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AURELIA;

OR

THE JEWS OF CAPENA GATE.

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

PART FIRST. — THE INFORMER.

CHAPTER I.—ROME IN THE YEAR OF GRACE 91.

In the year 842 of its foundation — period which corresponds with the year 91 of the Christian era—Rome already groaned under the implacable and sanguinary tyranny of the Emperor Domitian.

Doubtless, the Roman people, formerly so happy and so free, must have repented bitterly that it had given into itself masters in the person of its Cæsars; for, to the peaceful and mild reign of Augustus, had succeeded, without interruption, those of the stern and taciturn Tiberius, of Caligula, the madman, of the imbecile Claudius, and of the infamous and cruel Nero; then those of Galba, Otho and Vitellius. In other words, during fifty-five years, every possible humiliation and servitude had been inflicted upon the pride of the conquerors of the world: they had been made to suffer all sorts of misfortunes, of sanguinary excesses, of unparalleled disorders and fearful seditions; until terror and anguish had become the habitual daily conditions of their life.

It is true that the accession to the Imperial throne, of Vespasian and his eldest son, Titus, had been a truce to these public desolations; but this blissful interregnum of twelve years had flown with the rapidity of happy dreams; and clouds as threatening and gloomy as those which had overshadowed the worst days of suffering, were gathering on the horizon since Domitian succeeded his brother, so justly surnamed 'the delight of mankind,' had ascended to the throne. At the time our story commences, many public and private catastrophes, many sentences of banishment against the most illustrious individuals, many murders perpetrated openly or secretly, had marked the ten years already elapsed of Domitian's reign, and filled Rome with a terror which prostrated the most manly courage.

Nevertheless, in this year 842, Rome enjoyed, apparently at least, a moment of quiet and some little respite from its sufferings. Not that the Emperor Domitian had modified his usual instinctive cruelty, or that he had endeavored to conciliate some sympathy by putting a stop to his series of crimes; but, since several months he had left Rome, to direct personally the war which his generals had waged without success against Decebalus, King of the Dacians. He intended also seizing this opportunity to take revenge on the Quadi and Marcomani, tribes of Germany, and neighbors of the Daci, who, during this long war, commenced in the year 837 (A.D. 86), had not shown themselves the faithful allies of the Emperor, nor observed the conditions of their old treaties with the Roman people.

However, if temporarily, the weight of Domitian's iron band was not felt upon the immense city, the situation was neither better nor more encouraging. The danger was less actual and seemed less pressing; but it remained suspended over the heads of the people; and many, alarmed at what they saw around them, believed it still more fearful because not immediate.

The Emperor had left Rome filled with the ministers of his tyranny, and the habitual agents of his fury. A crowd of informers vied in skillfulness and audacity, to feed the equally insatiable hate and cupidity of the master of the world.

These shameful agents of imperial tyranny, full of that zeal which servile obsequiousness for the master awakens in vile natures, had divided the city between them, and prowled incessantly to the streets, hunting up the slightest indications upon which they might build their sinister accusations, scrutinizing the most natural acts with the activity and intelligence of those indefatigable hounds which are set upon the traces of forest beasts.

No detail, however minute, could escape their anxious investigations; no suspicion, however faint and fleeting, was treated with indifference by them; the dwellings, the most completely veiled in obscurity, became transparent and could conceal no secret from them. One might have thought that they penetrated into consciences and hearts, so well did their sagacity read the most hidden thoughts; but it was to suppress the least aspiration to liberty, and, in the forcible language of Tacitus, 'to keep a record of every tear and every sigh.'

CHAPTER II.—AN INFORMER AT WORK. On the eve of Ides of the month of Julius, (14th of July) in this same year, 842, (A.D. 81), the sun-dials in the Forum indicated the

sixth hour of the day, (noon), when a man, coming out of the basilica Julia, carried a whole under its peristyle already filled with a compact and tumultuous crowd.

