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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 X.—(CONTINUED.)

I had spoken so excitedly that I felt alarmed at the cold resolution which marked Vespasian's answers. But there was so much feeling in the manner in which he accused me of cruelty, and so much tenderness in the glance he gave me, that I felt sure of victory. I approached nearer to him; he took my hands and pressed them, calling me by the most endearing names. "Vespasian," I whispered, "it is not I who would abandon you.... believe this, at least."

"I know it, dear Aurelia.... I have never doubted your heart."

"He said this again with great tenderness with caressing words," continued the young girl, and tears suffused her eyes.

"But, Vespasian," I added timidly, "they may separate us."

"It would be a dreadful sacrifice!...."

"You said a sacrifice?" I cried trembling, "who then would you sacrifice?"

"Why this question? dear cousin."

"Vespasian, you do not love me!.... It needs but one word.... a single word.... And you will not speak it!"

"Oh! guardian! I wept bitterly, for from that time I saw that all was over. But I did not think that my betrothed would have had the courage to go still further."

"He was there before me.... gazing sadly at me.... his eyes filled with tears.... He scarcely dared to speak, and yet I could see on his face a secret calm, the same air of firm resolve that had caused me so much anxiety."

"Dear Aurelia," said he at last, "if I were asked to give up my life, it would be easier."

"Your life! Vespasian.... I am then nothing to you?...."

"You are everything to me!" he exclaimed in the same loving accents.... for he loves me, I cannot doubt. "But," he added solemnly, "I cannot prefer you to my God."

"Oh, guardian," continued the divine Aurelia, "when I heard these words.... I do not know what took place in me.... but this was too much.... I felt faint and giddy, and I fell.... I saw Vespasian spring forward and catch me in his arms.... He called loudly to my women.... Then, I saw nothing more.... I heard nothing.... I was senseless.... When I recovered my senses, I was lying on this couch, surrounded by my slaves.... I looked around me.... Vespasian had disappeared!...."

The young girl's voice grew faint as she concluded the narrative of this bitter trial; she struggled against the great sorrow that crushed her. Her eye was no longer proud, but veiled by her tears. She looked anxiously at Vibius Crispus who, feeling at last that he must say something, murmured in a low voice:

"Those Christians are all alike.... Nothing can conquer them.... They trample upon everything...."

"Is there no more hope, then, dear guardian?" asked Aurelia in beseeching accents.

Vibius Crispus scarce knew what to say. The selfish old courtier could find no balm for this wounded young heart. Besides, other thoughts filled his mind. What events would result from these facts which he had suspected, and of which he was now certain? The Emperor must soon become aware of them.... and then?.... Vibius was afraid!

"Dear ward, allow me time to reflect," said he, in the most caressing and affectionate tone he could assume. "No, all hope is not lost.... Time will doubtless conquer the young Caesar. Your love must certainly triumph.... But I am so much surprised that I don't know what to advise. Besides, nothing can be done at present. We shall see.... Above all, take care that the Emperor hears nothing of this!.... My dear ward, you may rely on your old guardian.... he is entirely devoted to you!...."

Vibius Crispus continued for some time to offer such vague consolations to that poor wounded soul. But the emptiness of his words wearied Aurelia, who felt herself abandoned by the awkward and cowardly old egotist; her last resource in her loneliness. She made no effort to detain him when he rose to go.

She listened to the noise of his steps on the marble pavement of the atrium. It grew fainter, then ceased, and silence reigned in the vast mansion.

"Oh, how lonely! how lonely!" exclaimed

Aurelia, groaning with anguish. "Who will come to me?"

"She closed her eyes and remained thus for some time, rapt in thought. When at last she looked up, a young girl stood near her, contemplating her with tenderness, and afraid to disturb her rest."

Aurelia uttered an almost joyful cry, and sprang into the arms of Cecilia, for it was she who thus appeared to Vespasian's betrothed as a merciful divinity.

CHAPTER XI.—AURELIA COMMENTS ON SAINT PAUL.

Aurelia showered caresses on Cecilia. She was happy to see this plebeian girl, this Christian slave who owed her her freedom. What motives were there not for the proud patrician, the betrothed of the Caesar Vespasian, to forget, and even to hate this daughter of an humble Tax-gatherer, whose name even was unknown to her a few days ago. And yet, it was in her gentlest tone of voice that she greeted her:

"Cecilia, my little Cecilia, is this you!.... What joy to see you!.... But how did you get here without being announced?"

Cecilia had not seen her noble benefactress since the memorable scene of the emancipation. She had called to return her thanks, accompanied by her father, her Christian friends, Flavia Domitilla and Aurelia's other relations; but this was the first time the two young girls met alone. Cecilia wished to express her gratitude more freely, and, at the same time, to inform Vespasian's betrothed of her own marriage with Olinthus, which would take place in a few days.

