

NERO'S INCENDIARY SONG.

("Amis! ennui nous tue.")

[Bk. IV. xv., March, 1825.]

Aweary unto death, my friends, a mood by wise abhorred,  
Come to the novel feast I spread, thrice-consul, Nero, lord,  
The Caesar, master of the world, and eke of harmony,  
Who plays the harp of many strings, a chief of minstrelsy.

My joyful call should instantly bring all who love me most,--  
For ne'er were seen such arch delights from Greek or Roman host;  
Nor at the free, control-less jousts, where, spite of cynic vaunts,  
Austere but lenient Seneca no "Ercles" bumper daunts;

Nor where upon the Tiber floats Aglae in galley gay,  
'Neath Asian tent of brilliant stripes, in gorgeous array;  
Nor when to lutes and tambourines the wealthy prefect flings  
A score of slaves, their fetters wreathed, to feed grim, greedy  
things.

I vow to show ye Rome aflame, the whole town in a mass;  
Upon this tower we'll take our stand to watch the 'wilder'd pass;  
How paltry fights of men and beasts! here be my combatants,--

The Seven Hills my circus form, and fiends shall lead the dance.

This is more meet for him who rules to drive away his stress--  
He, being god, should lightnings hurl and make a wilderness--  
But, haste! for night is darkling--soon, the festival it brings;  
Already see the hydra show its tongues and sombre wings,

And mark upon a shrinking prey the rush of kindling breaths;  
They tap and sap the threatened walls, and bear uncounted deaths;  
And 'neath caresses scorching hot the palaces decay--  
Oh, that I, too, could thus caress, and burn, and blight, and slay!

Hark to the hubbub! scent the fumes! Are those real men or ghosts?  
The stillness spreads of Death abroad--down come the temple posts,  
Their molten bronze is coursing fast and joins with silver waves  
To leap with hiss of thousand snakes where Tiber writhes and raves.

All's lost! in jasper, marble, gold, the statues totter--crash!  
Spite of the names divine engraved, they are but dust and ash.  
The victor-scourge sweeps swollen on, whilst north winds sound the horn  
To goad the flies of fire yet beyond the flight forlorn.

Proud capital! farewell for e'er! these flames nought can subdue--  
The Aqueduct of Sylla gleams, a bridge o'er hellish brew.  
'Tis Nero's whim! how good to see Rome brought the lowest down;  
Yet, Queen of all the earth, give thanks for such a splendid crown!

When I was young, the Sybils pledged eternal rule to thee;  
That Time himself would lay his bones before thy unbent knee.  
Ha! ha! how brief indeed the space ere this "immortal star"  
Shall be consumed in its own glow, and vanished--oh, how far!

How lovely conflagrations look when night is utter dark!  
The youth who fired Ephesus' fane falls low beneath my mark.  
The pangs of people--when I sport, what matters?--See them whirl  
About, as salamanders frisk and in the brazier curl.

Take from my brow this poor rose-crown--the flames have made it pine;  
If blood rains on your festive gowns, wash off with Cretan wine!  
I like not overmuch that red--good taste says "gild a crime?"  
"To stifle shrieks by drinking-songs" is--thanks! a hint sublime!

I punish Rome, I am avenged; did she not offer prayers  
Erst unto Jove, late unto Christ?--to e'en a Jew, she dares!  
Now, in thy terror, own my right to rule above them all;  
Alone I rest--except this pile, I leave no single hall.

Yet I destroy to build anew, and Rome shall fairer shine--  
But out, my guards, and slay the dolts who thought me not divine.  
The stiffnecks, haste! annihilate! make ruin all complete--  
And, slaves, bring in fresh roses--what odor is more sweet?

H.L. WILLIAMS