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AURELIA;

OR.

THE JEWS OF CAPENA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quignon

PART SECOND.—THE SLAVE.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

On such occasions she would remain at home, thoughtful and dissatisfied; struggling between the long cherished superstitions of paganism, and the vague presentiment of a more perfect creed.

When her father left the treasury to fill the post of collector of the tax on Jews, and moved into the house rented from Tongilianus, the undertaker of funerals, in the neighborhood of Venus Labitina's temple, the quiet happiness in which she had lived was disturbed.

The exigencies of the fiscal office filled by her father were to be a source of constant regret. She mourned over the fate of those poor families pitilessly persecuted for the least delay in the payment of the tax, and although they were Jews—a despised, odious people—she could be met frequently visiting the wretched cabins scattered about the Labitina woods and the vicinity of the Capena gate, to assist the women, children and old men who had been the victims of Cecilius' fiscal rapacity.

'Why did my father accept an office which compels him to make other people unhappy?' she thought, with bitterness; and she tried to persuade him to resign, or, at least to deal more gently with the delinquent tax payers; but, notwithstanding her great influence over Cecilius, the latter, who could not understand that any one should feel an interest in such beggars, was little inclined to give up a salary which was his only means of support, or to stay proceedings out of mere compassion.

The vesper's attentions became a new source of sorrow for Cecilia. Not that she was unwilling to change a condition the duties of which were burthensome. Often, in her childish dreams, she had thought of some loved companion, whose life she would embellish with her tender care; more than once she had prayed to her favorite divinities for that unknown being, whom she artlessly hoped to see appear suddenly before her.

But the much desired apparition was anything but charming under the coarse features and the mourning toga of our friend Gurgus. Cecilia, at first, had not taken the slightest notice of the enamored vesper; and when he had grown bold enough to avow his love, her delicate and refined nature revolted at the thought of a marriage which she deemed impossible.

An incident occurred, meanwhile, which, changing her whole life, had filled her heart and given a new direction to the vague thoughts that had so often disturbed her peace of mind. In one of her rambles in the Jewish quarter, she had met a poor old woman, bed ridden by disease, and wanting the most common necessities of life. The kind young girl was deeply moved; and, obeying the generous impulses of her heart, she had become a devoted nurse to the old Jewess bringing her medicine and food, and ministering daily to her wants.

One evening, she was seated by the sick woman's bed-side, holding her withered hand in hers, and talking hopefully of the improvement she had found in her condition, when a voice trembling with emotion, uttered these words close to her ear:

'May Heaven bless you, O gentle maiden, who have taken care of my mother and have relieved her whilst her son was away!'

The young girl turned her head. A young man wearing the 'sagum' or military cloak, with the breast plate, the buckler and shining helmet, was bending over her.

Cecilia started, and could not restrain a cry. She averted her eyes, and stood, blushing, and trying to collect her thoughts. She could not realize the import of the stranger's words.

The old woman had risen from her bed, and clasped the young man in her arms:

'It is my son,' she cried, 'my son who has been returned to me! Oh, yes, dear Olinthus, well may you bless this young girl, for, but for her kindness you should not have found your mother alive!'

Suddenly, the sound of grave voices united in a pious chant, filled the room. These voices coming from under ground seemed to ascend to heaven.

Olinthus remained thoughtful. A struggle was taking place within him. Turning at last to Cecilia:

'Come,' he said, 'the holy mysteries have begun, and you are worthy of entering in the assembly of the faithful. Mother, I will soon re-

turn. I am going to ask God to repay our debt of gratitude to this young girl.'

Cecilia was astonished, but she felt that far from having anything to fear, she could have full confidence in the young soldier. She put her little hand in his, and followed him.

After walking some distance in the dark, they came to the head of a subterranean flight of steps.

'Take care,' said Olinthus to the young girl; 'my brethren are there; you will be directly in their midst. Fear Nothing.'

Cecilia descended until, at the bottom of the steps, her eyes were suddenly dazzled by a bright light.

She had reached the sacred precinct. It was the crypt of the ancient temple of the Muses, which the Christians had discovered, and in which they assembled to praise God, to listen to the instructions of the pontiffs and to celebrate the holy sacrifices.

By the light of the lamps which hung from the ceiling, Cecilia saw a numerous crowd kneeling, and singing the hymns she had heard from above.

To the left were the women: Olinthus led Cecilia among them and crossed over to the right where the men were praying.

The women gave Cecilia the kiss of peace, and made room for her.

At the further end of the crypt, on a little higher ground, was a table around which stood the pontiffs clad in flowing white garments. Upon the table was a cross, a few candles made of the purest wax, small loaves of bread, and vases containing wine.

