received no attention from the god. But one night Asclepius came to him in a dream and said "You might do better to consult Apollonius."

The next day he confronted the younger Apollonius and asked, "What on earth is there in your wisdom that I can profit by?"

"Well, I can advise you of what, under the circumstances, will be most valuable to you," said Apollonius.

"By Zeus," thundered the impatient patient, "I want the health which Asclepius promises but never delivers!"

"Hush," said Apollonius, "for he gives it to those who desire it. But you do things that irritate and aggravate your disease—you wallow in luxury and accumulated viands upon your worn-out and water-logged stomach. It's as if you are choking your water with a flood of mud."

It was not exactly medical terminology, but it was this clear imagery that made the man understand and begin his road to recovery.

Apollonius also had the gift of prophecy as early as his days at Ægæ in Cilicia. The governor of the province at the time was known as a bully and a pervert. Not long after he heard of the handsome lad who lived at the temple of Asclepius, he journeyed there from Tarsus under the pretense of being sick and needing the god's help. Finding Apollonius walking alone, the governor asked if he would intervene with the god on his behalf.

"What recommendation does any good man need?" replied Apollonius. "For the gods love men of virtue and welcome them without any introductions."

"Because the god has invited you, Apollonius, to be his guest, but so far has not invited me," said the governor.

"Nay," was the reply, "tis only my humble merits, as far as a young man can display good qualities, which have been my passport to the favor of Asclepius. If you really care for righteousness, go boldly to the god and tender what prayer you will."

"By Zeus, I will," said the older man, "if you will allow me to address you with a prayer first."

"Why to me?"

"Ah, a prayer that can only be made to the beautiful, which is that they may grant to others participation in their beauty and not deny their charms," he said with a wink and a vile leer.

Apollonius stared him down. "You are mad, you scum," he said coldly.

This enflamed the other. Now he threatened to have the lad's head cut off.

"Ha!" said Apollonius. "It is true that a head will roll — and it will be next Thursday!"

With that he walked off. I can verify that on the day Apollonius had mentioned, the governor was captured on a highway by Roman soldiers and executed for having conspired with the king of Cappadocia against the interests of Rome.

By the time Apollonius was 20 he had made some other important decisions for himself as well. First, he vowed never to wed or have any connection with women. Second, he determined to go to the farthest extremities of the earth in his study of religions and philosophies. And third, he vowed that for the first five years of these journeys he would not speak. Why? Because holding his tongue, a biographer related, "would allow his eyes and mind to take note of very many things that...would be stored in his memory." And the memory, said Apollonius, is one's most treasured possession.

Armed with these resolutions, he spent his whole life traveling. He went to Antioch and lived in the temple of Apollo in the infamous Grove of Daphne. He learned from Arabs how to understand the prophesies of birds. He journeyed to Babylonia, was the king's honored guest and interpreted dreams with the Magi. He crossed the mighty Caucasus and watched the nomads along the Cophen River hunt lions and leopards. He saw herds of elephants along the

Indus River and worshipped at shrines established by Alexander's armies centuries before. He met with Brahmans at the Temple of the Sun in Taxila. He traversed the length of India to the Ganges, where he stayed with the sages and learned their wisdom. Then he went through all of Egypt and Libya, observing their religions and customs.

Wherever he was, Apollonius would begin his day with devotions to the sun, as Pythagoras would have it. When praying to the god of any temple, he would simply say, "O ye gods, grant unto me that which I deserve." The rest of the day, as Damis, a diarist who accompanied him, records it,

> If he were in a Greek city, he would call the priests together and talk wisely about the gods, and would correct them if they had departed from the traditional forms. If, however, the rites were barbarous and peculiar, then he would find out who had founded them and on what occasion they were established. And having learnt the sort of cult it was, he would make suggestions, in case he could think of any improvement upon them. Then he would go in quest of his followers and bid them ask any questions they liked. For he said it was the duty of philosophers of his school to converse at the earliest dawn with the gods, and during the rest of the day to discuss human affairs in friendly intercourse.[1]

In all things Apollonius urged common sense and moderation. For instance, when in Babylonia, the king was so pleased with their friendship that he offered Apollonius any ten requests if only he would name them. Apollonius asked only that he be provided with bread and dried fruits instead of the rich viands of the king's banquet. When the same king insisted that his guest stay in lavish palace quarters, Apollonius engaged him as follows. "Supposing, O king, that you came to my city of Tyana and I invited you to live where I live, would you care to do so?"

