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AURELIA;

OR,

THE JEWS OF CAPENA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quignon

PART THIRD.—THE VESTAL.

CHAPTER IX.—(CONTINUED.)

It was the triumph, going his rounds who, perceiving the light of torches at this unseasonable hour, had ordered the party to be challenged.—Now, Gurgus had had more than once trouble with the triumph capital. In his nocturnal expeditions, during the time that he was a vespillo, he had often been stopped by the chief of the urban police, and searched for such prohibited articles as human hair and teeth—spoils robbed from the grave by the vespillios. But never had the encounter caused him so much uneasiness.

“If this triumph proceeds to search my person as usual,” thought Gurgus, with a certain tremor, “what will become of the Grand Vestal’s letter?... What will become of me?...”

The danger became imminent, for the triumph, obtaining no reply, was galloping towards the suspicious party.

“Who goes there?” he repeated, when he was about twenty steps from them.

“Gurgus?” replied the son of Tongilianus, almost firmly.

“Gurgus, the designator?” asked the triumph.

“Ah! now I understand.... They are waiting for you over yonder!.... Pass on!....”

Gurgus hastened to avail himself of this permission, but he could not get over his astonishment at the facility of his escape, and at the words spoken by the triumph.

“This triumph understands,” he muttered, “that is very well.... but what is it that he understands?... They wait for me over yonder!.... That is not likely.... By Venus-Libitina! my intellect is at fault.... Well, never mind, that is of no importance.... let us make haste, lest this night bird should change his mind.”

Another state of astonishment awaited Gurgus and his men. As they came in sight of the sacred grove of the Muses, they perceived that the base of the dark mass, scarcely visible in the gloom of the night, was illuminated by thousands of lights, some stationary and some moving in the direction of that part of the woods consecrated to Libitina.

“What are those Christians about?” exclaimed Gurgus, “that they are not asleep, but wandering out at this late hour, with torches.... Could it be that they really expect me!.... This would be curious!.... But let us go on, we will soon find out!....”

When the party left the Appian way to enter the grove of the Muses, they were again stopped with the challenge: “Who goes there?” by two Christians, placed as sentries on the outskirts of the woods.

“Gurgus!” replied the designator, in a much firmer tone than he had answered the triumph’s challenge.

“You are welcome?” said the voices.

“This is well, what you are doing, Gurgus,” said one of the Christians, coming forward and grasping the designator’s hand.... “But we should have expected as much from your friendship and devotion.... Thanks, in the name of our brethren!.... You will find them all in tears!”

“But what has happened?” inquired Gurgus, completely bewildered. “I cannot understand what you say!.... You can know nothing of the business which brings me here.”

“You ask what has happened?” replied the Christian; “we have lost our mother.... Petronilla, the sainted virgin, fell asleep in the Lord, day before yesterday, and we are watching here to welcome the Christians who will attend her funeral at day break.... I thought you had been informed of this great misfortune....”

“No,” said Gurgus, “I had not heard of it.... Ah! Petronilla, the poor old woman whom I loved so much for the affection she bore Cecilia, is dead,” he added, with emotion, returning the pressure of the Christian’s hand. “This, then, is the reason why the triumph told me I was expected here.... Let your mind be easy, everything will be done in a suitable manner.... Only I should not have been advised so lately.”

“It was the Christian’s turn to wonder.

“Are Olinthus and Cecilia here?” asked Gurgus.

“They closed Petronilla’s eyes.... But returned to Rome yesterday, to bring back Flavia Domitilla and our other brethren. We are expecting them....”

“And the Pontiff Clemens?” inquired Gurgus, remembering the mission he had undertaken, “is he not here?”

“Clemens has not left Petronilla.... He is praying for her, at this moment before the altars of the Lord.”

“Very well,” said Gurgus. “I shall go and see how matters stand, and give my orders without delay.”

Gurgus and his vespillios penetrated into the grove. The worthy designator had never done so much thinking as on this eventful night.

“Let us see,” he reasoned as he walked on, “these Christians are poor.... This is evidently why they did not send for me.... I understand this.... But Gurgus loves his friends, and the occasion presenting he will prove it.... I liked Petronilla; I shall take charge of her funeral, and I want people to sneak off!.... Let us organize the ceremony.... First, I walk at the head of the cortege with my lictors dressed in black, this is understood.... Next come the images of the ancestors.... Did Petronilla have any?... Yes, one Peter, a very celebrated man, I have heard! Besides, I have in my store rooms any quantity of images of ancestors for families.... Very well!.... We shall want twenty mourners.... I shall see to this.... I shall say a word to the ‘proffica’ (the woman who acted as chief mourner at funeral).... and they will utter lamentation cries!.... There will be no lack of relations.... I imagine all those Christians will follow Petronilla.... The funeral bed, the pyre? That’s my lookout.... Ah, the funeral discourse?... It is rather late to get somebody to prepare it.... But I shall ask the Pontiff Clemens for a delay of twenty-four hours to organize my ceremony. He cannot object to this....”