The tribunal of the Recuperators was assembled by extraordinary, in this place where the Centumviri usually held their sittings, and what caused this great affluence of people, was that a very important suit, bearing on a State-question, had just been decided, after several sessions, during which the two most celebrated lawyers of the time had participated in the passionate debates.

The citizen, whose appearance under the peristyle we have mentioned, was a man of about fifty years. His radiant features, the triumphant looks he cast upon the crowd, which however seemed to avoid him with mingled terror and contempt, and from which threatening voices had saluted him with curses, would have sufficiently indicated that he was interested in the contestation, even though his dress had not revealed the active part he had taken in it.

He was clad in the toga of mourning usually worn by orators desirous of feigning distress and of inspiring compassion; and, by an extraordinary singularity, had completed this carefully studied, theatrical exhibition of desolation, by covering half of his face with a wide bandage.

Every minor detail had been made to harmonize, and the enormous bundle of papyrus leaves—probably documents connected with the suit just decided—which this gloomy personage held under his arm, were tried with strings as black as his toga.

He took off the bandage which, out of the court, had no longer any meaning, and concealed it in the folds of his wide garment. The hostile demonstrations of the people began to cause him some uneasiness, and he was already attempting to wend his way through the dense crowd, when deep groans, mingled with fearful imprecations, resounded near him.

These groans proceeded from the lips of an old man, whose appearance and demeanor denoted the wildest despair. This unfortunate being, like the man with the bandage and black toga, was leaving the interior of the basilica; but he came out rending his wretched garments, tearing his ash covered white locks, and striking his breast. It was evident that the decision of the tribunal had struck at his dearest interests.

He was accompanied by his defender, a younger man, whose noble and grave features wore an expression of sadness. The lawyer sustained the tottering steps of his unhappy client, and endeavored to soothe him with the most affectionate solicitude; but his efforts were unavailing to soften this wild grief; the old man anon broke out in noisy lamentations, calling upon the bystanders to bear witness to the injustice of men and the rigor of the gods.

The theatrical orator, first mentioned, would have been glad to make his way out, and avoid meeting this old man whose sight seemed to disturb him considerably; but the crowd was too compact. Baffled in his attempt, he made up his mind, resolutely, to approach those he wished so much to see, and this he did, composing his features, with remarkable facility, so as to give them the cheerful and kindly expression suitable to the occasion.

'My dear Pliny,' he exclaimed, grasping the hand of the old man's protector, 'allow me to congratulate you, notwithstanding your defeat! Your pleading, yesterday, was the finest I have ever heard! By Apollo! you have surpassed Cicero, your model! But it is not surprising that you have lost your case; I had consulted the auspices, and had advised you that they were favorable to my cause.'

Then, as Pliny the younger — for it was he who had defended and lost the case— withdrew promptly his hand and turned away, vouchsafing him no other answer than a look of contempt, the brazen-faced individual turned to the old man:

'Unfortunate Cecilius,' said he, affecting the liveliest compassion, 'why did you not accept the compromise I proposed? You would—'

He could not finish the sentence. An iron grip was upon his throat and clotted it with a vigor one would have little suspected in an arm weakened by age and a body crushed by sorrow.

It was the hand of the old man, who, straightened up at the first words spoken by his adversary, had sprung at him like a tiger, and was striking him with convulsive violence.

In an instant, he of the dark toga, breathless, almost choked to death, lost his balance and rolled down the marble steps, until his career was checked by the pedestal of one of the statues of the twelve great-gods that decorated the peristyle of the basilica Julia.

The admiring spectators clapped their hands, and gave expression to their delight by hooting, and overwhelming the discomfited orator with their gibes and mockeries.

Pliny—the Younger, who had not had time to

prevent this act of vengeance, seized Cecilius by the arm and hurried him away. They were soon out of sight.

Meanwhile, the citizen who had been made to descend so unceremoniously the broad steps of the basilica Julia, had jumped to his feet with a numbness which showed his limbs to be unbroken. But if his body was unharmed, his features were distorted by indignation and anger.