The songs ceased, and a deep silence reigned. A venerable old man stepped forward, near the table, and beckoned to the others to sit down. He wore a white garment like the other pontiffs, but with some mark of distinction to show that he was the first among them.

The old man commenced by inviting the people to elevate their minds towards God, and when the crowd had replied 'Amen,' he said:

'My brethren, we have received a letter from John, the only one of Christ's apostles who still lives. He advises us that he will soon be among us.'

A suppressed exclamation from all these men and women showed with what joy this news was received.

'My brethren,' resumed the old man, 'the beloved disciple, in his letter, sends you but one recommendation: Charity in Jesus Christ, the love of justice. Love ye one another, have together but one heart and one soul, and you will fulfil the law. Such are the words by which, in ending his letter, he confirms you in the faith of the Word of Life. Yes, my brethren, love one another in poverty, in misfortune, in suffering; let each of you sustain the weak, comfort the afflicted, relieve the poor, and he shall live!—And now,' added the venerable speaker, 'let the catechumens be brought forward.'

Four persons, a man, a woman, and two youths were brought forward and conducted to the priest. It could be easily seen that the four belonged to the same family.

'Flavius Clemens,' said the old man, addressing the chief of this family; 'one of our sisters in Jesus Christ, your aunt Flavia Domitilla, has informed us that you wished to be received in the grace and faith of the true God, together with your wife and your two sons. Do you, do they persist in this resolution?'

'Yes, Anacletus,' replied Flavius Clemens; and those who were with him repeated: 'We persist!'

'Flavius, you are great before the world and, with your wife, the nearest relative of the Emperor. Your two sons are Cæsars, that is, destined to rule the universe. This greatness, these lofty hopes, you may have to sacrifice them to your new faith. Will you do it, and will these children do it?'

'We will!' cried the four neophytes with one voice.

'Will you give up even your lives?' again asked the pontiff.

'Even our lives!' they responded with holy enthusiasm.

Anacletus made the sign of the cross on the forehead of the neophytes, and went through the ceremony of the imposition of hands, to receive them as catechumens. He then informed them that before they could be admitted to the baptism of the faithful, they must be instructed in all the mysteries and live in the strict practice of all the precepts of the religion of Christ.

Then, addressing the people: 'My brethren,' said the pontiff, 'recollect yourselves! now is the time of the holy communion! we are going to break the bread of life and to drink the chalice of salvation.'

All the Christians prostrated themselves, touching the ground with their foreheads.

The priest raised his hands; he then elevated the vases containing the wine, and pronounced

certain words, in a low voice which did not reach Cecilia's ears.

Then, those who surrounded the pontiff, that is the deacons, went amidst the faithful who received from their hands fragments of the consecrated bread, and drank from the same chalice.

After this distribution, they gave each other the kiss of peace, and remained plunged in religious ecstasy.

No sound was heard except the whispering of prayers and the smothered sighs which accompany tears of emotion.

Cecilia could not understand what she saw; she felt, however, that an important religious act was being accomplished.

A deacon offered her some of the bread and wine of which all the women around her had partaken. She declined, for she felt that she was not worthy of touching the sacred food, or of wetting her lips in the blessed cup.

The deacon, surprised at her refusal, inquired whether she was not one of the faithful.

She replied that she was the daughter of Cecilia.

A subdued rumor among those who heard the answer, expressed the surprise it caused. No one could understand how she had penetrated into the assembly of the saints.

The deacon hastened to inform the pontiff, who raised his voice to ask if any one had infringed the rules of the mysteries by bringing this heathen to witness them.

Olinthus came forward.

'This young girl,' he said, 'is the same who, for some time past, has been visiting our poor homes, to relieve our brethren's sorrows and dry their tears. To her, my mother—poor old Eutychia—owes her life; and when, but a while ago, I found her near my mother's bedside, it seemed to me that God inspired me to lead her to him. She is already our sister by her charity, and I feel confident that she will soon be so by her faith.'

'You have done right, Olinthus, and I absolve you,' said the pontiff. 'This maiden is not unknown to us; we have heard of her kindness to our brethren. In the name of Christ, we bless her!'

An aged woman then approached Cecilia.

'Child,' she said, 'you are worthy of knowing the God we serve; He visited you, when He gave you compassion and love for those who suffer. Come with me, I shall teach you His law.'

The language of this venerable woman was gentle and caressing; her words went to Cecilia's heart.

The mysteries being over, the crowd retired slowly, and Cecilia followed the poor woman, who held her affectionately by the hand. The amiable girl felt as if she were dreaming; she could not fathom the meaning of all she had heard and seen. But her heart was deeply moved, and ineffable thoughts filled her mind.

