

NERO DE MORIBUS

BY M. J. GOLDBLOOM

PLACE: A room in the palace of Nero, Rome.

TIME: 60 A. D.

CHARACTERS: Nero Claudius Cæsar, a brilliant but rather erratic youth of 23, Emperor of Rome.

Seneca, teacher of Nero, a well-known Stoic,
not too clever.

Paul, a Nazarene, formerly Saul, a Pharisee.

SENECA—Nero, this is Paul, the Jew who's here on an appeal to your judgment in some religious quarrel or other in Jerusalem. I've been talking to him and found him quite interesting. He's really very well educated. I brought him to you because I thought you might enjoy conversing with him, and besides, it might be well for you to see what he's like before passing judgment on him.

NERO—According to Horace, Aristius Fuscus, that man "whole of life and free from crime," refrained from business on Saturday in order not to insult your people, Paul, so I suppose I can't very well do less than give you a few minutes of my time before having you executed, especially since Seneca assures me I'll enjoy the conversation.

PAUL—To a free-born Roman citizen, Cæsar, you could grant no less.

NERO—Seneca, what are the charges against this fellow?

SENECA—Inciting to riot, blasphemy, sedition, disorderly conduct, and holding a public meeting without a license.

NERO—Oh, I see. He got up on a street-corner and said something that someone in authority didn't like. Well, I'll tell you what, Paul. If I find your conversation sufficiently interesting and intelligent, I'll let you off, but if you turn out a bore, like some of Seneca's other friends, I'll crucify you, and you'll have cause to be thank-

ful that my naturally gentle disposition won't permit me to treat you in accordance with your deserts.

SENECA—I'm sure that you'll find Paul very interesting, Nero.

NERO—I hope so, for his sake. Now, Paul, what did you say to get yourself into trouble?

PAUL—I merely asserted the immortality of the soul.

NERO—Well, I don't see just what there is for anyone to be annoyed at in that, although it seems to me a rather vicious doctrine, tending to take men's minds off this world in favor of a problematical next.

PAUL—But, Cæsar, that is just the highest virtue of a belief in immortality. Man should turn away from this world, for it is wicked.

NERO—What! do you call this world wicked, in which there are so many fair prospects for the eye, so many pleasing sounds for the ear, and in which one may know the many and various joys of the body, the pleasures of eating, drinking, and especially love? What have you to say to such blasphemy, Seneca?

SENECA—I agree with you Nero, that Paul is wrong in saying we should turn from this world, but you seem to me to advance utterly improper reasons. We should think of this world, not, as you suggest, as the scene of our sensual gratifications, but rather as the sphere of our duties. Only a very few indeed, Nero, can be happy, like you, in the immediate satisfaction of their every desire. For most, the pleasures of this world are far outweighed by its pains, and hence for them the argument in favor of this world based on the joy of life possesses no force. But all alike, pauper or publican, slave or Cæsar, have their duties in this world, and hence all alike should feel impelled to devote themselves to their duties in it, and to it as the sphere of their duties rather than to any chimerical other world.

NERO—Your arguments, Seneca, have succeeded in convincing me that Paul is, in a way, right. For I see that, as you say, this world offers no worth-while attractions to the overwhelming majority of my subjects. Hence it is well, even perhaps essential, that they should keep their eyes fixed, not on this world, but on some other. For if they were to keep their attention centered on this world, they could not well help seeing it for what it is, and realizing their own misery and its contrast with the happiness of the few, which is obtained by their oppression and starvation. And then, as always oc-

curs when they see the real state of things, they would rise up and deprive us of our privileges, and perhaps also of our lives. This unfortunate state of affairs is happily averted by religion, which, turning men's hearts towards heavenly things, prevents them from pondering their earthly woes. What has your religion to say, Paul, as to the proper behaviour for the poor?

PAUL—He whom I preach said, "Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's and to God the things that are God's." But I myself have said also, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation."