'By all the gods of hades and by all the furies, I shall take my revenge, cursed old man!' he cried as soon as he was on his feet; and after a few minutes' reflection, he was seen to hurry towards a building contiguous to the temple of Saturn, which, like the basilica Julia, was situated within the enclosure of the Forum.

This structure was known as the 'Tabularium' of the people. It was the place of deposit for public acts and records.

Having reached the office, the unknown called for the certificate of birth of a young girl named Cecilia; and addressed the agent who had hastened to show him the document:

'You will state at the bottom of the act,' said he, 'that by a judgment of the tribunal of Recuperators, rendered this day, Cecilia, born of the lawful wedlock of Cecilius Bassa, a Roman citizen, and Tarsilla Pacuvia, deceased, is declared to be the property of Parmenon, a duly authorized slave-trader, she having been mancipiated to the said Parmenon, by her father Cecilius. Here is a copy of the judgment.'

And he placed in the hands of the agent a certified document with which he had taken care to provide himself before leaving the Court-room.

The certificate having been duly entered and verified by this strange individual, he remembered probably that he had something else to do in the temple of Saturn, for, instead of retracing his steps, he entered a secret passage which led him to another and much larger office, where a prodigious activity reigned.

He was in the vast counting-room of the State and Imperial treasury.

We will not remain to examine the countenances of the citizens hurrying to pay their taxes, but will follow our unknown who, notwithstanding the avaricious glance cast on the piles of gold which the 'libripentes' weighed and counted incessantly, tarried not, but singling out a citizen in the busy crowd, called him aside to ask him this question:

'Well, my dear Palfurius, what is the amount of the legacies made to our gracious master, the emperor Domitian, since his departure from Rome? Have you prepared this calculation which I must send to the prince by the next courier?'

'Certainly, and the total is important enough. In the last six months the wills in favor of the emperor have produced fifteen millions of sesterii.'

'What! are you not ashamed, Palfurius, to speak of such a paltry sum? Well may the divine Domitian congratulate you on your zeal!'

'But,' exclaimed Palfurius, 'there has been little mortality in Rome, of late, and consequently but a small number of wills have been read.—Armillatus, with whom I was conversing recently on this subject, thinks that the mildness of the weather is the principal cause of this healthy condition; but the hot spell is commencing; it will bring diseases which will enable us to show our devotion to the prince.'

'You and Armillatus are a pair of fools,' cried the unknown, who seemed to care little how Palfurius, evidently a man of rank, would like the epithet; 'I repeat that this amount is insignificant, and it is singular that you should find an excuse in the condition of the weather and the scarcity of disease. Reflect that the friends of the emperor Augustus bequeathed to him a milliard of sesterii; that the sesterii was then worth much more than it is now, and that, consequently, you will never attain the fourth part of that sum, if you consider fifteen paltry millions of sesterii an important result for six months! Are you, perchance, one of those who think that Domitian should not be as well treated by his friends as was Augustus?'

This last remark, made in a significant tone, was so embarrassing, that Palfurius looked down, and could not find an answer.

'But,' resumed the pitiless questioner, 'since you have mentioned the name of Armillatus, may I know, at least, whether you have obtained the information which you were to procure me concerning Flavius Clemens and his wife Flavia Domitilla? Have you ascertained, at last, whether, as reported, they have embraced the new superstition? Flavius Clemens is immensely wealthy, and if it should be true that he has become a Jew, there might be an easy way of making up, in part at least, the deficit of which we were speaking.'

This question seemed to trouble Palfurius even more than the previous one; he replied, however:

'Flavius Clemens is the Emperor's cousin and

Flavia Domitilla is his niece. Their two sons have received from our august master the names of Vespasianus and Domitianus, because he destines them for the empire. How do you want us to pry into the affairs of persons so near connected with the prince and to whom he has shown such favor. Look you, this is a dangerous matter, and you have not reflected sufficiently.'

