



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XX.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, NOV. 12, 1869.

No. 18

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

AURELIA;

OR, THE JEWS OF CAPENA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quignon.

PART THIRD.—THE VESTAL.

CHAPTER II.—DOMITIAN.

Flavius Domitianus, the twelfth Cæsar, was born in the year 802 (A. D. 51), on the ninth of the calends of November (24th of October), in a house of modest appearance, in the sixth Region of Rome, styled 'Alta-Semita,' and which was situate in the 'Viculus' known under the name of 'Ad Malum-Punicum.' This was the house which he subsequently converted into a sumptuous temple, erected in honor of the Flavia race.

He was the third child of Vespasian, whose first-born, a girl, died in her youth; the second was Titus, of glorious memory. Domitian little resembled his father, and much less his brother.

Vespasian's children were born before he had accumulated wealth; his wife's father, Flavius Liberalis, was a simple clerk in the Treasury. Domitian, during his youth, suffered therefore all the privations of poverty; which did not prevent him, however, from disgracing himself by leading a life of disorder and debauchery.

Vespasian's fortune having grown, Domitian and his brother Titus were brought up in Nero's court. Domitian, like his brother, was probably sitting near Britannicus, when this young prince fell lifeless after drinking the poison poured into his cup by order of the fratricide Nero. Titus, who had tasted the murderous drink, came very near losing his life.

Domitian could then learn from Nero how to get rid of a brother; and from the courtiers how cowardice disguised even the involuntary paleness of their cheeks, which the Emperor might have construed as a vague reproach for his crime. Did Domitian, at a later day, remember this fearful lesson and wish to imitate it? The contemporary historians hesitate to charge him with this murder; but it is said that he had hastened the death of Titus by having him plunged in a tub full of snow, under the pretext of cooling the internal heat of which the moribund prince complained.

What is certain is that Titus had scarcely drawn his last breath, when Domitian hastened to Rome and had himself proclaimed Emperor by the Pretorians.

Like Nero, he showed, at first, an hypocritical moderation, and his reign had a happy beginning; but already there could be discovered the ridiculous and insatiable vanity, the mixture of vices and virtues which constituted his character. He was not long showing himself in his true light, and revealing his tyrannical duplicity, his avaricious greed, his studied cruelty, inspired by the strange, suspicious fears which ever haunted him.

From this time his series of crimes commenced and continued without interruption: sometimes slowly combined and deeply meditated; at others perpetrated with the suddenness of madness.

He seldom accomplished these murders, however, without preceding them with a sort of trial. One of his dearest ambitions was even that he should be looked upon as a great and wise judge, and Suetonius relates of him several instances of remarkable integrity. He often presided over the Senate and the courts, and his voice was never more choked by emotion, and his hypocritical protestations of indulgence more profuse, than when he attached importance to a condemnation.

The Senate, invested by the armed cohorts, scrutinized by the Emperor, who counted the sighs and noted even the pallor of the features, had not the courage to refuse. 'Nobody,' says Pliny-the-Younger, 'dared to speak, except the first called upon to give his opinion; the others, mute and passive, made a simple gesture of acquiescence, and thus it was that one alone proposed what all accepted with great sorrow and involuntary fear, but succumbing to the shameful intimidations of tyranny.'

The facts presented were often vague and insignificant, but he knew how to give them weight by speaking of threatening conspiracies, of attempts against his person or his power, and of rebellions against the laws and institutions of the empire. When the charges were so trifling that they could not be brought before the Senate, he employed secret or indirect means, such as poison, exile to distant lands where death awaited the victim, or moral tortures which drove

the persecuted wretch to seek relief in voluntary death.

When he had obtained from the Senate a sentence conformable to his wishes, he gloated upon the execution of the victim and the sight of blood. He was, therefore, even more cruel than Nero, who, according to Tacitus, ordered the murder, but averted his eyes. Under a tyrant so craftily sanguinary, and so anxious to diminish the horror of his crimes by some semblance of justice and mercy, the informers who had been discouraged by the severity with which Vespasian and Titus pursued them, could not fail to reappear in great number and to act their infamous part in freedom and security.

These men became the instruments of Domitian's power and the means of keeping Rome in a condition of incessant terror. The Senate, the army, the priesthood and the magistracy, all classes of society were infested with these wretches. Regulus, whom we have seen at work, was the most dangerous and the most celebrated among them.

