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AURELIA;

OR,

THE JEWS OF CAPENA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quinton

PART THIRD.—THE VESTAL.

CHAPTER III.—CONTINUED.

We need not say that Flavius Clemens, the two young Cæsars and all their family had nothing to do with the rebellion planned by Lucius Antonius. But it was true that the latter, as Metellus Celer's letter led one to suppose, strengthened himself by the use of their names, which were exceedingly popular, because of their near relationship with Vespasian and Titus. It was also true that the General of the army in Germany had no other intention in marching upon Rome, than to overthrow Domitian and to put his nephews in his place, for the people looked with pleasure upon the young Cæsars as the heirs of the empire.

But Regulus, who knew very little concerning the conspiracy of which Antonius was the head, had nevertheless seized with eagerness this opportunity to resume the plotting interrupted by Cecilia's release and Parmenon's death, and, as we have seen, in informing the Emperor that his relations were Christians, he had taken care to represent them as conspirators.

We shall show directly what Domitian meant by those sons of David whom he held in his power, and proposed to interrogate in presence of his court.

'Are you certain,' asked the Emperor, stopping abruptly before Regulus, 'of all you are telling me? How did you get this information? You will readily understand the grave character of these revelations, and how necessary it is that I should be informed of the smallest circumstances connected with them.'

'My lord,' said Regulus, 'permit me to relate all that has taken place during your absence, and what I had done to obey the instructions you had left me.'

At this juncture a singular and barely perceptible noise reached the ears of the two men, who turned quickly to see if any one was spying their secrets. But the wide gallery was deserted and silent, and the luminous stones reflected no other image than those of the Emperor and Regulus.

'Did you hear, Regulus,' said Domitian with uneasiness, and pointing to a colossal statue of Minerva, placed in the centre of the gallery on a bronze pedestal. 'It seemed to me the noise came from that direction....'

'Let us verify the fact, my lord,' said Regulus, 'the same noise attracted my attention.'

The Emperor and the informer walked round the statue, but saw no one.

'It is nothing, my lord,' remarked Regulus, 'the great weight of this statue causing its base to settle in the soil, has probably occasioned the slight noise we heard.'

'Very likely; well, Regulus, begin your narrative, I am anxious to know all.'

The informer's long narrative must have awakened a powerful interest in Domitian, for he listened to it with much attention; but the reader being already acquainted with the events that formed its substance, we deem it unnecessary to repeat it.

'However,' said Regulus after relating his disappointments, 'I did not lose courage, and the gods have permitted that I should again, and by other means, obtain possession of those secrets, so important to my master's safety, and the proof of which I have hastened to bring to his knowledge.'

The informer, however, was not very explicit in the second part of his narrative; he did not wish to say by what means he had obtained possession of the documents which he had brought to the Emperor. He merely repeated that he had corrupted Misius, whose acquaintance he made through the Archigallus. Having finished his story, he asked the Emperor what he thought of all this.

'It requires reflection,' replied Domitian. 'I shall again have need of your zealous services,' he added, putting his hand familiarly on the informer's shoulder. Regulus blushed with pleasure at this caressing gesture accompanied by a glance which promised future favor as a reward of future infamy.

'Speak, my lord, I shall obey,' replied Regulus, bowing low. 'We shall think of it,' growled Domitian.—'As for this young beau, Metellus Celer and his Vestal....'

'Will the Emperor permit me to give my advice?' asked Regulus.

'Speak,' said Domitian. 'It would be perhaps better to wait the further development of events,' said the informer. 'I have placed a man devoted to me near Metellus Celer, and I am sure that we can seize the latter in the retreat which he thinks so secure, whenever circumstances will require it. But if he is, as his letter would lead us to believe, connected with this conspiracy of Antonius, does not the Emperor see what precious information may be obtained from this source?'

'You are right, Regulus, let us wait!.... And as for the Flavius family.... let us wait also. When they will have fully betrayed themselves, my severity will seem natural and legitimate.... Moreover, to-morrow all these questions shall have made a great step. Regulus, do not fail to be here to-morrow.... You will be able to observe some curious things.... Go, Regulus, I am satisfied with your zeal.... Leave all these documents with me.'

The informer handed the various packages to the Emperor, who placed them on a tripod near Minerva's statue, and accompanied Regulus to give him further instructions. They walked out of the gallery into another apartment, where they remained in conversation a little longer.

No sooner had Domitian and Regulus left the phengite gallery than the bronze base of Minerva's statue opened noiselessly; and Hirsutus springing forth, seized the papers and swiftly disappeared with them in his hiding place. The secret panel fell back to its place, and the most expert eye could not have detected its existence.

