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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 XXIII.—(CONTINUED.)

‘Are you mad, my dear Gurgès,’ the unknown asked compassionately, ‘to stake your life in this way for vain chimæras which are certainly not worth the trouble? Is it not enough that you have sacrificed your office and your fortune for this superstition? . . . After all it is your own business, not mine. . . . But do not think that I am one of those vile informers who betray the Christians to their enemies. . . . By all the gods! that trade does not suit the man who stands before you! Do you hear, Gurgès?’

‘I am far from suspecting you,’ the ex-designator hastened to remark. ‘. . .’

‘Very well . . . very well. . . .’ said the stranger, interrupting him. ‘But let us return to the subject, time is precious. . . . We were saying, then, that thanks to the letter I brought you, you saved the Grand Vestal.’

‘Silence!’ repeated Gurgès; ‘you must be aware of the misfortune. . . .’

‘Oh,’ cried his companion, again interrupting him, ‘you allude to the search made and the persecutions ordered to discover an accomplice. It’s an old story, my dear Gurgès, and Domitian thinks no more about it. . . . Besides, it is three days since the Grand Vestal ceased to exist.’

‘How is this?’ cried Gurgès, springing to his feet from astonishment. ‘How can you know?’

‘Yesterday,’ replied the mysterious stranger, ‘a messenger brought the positive news that Flavia Domitilla, Euphrosine, and Theodora have found their death in Terracina.’

‘Oh,’ exclaimed Gurgès sorrowfully. ‘What, Flavia Domitilla also! . . . But you said at Terracina. The island of Pontia was the place of banishment of those three Christians. . . . You have been deceived!’

‘My dear Gurgès,’ replied the other, ‘have you never heard that Domitian when he wishes to destroy people, and is withheld from doing so openly on account of their name or influence, or from some other motive, draws them to some place where everything has been prepared for their ‘accidental’ death. This is what has happened. Flavia Domitilla and her companions were suddenly transferred to Terracina upon the pretext of softening the rigor of their exile. . . . But on the very night after their arrival, the house in which they had found shelter was destroyed by fire, and good care was taken that they should not escape.’

‘Another sorrow for the divine Aurelia and her noble relatives. Another triumph for the religion of Christ!’ exclaimed Gurgès, with that accent peculiar to times of persecution, in which were blended bitterness and sorrow, with faith and enthusiasm. ‘Yes, for the religion of Christ! for those illustrious virgins have suffered martyrdom!’

‘It was martyrdom, or at least what you call by that name,’ replied the stranger. ‘It is said, in fact, that Flavia Domitilla and her companions showed publicly their contempt for the gods and refused to offer them incense. So did Nereus and Achilles, Flavia Domitilla’s eunuchs, who were beheaded in Terracina on the very day their mistress died.’

‘Glory be to God!’ said Gurgès, making the sign of the cross. ‘Glory be to His martyrs. But,’ he resumed, ‘how could you learn these particulars which are not known in Rome? . . . How could you see this courier who must have been secretly sent to the Emperor?’

‘This, my dear Gurgès, is what I cannot tell and you will not know. Let it suffice that you may be sure I do not deceive you in this circumstance any more than I deceived you in the Grand Vestal’s case. But,’ added this mysterious man, ‘we have now reached the important point of this conversation. Let us recapitulate: Domitian has already put to death on account of Christianity, Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla, besides many who were not his kindred. What members of the imperial family remain that have been spared by his cruelty?’

And as Gurgès made no reply: ‘There remain,’ proceeded the stranger, ‘the divine Aurelia, the two Cæsars, Vespasian and Domitianus, and finally Flavia Domitilla, the widow of Flavius Clemens, banished, after the latter’s death, to the island of Pandataria. Now all these are Christians and may be threatened at any time.’

‘Aurelia,’ remarked Gurgès, ‘has already appeared before the city prefect, who charged

her to give up Christianity. . . . From that time she has practiced it openly, in the face of the Roman people, by taking care of the poor, assisting the confessors of the faith, and helping to bury the martyrs. . . . I believe Domitian will never dare to attempt anything against her or the young Cæsars.’