"Why no," said the king, "unless I were offered a house that was big enough to accommodate my escort, bodyguard and myself in a handsome manner."

"Then," said Apollonius, "I may use the same argument with you. Let me therefore be entertained by some private person who has the same means as myself, and I will visit you as often as you like."

Wherever he went, Apollonius inveighed against the sacrifice of animals, for he revered them all and was said to be able to communicate with many. Once when he had agreed to join the Babylonian king in sacrificing to the sun, he was caught unawares when the king's servants brought out a magnificent white horse of the Nisæan breed. The steed was adorned with all the trappings of a triumph, and the king's priests prepared to sacrifice it. Apollonius could only reply: "Please, O king, go on with your sacrifice in your own way, but permit me to sacrifice in mine." With that he took up a handful of frankincense and said: "O Sun, send me as far over the earth as is my pleasure and thine, and may I make the acquaintance of good men, but never hear anything of bad, nor they of me." And with that he threw the frankincense into the fire and watched the smoke as it curled upwards. Then he said: "Now O king, go on with your sacrifice in accordance with your traditions, for my traditions are such as you see."

In the first year of this chapter, Apollonius had returned from his long sojourn in Babylonia, India and Egypt and now desired to reacquaint himself with Greece. It was an exhilarating time to visit because the next Olympic Games were approaching and festivals and competitions were being held all over Attica and the Peloponnesus. It was also exciting for the band of students who by now accompanied Apollonius wherever he went. They sailed into the Athenian port of Piræus in the height of autumn and in the midst of the festivals that accompanied the celebration of the Eleusian mysteries. Philosophy students were everywhere, some stripped and enjoying the heat, others studying books and some rehearsing speeches or engaging in competitive debate. So well was Apollonius known to them by reputation that when they learned that he was on his way from the seaport to the Acropolis, most of the youths stopped what they were doing and fell in step with him.

Soon everyone in Athens knew that Apollonius was a man who taught philosophy and how worship of the gods was to be conducted—even if it challenged their accepted ways. In succeeding weeks, for instance, when the Athenians were enjoying their festival of Dionysus, Apollonius saw them flocking to the theater and assumed they were going to listen to the traditional processional and rhythmic hymns. But when he heard them dancing lascivious jigs to a pipe that played the sacred epic of Orpheus, he sternly rebuked them. "You are dancing away the reputations of those who lost their lives winning victory at Salamis," he admonished. "If this were a military dance I would say, 'Bravo, soldiers, for you are training yourself for war and I will join you.' But yours is a soft and effeminate dance. And what do you mean by your saffron robes and your purple and scarlet raiment? For surely your victorious ancestors never dressed themselves up this way. No one here bears a helmet, but disguises themselves as female harlequins! What can one say therefore of your national trophies? They are no longer monuments to the shame of the Persians, but to your own shame because you have degenerated so much from those who set them up. Nay, I see you turning to the wind and letting it billow up your skirts so you can pretend you are ships. But surely you might at least have some respect for the winds that were your allies and once blew mightily to protect you. You have turned Boreas, the most masculine of all winds, into a woman."

Apollonius attacked their sport as well. Athenians would flock to theaters to

watch human slaughter, for the show promoters would pay large sums for convicted adulterers, burglars, kidnappers and similar rabble, then pit them against each other in mortal combat. When he was invited to attend, Apollonius refused to enter a place he called "so impure and reeking with gore."

"I am surprised that the goddess [Athena] has not already quit the Acropolis when you shed such blood under her eyes," he said. "For I suspect that presently, when you are conducting the Pan-Athenaic procession, you will no longer be content with bulls, but will be sacrificing whole herds of men to your goddess."

