



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE

VOL. XX.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, DEC. 24, 1869.

No. 19.

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

AURELIA;

THE JEWS OF CAPEA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quinton

PART THIRD.—THE VESTAL.

CHAPTER XIII.—(CONTINUED.)

Albeit, the Grand-Vestal found a singular pleasure in Cecilia's conversation. Several motives revived continually the interest and sympathy by which she felt drawn towards the humble young matron who had given such an example of generosity and greatness of soul.

Cornelia preserved a vivid remembrance of the compassion shown her by the pontiff Clemens, when he had met her at Aurelia's house, still crushed under the shameful punishment inflicted by Helvius Agrippa, for having allowed the sacred fire to burn out.

The Grand-Vestal felt a longing desire to know better the religion she had often heard ascribed, but which had appeared so beautiful to her as described by the eloquent voice of the chief of the Christians.

Chastity was also one of the virtues of this new creed; Clemens had celebrated it in two magnificent epistles which the Grand-Vestal, urged by a singular curiosity, had wanted to read. She had learned from them that a large number of Christian young girls held it a glory to remain the spotless brides of the divine Lamb; but she had not understood the figurative sense of this expression; from the want of proper interpretation, what she had read and heard had left in her mind a confusion which she eagerly wished to have unravelled.

Who better than Cecilia could dissipate this darkness, substitute calmness to this trouble, and satisfy this ardent curiosity? A few conversations with this young woman filled Cornelia with astonishment and revealed to her a new field of thought. On one occasion she had questioned her on Christian celibacy, and asked her if there was any similarity between the Vestals and those young girls who, for Christ's sake, condemned themselves to the same duties.

'Christ,' replied Cecilia, 'does not demand that we should select Him for our only spouse; but when we have made this sacrifice, He requires that it shall be complete.'

'In what manner?' asked the Grand-Vestal. 'It does not suffice that the chastity of the body should be preserved; but the soul must keep inviolate the pledged faith, and its purity must not be soiled even by a sinful desire.'

Cornelia remained silent, weighing mentally these simple words in which she found the condemnation of her secret sentiments.

'I can understand,' she remarked at last, 'that a sacrifice freely consented should be made without reservation; it becomes easy when one is not compelled to make it.'

'God sustains and strengthens the courage of His servants; He fills the heart with immense joy.'

'The Vestals know nothing of these consolations of the soul,' said the priestess bitterly. 'Nothing has been left them but sadness and regret. How can they help cursing their obligations?'

'There is doubtless this great difference between you and our virgins,' resumed Cecilia, 'that they bear with joy the yoke they voluntarily accepted, and you submit to a necessity which provokes your legitimate complaints. However,' she added, smiling, 'the Vestals otherwise much resemble our young girls, and it would not be difficult to show that their duties are the same and they can find consolation in their fulfilment.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed the Grand-Vestal, with some irony, 'I curious to see how you will prove to me that I am happy.'

'Madam,' said Cecilia, 'one of the great precepts of our religion is that we must confide in God's will and submit to His designs. He alone disposes of blessings and trials, and we must accept what it pleases Him to send us. The most perfect among us ask as a favor, to receive sufferings and sorrow rather than joy and happiness; the others must resign themselves up to affliction if Providence so wills it, and this resignation soon becomes an immense consolation. You see that abnegation may transform our unhappiest condition.'

'This is all very well, my dear child,' said the

Grand-Vestal pensively, 'but I am not a Christian, and I have not the resource of your virtues.'

'No, madam, it is true that you are not a Christian, but if virtue is good and may make you happier, why not try it?'

The Grand-Vestal smiled at the amiable young woman's frankness.

'My dear child,' she resumed, 'you have told me that compulsion is not admitted among you. Has not one the right to try to escape from the restraint imposed against one's will? . . . Is not thought free in one who obeys a compulsory power? . . . What is your opinion?'

Cecilia understood easily the allusion to the Grand-Vestal's own situation. She suspected the secret sentiments which had dictated this question whose importance was betrayed by the anxiety depicted on the questioner's features.

'Madam,' replied the young woman seriously, 'duty, whatever be the conditions upon which we assume its fulfilment, is duty still. . . . Voluntary or not, our law forbids its violation.'

Cornelia, started at these words. She remained silent a few moments, collecting her thoughts, and when at last she spoke her face was bathed with tears.

'Cecilia,' she exclaimed, 'you do not know all I have suffered and still suffer. Your religion cannot condemn complaint. . . . Listen to my story. It is only when you will have learned how I was made a Vestal, that you can comprehend my misfortune, and know the bitter anguish that fills my soul and which I have tried, so far, to conceal from you.'

These last words of the Grand-Vestal need some explanation.