The meditations of the designator were interrupted by the sound of pure voices ascending to heaven in pious concert. Looking up, he stopped in a respectful attitude. The corpse was before him.

Petronilla, the octogenary virgin was placed in a reclining position, on a bed of leaves. Her eyes turned to heaven. She was clad in white garments, studded with flowers—emblems of the purity of her life; a wreath of white roses encircling her brow. One would have scarcely realized that she was dead, such was the serenity of her features, which retained an august expression very different from the rigidity of death.—Around her burned torches of resin, emitting an aromatic odor, and perfumes that filled the atmosphere with their fragrant emanations.

On each side of the funeral bed was a choir of women and young girls who watched, and sang alternately sacred hymns or passages from the holy canticles. These were the voices Gurgus had heard.

The women sang:

“Blessed be the Lord! She died in His grace; the betrothed came; she held her lighted lamp in her hand.”

The young girls replied:

“She has flown to heaven like the dove of the desert; her soul is as white as the lily in the vale; no impure breath has touched her virginal body.”

And all repeated together, three times:

“Glory be to God! Glory be to God! Glory be to God!”

The designator looked at these arrangements with a critic’s eye, and communicated, in an undertone, to his vespillios his condemnation of such things as did not appear to him in harmony with the established usages.

“Where are the embalmers,” he whispered, “to wash and perfume the body of this respectable matron? Where are the faces which should surround that bed? By-the-by, it should have been decorated with better taste. I don’t see the black hangings.... Nor the cypress trees, clipped into a mournful shape, nor the flute players who should accompany these funeral songs. If I had been advised of this, nothing would be wanting in the marks of respect due this old Petronilla....”

A hand laid on the designator’s shoulder interrupted the expression of his regrets.

“Ah,” said he, turning round, “Olinthus and Cecilia.... Why,” he added reproachfully, “did you not inform me of this sad event?”

“Dear friend,” said Olinthus, “since two days we have not left our mother one moment. She passed away in our arms....”

“Olinthus,” exclaimed Gurgus, “I must take charge of the funeral.... I only ask for a few hours delay in order to prepare it with becoming solemnity!”

“Thanks, Gurgus, but this cannot be....”

“And why not, my dear Olinthus?... Should a friend’s services be refused?”

“No, Gurgus, but Libitina, the goddess of funerals cannot preside over the obsequies of a Christian virgin,” replied the centurion, with a smile.

The designator looked shocked.

“You, Christians, are very exclusive!” he remarked, discontentedly.

“Gurgus! Gurgus!” said Olinthus, in a tone of friendly reproach, and pressing the worthy designator’s hand. “Do not feel vexed.... Here comes the pontiff Clemens,” he added, pointing at a cortege in the distance, “he will tell you, better than I could, the reasons of our refusal.”

The dawn lighted faintly the sacred grove. The first rays of the rising sun tinged with gold the cloudlets on the horizon. The damp mist of night melted, driven by the morning breeze. The loud chirp of the insects mingled with the voices of the birds celebrating with joyful songs the return of light.

Amidst this concert of awakening nature, grave and pious voices intoned the sacred canticles; a long file of men and women bearing green palms, approached slowly, and surrounded the bed upon which rested Petronilla. Each one, as he or she passed the foot of the bed, made the sign of the cross, and sprinkled the body with the holy water used in Christian ceremonies.

Then, in the rear of these men and women, came the Bishop Clemens surrounded by his priests and deacons. The pontiff blessed the crowd who bent their heads reverently. Having arrived near the corpse, he sprinkled it three times.

The time had come for the funeral.

Olinthus and Cecilia joined the cortege; they were followed by Flavia Domitilla, and by Flavius Clemens and his two sons, who had hastened to pay the last honors to the daughter of the chief of the Apostles. They had been detained in Rome by unimportant cares. During the night, Domitian’s summons to attend on the next day the examination of the sons of David, had been delivered to them.

Gurgus and his vespillios mingled with the crowd.

“My brethren,” said the pontiff, addressing the silent and collected multitude, “Petronilla is no more. Almighty God has recalled her to Him. She is in His Tabernacles, repeating the eternal Hosanna, and singing the praise of the Lamb. She awaits us amidst the just with the Apostles of Christ, the first martyrs of the faith, the holy virgins whom the mysterious Spouse glorifies and consoles.

“Let us rejoice, my brethren, for this day is not a day of mourning; let us, too, sing Hosanna, for the Lord has manifested in this humble servant His grace and the most precious gifts of His love!”

“Glory be to God! Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be to His elect!”

The assemblage repeated these three invocations.