The days that Apollonius had spent in the temples of Asceplius also served him well in his encounters with the afflicted. Damis, who was constantly at his side, cites a case that arose when the philosopher was spending his morning lecturing and discoursing with his own party and the many local students who thronged to be at his side. At one point when they were discussing the proper use of libations in temple rites, there appeared in his audience a young dandy who had so evil a reputation for licentiousness that his conduct had been the subject of coarse street songs. As Apollonius was instructing how to pour a libation for the gods over the handles of the cup (because men are least likely to drink from that part), the youth burst out with loud and coarse laughter. After one or two similar outbreaks, Apollonius looked over at him and said, "It is not yourself who perpetrates this insult, but a demon who drives you on without your knowing it."

Indeed, the youth would laugh at things when no one else laughed. He would burst out crying or talk to himself for no particular reason. So Apollonius, recorded his biographer, got up and fixed his stare on the youth. Very soon the demon within him began to utter in fear and agony much like a torture victim on the rack. The ghost swore he would leave the young man alone and never take possession of anyone again. But Apollonius addressed him with anger as a master might a bad dog or rascally slave. He again ordered the devil to quit the young man and then give a visible sign that he had done so.

"I will throw down yonder statue," said the demon. Just then the lad pointed to one of the images in the portico behind them. The statue began swaying gently, then fell down. The students were aghast with amazement, then clapped their hands as if having seen the cleverest of magic acts on stage. With that the young man rubbed his eyes as if he had been asleep. And as he looked toward the sunlight he assumed a modest demeanor. Gone were his babbling and his spasmodic motions. That day he gave up his dainty dress and the rest of his sybaritic ways. He fell in love with the austere life of the philosopher, donned their cloak and modeled his life upon that of Apollonius.

So did many other aspiring youths. Before long Apollonius would lead a brave band of them to the capital of the empire and to the den of a beast more ferocious than any he had encountered in his far-flung adventures.

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The spring of the first year in this period found Nero more impatient than ever to display his skills as an artist and charioteer. Although he had continued giving some performances in his private gardens in Rome, the small audiences never justified the enormity of the talent expended, in his view. Yet, he couldn't muster the courage to venture onto a more public stage in Rome. But Neapolis was another matter, and it is there that the emperor spent much of the spring playing to a theater packed with notables from all over Campania.

At the same time, a grander scheme was hatching in Nero's mind. He would travel to Athens, Corinth, Olympia and all over Greece to vie for the glorious and long-revered wreaths of its Games. The emperor actually began making plans for it while still in Campania, but when he consulted various augurs and seers about it, they said that the signs weren't propitious at the time. Some say that the people of Rome feared Nero would put an end to the free corn dole in order to help finance his trip, but who am I to say that this would influence the augurs? In any event, Nero announced that for the peoples' sake, he would postpone the trip to Greece. But in the meantime he should not have to suffer cultural deprivation. What followed were a series of feasts in public places as if the whole city were his own home. I will describe only one of them, which occurred at the artificial lake of Augustus and Marcus Agrippa. On one day after exhibiting a wild beast hunt, Nero immediately had water piped into the theater and produced a sea fight. Then the water was let out again for a gladiatorial combat. Then the lake was flooded once more for a costly public banquet, all supervised by the Prætorian prefect Tigellinus.

Now the arrangements for this "floating banquet" were as follows. In the center of the lake were floated dozens of the great wooden casks that ships and taverns use to store wine. On top of these they fastened planks. Nero, Tigellinus and the rest of the imperial party occupied the center, where they sat on purple rugs and soft cushions. The platform was towed about by other vessels, with gold and ivory fittings. The rowers were degenerates, sorted according to age and vice. The lakeside was rung with taverns and brothels, and at night it blazed with lights and echoed with singing and shouting. Inside the brothels were all sorts of high-ranking ladies, and outside them naked prostitutes postured lewdly at all who passed by. For as one observer wrote, the revelers would

> ...enter the brothels and without hindrance have intercourse with any of the women who were seated there, among whom were the most beautiful and distinguished in the city, both slaves and free, courtesans and virgins and married women; and these were not merely of the common people, but also of the very noblest families, both girls and

> grown women. Every man had the privilege of enjoying whichever one he wished, as the women were not allowed to refuse anyone.
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> Consequently, indiscriminate rabble as the throng was, they not only drank greedily but also wantoned riotously. And now a slave would debauch his mistress in the presence of his master, and now a gladiator would debauch a girl of noble family before the eyes of her father. The pushing and fighting and general uproar that took place, both on the part of those who were actually going in and on the part of those who were standing round outside, were disgraceful. Many men met their death in these encounters, and many women, too, some of the latter being suffocated and some being seized and carried off.[2]