Metellus Celer's letters, frequent at first, had suddenly stopped, and the Vestal was at loss to explain this silence. She questioned Cecilia who knew no more than that the mysterious messenger had ceased coming. We know the reason of this, but Cornelia could not be aware that this interruption was due to the discovery of the conspiracy, and much less that the letter conveying to her the anxiously wished for assurance of Metellus Celer's love had been placed under the Emperor's eyes, and was now in the hands of the pontiff of the Christians.

If the Grand-Vestal, unable to control her growing anxiety, longed to confide her torments to some faithful and discreet heart, Cecilia had no greater desire than to possess the confidence and friendship of the priestess whom she hoped to convert to Christianity. She had not concealed this hope, and Cornelia had replied: 'I do not believe it possible to go from the Atrium Regium to the Capena-gate.'

'Madam,' Cecilia replied, 'you are so near it by your chastity that but a step remains to be made.'

Another motive, besides the laudable one already mentioned, attracted Cecilia towards the Grand-Vestal. She felt the liveliest curiosity to learn something of the private life of the Vestals whose only apparent duty was to feed the sacred fire. It was therefore with undisguised satisfaction that she prepared to listen to Cornelia's story.

'You are going to hear some strange things,' said the latter. 'But you will know the full extent of a Vestal's misfortune, and you will tell me whether I am not right when I revolt against a yoke whose weight you cannot even suspect.'

CHAPTER XIV.—HISTORY OF A VESTAL.

The Grand-Vestal commenced as follows:— 'I was born amidst all the advantages of rank and wealth. My family was looked upon as the first in Rome, for what other race can boast of such illustrious men as the Scipios, the Scillas, the Lantulus, the Cinnas and others which I count among my ancestors! Oh, why was I not, like you, my dear Cecilia, the daughter of a freedman! This humble origin would have saved me from the dreadful fate which has made my life one of sorrow and will end—I have had that fearful presentiment—only when I descend into the living tomb of the Campus Sceleratus!'

'Madam,' remarked Cecilia, interrupting her, 'it is only the virgins who have broken their vows who are committed to that horrible doom. It cannot, therefore, threaten you.'

A slight blush spread over the pale face of the Grand-Vestal; she overcame her emotion, however, and resumed her narrative:

'I shall pass rapidly,' she said, 'over the first joys of my infancy; happy and too short period, alas! which I remember incessantly after thirty years of sufferings, regrets and tears! Methinks I see the fatal day which ended the happy dreams of my childhood. My mother had taken me, for the first time, in her soft and rich litter to the magnificent porticoes of Rome. We had received the flattering homage of the crowd; my pride was moved by the exclamations of praise I heard around us; young as I was, I commenced to understand the privileges of rank and wealth. This popular demonstration filled me with delight.

'When we returned home, we found my father sitting in the middle of the Atrium, and plunged in the deepest sadness. Upon seeing me, he started, and bitter tears descended slowly down his pallid cheeks. I rushed into his arms, as was my wont, and while he held me passionately clasped, as though I were threatened by some pressing danger, I heard him say to my mother in a voice choked by emotion: 'Lælia is dead!'

'Dead!' exclaimed my mother, as faintly, and her face, but now so joyous, became as deadly pale as my father's.

'She died last night,' continued Cornelia in the same tone. 'I heard it at the Forum. . . . Here is an empty place in the Atrium-Regium. . . . Who will fill it?'

I felt my father's arms clasp me tighter to his heart, and I saw my mother kneel silently and mingle her tears with those of Cornelia and mine, for I wept to see them weep. The slaves who accompanied us seemed to share the sorrow of their master, and many sobbed aloud. I could hear also, proceeding from another part of the Atrium, the shrieks of despair of my poor nurse, as she lay an inert mass on the marble pavement.

Then, my mother tried to recall her courage, and asked:

'Cornelius, are we indeed threatened with this dreadful misfortune?'

'The pitiless goddess asks for another virgin to replace the one she has lost,' replied my father, 'and what other will be more agreeable to her than this child? All my friends share the forebodings which besiege my heart, and they have not concealed this from me. . . . Fabia, our daughter will be taken away from us! Believe me, we shall lose her soon!'

'Cornelius, the gods will make your forebodings false. No later than yesterday, I consulted the augurs on our daughter's future. . . . they replied that they saw nothing but happiness in store for her, for a long time to come.'

'Fabia,' said my father, gazing at her with emotion, 'the augurs always flatter our desires. . . . Dear wife, if you fear nothing, why is it that you weep?'

The groan which escaped from my mother's heaving chest proved but too well that she was vainly endeavoring to disguise to herself the grave causes of anxiety which tormented her as cruelly as they did Cornelius.

My father then related what he had heard in the Forum, where the necessity of selecting another vestal had been eagerly discussed by the patricians. They had reckoned the number of young girls that presented the required conditions for this choice, and my father saw with terror that it would be difficult to complete the legal number—twenty girls, from six to ten years old—which should be presented to the pontiff.