Domitian's insatiable thirst for gold does not seem to have been a natural inclination, but to have grown gradually from the necessity of meeting the extraordinary expenses occasioned by his taste for ruinous exhibitions, his mania for building and the prodigious festivals with which he frequently entertained his people. Some conception may be formed of the treasures wasted for the gratification of his capricious fancies, from the fact that the gilt work alone which entered in the reconstruction of the capitol cost over twelve thousand talents, or more than seven millions dollars. His palace was of such vast dimensions that he received there an incredible number of citizens, to whom he gave the most magnificent entertainment. In the games of the circus he had the amphitheatre turned into a veritable lake on which appeared such a large number of vessels, that a mock naval fight was given by two complete fleets. Another time he employed several legions in planting into the arena full grown trees procured from the neighboring forests, in order to give the people the pleasure of hunting an immense number of wild beasts collected at great expense from different countries, and let loose in the Maximus Circus.

To pay for these expensive follies, he resorted to the most tyrannical exactions and the most violent measures. But he was as prudent in his spoliations as in his other crimes.

The informers besieged the death-beds of wealthy citizens to win their liberality in favor of the Emperor, and if they failed in this task, the vague allegation of some deed or word construed as offensive to the majesty of the prince, was sufficient ground for the fiscal to confiscate the most considerable estates.

Agricola, the father-in-law of Tacitus, was obliged, like many others, to gratify Domitian's cupidity; in order to protect the interests of his family, he made the Emperor the co-heir of his wife and daughter. During the last hours of this great man, messengers passing from his house to the palace of the Emperor, kept the latter advised of the most minute circumstance that transpired, so great was Domitian's fear that this important legacy would escape him! It is even suspected that he hastened the consummation of his wishes by giving poison to this virtuous citizen.

We have said nothing of Domitian's infamous debauchery which equalled the most monstrous inventions of his predecessors, nor of his religious follies which excelled their greatest acts of madness; neither have we described his incredible acts of vanity, nor related how he made himself the object of universal hatred.

He lived by himself, in his house, as in a fortress, holding no communication with his family—whom he hated and always held in great dread. When he raised the sons of Flavius Clemens to the dignity of Cæsars, it was more with a view to self-protection than to favor their elevation. Continually exposed to conspiracies, he wished by this means to discourage revolutionary attempts and show their uselessness, in presence of successors appointed before-hand, and who, he thought, would prove an invincible obstacle to the ambitious schemes of other pretenders. But the facility with which he afterwards sacrificed all his relations, and the remorseless fury by which he won the surname of 'Butcher of his kindred,' prove that the ties of blood had no power over his soul—it was inaccessible to the most natural sentiment.

He had some traits of resemblance with the most odious of the princes who preceded him.—Like Tiberius, he was wicked and sullen; like the imbecile Claudius, he was weak and irresolute, although superior to him in intellect; and he was as cruel, and more vain, perhaps, than Nero, of hateful memory. Although Juvenal has styled him 'Nero-the-Bald,' many of the old writers were struck by the analogy existing between his characteristic vices and habits, and those of Tiberius. He himself seems to have understood that in the close study of that em-

peror's acts, he would find the teachings best adapted to his own nature; and, although he had a taste for books and literature, as proved by his efforts to endow Rome with fine libraries and with copies of the best works from Alexandria and elsewhere, he seldom read anything but the 'Memoirs of Tiberius,' endeavoring always to shape his conduct and his style according to those detestable traditions.

Physically, Domitian was tall, and his demeanor affectedly modest. His features had something idiotic, although his eyes were remarkably large. His form had been graceful, and his appearance comely, in his youth, but his premature baldness and obesity had left little of this comeliness of face or gracefulness of outline.

His skill with the bow was extraordinary.—the Parthians and Scythians, so vaunted by ancient writers; the famous Aster, whose arrow pierced Phillip of Macedon's right eye; William Tell, who acquired so much renown in modern times for having shot an apple of his little son's head, would have been deemed but inferior archers along side of Domitian. When shooting wild beasts in his retreat at Mount Albinus, he would sometimes say to his companion: 'See, I shall stick two arrows in that animal's head, in guise of horns.' And he never failed to do it. At other times a young lad would stand off at a considerable distance and hold up his hand with the fingers spread open, and Domitian would speed arrow after arrow through the narrow space without as much as grazing the fingers.

But he soon tired of innocent diversions; his cruelty might sleep but it never died. Since his return to Rome, Domitian had amused himself in perpetrating certain jokes, which were not without significance, as indicating his gloomy train of thoughts. We shall cite an instance.

He sent invitations to the principal senators and knights to dine with him on a certain day.—As a matter of course, all came, but the smile vanished from their lips when they entered the banquet hall: the floor, the ceiling, the walls, everything about the room was draped in black. For each guest there was a small sepulchral column bearing his name, and supporting a funeral lamp, whose feeble rays dimly lighted this gloomy scene. A number of young slaves, completely nude, but blackened from head to foot, personated the infernal shades. After performing lugubrious and frightful dances, they placed dishes before the guests. These dishes were such as it was customary to offer the dead in the funeral ceremonies.