‘I believe the reverse, my dear Gurgès, and my mission is to give you warning, you have credit and influence with these illustrious persons. You can affirm most positively to them, that Domitian has resolved to punish their boldness, and on consideration of family ties will stop him. . . . Yourself, my dear Gurgès, are threatened with an early prosecution. . . . and at this very time I would not give four sesteria for your life.’

‘So much the better,’ remarked Gurgès with a calmness that won his companion’s admiration. ‘I have told you that I aspire only to the glory of my brethren who have died for the name of Christ. . . . Aurelia and the young Cæsars entertain the same sentiment. The news you have brought will fill three hearts with joy. . . .’

‘Then, my dear Gurgès, those who despise life so much, must also despise the empire.’

‘Oh, the empire,’ replied the ex-designator, with supreme contempt, ‘the empire—this great hope has been given up long ago.’

‘It is then useless for me to say that this hope might be renewed. . . . I know what I am saying, Gurgès,’ continued in a solemn tone, the stranger, who had paused to observe the effect produced by his words on the companion whose secret thoughts he would have fain read. ‘Yes, as humble as I may appear. . . . it may be in my power to return to the divine Aurelia and the two young Cæsars what they have lost.’

‘Can it be a crime you have come to propose to me,’ cried Gurgès, getting up with great indignation. ‘For the Emperor is still young enough to reign many years, and unless he should be overthrown. . . .’

‘Gurgès, Gurgès,’ exclaimed the unknown who felt a guilty confusion at the indignant apostrophe of the Christian, faithful even to the tyrant who threatened his life: ‘do not give more meaning to my words than they should have. . . . Sit down. . . . and listen to what I have to say. . . . You will see that my propositions have nothing in them that is not perfectly legitimate.’

At the same time he pulled Gurgès by his tunic with such force, that the ex-designator fell back upon his seat.

‘Do you know, Gurgès,’ resumed the unknown, ‘that for the last eight months. . . . since the death of the consul Flavius Clemens, Rome and Domitian himself are kept in a state of continual alarm by the strangest omens which—strange to relate—seem to announce that the Emperor will soon disappear, either by his dying or in some other way. Don’t you know that quite recently, a crow—the bird of bad omen—lit on the Tarpeian rock and spoke, as clearly as any human voice, those words in the Greek language: ‘All shall go well’. . . . What can this mean but that the Emperor will be hurled from the throne, by the hand of the gods, no doubt. . . . For, can it be supposed that with Domitian, a man who has committed so many crimes, Rome can know better days. . . . Moreover, the tyrant has found the interpretation of the omen completed in a dream. . . . and he is himself convinced that his end is near. Well, Gurgès, if such should be the will of the gods, why should it not be permitted to endeavor to secure the empire for the grand-sons of Vespasian, the nephews of Titus, for those whom the people love both for their origin and their own personal worth. . . . Now, I repeat it, I am perhaps the man who can best remove obstacles fix the choice of the pretorians, and conquer the suffrages of the people. . . . but to effect this. . . .’

‘The Cæsars should renounce Christianity?’ asked Gurgès.

‘Doubtless, it is a matter of necessity. Rome would not consent to be ruled by princes, imbued with this superstition.’

‘Let us stop here,’ exclaimed Gurgès, rising. ‘I would never have thought that in my humble condition, the friendship with which the two Cæsars honor me, could inspire the idea that I, the former Vespillo, could be a useful intermediary, and treat in some sort, of the empire. . . . But this very friendship authorizes me to proclaim loudly in the name of the two Cæsars Vespasian and Domitian: that they have renounced the empire as easily as I, Gurgès, renounced the worship of Venus Libitina, and abdicated the title of designator of funeral ceremonies.’

‘But what kind of men are you?’ cried the stranger, ‘that neither death nor the certainty of matchless rank and power can elicit from you anything but contempt and disdain?’