There were many causes of exemption, which protected this or that family; some could claim the privilege of the three children (iustitiam liberorum) here the father was a flamine, an augur, a quincecentum, an epulo or a salenus; there the child had lost one of its parents, and the law designated only such as had their father and mother living. Finally, it became evident that while a large number of families were shielded by these and like causes, mine was among the very few threatened. I must be one of the twenty from among which chance (skillfully guided) would designate the victim.

'Fabia,' exclaimed my father, sorrowfully, when he had finished these details, 'a simple flutist at the sacrifices would save his daughter! This obscure title has never been denied! . . . But I, a consul, shall see my child torn from me! . . . What Vesta, the implacable goddess, wants for her temple is illustrious and beautiful virgins. Am I not the first patrician of Rome, and is not Cornelia the most graceful among the children of her age?'

A few days after this, a herald brought an order from the pontiffs to my parents, to conduct me to their presence on the next day, when the solemn ceremony would take place which filled the hearts of Roman mothers with fear and hope. My parents obliged to be present at the election which was to decide my whole life, accompanied me to the place where the Emperor, in his capacity of High Pontiff, would seize upon the virgin claimed by Vesta. They went without any escort; that would have increased the peril by calling to mind our rank and fortune. For, since the time of Augustus, the priestesses of the Atrium Regium have always been chosen among the noblest patricians. High birth, far from being a cause of exemption, was but another title to the sacrifice imposed by a religion which counts ambition and pride among its greatest virtues.

When we penetrated into the Atrium through the compact ranks of the tumultuous assemblage, the young girls designated by the pontiffs had already been presented. They were nineteen in number, and I was the twentieth.

A herald conducted me to a place in their

midst. It seemed to me that this first separation from my family was a cause of joy for the parents of the other children, whose anxious faces brightened up as if I were a victim selected in advance by an inexorable fate. Strange to relate, I heard the people around me affirm that chance would designate Cornelia.

Suddenly, the serrated ranks of the multitude opened to make way for a cortege which was advancing silently towards the Area. It was the Emperor Nero, in his costume of High-Priest and escorted by the sacerdotal college. Every voice was hushed and the awe-stricken crowd waited in breathless anxiety the result of the solemn ceremony.

An augur approached the Emperor, and informed him that he had consulted the auspices and no bad omens had been observed. The herald then proclaimed the names of the young girls presented. When mine was called I heard behind me the smothered sobs of my parents.

The names had been written on small tablets and deposited in an urn. The Emperor plunged his hand in the vessel and read aloud from the tablet which he drew forth the name of Cornelia—my name, whispered in advance by so many lips!

The exclamations of the people drowned the heart-rending cries of my mother, and the imprecations which my father in despair addressed to the gods.

The Emperor came up to where I stood, and putting his hand on me, as it is done when one takes possession of a slave, pronounced the consecrated words:

'Amata,'—(Amata was the name of the first Vestal taken in this manner, and in imitation of the ancient religious traditions, it was preserved in the formula subsequently adopted)—'I take thee. . . .'

The enthusiastic clamors of the people and the pontiffs became so loud as to interrupt the Emperor; when, at last, they had subsided, he resumed:

'Amata,' said he, 'I take thee to be a priestess of Vesta and to perform the sacred rites; to do, according to the rights of the Vestals, all that is for the interest of the Roman people and of the Quirites. May a favorable law consecrate this election!'

So, I was a Vestal! My father and mother were now nothing to me, for a Vestal has no family! I must lose forever all I had known and loved! A child scarcely six years old, I could not comprehend the fatal consequences of the pompous ceremony, and yet, I wept bitterly, for I saw my young companions throw themselves in their mother's arms, whilst mine called me in vain! . . . I was in the hands of the pontiffs who dragged me towards a closed litter, into which they made me enter despite my cries and supplications!

A few moments later, I was in the Atrium Regium; my curls fell under the scissors of the priests, and I was dressed in the garb of a Vestal. It is now near thirty years since I entered this despair which, by a bitter irony, they have sought to transform into a voluptuous and charming retreat; as if a sumptuous life and material enjoyments could prevent regrets, replace the joys of the family, and console us for the void in our affections.

I never saw again my parents. They died broken-hearted during the first year of my ministry. The better to consummate a separation destined to be eternal, the pontiffs had not permitted us to meet a single instant.

The impressions of our childhood are so transient, that the life of the Atrium Regium pleased me at first. How could it be otherwise? However wealthy my family, I had never been accustomed to such splendor as now surrounded me. Then, could I remain insensible to the public homage, the enthusiastic exclamations which greet us wherever we go? The young girls who live here are all of illustrious birth, and their intercourse is of the most charming. I became intimate with the youngest, between whose age and mine there was less disparity, and I loved them with all the ardor of a heart who knows no other affections.