The company, overwhelmed by terror, remained speechless. Domitian alone spoke, but it was to entertain his guests with tragical narratives and ghost stories. Every one thought their last hour had come, and the dishes remained untouched. Having well enjoyed their terror, Domitian committed his guests to the care of strange slaves who carried them home in mourning litters.

Those poor people had hardly recovered from their stupor when Domitian's messengers were announced. Was it the death-warrant? No; Domitian sent to each guest the dishes which had been placed before him, the sepulchral column bearing his name, and the slave who had waited on him. But dishes and columns had been scrubbed, and were found to be silver plate of admirable workmanship: the slaves had taken a bath, and were now handsome boys clad in rich garments.

Notwithstanding this happy termination the joke was little relished, and was long remembered by the victims.

Two persons only were satisfied. These were Domitian and Regulus.

Domitian was delighted, because he had terribly frightened his courtiers; Regulus, because he thought the Emperor was getting roused from his lethargy and would soon require his services.

He thought right. A few days after this, he received a message from the Emperor commanding his presence at the Palatine.

Domitian awaited his coming in one of the galleries of this extensive mansion: but, becoming impatient, at the informer's delay, he called for his bow and arrows, and stepped into the garden. Soon after, an attendant announced that Marcus Regulus had arrived:

'Let him come here,' replied Domitian.

CHAPTER III.—THE LUMINOUS GALLERY.

When Domitian stepped into the garden with his bow and arrows, he had also called in a loud voice:

'Hirsutus! Hirsutus!'

At this name, a boy, or rather a young man, for he was eighteen years old, came out suddenly from behind a tree, and approached the Emperor.

'Hirsutus,' said Domitian, 'go and stand yonder, I need a little recreation.'

'Are you going to hurt me again?' replied Hirsutus, without attempting to disguise his un-

willingness, and speaking in a familiar tone which few dared use with Domitian.

'Oh!' remarked the Emperor, 'do you still think of that little scratch you got the other day? It is the first time that such a thing happened to me!'

'You call this a scratch?' replied Hirsutus, with a bitter smile.

And he held up his hand, the middle finger of which was fearfully torn, the flesh having been cut to the bone.

'What my son!' remarked Domitian, with something like compassion in his voice; 'are you not yet cured? Heliodorus, my physician said it would be nothing. Why did you not use the salve sent by Eutrapeles?... Go,' continued Domitian, resuming his walk, 'go, you will hold up the other hand.'

Hirsutus made no reply. He preceded the Emperor towards the hippodrome. But who could have studied the poor lad's face, would have read there a strange desire to revenge himself on the man who daily placed his life in danger for mere amusement.

Domitian, busy with selecting his arrows and examining his bow had not remarked this.

Hirsutus was a poor, mishapen creature. His pear-shaped head was covered with thin, wiry hair, short and hard like the hair of a modern clothes-brush. He owed his name to this peculiarity. This pointed head was connected by a very short neck to an extraordinary large body; his arms were long and thin, and his legs crooked and dragging, making him altogether one of the most biceous freaks of nature. But a strange light flashed from his eyes, and a lively intelligence animated this uncouth mass which was not unlike the bust of some divinity of the ancient Latium.

Whence came this singular being? Where was he born? Nobody about the imperial court, and not even Domitian himself, could have answered these questions. The boy had been brought by a necromancer named Asclepius, who came to Rome occasionally, and in whom Domitian had the most superstitious confidence, although he subsequently had him put to death, for saying that he knew when the Emperor would die.

Hirsutus hardly ever left his master. Domitian consulted him on the most important occasions, and more than once the appointments to the first offices of the empire depended upon the capricious whim of this hideous creature. But all this, as we have seen, did not prevent the Emperor from making him his plaything and exposing his life daily. Hirsutus hated Domitian mortally, but he concealed this feeling carefully in the hope that an occasion would present itself to satisfy it.

When Marcus Regulus arrived near the emperor, he found him engaged in shooting his arrows between the poor lad's finger. Domitian, at first, paid little attention to the informer who waited respectfully until he should be spoken to; and when he addressed him, at last, it was merely to call his attention to some skillful shot, and the looks he threw him were anything but satisfied. Yet, Regulus felt no uneasiness at the coldness of this reception. He was calm, and the vague smile which played on his lips expressed great confidence.

Suddenly, Hirsutus uttered a cry of pain; an arrow had pierced his hand. The poor fellow ran about, howling with mingled pain and rage, and trying vainly to pull the shaft from his wound.

'By Minerva!' exclaimed Domitian, without the least show of compassion for his favorite's sufferings, 'Regulus, you are the cause of this awkwardness! You have distracted my attention!... But let us drop this,' he continued, throwing aside his bow and arrows. 'Come in my gallery, I wish to speak to you about some serious matters.'