Nero himself showed that he was already corrupted by every type of lust. And just in case anyone at all had a lingering doubt, it would have been dispelled a few days later when the emperor went through a formal wedding ceremony with one of a gang of male perverts called Pythagoras. In the presence of witnesses, the emperor put on the bridal veil, gave a dowry, was married and performed in the nuptial bed with his new "mate" as the "wedding" party looked on.

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Rome's revelries came to an abrupt halt in July. For on the nineteenth day of that month, the entire city was swept up in a fire that raged for six days and proved to be the worst in its history. To this day you can see sooty scars on public buildings or go to Ostia and see the rotting piles of charred wood and rubble that were barged down from Rome to clear the way for new construction.

And to this day as well, you can always start an argument in a tavern by claiming either that Nero did or did not start the fire himself.

I will give you a sampling of both versions. One side argues that Nero coveted the lands around the Subura (in and about where the Amphitheater stands today) so that he could build a sprawling new "Golden House" on land big enough for a lake and gardens. So to begin what he might have termed this "municipal land clearance," he sent out agents who pretended to be roving rowdies, using their night torches to set fire to a few buildings each in several parts of the city. The people were soon at their wits end at not being able to find the cause of the fires. Those who ran to help friends in one section would have to run back because they learned their own homes were now burning. Soon there were reports that fire-fighting companies would not act unless paid outrageous fees. When the panicked home dwellers ran to the aqueducts with their own empty pails, they found only trickles and spurts of water because the homes of the rich

had siphoned off so much of the flow. Then came the plundering of burning homes by soldiers and others who were supposedly sent to help.

And watching all this from a porch atop his palace on the Palatine – so the story goes – was the emperor himself. He was dressed in the Greek lyre player's garb and could be heard singing a song he had written himself entitled "The Capture of Troy."

The other version says that this is but fancy embroidery. Nero at the time had been visiting his ancestral home of Antium, some 25 miles to the southwest. The fire, they say, started in the Circus Maximus where it adjoins the Palatine and Cælian hills. It broke out in shops selling oil and other flammable goods. Fanned by a high wind, the conflagration quickly swept the whole length of the Circus. After rampaging over level spaces, it quickly climbed the hills and whirled through the public shrines and homes of the wealthy. Then it returned below, fanning itself through the narrow winding streets of the Subura and surrounding neighborhoods where it seemed almost to be chasing the helpless people as they fled screaming in its path.

Nero, says this version, happened to be returning from his ancestral home of Antium that night and actually reached the city just as the fire was beginning to engulf the Domus Transitoria, the mansion he had built to link the Palatine to the Gardens of Mæcenas on Esquiline Hill. He watched, strumming his lyre, as the flames ravaged the Palatine, including the family palaces of his Julio-Claudian ancestors.

Regardless of the cause or the intent, the fire had consumed all but four of Rome's 14 precincts by the time it spent itself. Three precincts were leveled to the ground. The calamity had no parallel since the destruction of Rome by the Gaul invasions, which had begun exactly on the same date 418 years before. Gone were most of Palatine Hill, the Theater of Taurus, most of the Circus Maximus. Gone were ancient temples and monuments: Servius Tullius' temple of the Moon, the temple vowed by Romulus to Jupiter the Stayer, Numa's sacred residence, Vesta's shrine of Roman household gods, the temples dedicated after the Gallic and Punic wars. But even these losses could not equal what was lost in so many homes of nobles: Greek artistic masterpieces, statues of ancestors and the authentic records of family genealogies.

The fire was so devastating that those who remained alive were said to worry more about whether the city itself would survive than about their own possessions. By the sixth day, some survivors were already camped out in temples and public monuments, where they clung to their few remaining possessions. Others hovered about the city walls or in fields on the outskirts. But Nero was not indifferent to them. He threw open the Field of Mars as well as his own gardens for relief of the homeless. Some of them were allowed to live in its public buildings and for others he built temporary accommodations. Food was brought

from Ostia and the price of corn slashed sharply. Nero then began clearing housing sites at his own expense before turning them over to their owners. His engineers directed that rubble was to be collected and picked up by empty corn ships returning down the Tiber and dumped into the marshes around Ostia.