"Madam," said the modest young Christian, confused by this affectionate welcome. "I met your guardian, Vibius Crispus, in the atrium, and he brought me here, saying that you were very sad.... O my dear and noble mistress, what causes your sorrow?"

"It is true, Cecilia, that I am anxious, wearied, unhappy. But these are things I cannot speak of, and which do not prevent me from loving you. Oh! how well you did to come at this moment!...."

Aurelia would have felt embarrassed to repeat to the young girl the complaints she had confided to Vibius Crispus; she would not have her know the wounds inflicted to her pride and her love. She preferred to say nothing of what weighed so heavily on her mind.

"Cecilia," she asked with a smile, "are you content now that you have no longer to fear that dreadful Parmenon? Tell me, what has become of you?"

"Madam," said Cecilia, and her eyes beamed with gratitude, "my life will not be long enough to love you and bless you as I should.... My happiness will soon now be complete. Our brethren are preparing my marriage with Olinthus."

"You are going to marry?" exclaimed Aurelia heartily, carried back by this news to her own bitter troubles. "Ah! I remember, Olinthus was your betrothed, and there is no obstacle between you!.... And how will your wedding be? I hope my little Cecilia will become a matron by 'conflation'."

"Oh! madam," said Cecilia, smiling, "we Christians, know nothing of those forms. We have our own.... It is at the foot of the altar, after the oblation of the sacrifice, that we will be united before the pontiff who will bless us."

"Tell me, Cecilia," asked Aurelia with a certain anxiety, "do the Christians about to marry love each other dearly?"

"Doubtless, madam," replied the young girl, astonished at this strange question. "Why should they not love each other? It is the first duty according to our law."

"Ah! your law says this?"

"Why, yes, madam.... The husband is flesh of his wife, the wife flesh of her husband; the two make but one.... The husband must love his wife like unto himself, and the wife must love her husband as she loves herself.... This is what is written.... Moreover, my dear mistress, you can see for yourself," added Cecilia, handing Aurelia some sheets of papyrus, "that the young patrician took and read with eager curiosity."

It was St. Paul's epistle to the Ephesians on the duties of marriage.

"Madam," continued Cecilia, whilst Aurelia was reading those precepts of Christian union. "I have learned very little, as yet, for it is not very long since I embraced this holy religion. They have put into my hands the books which will teach me what I must be in my new position. He who wrote this epistle was a great apostle.... Among us, his word is looked upon as the teaching of God."

"Cecilia, what is the meaning of this passage: 'This is why the man will leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife?'"

"This is said to show that the husband and

wife must mutually prefer each other to all that they hold dearest in the world."

"And, consequently, that they must never abandon each other," said Aurelia, continuing the interpretation. "It seems to me I do not mistake?"

"No, madam, you say truly. Marriage among the Christians admits of no division in our affection, and it remains thus until ended by death."

"So you would never consent to leave Olinthus?"

Cecilia paused before she answered this singular question, and gazed with surprise at Aurelia. The tremulous voice and anxious face of the young patrician left no doubt as to the great interest she felt in this inquiry.

Cecilia reflected that her kind young benefactress had perhaps conceived some project concerning her establishment, and was about to ask her to renounce Olinthus. She replied with great firmness:

"Olinthus and I are only betrothed, madam, and these rules do not as yet apply entirely to us.... But we have chosen each other.... I have given him my heart.... I look upon him already as my husband.... and for no motive would I sacrifice an affection in which I have placed my happiness."

"You said for no motive, did you not, my little Cecilia?" repeated Aurelia, evidently delighted by this answer.

"Yes, madam," replied Cecilia to the same earnest and solemn tone. "Even to save my life I would not renounce Olinthus."

Aurelia felt like kissing the artless young girl again, for the pleasure this clearly expressed resolve gave her; but she was impatient to come to the question which interested her personally.

"I suppose," she resumed, "that you had to choose between Olinthus and your religion.... what would you do?"

"Oh! this is a different thing," replied Cecilia quickly.

"How! another thing?" cried Aurelia. "Does not your law forbid the husband to abandon his wife, and the wife her husband?... Suppose you were already married, would you give up Olinthus?"

"Certainly, madam, if to keep Olinthus I had to renounce God. God is above Olinthus, and our law teaches us to sacrifice everything for Him."

"Cecilia, what you say is impossible!.... You would not do it!...."

"I have done it, my dear mistress," said the young girl, with touching simplicity, for if she could not understand the object of all these questions, she saw the opportunity of giving the questioner a great lesson in Christianity.

"You have done it!.... When?... exclaimed Aurelia, much astonished.

"When I was in Parmenon's hands. With one word I could have obtained my freedom, and with it, Olinthus. I did not speak that word, for it would have been betraying my God and my brethren!...."