She seemed to recognize those words of peace, union and love to which she had listened—her truth-seeking soul had listened long ago; those sacred songs had for her a sense; she understood those men and women, now silent and collected, they uniting their voices in prayer; they honored divinity better than all those she had seen daily in the ceremonies of her pagan creed, and in the temples of Rome.

Then, that consular citizen, that illustrious matron, those two young men, proclaimed Cæsars—all those worldly honors despised, and death preferred to life—had filled her soul with admiration and astonishment.

They had reached another part of the crypt and a new spectacle offered itself to Cecilia's eyes.

'Take a seat by me, my dear child,' said her aged companion.

Two long tables placed parallelly, ran nearly the whole length of the subterranean room. They were covered with the simplest articles of food; bread, eggs, milk, a few dishes of meat, and fruit.

The men went to one of the tables, over which the pontiff who had celebrated the mysteries, presided, seated on a stool a little higher than the rest.

The old Jewess who accompanied Cecilia, took a similar seat honor at the head of the women's table.

The pontiff stood up and blessed the food; and all proceeded to eat. The conversation, carried on in a low voice, became general and characterized by a friendly effusion mingled with reserve.

'These are our agapæ or feasts of charity,' remarked the old woman to Cecilia; 'we have always after the holy mysteries, in order to tighten the bonds that unite us, and to remind us that permitted pleasures, or necessary pain, all must be in common between us.'

Cecilia noticed that this old woman who spoke to her with the tenderness of a mother, was the recipient of great marks of respect from all those

present. Even the pontiff had bowed low when she passed near him.

It was, also, with no little astonishment that she saw Flavius Clemens and his two sons waiting humbly on the men, whilst his wife and another matron, whose appearance indicated her high rank, filled the same office at the women's table. She remembered the Saturnalia, where the masters became the servants of their slaves, and the Matronalia during which the Roman ladies abdicated temporarily their pride to become dependent on their inferiors; but she had never heard that the consuls and their wives, and the heirs to the empire had ever submitted to such trials.

The old Jewess seemed to read her young companion's thoughts:

'My dear child,' she said, 'among us the greatest must yield to the smallest. Our God humbles the mighty and exalts the weak. It is because I am the weakest and poorest of all that they do me honor. They also respect in me the daughter of the apostle whom Christ made the corner-stone of His Church. I am Petronilla, the daughter of Peter, the Chief of the Apostles, who was chosen because he was only a humble fisherman. Some day you will understand all these things, my child. Remember my name, and whenever you feel for the wish, come to me, for I love you.'

'And now,' she added, 'I shall put you under the care of this matron, who will take you to your father's house, for it is late and we are going to separate.'

What was Cecilia's astonishment, when Petronilla beckoned to Flavia Domitilla, and placed her, the humble plebeian girl, under the care of the Emperor's cousin.

She left the crypt with Flavius Clemens, the two young Cæsars, and that other matron whose imposing mien had struck her.

At a hundred paces from the entrance to the cave, lighters were waiting. The torches of the runners lighted the darkness of Labitina's woods; and the slaves hastened to execute the orders of their masters.

Here, all the apparel of power; all the splendors of wealth! And, but an instant ago, poverty, abasement, equality with the humblest! Well might the bashful and artless girl believe herself fascinated by a dream!

'Young maiden, come with me into this litter,' said the unknown matron.

And, as Cecilia hesitated, scarcely believing that this invitation could be intended for her, the matron added:

'What, my child, are you so proud that you refuse Flavia Domitilla?'

'Are you, then, also a relation of the Emperor?' the young girl asked, with lively curiosity.

'Yes, dear child,' replied Flavia, smiling at her eagerness. Come, get in, we shall soon make each other's acquaintance.'

Cecilia obeyed. The cortege moved, and was not long reaching her father's residence. Cecilius was very uneasy, not knowing what had become of his daughter. But when he saw her return in such illustrious company, and when Flavius Clemens had spoken a few words to him, he was so delighted, that he thanked all the gods he knew by name, and forgot to question his daughter as to the cause of her delay. With the protection of these great people, his fortune was assured!

Sleep did not visit Cecilia's eyes during that night. What she had witnessed and heard on that eventful evening, filled and confused her mind.

### CHAPTER III.—CHRISTIAN ESPOUSALS.

Cecilia on the following days returned frequently to see Petronilla, the holy woman, whom she soon learned to love dearly, and to whose teachings, lavished with inexhaustible solicitude, she listened with increasing interest.