Friends of my childhood, you are no more. . . . It is long since death parted us. . . . What a void you have left here. What cruel memories torture my heart when I look back to the fatal day which robbed me of the only beings whose existence, completely blended with mine, gave me the most precious joys I have ever tasted. . . .'

The Grand-Vestal's voice had become tremulous, and her tears flew faster. She resumed, after a short pause:

'It was a horrible day which saw the death of Varonilla and the two sisters Ocellates. . . . From that time I looked upon life with fear, and the future appeared to me gloomy and desolate. It is ten years since that event happened, my dear Cecilia, for it was in the beginning of Domitian's reign, and each of my days, during that period has been marked with so much anguish, that I know not how it is I have not succumbed?'

'Until that time I had lived peaceful, if not happy. I feel, it is true, a vague sadness, but I could not have explained its cause. It is said that migratory birds, when held captive, becomes restless when the season comes for them to seek more genial climes. In like manner I was agitated and troubled during the transition from infancy to womanhood, and when, seized with the vague desire of a different fate, I saw the horizon of my life bounded by the gloomy wall of this narrow precinct.

'However, I swear it by Vesta, my life was so pure and my heart so candid, that I could not understand what I felt. My soul remained in this sort of torpid state until I was twenty-five years old. The Vestals are initiated from the first day, into the practice of Vesta's worship and its mysteries; but, outside of these material duties, they are never told anything of the closer and more fearful obligations of the soul. It is left to time to instruct them; to their hearts to comprehend; to circumstances to enlighten them suddenly.

'This is what happened to me. 'One morning I awoke, frightened by moans and shrieks, and the tumultuous noise made by our slaves as they ran to and fro in the Atrium Regium. I listened and heard a voice exclaim: 'They are dead! . . . Their bodies are already cold!'

'Who is dead?' I cried, as the woman who generally attended me entered my room, all in tears.

'Varonilla and the sisters Ocellates! . . . We have just discovered the fact.'

'Varonilla and the sisters Ocellates?' I repeated, with stupor. I had left them in all the bloom of health the evening before; I could not understand what I heard.

'It is impossible!' said I to the woman. 'What! all three dead at the same time? Who can have said this absurdity?'

'I had jumped out of bed, however, and was rushing towards the apartments of those three young Vestals. I scarcely heard the answer made by my slave: 'They have been killed.'

'Oh, my dear Cecilia, what a terrible sight met my eyes as I opened the door of the room where our servants were crowding around three youthful forms stretched in all the rigidity of death. With a single glance I recognized the pale features of my young companions, of those those I loved as sisters. I fell, senseless.

'I was told that I remained several days in a state of stupor, bereft of reason, of the very sentiment of my existence. When I recovered my senses, I was lying in my bed, and seated near me was a pontiff—Helvius Agrippa. I started with fright, and yet I remembered nothing.—Agrippa said to me in a grave and severe tone: 'Cornelia, the death of Varonilla and the sisters Ocellates changes your position here. You are now the Grand-Vestal.'

'My sobs interrupted him. Memory was returning and with it the dreadful sight of the blood-stained remains of my three friends.

'Great gods!' I cried. 'It was then true. They are no more.'

'Thus die the virgins who break their vows,' said Agrippa with awful solemnity. 'Do not forget it Cornelia. . . .'

'What do you mean?' I asked, looking up at the pontiff who in his turn gazed at me with astonishment.

'It is strange,' he murmured. 'What! he resumed, after a short pause, 'can it be possible you are not aware that Varonilla and the sisters Ocellates have been convicted of incest, and their corrupters banished? . . . Cornelia, Cornelia! . . . you have been accused of the same crime, and if you do not sleep now in the Campus Sceleratus, near these unworthy Vestals, you may thank the clemency of the Emperor. . . . whose niece is confided to your care. . . . That child has saved your life. . . .'

'Having uttered these threatening and mysterious words, Helvius Agrippa left me to study their impenetrable sense.

'What! my young companions had succumbed under an accusation of incest! . . . What! I had come near perishing under the same charge. Upon what grounds had this abominable denunciation been made? Who had tried us? Why had we not been arraigned and our defence heard?'

'Here is what was related to me: 'Late in the evening, and but a few moments after I had bidden good-night to my young companions, a centurion, accompanied by a pontiff, penetrated into the Atrium Regium. They went straightway to the room where Varonilla and the two Ocellates were still gaily engaged in conversation.

'You must die!' said the pontiff, entering abruptly, and addressing those three young virgins, who grew deathly pale and could not restrain a cry of terror.

'You have broken your vows,' continued the pontiff with implacable composure. 'You must die! such is the order of the Emperor who, as