

He declared that he saw darkness in front of him in the form of a black cloud. From that cloud came forth faces in which he saw his mother, his wife, and his brother. His teeth were chattering from fright; still his soul of a comedian found a kind of charm in the horror of the moment. To be absolute lord of the earth and lose all things, seemed to him the height of tragedy; and faithful to himself, he played the first rôle to the end. A fever for quotations took possession of him, and a passionate wish that those present should preserve them for posterity. At moments he said that he wished to die, and called for Spiculus, the most skilled of all gladiators in killing. At moments he declaimed, "Mother, wife, father, call me to death!" Flashes of hope rose in him, however, from time to time, — hope vain and childish. He knew that he was going to death, and still he did not believe it.

They found the Nomentan Gate open. Going farther, they passed near Ostianum, where Peter had taught and baptized. At daybreak they reached Phaon's villa.

There the freedmen hid from him no longer the fact that it was time to die. He gave command then to dig a grave, and lay on the ground so that they might take accurate measurement. At sight of the earth thrown up, however, terror seized him. His fat face became pale, and on his forehead sweat stood like drops of dew in the morning. He delayed. In a voice at once abject and theatrical, he declared that the hour had not come yet; then he began again to quote. At last he begged them to burn his body. "What an artist is perishing!" repeated he, as if in amazement.

Meanwhile Phaon's messenger arrived with the announcement that the Senate had issued the sentence that the "paricide" was to be punished according to ancient custom.

"What is the ancient custom?" asked Nero, with whitened lips.

"They will fix thy neck in a fork, flog thee to death, and hurl thy body into the Tiber," answered Epaphroditus, abruptly.

Nero drew aside the robe from his breast.

"It is time, then!" said he, looking into the sky. And he repeated once more, "What an artist is perishing!"

At that moment the tramp of a horse was heard. That was the centurion coming with soldiers for the head of Ahenobarbus.