Silence and solitude reigned in the immense gallery when the Emperor returned.

He could not restrain an exclamation of surprise upon reaching the tripod and missing the papers he had so recently put there. Laying his hand mechanically on the gilded surface, he felt something warm and damp that made him recoil with horror. His fingers were stained with blood!

Domitian cried aloud and the echoes of the luminous gallery repeated the cry. The guards rushed in thinking the Emperor had called for help.

They found him gazing with superstitious terror on Minerva's statue.

'Go away! retire!' cried Domitian angrily, for he did not wish others to witness his anguish.

When he was again alone, he examined the statue carefully, feeling the joints of the bronze base with his fingers. But his search was fruitless; he saw nothing but a compact mass of metal.

'This is strange,' he muttered, pressing his hand on his brow moist with the cold sweat of fear. 'To-morrow this statue shall be pulled down....'

In a book store on the Sacred Way, a hundred men were busy copying, by the light of numerous lamps, a document which a stranger had just brought in.

This document was the second proclamation of Antonius, so mysteriously stolen from Domitian by the boy Hirsutus, and which, it will be remembered, contained an energetic appeal to arms.

Next day, the walls of Rome were covered with these copies, and the Pretorians had to use force to disperse the threatening crowds assembled near them, and from which were heard the most outrageous and significant curses against Domitian.

CHAPTER IV.—MINERVA'S STATUE.

Domitian, frightened by the strange adventure of Minerva's statue and the mysterious disappearance of the documents he had intended to turn to such good account, passed a restless night. Suetonius relates that during the few moments of sleep which the Emperor enjoyed, a dream brought him the most frightful omens.

He saw Minerva, the goddess whom he honored especially with a superstitious worship, step slowly from her pedestal, leave the gallery consecrated to her name, and approach, with desolate attitude, the couch where he lay trembling.

But it was no longer the armed goddess which had sprung from the brain of Jupiter, the king of Olympus. She had doffed her warlike vestments and resembled now a young maiden who has been touched by the cold and mortal hand of the Parca. Her shining helmet, her shield, her armor and lance, all these symbols of her invincible power had vanished, as if she had succumbed to the superior strength of an adversary

and he had despoiled her and made a trophy of her arms.

During a few minutes, Domitian contemplated her in silence, the cold sweat pearly on his brow. The goddess, erect and her hands joined in supplication, gazed upon him sadly, without moving her lips, and motionless like a bronze statue weeping upon a tomb. The inert mass had been animated for a few moments, by a prodigy, and then, had resumed the coldness and rigidity of bronze.

At last, by another prodigy, her arm was raised slowly towards the Emperor; her eyes moved in their orbits; her lips parted, and in a harsh voice that rang like the sound of a trumpet, she cried three times:

'Domitian! Domitian! Domitian! Then lowering her voice, she added sadly: 'I can no longer protect thee.... A more powerful god has broken my weapons!.... Jupiter himself could not save his daughter!....'

The Emperor bounded on his bed, awoke suddenly, and screamed so loudly, that his guards who watched in the adjoining room, rushed in to protect him.

Domitian was moving his arms wildly, as if to drive away some fearful vision, and repeating in a voice full of anguish:

'Save me! save me!.... Help Minerva!.... she is there!.... there!.... Do you see her?.... She abandons me!....'

But no other eye could discover that which Domitian's gaze followed with increasing anxiety in this vast room scarcely lighted by a single lamp, nor that which his trembling hand pointed at in the vacant gloom.

At early dawn, when Regulus entered the Emperor's room, he found Domitian kneeling by his bedside, his hands raised to heaven.

Regulus had read the mysterious proclamation posted on the walls of Rome, during the night, and not understanding how these documents, which he held safe at home, could have been made public, he had hastened to the palace to have this strange fact explained, and, at all events, to inform the Emperor of it. But on finding Domitian in this state of complete prostration, caused by the events of that fearful night he foresaw some circumstance still more fatal than those which already caused his anxiety; and extending his hands to the Emperor, he exclaimed:

'In the name of the gods, my lord, what is the matter with you, and what has happened?'

Domitian raised his vacant and fearful eyes upon the informer, and gathering a little courage from his presence, wiped away the cold sweat from his brow, and murmured hoarsely:

'Fearful omens! Horrible night!.... My lord,' said Regulus, who, seeing his master overwhelmed by a terror which he could not understand, sought to divert his attention by an important disclosure, 'the document I gave you yesterday, and of which I alone possess the copy, has been posted on Rome last night. How did this happen?'