“My brethren,” continued Clemens, “the days of persecution are near; I feel it in my heart, God has revealed it to me by secret warnings. Let us await with peaceful souls the hour of trial; let us bless the Lord if He wisheth that we should confess His name.

“I have appointed seven notaries to preserve the names of those who shall fall by the sword, in order that the memory of their constancy shall not be lost for the encouragement of the weak and the imitation of future Christians; I have prepared the asylum where the bodies of our martyrs will rest until the day of eternal life.

“We are going to place Petronilla in this first Christian field of rest; it was meet and just that Peter’s daughter should be the first to enter that asylum which will extend one day under the city of Rome like an invisible boulevard, and where the bones of our brethren who died for the faith of Christ, will be so numerous, that they will serve to make the cement of its walls, and the stones of its vaults!”

“Glory be to God! To our Lord Jesus-Christ! To His elect!”

The assemblage again repeated the joyful words.

“And now, Christians,” continued the pontiff, “having celebrated the holy mysteries, let us lay Petronilla in the grave whence her body will arise, impassible and glorious, at the consummation of ages. We shall not, as the Gentiles do, throw to the winds her ashes gathered from a funeral pile; she will remain among us as a pious memento, as a sacred relic—humble and gentle example during her life, glorious exhortation after her death!”

“Amen!” responded the multitude.

The pontiff then took a palm from the hands of one of the faithful, and having dipped it into a vase containing water, sprinkled a few drops upon the venerable virgin asleep in the Lord; after this he turned around and sprinkled the assemblage.

The sacred dew fell on Gurgus as well as the other assistants.

“That’s the lustral water,” whispered the designator to his vespillios. “It is the way to throw it on the relatives and friends of the deceased, but this should be done at the end, not

the beginning of the ceremony. Another mistake! Why did they not let me do it?”

The bed of leaves was lit by twelve young maidens dressed in white and crowned with white flowers. Near them walked other young girls, also clad in white, and singing sacred songs. Next came the women carrying pine torches, and lastly the men grouped around the pontiff and his priests and joining their deep voices to those of the maidens.

A young woman, dressed in the deepest mourning, walked immediately behind the funeral bed, supported by Flavia Domitilla, the Emperor’s niece, and Eutychia, the mother of the plebeian centurion. The disconsolate mourner was Cecilia. The young matron was so overwhelmed by her grief that she would have fallen but for the assistance of her two friends.

As for Gurgus, he followed the cortege at some distance, still criticising the arrangements, but respectful and with uncovered head.

The funeral procession soon reached the crypt which was to receive Petronilla’s body. Some of the men took the place of the young maidens, to lower the body in the grave which was lined with a thick layer of laurel leaves. The sainted octogenarian was placed on the aromatic bed, with her head towards the East; and the young girls kneeling around the grave, threw into it their wreaths and palms.

Cecilia, still sustained by her two companions, approached to deposit also her pious memento. This was the slave’s garments she had worn on the day of her emancipation, and with which she now wrapped the rigid limbs of the loving friend who had received her in her arms on that memorable occasion.

The songs had ceased. The pontiff sprinkled the body once more, and threw upon it a little earth. The women put out their torches; the men filed past, each throwing a handful of earth upon the body and inclining his head reverently; and soon there was left near the levelled grave but two persons kneeling and weeping together—Olinthus and Cecilia.

When, at last, they arose to go, Olinthus found himself face to face with Gurgus. The designator’s eyes were wet with tears.

“Take me to the pontiff Clemens, my dear Olinthus,” said Gurgus, “I must speak to him.”

“Come with us,” replied the centurion, too much absorbed in his grief to say more.

Gurgus followed silently. When they arrived near the pontiff he was inviting Flavius Clemens and the young Cæsar to join the other Christians in the agapæ which followed the funeral ceremonies.

“We cannot,” replied Flavius Clemens. “The Emperor has sent for us; and it will soon be time to go to the palace, in obedience to his orders.”

“Ah,” thought Gurgus, “if this consul and those young Cæsar had seen the letter I have under my tunic.... how quick they would turn their backs upon Domitian!”

When Flavius and his sons had taken leave of the pontiff, Olinthus introduced Gurgus to the latter, whom he acquainted with the designator’s generous offer.

“Thank you, my son,” said the priest, with a smile. “But you see we have our rites.”

“Which are better than ours,” replied quickly Gurgus, moved by Clemens’ kindness and this name of ‘son’ which the venerable man had applied to him. “But, my lord, I have called to see you upon a grave matter,” he added, “will you permit me to speak to you privately?”

Olinthus left them. The designator then hastened to hand Metellus Celer’s letter to the pontiff, saying:

“Read, my lord, this writing which has been in the Emperor’s hand.”