'So,' said the unknown, giving a peculiar emphasis to each sentence, 'you and Armillatus refuse to undertake it? It does not suit you—consular men as you are, able to penetrate into the intimacy of another consular, and chosen for that reason—it does not suit you to investigate a matter which gives uneasiness to the Emperor, and of which he wishes to be informed? Very well! We shall find other means. But really, dear Palfurius, you are the mere shadow of your former self!'

With this ironical and threatening remark, the unknown suddenly left Palfurius Sura to the latter's great relief.

Crossing hurriedly the crowded halls of the temple of Saturn, he entered the Forum. It was deserted, for the heat had become unbearable, and the citizens had returned to their homes to enjoy the customary siesta.

But our man minded not the burning rays of the sun. He was absorbed in his thoughts of hate and revenge. Crossing the immense Forum in all its length, he followed the way to the Forum of Mars as far as the Ratumena gate; then, turning to the left, he entered a broad street, which led him to the Flaminius circus.

To the right is one of the oldest edifices in Rome, the 'Villa publica,' where the Romans lodged the Ambassadors of countries with whom they had no alliance. They were not permitted to enter the city proper, (urbs.) The representatives of allied nations were introduced into the holy city and magnificently entertained in the 'Græcostasis,' a splendid house situated in the centre of the Forum.

Near the 'Villa publica,' the slave traders occupied shops or taverns built between the massive pillars of the porticos. The unknown knocked repeatedly at the closed doors of one of these taverns. It was at length opened by an individual of high stature, clad in a many-colored toga.

This man, whose brutish and insolent countenance bespoke a ruffian of the first order, was strangely disfigured. The horrible scars with which his face was covered, were evidently produced by the application of powerful acids or of the juice of venomous plants, so skillfully prepared by the witches of that time.

As he opened the door, this repulsive being rubbed his eyes, and yawned so as to distend unmoderately his jaws. He had been disturbed from his siesta, and seemed in very bad humor thereat. But his anger vanished as if by magic when he recognized his untimely visitor.

'Parmenon, Cecilia is ours!' said the latter; but, on his lips, this word, ours, seemed to mean, mine; one could have easily seen that a master was speaking, and that Parmenon was a subaltern. 'Yes, thanks to my eloquence, the mancipation in thy favor has been declared valid by the Recuperators, and thou canst put the ticket of sale on Cecilia; but thou must explain that she is of free condition, else a guarantee will be required.'

'Master, I shall put the ticket.'

'Very well! But it is necessary, absolutely necessary, that Cecilia should be sold to-morrow. Besides, thou wilt stipulate formally that she can never be enfranchised or emancipated. I have important reasons to make this a rigorous clause. Ah! I was forgetting . . . the price must be one hundred thousand sesterii, not a 'stips' less. Remember our agreement; I must have two-thirds. If ever thou shouldst think of invoking the absurd Cincia law, thou knowest, wretch, that I can . . .'

'Master, fear nothing; what has been agreed shall be faithfully fulfilled;' hastened to answer Parmenon, in whom the last words of the unknown had awakened unpleasant reminiscences.

Satisfied with this promise, and having no further recommendation to make to Parmenon concerning Cecilia, our individual, who had not completed his self-imposed task, hastened to leave the 'Villa publica,' and returned in the direction of the Ratumena gate.

Following his steps, we again cross the Forum; we then leave it on our right to enter the Clivus of Victory, and we are in the Palatine, in its south-east angle, and in front of a celebrated house. Built by M. Livius Drusus, the people's Tribune, it had passed into the hands of P. Crassus, and afterwards into those of Cicero, who borrowed three millions sesterii to pay Crassus the purchase money.

This M. Livius Drusus made to his architect, who proposed to construct the house so as to protect the owner from prying eyes, this answer, which has been preserved by history: 'I wish my house could be made of glass, in order that

everybody should see what is going on within.' The mysterious individual we have followed so far, looked carefully around to make sure that he was not observed; and, having ascertained that the street was silent and deserted, crossed rapidly the small circular place in front of the house, knocked softly at the door, and addressing the slave-porter who answered his knock:

'Greeting,' said he, 'to Palæstrion, the future freedman of the divine Aurelia!'