'This is as it should be,' replied Domitian, showing no astonishment: 'Minerva, who abandons me, has taken these documents and has doubtless caused them to be distributed in Rome.... I am lost, Regulus,' cried the tyrant with sudden fierceness, 'the gods have conspired against me! they want my death!.... Let their bolts strike me if they wish!' he added in a tone of despair, and hiding his face in his hands.

Triumphing at last of his own weakness and returning gradually to the angry mood, Domitian related to Regulus, with many interruptions, what had occurred since their last interview.

These who are familiar with the ancient writers, know how strangely superstitious the Romans were, and the facility with which they accepted the most incredible prodigies. Regulus was particularly addicted to these superstitious fears, and he was often known to shed the blood of victims to conjure the effects of evil omens and propitiate the anger of the gods.—We may then imagine the impressions left in his soul by the Emperor's narrative, so eloquently strengthened by the mysterious removal of the papers, the apparition of Minerva, and the unaccountable divulgence of Lucius Antonius' proclamation.

But who was this god, more powerful than Minerva, greater even than Jupiter, since the King of Olympus could not protect his daughter against his power?

Domitian and Regulus, moved by the same presentiment, remembering the rumors so long circulated in Rome, thought of the God of the Christians, and without communicating to each other this thought, betook themselves to reflect that it would not be wise to attack Him at this time. Would He not come to the assistance of His worshippers if they were threatened? And since He had had the power to overthrow Minerva, could it be hoped that he would spare the Emperor?

Domitian expressed this secret resolve of his

frightened heart when, after a long pause, he said to Regulus:

'It is to-day I must see those sons of David, announced to Rome by the Fates.... It will be, if I believe certain secret warnings, the end of these mysterious events.... the beginning of some hope or the confirmation of all my fears.... We must beware of this unseen power which nobody knows and which reveals itself by such prodigies!'

Whilst conversing in this manner, the Emperor and Regulus were walking slowly through the vast apartments of the Palatine-House.—They reached the hall where they had parted the day before, and which was contiguous to the luminous gallery in which stood the statue of Minerva, the cause of so many terrors.

Since the apparition that had troubled his sleep, Domitian had not dared to enter the gallery; but he felt a lively curiosity to know what had become of the statue; whether it had left its pedestal forever; or, if it had resumed its place, whether it was still despoiled of its armor, as he had seen her during the night.

Domitian, still under the impression of his terror, would not have thought of going alone into the fatal gallery, but encouraged by the presence of Regulus, he determined to verify the facts immediately. Pale and trembling, they entered together the gallery of phengite stone.

The goddess was standing as usual on her bronze pedestal. The rays of the rising sun playing on her richly gilded helmet, her shield and armor, surrounded her with a flood of light; her lance was still grasped in her motionless hand. In other words, nothing was changed in the statue which Domitian and Regulus examined with anxious care. Not daring to lay their hands on it, lest an avenging flame should burst forth to strike them, yet they looked closely at the faintest lines of the elaborate carving of the pedestal, as if they had suspected the truth; but the bronze mass kept its own secrets, and Domitian and Regulus gave up all hopes of discovering what the gods doubtless wished should remain an impenetrable mystery.

'Come, Regulus,' said Domitian, still more discouraged after this fruitless search, 'we must give up the hope of learning anything from this statue.... By Jupiter! all this is strange and incredible!.... If I had not seen the goddess move in the darkness, I might perhaps doubt!.... But there is a terrible and significant reality in these facts.... Well, we shall see.... Regulus you must be here punctually at the seventh hour. That is the time fixed for the examinations of those sons of David.'

Regulus bowed profoundly and promised to be at the Emperor's orders at the hour appointed. He then hastened to take leave of Domitian, for he was anxious to be relieved of the restraint he had exercised to conceal, whilst in his master's presence, the great trouble that filled his heart.

From the windows of the palace, the Emperor could hear the distant clamor of the excited crowds of citizens who had read the proclamation of Lucius Antonius and now gave utterance to loud curses and threats against the tyrant; but he could see also his Pretorian guard whose devotion he had secured by frequent liberalities, charge the multitude and disperse them after covering the street with dead bodies.

A smile of confidence lighted his face as he withdrew into the interior of the palace, murmuring to himself:

'By my fortune! so long as these brave swords are mine, I may defy even the anger of the gods.'

Whilst Domitian is preparing to interrogate the sons of David in presence of his court, let us explain how Hirsutus could conceal himself in Minerva's statue, for what object he pried into his master's secrets, and why he had so adroitly possessed himself of the pamphlets, letters and proclamations which Regulus had brought to the Emperor.