NERO—An admirable religion for the people, to be sure. An excellent slave-morality it is. Religion is in all truth the opiate of the masses and a most necessary and efficient opiate at that. It is a great comfort to a slave and his family, when, having toiled from dawn to dark of a scorching summer's day under the lash of an overseer in a Sicilian wheat-field, they gather around the altar to render thanks to Juno Lucina that the latest baby has been still-born and will not have to endure the same travesty of life as its parents. And think of the joy of the free-born Roman citizen who, though hungry and ragged, is enabled by the beneficent influence of religion to celebrate the Saturnalia and Floralia, or to honor Bacchus, Venus of the market-place, or even Hercules in the amphitheatre. Yes, it is fortunate for me and those who, like me, have plenty, that there is religion to turn the eyes of the masses away from this world and their sufferings in it to some problematical other, where they may find bliss, or at least to gods, by trusting in whom they may be comforted, and may not feel their burdens so heavily.

SENECA—You seem to think, Nero, that only by being made to turn their eyes away from this world to some other can the people be made to suffer peacefully and willingly the miserable lot which they must here endure. But this is not so at all, for the consideration that it is their duty to obey their masters, and to labour for them, is by itself quite sufficient to cause them patiently to bear their suffering, and gladly to serve in order that the chosen few may have plenty.

NERO—You, Seneca, keep talking about duty. Will you kindly oblige us by informing us what you conceive this duty to be?

SENECA—A man's duty is that which he must do if he would be righteous.

NERO—And by what method, will you be so kind as to tell us, do you plan to discover what course of conduct a man who would be righteous will pursue?

SENECA—That, Nero, is a question very simply answered. Every man has within himself a conscience, implanted by nature, and which tells him to act in accordance with the law of nature. All that is necessary for a man to do in order to be righteous is, that he follow the dictates of his conscience in all things. What could be simpler than that?

NERO—Your solution, Seneca, is indeed simple, so simple as a matter of fact, that when carefully examined, it proves, like almost all simple solutions, to involve a number of irresolvable difficulties. First and foremost, permit me to ask what we are going to do about men who are so inconsiderate as to have consciences which neglect to dictate that they follow the law of nature? It seems to me quite conceivable, even highly probable, that such persons may exist, especially in view of the rather distressing fact, that you Stoics, while perfectly agreed that your consciences direct you to follow the law of nature, have nevertheless managed to disagree, as to just what the terms of that law of nature are, which your consciences direct you to follow. And not only that, but do not all Stoics differ radically from all Epicureans in their views as to what is right?

SENECA—What, Nero, would you assign any value to the opinions of the Epicureans on any subject whatsoever! Has all my teaching been in vain! Have all my patient labors been in sufficient to preserve you from the pernicious doctrines of that abominable sect! O, Nero!

NERO—I was not advocating the beliefs of the Epicureans; I was merely pointing out that they differ from yours, a fact which you seem hardly inclined to dispute. And while the Epicureans may be most detestable persons, they are nevertheless existing human beings, and since their consciences do not dictate the same course of action as yours, why then it is obvious that conscience is not sufficient by itself to determine what is right and what is wrong.

SENECA—But the Epicureans, knowing what is right, merely re-

frain, for the sake of their personal comfort, from doing or even declaring it, and hence are wicked.

NERO—In that case I need only point to the Cynics, against whom it is obvious that you could not possibly level any such accusation, and who, indeed, might well denounce you in just such terms. For they, in truth, agree with you that men should live according to the dictates of their consciences, but they appear to have consciences which demand of them far stricter and more uncomfortable modes of behaviour than those to which yours lead you. So you see, Seneca, that if you declare that every man's conscience should be his guide, you will find very little justification for any code of morals, inasmuch as the disagreement of one individual will destroy the universal validity of your whole system, and each man will be a law unto himself. Is this, Seneca, what you desire? If so, then where does your concept of duty come in? How can you possibly justify it?

SENECA—Well then, though it would appear to lead to no solution if we accept the validity of the judgments of every man's conscience, I think it is quite possible for us to escape the difficulties which you have raised by assuming that only a few men are sufficiently highly developed to see what their duty is.

NERO—But Seneca, waiving the consideration that this latest suggestion of yours fails to provide for a sense of duty in the great mass of the people, and these are therefore left with nothing to hold them in check and prevent them from rising up and ridding themselves of us—waiving this consideration, I say, it is still necessary for me to determine which of several different standards of righteousness is the true one. For as I have already pointed out, great differences of opinion exist between one school and another, and even within any given school itself, as to what constitutes the good life. I am afraid, Seneca, that if you hope to convince me of the tenability of your position it will be necessary for you to supply me with some criterion by which it shall be possible for me to judge between one ethical system and another, and decide wherein lies the true way to achieve the good life. Can you supply such a criterion, Seneca?