‘Oh,’ said Gurgès, ‘we are men who are sustained and animated by the hope of an eternal bliss to be reached through death. . . . This is

why we look with pity on life and all its joys, even to the highest.’

‘But tell me, my dear Gurgès how did you conceive this hope of which you speak? . . . What made you become a Christian, you the wealthy designator. . . . you the supreme chief of Venus Libitina’s agents?’

‘It was a miracle,’ replied Gurgès, ‘a miracle which passed my understanding. . . . You said just now that it was I saved the Grand Vestal. No, it was the God of the Christians.’

‘A miracle, Gurgès. . . . What, you are a Christian because you have seen what you call a miracle? . . . But there is a man in Rome who has been performing miracles long since.’

‘You mean Apollonius of Thyana, do you not?’

‘The same. . . . In Nero’s time did he not recall to life a young girl they were carrying to the grave? And quite recently, in presence of Domitian who was questioning him, did he not disappear suddenly from the crowded room to go to Pozzuola, where his disciple, Damas, affirms that he saw him at the very hour he should have still been in Rome?’

‘Well,’ inquired Gurgès, ‘if Apollonius of Thyana has performed those two miracles, why is it that you do not believe in him, although he styles himself a god? . . . Why is he mocked and laughed at publicly in Rome?’

‘What is the nature of those prodigies that you Christians make so much noise about, that they should be held in greater faith?’

‘But,’ replied Gurgès, ‘you have seen one and you may judge for yourself.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked the unknown.

‘What,’ said Gurgès, ‘don’t you remember what took place last year at the Latin Gate, and that venerable old man whom Domitian caused to be cast, alive, in boiling oil? Did you not see that apostle of Christ rejoice in the midst of this fearful ordeal, and come out unhurt? Is that miracle not great enough which was witnessed by the whole Roman people? What do you think of it?’

Gurgès alluded to the glorious triumph of St. John the Evangelist, which the Catholic Church celebrates on the 6th of May. But, aside of the great number of conversions brought about by this prodigy, the Emperor and the philosophers ascribed it to the power of incantations. This explains the disdainful reply made by the unknown to Gurgès’ question:

‘Magic, my friend. . . . pure witchcraft.’

‘Well,’ said Gurgès, ‘your Apollonius of Thyana is said to be such a great magician, may try it. . . . and if he succeeds. . . . But,’ he added, ‘this is enough; it is time I should return to my brethren. . . . the more so since I must impart to them the grave news you have told me. Anyhow, don’t expect that the Cæsars Vespasian and Domitian will change their resolution, even if you had really the power to realize your promises. . . . If God wills it, the empire. . . . or death rather than the renunciation of faith.’

And Gurgès, bowing to the unknown, hastened away. The unknown remained alone, absorbed in his perplexing thoughts.

‘What shall we do?’ he soliloquized, rising from his seat; ‘if these two young men fail us? . . . Who can we select? . . . No one wishes to brave the danger. . . . Nerva, it is true, is ready. . . . but he is but an old man. . . . Shall I go to that meeting of which I received mysterious notice to-day. . . . Yes. . . .’

Having made up his mind, he hurried from the tavern. The night was dark and the unknown observed carefully the door of each house, as he went on, as if he were looking for some signal. He stopped at last, muttering: ‘it is here!’ and having examined once more to make sure it was the right place, he said a little louder:

‘Brutus and Senate.’

The door was promptly and noiselessly opened. ‘I am expected, am I not?’ said the stranger as he glided in.

‘Yes, my lord,’ replied a voice. And the door closed.

The new comer crossed rapidly an atrium still darker than the street, and having opened another door at the furthest end of this habitation, found himself suddenly in a dimly lighted room, where a few men were assembled, who exclaimed:

‘Ah, here is Parthenius at last.’

‘Parthenius, the news are serious. . . . we must decide how to act. . . . Here, see these tablets I have taken last night from under Domitian’s pillow.’