"It is true," murmured Aurelia, "yes, it is true!.... Vespasian would have the same strength.... Oh, I must lose all hope!...."

Her sobs choked further utterance. Cecilia had shown her the greatness of a Christian soul often struggling with the dearest sentiments and conquering them by the holy austerity of duty. Cecilia, like her, was young, and loved with a pure and fervent affection, and yet she had sacrificed everything, her happiness—dearer than life itself; and Aurelia remembered the bleeding scars left on the poor girl's delicate shoulders by the torturer's lash—touching proofs of her constancy.

Here was a great example for the young patrician; but it overwhelmed her, for she felt now that Vespasian must also prefer his God to her love; she had read in his eyes the sad firmness and calm resolve of a Christian who will not compromise with his faith. The poor child commenced to understand the law of duty.

Cecilia had seen the tears of the noble young girl, and she understood at once why they flowed. She clasped in her arms the daughter of the Caesars, and wept silently with her. It was a touching picture!

"Cecilia!.... Cecilia," sobbed the young patrician, "this sorrow will kill me!"

"My beloved mistress, can the Caesar Vespasian perjure himself?"

"So, Vespasian would renounce the empire.... Even I would be nothing to him...."

"But why suppose that the Caesar will have to undergo this trial.... Does any one threaten him?"

"No, but this may happen sooner or later.—It is this which frightens me since I know he is a Christian.... and then?...."

Cecilia lavished her tender caresses upon the afflicted young girl, but hesitated to answer those pressing questions.

"Tell me," resumed Aurelia, "would Olinthus have such contempt for your love?"

"Madam," replied Cecilia with much feeling, "I would, if need be, soften the pain of Olinthus' sacrifice, by encouraging him myself...."

"Oh!" exclaimed Aurelia, "and you say that you love your betrothed?"

"It is because I love him that I would prefer his happiness to mine."

"What do you mean?... His happiness?"

"Our God, my dear mistress, may sometimes impose upon us painful duties, but He rewards us a hundred fold for what we suffer in His name! This is what makes our strength."

"My cousin, Flavia Domitilla, told me this already. She even added that the imperial power is nothing...."

"Nor life, even, my dear mistress," said Cecilia, interrupting her with affectionate respect.

Aurelia hung down her head, and remained silent. The bright example of Christian fortitude presented by Cecilia, could not fail to make a deep impression upon the young patrician's mind. Aurelia abandoned herself involuntarily to the charm of this grateful affection which gradually opened her heart to resignation and hope.

At that period, moreover, Christianity, like unto the morning flower still wet with the dew of the night, and impregnated with its fragrance, filled the soul with its penetrating perfume; it often happened that from a single word, an example, a thought, sown in that soil already prepared by mysterious aspirations, faith sprang forth, to grow and blossom suddenly under a divine breath.

And who more than the young patrician had felt the genial warmth of this Christian atmosphere with which she was, so to speak, surrounded? Nevertheless, a single day was not sufficient to conquer these vacillations of a rebellious heart, or to temper this great sorrow, breaking forth in loud groans.

The two young girls remained a long while together. When Cecilia took leave of Aurelia, the latter no longer felt the bitter despondency which had followed her guardian's departure.—She had now a loving heart to sympathize with and console her.

Cecilia's marriage did not make her renounce the work of love and gratitude she had undertaken. She pursued it with indefatigable devotion, and her gentle words, her modest virtues and great faith, had a blissful influence on the mind and heart of the young pagan whose soul she wished to save.

CHAPTER XII.—THE ATRIUM REGIUM.

In the eighth region of Rome, at the base of Mount Palatine, between the New-Way, the Viscus-Tuscus and the Forum, was an ancient temple of circular form, and built at the end of a court surrounded by porticoes. Near by was a sacred grove enclosed by high walls.

This temple was erected by Numa Pompilius, who consecrated it to Vesta, the goddess of earth and fire, and who built his house, a small and humble structure, near this sanctuary. At the time we speak of, the deity alone dwelt in it, with the priestesses having charge of its altars. The Atrium Regium or Regia Numa was still venerated by the Romans as the inviolate residence of the pious king to whom they owed a worship which survived all other institutions.

Numa had instituted but four vestals; Servius Tullius or Tarquin-the-Elder raised this number to six. During the eleven hundred years this institution lasted, that is, to the time of Theodosius-the-Great, who is said to have abolished it (A. D. 389) this number never varied.

Everything connected with the worship of Vesta was symbolic, from the temple in which the sacred fire was kept continually burning, to the obligations of the priestesses. The shape of the temple was round—image of the earth of which Vesta was the divinity; the priestesses must be virgins, because fire, the principle of heat which animates the world, is naturally sterile. No image retraced Vesta's features: fire alone represented her in her temple.