SENECA—Nothing could be easier. That concept of duty is the true one which is the most useful. The value of every action is to be

judged by its utility. If a deed produces more pleasure than pain, then duty directs the performance of that deed, and vice versa.

NERO—Yes, nothing could be easier than to set up utility as the final standard to which all codes of duty shall be referred, the final arbiter of the righteousness of any act. It is, however, unfortunately also true that nothing could be more futile. For firstly, Seneca, you will require a table of equivalents for pleasure and pain. Will you not be so kind as to permit me to see this table, which you have, of course, already prepared? For without it you would certainly be unable to decide as to what were the correct ethical standards to adopt, while you have, on the contrary, come to so definite a decision on the subject, that you are quite ready to condemn immediately as a fool, a knave, or both, anyone who may chance to disagree with you concerning it.

SENECA—I am sorry, Nero, but I have never given the question of such a table any thought. Consequently, I am quite unable to present you with it. However, I do not believe it necessary, for we are all able to weigh pleasure against pain with sufficient accuracy for all normal purposes.

NERO—I have no such faith as you appear to possess in the innate ability of the human mind to reduce all the diverse pleasures and pains which exist to one common denominator. However, I might as well waive the point, since any such table is obviously impossible to construct, and your theory has several other equally vulnerable points. Seneca, even leaving out the purely physical effects of every act, is there anything done by anyone at any time, all of whose consequences, with their attendant pleasure and pain, you would be capable of enumerating? Before you reply, consider that every act of one of us may well have influenced every subsequent act of that person, and every act which has immediately affected any other person is likely to have played a part in every subsequent event of his career, and so on indefinitely.

SENECA—No; I can't possibly, I must admit, know all the remote consequences of any act, and I am therefore unable to arrive at any more than a rough approximation in any judgments as to the pleasure and pain produced by any act. But I still maintain that such a rough approximation is ample for any practical purpose. We are justified in neglecting the remote and untraceable effects of any act on the theory that the result of any act in the determination

of other events grows less as we go farther away from the original situation, and furthermore, that in the remote effects of an act, good and evil will probably occur in about equal quantities and counterbalance each other.

NERO—Well, Seneca, although it would be extremely easy for me to point out to you that, in the first place, if you hold an act to be right or wrong according to its consequences, you must assume a universal reign of causality, so that every act may have consequences by which it can be judged, and under such conditions, every act continues of uniform importance in the causal mesh through all eternity; while secondly, if we are justified in assuming that the pleasure and pain attendant on the remote consequences of any act will balance one another, we are equally justified in assuming the same of the immediate effects; although, as I said, these things would be so easy to point out, I shall refrain from doing so. Instead, I shall ask you if you are possessed of perfect and infallible knowledge of the future.

SENECA—Of course not! Such knowledge only a god could possibly possess, never a mortal man.

NERO—Since you admit that you are not equipped with foreknowledge absolute, it is obvious that you can not infallibly predict even the immediate consequences of anything you may do. Hence, if one accept this ethical theory of yours, one must, in order to be logical, concede that, while a deed may be declared good or bad, such judgment may only be given after the fact, and that it is the veriest lunacy to claim that these epithets may be transferred from the deed to the doer.

SENECA—But if we do not accept these criteria, our whole moral system breaks down. Ethical judgments become impossible, and we are left with chaos.

PAUL—Not at all. All your difficulties arise from the fact that you seek for truth in man's reason, rather than in God's will. What is right, is right because God has commanded man to do it, and what is wrong is wrong because He has forbidden it.

NERO—But why should man obey God?

PAUL—Man should do God's will because God created man, who therefore owes Him obedience.

NERO—But if God created man, why did he not create him perfect

and incapable of doing other than God's will? Or is your God limited in His power?

PAUL—God created man free to choose between good and evil, for what would be the point of God creating automatic beings without the power of choice? Where would there be any moral element in such a system? It would be quite as senseless, purposeless, and unintelligent as the most thorough-going mechanistic and materialistic system which man could conceive—such a system, for instance, as Stoicism.

