



THE HISTORY OF NERO

JACOB ABBOTT

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he had not received visitors was, that the state of his health was very infirm, but that he entertained none but friendly feelings toward Piso, and wished him prosperity and success.

Nero determined to consider this as proof that Seneca was privy to the conspiracy, and that he secretly abetted it. At least he determined, for a first step, to send an officer with a band of armed men to arrest him, and to lay the crime to his charge. Seneca was not in the city at this time. He had been absent in Campania, which was a beautiful rural region, south of Rome, back from Misenum. He was, however, that very day on his return to Rome, and Silvanus, the officer whom Nero sent to him, met him on the way, at a villa which he possessed a few miles from Rome. The name of this villa was Nomentanum. Seneca had stopped at the villa to spend the night, and was seated at the table with Paulina his wife, when Silvanus and his troop arrived.

The soldiers surrounded the house, so as to prevent all possibility of escape, and posted sentinels at the doors. Silvanus and some of his associates then went in, and entering the hall where Seneca was at supper, they informed him for what purpose they were come. Silvanus repeated what Natalis had testified in respect to the messages which had passed between Seneca and Piso. Seneca admitted that the statement was true, but he declared that the word which he had sent to Piso was only an ordinary message of civility and friendliness; it meant nothing more. Finding that no farther explanation could be obtained, Silvanus left Seneca in his villa, with a strong guard posted around the house, and returned to Rome to report to Nero.

When Nero had heard the report, he asked Silvanus whether Seneca appeared sufficiently terrified by the accusation to make it probable that he would destroy himself that night.² Silvanus answered no. "He displayed," said he, "no marks of fear. There was no agitation, no sign of regret, no token of sorrow. His words and looks bespoke a mind calm, confident and firm."

"Go to him," rejoined Nero, "and tell him that he must make up his mind to die."

Silvanus was thunderstruck at receiving this order. He could not believe it possible that Nero would really put to death a man so venerable in years and wisdom, who had been to him all his life, in the place of a father. Instead of proceeding directly to Seneca's house he went to consult with the captain of the guard, who, though really one of the conspirators, had not yet been accused, and was still at liberty, though trembling with apprehension at the imminence of his danger. The captain, after hearing the case, said that nothing was to be done but to deliver the message.

² It seems to have been considered by public men in those days, that to resolve on self-destruction was a much more honorable course to pursue in an extreme emergency like this, than to wait to be condemned and executed by the officers of the law. The attempt to frighten a man into the act of killing himself was accordingly *one* of the various modes which a tyrant might resort to, to remove those who were obnoxious to him.