But we must describe the curious gallery into which Regulus followed Domitian, ere we proceed to relate their conversation.

During the reign of Nero, a singular stone was discovered in the quarries of Cappadocia which has been carefully described by Pliny the Elder in his Natural History. This stone, as hard as marble, was at the same time transparent, or rather luminous. It was, for this reason, called 'pneoglyte,' from the Greek name for light. Pliny also relates that Nero had a temple built with these stones, and the light penetrated into the interior, as though there had been no walls.

Notwithstanding its hardness, this stone could be split in thin layers, like slate; and the wealthy citizens subsequently used these transparent panes in their windows. For glass, although known to the Romans and used to manufacture vessels of various shapes, had not yet been made into panes.

Domitian wished, like Nero, to turn to account this precious discovery, but for his own benefit—not in honor of the gods. In order that no one should approach him unseen when he

was alone, he had caused a wide gallery to be constructed with these luminous stones, in the interior of his immense palace, and it was his favorite resort when he did not walk the gardens. It was in this gallery he amused himself with killing flies, when tired of shooting arrows between the fingers of the unfortunate Hirsutus.

Vibius Crispus never approached this part of the palace. He feared that Domitian might remember his joke about the flies.

Domitian, having reached the centre of the gallery, look around to see that nobody was near and casting an angry look on the informer, said:

'You are very awkward! Regulus.'

'How is that? my lord,' asked the informer respectfully, but with singular assurance.

'Read,' simply remarked Domitian, handing him a sheet of papyrus, which he drew from under his purple robe.

The informer looked triumphant.

'It is a proclamation, my lord,' he replied, without taking the document. 'I need not read it.... I am already acquainted with its contents.... Here is a similar copy.'

And the informer handed Domitian another sheet of papyrus.

'A proclamation!... You said a proclamation?... repeated Domitian with unfeigned surprise. 'But this does not have the appearance of one.'

'My lord, the word may not be very exact. But when one knows the object of the writing, one may, I should think, style it a proclamation, for it aims at preparing the mind of the people.'

'Prepare it to what?' asked Domitian, with visible anxiety.

'To rebellion and a change of reign,' replied Regulus, bluntly.

Domitian bounded like a wild beast wounded by the hunter's shaft.

'By Minerva!' he cried with concentrated rage; 'can it be true! Is such the aim of all those covert allusions? Oh, they shall not succeed! and I will make them repent of their audacity!... But who is the author?' he asked, fixing his blood-shot eyes on Regulus.

'The author of this impious project and of these libels,' replied the informer, is Lucius Antonius, the general commanding the army of Germania, who wants to have himself proclaimed emperor—he, or another, it matters little. Here, at all events, another document of far greater significance, which does not leave the least doubt as to his projects.'

Domitian jerked the manuscript from the hands of Regulus, and proceeded to read it with eager curiosity. In this document, as in the other one, the writer reminded the people of Domitian's many crimes; he revealed the true motive of Lucius Metellus' murder, and alluded sneeringly to the low birth of the man who had had the boldness to style himself a god and to have his statue worshipped in the capitol; he insulted Domitian's recently acquired glory, by stating that he had been shamefully beaten by the Dacians and Marcomans, and, following the precedent established by himself in a previous expedition, had gotten up the evidences of an imaginary victory by purchasing a large number of slaves and parading them as prisoners of war after having their hair and their garments arranged according to the fashion of the people he claimed to have conquered. Finally, the writer ended with an energetic appeal to the Roman people, whom he called upon to aid and sustain the effort soon to be made for the tyrant's overthrow by a numerous army, which he announced as ready to march on Rome to deliver her from the yoke of the odious Domitian.

In order to understand the full import of this proclamation and the rage it must have excited in Domitian, it must be known that the peace which ended the war against Decebalus had been purchased at the cost of Roman honor. Owing to Domitian's mismanagement, his expedition undertaken to avenge Oppius Sabinus and Cornelius Fuscus, whose legions had been cut to pieces by Decebalus and Duras, the two Dacian kings, aided by the brave Degys, brother of Decebalus, would have ended in a fearful disaster, had he not averted it by signing an ignominious treaty. The Emperor, nevertheless, had the impudence of soliciting the glory of a triumphal reception, and the Senate gave its cowardly assent.

The first proclamation contained only injurious revelations, the true import of which was more fully developed in the second. And yet, what had most deeply wounded Domitian's vanity were the particulars of concerning his humble origin and of the murder and incendiarism committed in order to conceal or rather wipe out the proof of this origin. Hence his anger against Marcus Regulus whom he had intrusted with the management of this already old affair—either the secrecy or the ability of the accomplices must have been at fault, since the accusation was now trumped up so boldly.

But the Emperor foresaw the coming of grave events; and his resentment against the informer