'Alas, my lord,' replied the slave, bowing with deference, 'may Jupiter hear you! Many times, already, you have given me such words of hope, but I do not perceive that my chain is loosened or its links broken!'

And the poor fellow pointed to his legs, which were tightly imprisoned in a double circle of iron connected with a long chain, the end of which was firmly secured to the wall.

'You do wrong, Palæstrion,' resumed the unknown, 'to doubt my words; every time you have seen me, I have broken one of those links, for I have given you gold, that is, the means of purchasing your freedom. And to-day again, I have taken care not to forget the interest I feel in the unhappy Palæstrion. Here are two 'aurei' for you.'

And he handed to the slave two gold pieces, which the latter hid away with marvellous dexterity, in the folds of his garment.

'But, my lord,' remarked the slave, 'you must have a motive to show such deep interest to a poor wretch like me! I confess that I am very uneasy, for, since the last time you were here, something has happened in this house which has given me much to reflect upon!'

'Ah! what is it, Palæstrion? What has happened?'

'I must tell you, my lord, that our mistress, the divine Aurelia, is not cruel towards her slaves. She seldom causes them to be whipped. She was very fond of a girl named Doris . . . Did you know her, my lord?' asked Palæstrion, interrupting his narrative, for he had seen the unknown start at the mention of that name.

'How do you want that I should know her?' replied the latter, whose features assumed an expression of indifference. 'Continue.'

'Well, my lord, this Doris who was the habitual 'ornatrix' (hair dresser) of the divine Aurelia, by order of our mistress, she was stripped of all her clothes, suspended by her hair in the centre of the 'atrium,' and there, in presence of the whole 'family,' (name by which the slaves in a household were designated,) was so cruelly whipped by the public executioner, that she expired under our eyes in the most horrible convulsions.'

'And why this unusual severity?' asked the unknown with well-feigned impassibility.

'Oh! the divine Aurelia is quite grieved at the death of her hair-dresser; she says she cannot replace her easily. It is even stated that she weeps frequently; but we have been told again this morning, that she would consign to the same fate any member of the family who, like Doris, should betray the secrets of her house to Marcus Regulus . . . Why! my lord, what is the matter with you?'

It required a mighty effort on the part of the unknown to conceal the emotion caused by this name. He succeeded, however, and replied with composure:

'Nothing, Palæstrion; the fate of this young Doris fills my heart with compassion, and I would not suppress a groan. But this Marcus Regulus must be very dangerous that such an order should be given?'

'They say, my lord, that he is the wisest wretch there is in Rome, and I have thought, . . . that Doris' fate awaits me . . . if . . . unfortunately . . . he who questions me . . . and whom I do not know . . . should be . . .'

'Thanks, Palæstrion, for the comparison and your good opinion of me! But, thanks to the gods, my questions cannot compromise you and make you fear this fate . . .'

'It is true, my lord . . . and you will pardon a poor slave who trembles, but who meant no offence, . . . for you are not Marcus Regulus . . . Besides, I shall see whether I can reply to your questions.'

'They will be very simple ones, and dictated by my devotion to the noble house of your august mistress. Is our Grand-Vestal, the illustrious Cornelia, any better? Will she soon be able to resume her high and holy duties?'

'No, my lord, the health of the Grand-Vestal is not good. The divine Aurelia's tender care cannot succeed in making her forget the punishment inflicted by the Pontiff Helvetius Agrippa; and it is the deeply felt and ever recurring shame of that punishment, which, it is said, prevents her recovery.'

'And your mistress, the divine Aurelia, is she occasionally visited by Metellus Celer?'

Palæstrion seemed to think this question dangerous or indiscreet, for he made no reply to it.