The execution against Domitian for his numerous crimes was organized for his overthrow, but they had all failed owing either to the weakness of resources, the treachery of some member, or the want of boldness in the leaders. Nevertheless, two new conspiracies, in and out of Rome, had been recently formed, with hopes of better success.

The immediate object of both was the same—the overthrow of the tyrant. The means of action and the ultimate design alone were different. One of these conjurations had at its head Lucius Antonius, General of the army of Germany, who relied on his legions, and intended to march on and proclaim the fall of Domitian.

Little is known about this revolt, which was promptly suppressed, as we shall see. The Senate, it is believed, favored the plans of Antonius, which were merely to bring about a change of reign, by placing the young Cæsars, Vespasian and Domitianus, his designated successors, on Domitian's throne.

This outbreak was about to take place, and yet Domitian knew nothing of it. The first

news were brought to him by Palladius Sura, whose whole merit was that of having torn a copy of the proclamation from the walls of the city, to bring it to the Emperor.

Regulus had been more fortunate, owing to circumstances which will be explained in another chapter. He had managed to seize the packages of proclamations and to inform Domitian of the name of the General who threatened his power. But Regulus knew nothing beyond this, and consequently, the informations brought by him to the Emperor, were very incomplete. We need not add that the informer was working actively to complete them.

The object of the second conspiracy was to place on the throne Cæcilius Nerva, a respected old man who had twice been invested with the Consular dignity, and who was then sixty five years old. This plot had originated during the war against the Dacians. It was managed with the greatest prudence, and the conjurers watched a favorable opportunity with patience, avoiding any rash and premature action. They intended, as a last resort, if the opportunity to act did not present itself, to get rid of Domitian by assassination.

The Emperor had not the least suspicion of the existence of this conspiracy, and neither Regulus nor any other of the numerous informers who served the master with so much zeal had suspected it.

All that Domitian knew was that Apollonius of Thyana had promised the empire to Nerva, after consulting the entrails of a murdered child. This horrible sacrifice had been consummated in a distant country house, and Domitian had been informed of it by one of the disciples of the philosopher, named Philiscus, whose humane feelings had revolted at the abominable act. But Philiscus did not know that Apollonius belonged to the Nerva party, and that the human sacrifice was intended to inform the conjurers of the issue of their undertaking.

Domitian, however, was much incensed against Apollonius of Thyana for having encouraged such hopes. The philosopher, fearing the vengeance of the Emperor had carefully prepared the means of justifying his course; he wished to obtain an audience from Domitian and to propitiate him with presents of rare things brought back from the distant countries he had visited. This was why we have seen him, at Pompey's portico, soliciting the intervention of Aurelia and offering the young girl the beautiful murine vases she had admired.

Hirsutus, the hideous abortion, belonged body and soul to both of the conspiracies. The lively hatred he bore Domitian had led him to embrace with joy every project that promised his resentment a complete revenge. Both parties had accepted eagerly his co-operation, for his position near the prince and the great favor he enjoyed, together with his bright intellect and the bitter hatred that filled his heart, made him a valuable auxiliary.

He served the two conspiracies with equal zeal and faithfulness, never betraying to one the information which concerned the other; preserving an inviolable secrecy in all his acts, and doing his utmost to preserve the mystery of his double participation. So ably did he manage this, that the leaders in Germany knew nothing of the insurrection that was preparing in Rome, and the Nerva party was taken by surprise by the proclamation of Antonius. Little did Hirsutus care when revenge would come, provided Domitian was overthrown and he helped to do it.

Hirsutus having remarked that the luminous gallery was the spot where Domitian held his interviews and decided the most important questions, asked himself whether it would not be possible to become an invisible listener. It was no easy matter, and yet he succeeded in procuring a piece of concealment in the brazen base of Minerva's statue. It is probable that, assisted by the gold of the conspirators, he had secured the services of some skillful workmen during Domitian's absence.

The noise heard by Domitian and Regulus was made by Hirsutus entering his post of observation by a subterranean passage. The young man had heard the most important part of the conversation between the Emperor and the informer. We have seen how adroitly he had taken possession of the papers. The bloody mark on the tripod was from his wounded hand.

That evening three important things were done by Hirsutus:

He sent the proclamations to the tavern we have mentioned, with orders that they should be copied and posted that same night.

At the same time a courier was dispatched from Rome to Germany, bearing the following despatch written in a secret cipher:

'Misius has been bought over. The proclamations were placed in the hands of the Emperor by Regulus, but a copy has been redeemed. Your faithful Galbula is having it copied, at this moment, in his tavern, and the copies will be posted this very night, despite your agent's