She also often saw Eutychia, who called her daughter, and Olinthus who gave her the sweet name of sister; and had long conversations with them. They continued Petronilla's work by teaching her the religion of Christ, and fortifying her in her nascent faith.

With such teachers and under the influence of such examples, the pure-minded girl could not be long in renouncing the lying fictions which she had already secretly despised, and which she now rejected with horror. In a few months she became truly a Christian in heart, aspiring only to the grace of baptism, and rapt in joys as sweet as they were new to her.

'What a blessing!' she would exclaim; 'that I should at last see the truth, I who have been so long without knowing it, and who yet sought it with all my soul!'

She had become the darling child of this whole poor tribe of exiles; all knew her and surrounded her with marks of the liveliest affection.

It seemed as though these poor, people vied in repaying in love for the daughter, the miseries

caused by the father. For, Cecilius who was not aware of the tie existing between his daughter and the Jews, was as pitilessly exacting as ever, and continued to spread desolation and ruin in the poor colony.

Cecilia was deeply moved by the tenderness with which all greeted her. If she understood that Christianity dictated this pardon and forgetting of injuries caused by her family, she felt still more the power of that charity which inspired love by way of retaliation. She saw that this virtue, completely unknown to those with whom she had lived hitherto, was the life-giving principle of the little society into which chance, or rather divine Providence had suddenly thrown her.

As Petronilla had told her on the occasion of the agapæ, joys and sorrows were in common between these Christians so truly united, so thoroughly imbued with brotherly love. Whatever one of them possessed was the property of all; and however small and insignificant the offering, it was received with gratitude, and the blessing of God was invoked on the giver. These men and women cared not for riches or for the comforts they bring, but despised and rejected them.

Cecilia, the humble girl, soon became the intimate guest of the noble Flavius family. Flavia Domitilla had distinguished her, and had asked Petronilla to confide her to her care. The venerable daughter of the Apostle, had the more willingly consented as Cecilia would find in Flavia Domitilla's house, the example of the greatest virtues and the best school in which she could study a perfect Christian life.

This illustrious matron whom the Church counts among the most sainted virgins who lived in those early ages, was then residing in Rome, and not far from the Imperial palace, a life of admirable charity and self-sacrifice.

Her mother, whose name has not been preserved in history, was a sister of Clemens. She was nearly related to the Emperor Domitian, for she was the grand-daughter of Sabinius Major, Vespasian's elder brother.

This Sabinius Major was the first who illustrated the Flavia race, whose founder, according to Suetonius, was an obscure undertaker of public works. He was Prefect of the city when he was killed during a riot incited by the Vitellius party. Tacitus who relates his death says that he had commanded the armies of Rome during thirty-five years under the Emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero.

This infuriated mob set fire to the Capitol where Sabinius and his family had sought an asylum, and massacred them. One child only escaped from this butchery. This was Flavia Domitilla, who owed her life to the courage and devotion of two Christian slaves, Nereus and Achilleus—who both suffered martyrdom, subsequently, with their mistress.

Flavia Domitilla, placed by these men in a Christian family, lived with them several years, and embraced their faith. When more propitious times came, she was sought and claimed by her uncle, the consul Flavius Clemens, and went to live with him. She became the chosen instrument of Providence through which this noble family embraced the true faith.

The large estates of her family having been restored to her, she devoted her abundant means to relieving the poor and consoling the unfortunate. She gave the example of all the Christian works performed in the midst of wealth and worldly greatness with that humble spirit and sublime devotion, which have found imitresses, even in our days, among women of the highest rank.

Cecilia conducted by Petronilla, went every day to Flavia Domitilla's house, where she associated herself to the practice of virtues which she had never before suspected. She brought to this pious task the enthusiasm of a neophyte who found in her own heart the liveliest sympathy for those who suffer.

Gurgus who, for some time past, had commenced persecuting the young girl with his love, and who felt a certain uneasiness at her frequent absence from home, was far from suspecting how she employed her time. It will be easily understood why Cecilia had little time to think of the vesper, and why she had not hastened to give the favorable answer to his suit, with the hope of which her father had so long lured Gurgus.

Moreover—shall we say it? another thought was gradually absorbing the maiden's mind; a new feeling had grown side by side with her new faith—foreign to it and yet arising from it. This feeling caused her much anxiety, for she feared that it was distracting her thoughts from God.

The poor child loved Olinthus. For several days she had avoided meeting him, hoping thus to recover her peace of mind; but absence seemed only to increase the feeling which filled her heart and mastered her will.

The motherless girl resolved to consult her two benefactresses, Petronilla, who loved her as her child, and Flavia Domitilla, who treated her like a sister. She knelt, one day, before these