With a little attention we find in the traditions of ancient religions the distinction which Christianity has made so great between spirit and matter.

If the material fire burning on Vesta's altars, happened to go out, it was a misfortune so great that Rome feared the most fearful events. The negligent priestess was punished with the rigorous torture of the lash.

But, if the Vestal permitted the flame of purity which should burn in her virgin heart until her youth had flown, to die out, Rome was no longer Rome, but an immense necropolis, plunged into a lifeless consternation, and which revived to hope only when the crime had received its punishment.

And this punishment was not merely the dread penalty of the lash; the guilty priestess was buried alive.

Those two emblems, fire and earth, cannot grow old. It was proper then that the virgins of Vesta and the sacred fire should remain for-

ever young. For this it was that the fire which lost some of its purity by coming in contact with material fuel, was rekindled each year, on the March Kalends, that is on the day upon which the year formerly commenced, and time renewed its imperishable youth.

For this, also, the priestesses of Vesta upon reaching their thirty-sixth or fortieth year—extreme limit of their sacrifice, were made to turn over their ministry to younger successors, in whose hands the divine flame, image of Vesta's imperishable chastity would burn more brightly.

Let us penetrate into the sacred asylum whose thick walls have ever awakened the curiosity of man. Paganism knew nothing of the austere practices which have made the cloister inaccessible.

Women could visit the Vestals at all hours. The men were not excluded, but they must retire before nightfall. The public had access to that part of the temple where the sacred fire was closely watched and fed by a vestal. The inner part of the sanctuary was closed to all except the Grand-Vestal and the pontiff. There were kept the images of the tutelary Gods of the Romans; and among other a Palladium, or statue of Pallas, to which was attached the safety of the empire.

The costume of the Vestals was the most graceful that could be worn by a young girl. It consisted in a long stole of the finest linen, descending to the feet; and, over this, a short, white tunic, reaching a little below the waist. Their hair was plaited into six braids and tied up with narrow bands; over this was placed the 'stiffulum,' a square veil of large dimension, which fell gracefully over the neck and shoulders. A few more bands in her hair, and a wider belt of purple than that worn by her companions, were the only distinctive marks of the Grand-Vestal.

Nothing had been neglected to make of the Atrium Regium a delightful retreat, a quiet asylum where the soul might recollect itself in silence and repose. Every luxury was lavished here, so that the Vestals would have nothing to regret of worldly pleasures. The worship claimed at their pure hands by the goddess, has no exacting duties; provided the fire burns always brightly on her altar, Vesta smiles, and demands no other homage.

What care could trouble the serene life of these spoiled children of the State, whose every desire was gratified as soon as conceived? The State made the most liberal provision for the enormous expense of their household; it paid for the numerous eunuchs, the attentive slaves that filled the Atrium Regium; the soft litters at which the wealthiest Roman girls cast envious looks; the magnificent cars which caused secret spite to the aristocratic matrons, as they rolled past them. In addition to these privileges of the most respected institution, each Vestal received a considerable income. How happy this life then in which were to be found combined all the pleasures of wealth and rank—all that could flatter the vanity of young girls!

And yet, when a Vestal died, or resigned her office after the legal term; when Vesta claimed another virgin to fill the vacant place in her sanctuary; why was it that consternation reigned in Rome, and every family was alarmed at the mere thought of a daughter being conducted to the Atrium Regium to enjoy the life of ease and comfort we have attempted to describe?

Here is the reason of this universal horror: In the sixth region of Rome [Alta Semita] was a field, the mere name of which inspired terror. It was called 'Campus Sceleratus'; which may be rendered by 'The Field of Crime.' No human habitation was to be found near this cursed spot; no footstep ever disturbed its awful silence and eternal solitude. It seemed as if nature itself shrank in this gloom. The humblest grass could not grow on this soil which seemed condemned to a fearful barrenness. The dew fell not upon the least green tuft; all was dark, naked, desolate.

This sinister spot formed a slight eminence close by the walls of Rome, beyond the 'Agger Servius,' from which it could be plainly seen. Neither the magnificence of the Atrium Regium, nor the honors paid to their rank could make the Vestals lose sight of this fatal spot hid in the shadow of the monuments of the queen of the world. Their mournful gaze ever sought the unbalanced mound where so many of their companions had found the most horrible and cruel death.

In this field, the priestesses convicted of incest; that is to say, of having sinned against the immaculate purity imposed upon them from childhood, suffered the extreme penalty for their crime.

From time immemorial there existed in the centre of the 'Campus Sceleratus,' a deep subterranean vault, whose thick walls smothered the last groans of the victims entombed alive in it. The opening of the shaft through which one descended by means of a ladder, was closed with a wide slab cemented in masonry and covered with