The fire caused some good because it prompted many meetings that led to improvements in city planning and regulations for better public safety. Once reconstruction began, it would be on streets that were made broader and straighter. Heights of houses were to be limited and each was to be equipped with firefighting equipment. All multi-family dwellings were to be built around courtyards and their frontages to be protected by colonnades. No two dwellings could have a common wall. Moreover, a fixed portion of every building had to be untimbered, fireproof stone. The public aqueducts were to be posted with guards to prevent illegal tapping for private uses. Despite steps such as these, Nero could not escape the gossip and derision of Romans that he had been directly responsible for the fire. The prominence and propriety given to the construction of his new Golden House was a daily reminder. Some half-joked that it was so large it would probably stretch all the way to the ancient Etruscan city of Veii some 12 miles outside the city walls. Thus, this graffiti about town:

> All Rome's become one house. To Veii fly,
> Unless it stretch to Veii, bye and bye.

One could also read this on walls:

> While Nero sweetly struck his lyre
> Apollo strung his bow.
> Our prince is now the god of fire,
> The other god our foe. [3]

Many priestly supplications were made to various gods and oracles to ascertain the cause or the divine reason behind the fire. The Sibylline books were consulted and prayers addressed to Vulcan, Ceres, Juno and other gods. Ritual banquets and cleansing rites were held. But nothing seemed to dull the enmity that people felt toward Nero. It was perhaps as long as a year after the fire that he tried to put an end to the persistent suspicions about his own motives. The emperor made it known that the real cause of the fire had been the mysterious Christians. He even referred to them as a "deadly superstition."

Why Christians? Why not blame it on a group of Egyptian astrologers or a gang of unemployed actors or even sabateurs from some hostile foreign power? The best answer is: why *not* Christians? They were a growing group and one that, like the Jews, remained apart from the rest of society. Their "secret" religious

practices made outsiders uneasy and—as today—gave rise to rumors among the ignorant that they held orgies and practiced cannibalism in some secret ritual handed down by their founder that involved drinking blood and eating a body. This same strange "sect" was hated in some families because it had pitted husband against wife, son against father and slave against master.

After the fire had subsided, more than one Roman would swear he had heard a Christian leader preach of a coming day in which the world would be dissolved by flames. And—worst of all for the Christians—what a strange coincidence it was that the fire had spared all of Trastevere, which lies west of the Tiber, and much of the Aventine Hill, which lies just across from it. How interestesting that these were the very places that contained most of the Christian population! And how strange that when one walked these streets one could sense a marked indifference to the civil mourning that all other Romans were displaying at the loss of so many sacred temples and venerated shrines.

It isn't clear how many arrests were made at this time (for hundreds more would be held and tried in the next two years). But it was enough at the time to make the emperor's point. When hunting games were given in the theater, it was thought clever to dress Christians in the skins and make them quarry along with the wild animals. It was also at this time that Christians and other condemned persons were first used to dramatize scenes in stage tragedies. Thus, real "actors" were used when Hercules was burned on a mount or when Adonis was torn to pieces by wild boars or when Icarus was thrown down from the heavens.

The emperor himself seemed to enjoy being in the midst of it. The Circus Maximus was still too destroyed for public use, so Nero increasingly opened his own private circus and surrounding gardens that lay west of the Tiber some four miles from his palace on the Palatine. In both the circus and the gardens Nero reminded one and all who had started the fire. Christians were swabbed with pitch, fastened to poles, and made into human torches to help light the gardens at night or be displayed as exhibits in the circus. And in both cases, the emperor was often present, mingling with the crowd in the gardens or driving about the circus dressed as a charioteer.

But the spectacle soon sickened even the most hostile Roman. As one observer wrote: "Despite their guilt as Christians and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest."

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WITH THE NEED TO REBUILD THE CAPITAL and showpiece of the world as quickly as possible (lest client states sense a weakness and rebel), the demand for money was intensified. With Nero also building the world's most ridiculously lavish