When the pontiff finished reading, Flavius and his sons were still in sight. Clemens saw them ready to step into their litters. He made a motion as if to call them back, but withheld the cry ready to escape from his lips.

“No,” he said, thoughtfully, “I must not recall them.... It is better that they should obey Domitian.... If they showed the least hesitancy.... if they attempted to justify themselves.... they would be lost.... Let them approach the Emperor, ignorant of this accusation.... Their surprise and indignation will only have truer and more convincing accents.”

He turned to Gurgus.

“You say, my son,” he added, “that the Emperor has read this letter?... How do you know it?...”

The designator narrated briefly what had happened to him.

“You have acted right, my son,” said Clemens, “I shall justify your confidence.... You may rest assured that this letter will be handed to the Grand-Vestal. But be silent concerning these matters.”

Gurgus promised to obey.

“My son,” resumed the pontiff, in a solemn tone, and as if answering a secret thought, “God has given me for mission to help all who are in

danger, to save alike the gentle and the Christian, the priestess of false divinities as well as the virgin consecrated to Christ.... It may happen that I shall come to you, one day, as you have come to me.... Will you do then what I shall ask you?”

“I wear it!” exclaimed Gurgus, with enthusiasm, “at any time, in any place, and for anything, I devote myself to the pontiff of the Christians....”

Gurgus could not resist when one appealed to his heart.

“Farewell, my son,” said Clemens, with an affectionate smile.... “We shall doubtless meet again.... For the present my flock require my care.”

Gurgus bid farewell to the pontiff, and having joined his vespillios, returned with them to Rome.

CHAPTER X.—WEALTHY, BEAUTIFUL, GREAT AND UNHAPPY.

Whilst Domitian is marching against Lucius Antonius, we shall go back to Cicero’s house, to find the divine Aurelia, of whom we had lost sight.

It was a few days after Cecilia’s emancipation. Aurelia, alone in her cubiculum, was reclining on rich cushions, playing listlessly with some flowers, which she took from a beautiful murrhin-vase and picked to pieces. The young girl was sad and pensive. Some bitter sorrow seemed to weigh on her heart. She had sent for her old tutor, and was waiting with impatience for his arrival.

From the time when she had thrown herself, weeping, into the Grand Vestal’s arms, exclaiming: “Vespasian is a Christian! all my hopes of happiness have fled!” this thought had not left her mind, and none could have guessed what despair had filled her heart when, before the pretor’s tribunal she had seen Flavius Clemens and his two sons surrounded by the Christians, receiving their homages, and, in return, showering marks of sympathy upon these despised people.

Aurelia abandoned herself to the bitterness of her thoughts in the midst of the solitary life led by the Roman women, and which is little known in our days. Such a thing as the family circle or the pleasures of home was unknown. The adage: “Mulier familiaris suæ et caput et finis est,” had necessarily passed from the laws into the customs, or rather custom had introduced it into the law, and this habit of looking upon woman as a being left to its own resources, commencing and ending in the same person, had destroyed even the meaning of natural family ties.

The words which, in the Roman law or in the ancient writers, expressed the relations established by consanguinity between individuals, designated ties very different from those known at the present time. With a little attention we discover in the writings of the old authors the absolute void of a Roman woman’s life, and the forced solitude which surrounded her. We realize all the frivolity and idleness of that existence so forcibly styled “mundus mulieris.” So, we might give the list of her numerous garments; we might say which she wore in the morning, which at mid-day when visiting the porticoes, and which she reserved for evening wear; we might name the perfumes and cosmetics prepared to enhance the brilliancy of her complexion, the essences in which she bathed, the jewels with which she loaded her fingers, her wrists and ankles. All these things have been minutely described.

We see her plunged in indolence in the midst of numerous slaves always ready to spare her the least exertion; we follow her in her shopping and visiting excursions in the city, and gaze with astonishment upon the extravagant splendor of her cortege, when she repairs to places of public amusement.

But it is seldom that we see her surrounded by her family; seldom that she is shown to us enjoying the pure happiness of the home circle; she hardly seems to know the sainted affection which unites beings in whose veins the same blood courses.

Cornelia, the mother of Gracchus, so proud of her two sons whom she called her most precious jewels, presents a pure picture seldom reproduced in Roman history.

The matron, having a husband and children, felt necessarily some movement around her, but the motherless young girl, the orphan, “sui juris,” was truly alone in the world; she was as lost in the immensity of that city of Rome with its three millions of inhabitants. Wherever she turned, she saw a moral wilderness; from the uproar of the thousand noises which filled the city, not a voice spoke to her soul.

It is Christianity which has created the intimacy of modern relations; it is through the emancipation of woman restored to her primitive equality with man that the politeness of customs was founded; to religion we owe the charm—unknown to ancient civilization—of the pure and respectful friendship which transformed society.

This thought is not new, but it is so true, that it cannot be proclaimed too often.