The speaker was a deformed and hideous creature who had sprang forward to welcome Parthenius. In other words, it was Hirsutus, the Emperor’s dwarf and most implacable enemy. ‘My lords,’ said Parthenius, ‘I also have interesting news to communicate. . . . You are right; these tablets must put an end to all hesitancy. Let us deliberate.’

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE CLOUDS GATHERING.

Aurelia, since her eyes had opened to divine truth, had been an example of what faith and grace can do when they take possession of a heart. She was not long understanding that she must renounce the empire, as her new belief would prove an insuperable barrier; and she accepted with joy this sacrifice which formerly would have seemed to her an impossibility.

Nevertheless, she had preserved her love for Vespasian, but she had sacrificed this legitimate affection by showing herself ready to sacrifice it to God, if His glory required this last proof of devotion. Now, she felt that for her faith, she could not only silence the voice of her heart, but have even the strength of encouraging her cousin in his resolutions. She understood now that religion must be placed above all things human, even to the most precious and the dearest and she frequently conversed on this subject with Cecilia, whom she called sister, and who, conforming to her desires and orders, gave her the same sweet name.

After Flavia Domitilla’s departure, she had succeeded that sainted matron in the accomplishment of all the pious works of which the latter had given the first example in Rome. Like her, Aurelia could now be seen daily assisting the sick, sheltering abandoned infirm slaves, and relieving all the miseries and sorrows of poverty. She wanted to give up her immense wealth and to place it in the hands of the pontiff Clemens; but the latter had refused and had compelled her to remain its dispenser, enjoying her even to devote a sufficient portion of her income to maintain her high rank in a becoming manner.

Those distinctions, so highly prized of old, and now despised by the divine Aurelia, were a great burden to her, and she endeavored to compensate by voluntary privations and humble deeds in her private life, the enjoyment and secret vanity of the pompous exigencies to which she must submit to public. Thus, she taught herself, her numerous slaves, many of whom she had set free, but who had remained with her; she nursed them in their sickness and provided with solicitude for all their wants. They were frequently the auxiliaries of her charitable intentions, in which she was aided, however, principally by Cecilia and Gurgès.

Such was the life of the divine Aurelia, when the persecution broke out suddenly, which Domitian determined to wage against the Jews so long designated to his vengeance.

The first persecution was due to the necessity in which Nero found himself of justifying the burning of Rome by accusing the Christians of that fearful catastrophe. But it is difficult to set forth with anything like precision, the real causes of the second persecution. Domitian, after his many crimes, covered with the blood of the most illustrious citizens, could not but feel that he had become odious to the people, and that the desire for his overthrow was not confined to the ill-fated Lucius Antonius and his unknown confederates. The slaughter of all whom he believed implicated had not thrown any light upon the conspiracy. He lived in continual dread and anxiety, and took the most extraordinary precautions to guard against the fate predicted by the Chaldean philosophers, (Suetonius, in Domit., Cap. XIV.) and of the approach of which he had a presentiment.

Fearful omens were continually adding to his anxiety. He felt that he was surrounded by invisible and active enemies, even in the imperial household. He relented in his acts of cruelty, hoping to pacify the public mind, but it had no effect, and the warnings of his approaching fall continued more frequent and explicit. He then gave full sway to his cruel instincts, and woe to whoever excited his suspicions. The narrative of his cruel deeds would appall the reader, and would be foreign to the plot of our story.

At last, shut up in his palace, like a wild beast in its lair, and rearing with powerless fury, he remembered the prophecy that the Jews would become masters of all things, and he persuaded himself that the danger lay with his own kindred. He resolved, therefore, notwithstanding his former fear of the powerful God of the Christians, to proceed against his relations, in whom he centered all his apprehensions; for, if the Sibylline books promised the empire of the world to the people coming from Judea, that is, to the disciples of Christ, were not Flavius Clemens and his sons—Christians all—the secret choice of the people of Rome?

Such was, in our opinion, the only cause of the second persecution. Its character was more political than religious. With the exception of the martyrdom of St. John and a few other Christians, such as the holy priest, Nicomedes, whom the excited populace beat to death with clubs, it is not shown that this persecution reached any large number of the faithful. It fell almost exclusively upon the members of the Imperial family, and after the murder of his rela-

tions, Domitian countermanded the orders he had issued against the Christians.