SENECA—You're doing a grave injustice to Stoicism, Paul. Why, the good life is central to Stoicism, and—

NERO—Paul's sideswipes at Stoicism will have to remain unrefuted for the present, Seneca; I have no particular interest in debating the desirability of Stoicism as a cosmological system. But tell me, Paul, does your God give men any incentive to lead them to prefer the good to the bad? For admitting this rather paradoxical idea of free will, I still think that this will ought to have something on a basis of which it may act. If it were to act merely from the motive of obedience, it would, I think, be just such an automatic device as you have already pointed out and can have no ethical value. On the other hand, a will acting purely irrationally would hardly be free in any worth-while sense of the term.

PAUL—God has offered man the most cogent possible reason for choosing to do right rather than wrong—he will suffer eternally in Hell if he doesn't.

NERO—Waiving the question of the moral nature of a God capable of creating beings to suffer eternally, I must still ask you how it is, that, with so good a reason for righteousness as the fear of an eternity of pain, men should nevertheless do wrong so large a portion of the time?

PAUL—In reply to the question which you have been so kind as not to require me to answer, I will say that God had a very good reason for condemning the greater portion of mankind to Hell. For in view of the fact that population tends to increase in geometrical progression while the means of subsistence increase only in arithmetical progression in equal periods, it would have occurred that, if all men had gone to Heaven, the population would very soon have outstripped the food supply, and either all the blessed would have been grossly undernourished, or many, perhaps most, of them would

have had to starve altogether, a state of affairs which would have made a veritable Hell of Heaven. Therefore God created Hell to take care of the surplus population, and sent the greater portion by far to Hell, admitting only a very few indeed to Heaven. As a consequence of this, the per capita food supply of Heaven is constantly increasing, while the means of subsistence in Hell fall ever further behind the needs of the population. Thus the blessed are getting blessed and the damned are getting damner every day. As to your other question, men sin in spite of Hell because they are all descendants of the first man, Adam, and fell in his sin, and are in consequence born in sin and incapable of avoiding it no matter how hard they may try. Adam was created before Hell, and was threatened only with death as the punishment of sin. Moreover, he thought he would be able to keep his disobedience hidden from God—an idea of which he was speedily undeceived.

NERO—Your explanations interest me greatly, Paul, but there are still certain points which I wish you to clear up for me. In the first place, if all men are equally incapable of doing right, how have we the right to make moral judgments concerning them? Are they not all alike sinful, no matter what they may do or refrain from doing? And where, may I ask, will this Heaven which you mention get its inhabitants.

PAUL—You are quite right, Cæsar, in saying that we may not properly make moral judgments concerning men, because they are all equally sinful. For Jesus Christ Himself, Who was God incarnate, said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." And as to the inhabitants of Heaven, while it is impossible for any human being to achieve unaided the goal of righteousness, he may nevertheless do so through the grace of God. For God sacrificed Himself on the cross to atone for the sin of Adam, and man may therefore, by mystically participating in His death and rebirth through the rite of baptism, become pure and incapable of sin.

NERO—Then are all your Christians incapable of sin?

PAUL—That is the case.

NERO—But do not many of them do things which are normally considered sinful?

PAUL—Whatever they may do, no matter how it would normally be considered, cannot be sinful, for they are incapable of sin.

NERO—Thus, Paul, you hold that a man is good or bad irrespective

of the nature of his actions, and solely on a basis of whether or not he has received the divine grace. Am I correct?

PAUL—Quite, Cæsar.

NERO—In that case we have arrived at the conclusion that we are not justified in making moral judgments concerning persons on a basis of their acts. Paul, I must congratulate you on holding so eminently intelligent a view of the subject, and I will gladly acquit you of all charges against you. But don't get into trouble again, because I'm afraid that if you do, the power of public opinion will force me to have you executed.

SENECA—But Nero, these ideas are positively immoral!

NERO—You cannot reject my ethical theory, Seneca, on a basis of ethical considerations derived from your own system, which has already been shown to be untenable. But I have not time for further discussion at present, as I have an appointment with Anicetus, admiral of my fleet, to arrange with him about a little family matter, namely, the assassination of my mother.