Flavius Clemens was put to death, and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, was banished, but Domitian attempted nothing against the young Cæsars and Aurelia, notwithstanding their refusal to sacrifice to the gods when urged to do so by the city-prefect. The leniency of the tyrant cannot well be explained; it may have been owing to the strange omens which followed the death of Flavius Clemens, and which are related by Suetonius. It seemed, according to this historian, that not only mankind but the Gods had united to avenge the death of the martyr, and make Domitian tremble for his own fate.

But a tyrant like Domitian could not resign himself to lose his power and his life, without trying to exercise his vengeance to the very last hour. After the persecution of the Christians, the Emperor’s suspicions turned, with more justice this time, upon other parties, many of whom in fact were conspiring against him. Dios Cassus relates that the boy of whom he had made his plaything, and who was no other than Hirsutus, found under his pillow tablets containing the names of the principal officers of his household, whom he intended to put to death.

The name of the Empress Domitia Longina headed the list of victims.

It became urgent to act, and for this purpose the nocturnal meeting was held, in which we have left Parthenius. But if all agreed upon the necessity of action, the leaders of the conspiracy had not yet been able to agree upon the choice of the successor who should be proclaimed in Domitian’s place. Parthenius belonged to the party who favored the election of the two young Cæsars provided they renounced Christianity, and he had accepted the mission of sounding them. Hence his joy upon meeting Gurgès, of whose intimacy with the young Cæsars he was aware.

Great was the disappointment of his party when Parthenius communicated the result of his interview with Gurgès. A long and stormy discussion ensued, but the conspirators, knowing all the danger of further delay, finally agreed upon the choice of the Consul Nerva, a man who commanded general respect and confidence by his moderation and justice, and many other eminent virtues, but against whom militated an important objection. He was over seventy years of age, and could not live long—would they run the risk of falling after his death, under the yoke of a new tyrant?

This matter having been decided upon, one of the conspirator was instructed to proceed immediately to Tarentum, in order to advise Nerva to return secretly to Rome. There remained now but to select the day upon which Domitian should be attacked, and of a common accord, they appointed the fourteenth day before the Kalends of October. This was precisely the day fixed by Domitian’s presentiments.

Parthenius, who was the Emperor’s chamberlain, would introduce Stephanus under the pretext of presenting a petition to Domitian; the others were to rush in if Stephanus failed to kill the tyrant outright, and help to finish him.—Hirsutus would see that the Emperor would have no weapons within his reach.

These preliminaries settled, the conspirators separated after swearing to each other fidelity to the cause they had embraced.

CHAPTER XXIV.—THE DEATH OF A TYRANT.—EPILOGUE.

The day appointed was not distant, and the conspirators prepared everything with the greatest prudence, taking care to avoid everything that might have raised the least suspicion.

Stephanus showed himself in public every day with his left arm in a sling as though it had met with an accident. But the cloth in which his left hand was wrapped concealed the dagger with which he was to strike the tyrant.

At last, the fatal day arrived. On the previous day, the Emperor’s secret fears had increased. At supper, having ordered that a certain dish should be kept for the next day, he added: ‘Provided I may eat it!’ Then he remarked that on the morrow the moon would become bloody in crossing Aquarius, and an event would occur of which the whole world would speak. During the night he sprang from his bed with cries of terror. Near morning, he sent for a German aruspice, and the latter having predicted that some great change was preparing, he had him put to death.

Some time after this, he tried to pull out a small wart he had on his forehead. At the sight of the blood which flowed from this slight wound, he cried:

‘May it please the gods that this be enough!’ He then asked what time it was, and was told the sixth hour. He became joyful and prepared to give the usual attention to his toilet, for in his presentiments the fifth hour (ten o’clock a.m.) was the time which fate seemed to have fixed for the consummation of attempts upon his per-