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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 XX.—(CONTINUED.)

Meanwhile, a commotion has taken place in the Forum. The ranks of the silent multitude have opened to let pass a party of men—Ravinius and his aids—bearing a wooden gallows made in the shape of a fork. Above the fork is a scroll upon which is written in large black letters:—

Metellus Celer, Knight, Corrupter of the Grand-Vestal Cornelia.

Which meant that the unfortunate young man would be torn with leaden-pointed whips until death would ensue; for such was the fate awarded to the seducers of Vestals.

Another undulation of the crowd showed that the victim was approaching. A litter, hermetically closed, was seen to leave the Comitium; it was carried slowly across the Forum, and stopped at the foot of the gallows. A young man stepped out; his face was pale with suffering and the certainty of death; but so handsome, so noble, and disdainful withal, that the people moved with pity and sympathetic admiration, uttered one of those exclamations which console suffering innocence while they make its oppressors tremble.

This young man was Metellus Celer, who, brought to Rome by the agents of Marcus Regulus, had learned, but a few hours since, that he was sentenced to death. The unfortunate young patrician cast around him a look in which could be read not the desire to solicit mercy, but a sombre indignation.

"Romans!" he cried, upon perceiving the scroll attached to the gallows, "remember that this inscription is a falsehood!... The Grand-Vestal has never transgressed her duty... and I die innocent!"

But the crowd, but now moved with compassion, remained stolid and silent, wrapt in the cruel expectation of the scene which was to follow. Ravinius laid his heavy hand on Metellus Celer, and commenced to strip him of his garments. In a moment the wretched young man was bound to the forked gallows, in such a way as would facilitate the execution. Then, Ravinius commenced to strike slowly, for the flagellation must continue until the lettica bearing the Grand Vestal will pass near the Comitium, in order that the priestess may hear the agonizing shrieks and last groans of her alleged accomplice!

But Metellus Celer's constancy defies the horrible pain caused by the leaden balls which bruise his flesh at every blow of the whip. The words which escape his lips from time to time, are not words of supplication, but an indignant protest.

"What have I done?" he exclaims in a voice which grows fainter, "what have I done?... I have done nothing!..."

They could wrench no other cry from him, says Pliny-the-Younger, from whom we have borrowed the principal details of the double execution of Metellus Celer and Cornelia, which he has narrated with all the indignation of an honest soul.

Whilst the multitude witnessed, with varied emotions, this slow and cruel agony, a silent cortege left the Atrium Regium and wended its way through the Forum, by the Vicus Tuscanus. The sacerdotal college, formed in two ranks, escorted the Emperor wearing the costume of the High Pontiff, and walking behind a funeral lettica carried by eight slaves.

This litter, taken forcibly from Gurgus, had been securely closed on every side with cushions fastened by leather thongs, so as not only to conceal the victim from sight, but smother the sound of her cries of despair. For it was feared that the sight of this beautiful virgin, condemned to the most horrible death, might awaken a dangerous compassion, and that her groans might find an echo in pitying hearts.

As the gloomy procession advanced, the people gave way, then closed their ranks, and formed in its rear, to follow it to the Campus Sceleratus, where they would feast their eyes upon the last act of this dreadful drama. Not a voice broke the stillness of the atmosphere, which hung upon the great human crowd with the heaviness that indicates the approaching storm.

Ravinius multiplies his blows. Metellus Celer, who still breathes, although his body is but one bruised, bleeding mass, must expire now, so

that the executioner may join the passing cortege, and be ready to perform the important duties assigned to him by the sacred rites and ancient usages. It is he who, after the last invocation by the High Pontiff, will lower the Grand-Vestal into the abyss, and seal the stone which will shut her off forever from the world. He roars with impatience; the bloody whip cuts deeper into the flesh to seek a last remnant of vitality.

Metellus Celer seemed to revive under this new torment; casting a languid look around him, he perceived the fatal litter! Cornelia was there, about to die also, and he would see her no more. This cruel sight completed the work which torture had prolonged. The unfortunate man's body was convulsed by a desperate effort which shook the gallows; a piercing shriek, the last supreme cry of despair, too horrible to be borne, rent the air. Then, the rigid limbs became unent, the head fell on the breast—Metellus Celer was dead.

Did this last fearful cry reach the ears of the unfortunate Vestal?... Who knows? But the lettica trembled on the shoulders of its bearers, and notwithstanding the cushions that muffled the sound, a groan, full of anguish, mingled with the last sigh of Cornelia's dying lover.

Metellus Celer was spared another cruel pang. If death had not veiled his eyes and deprived him of hearing, he would have seen Marcus Regulus, who walked near the litter, pause as he passed him, and would have heard the informer address him this ironical remark:

"Well, Metellus, I told you so once: take care the third time I find you on my way. This is no longer the day when Parmenon fell under your sword!"

But these words were addressed to a corpse, and Marcus Regulus turned away with the shame of his useless outrage.

The litter stopped near the mouth of a shaft from which protruded the end of a ladder.—Everything in the vault had been prepared in accordance with the ancient rites; the funeral bed was made, the bread, the water and the milk, last food of the victim were placed near the couch, and a small lamp threw a dim light on these objects, leaving all around wrapt in darkness. Amidst the general silence, the slaves opened the litter, and the Grand-Vestal stepped forth.

At the sight of this majestic virgin, scarcely able to stand up, the crowd could not restrain an exclamation of horror. Cornelia's form was almost entirely concealed under the folds of a long black veil, her pale features being alone visible. But the involuntary weakness of the woman succumbing to physical suffering, was of short duration. Her eyes flash with scorn and pride as they rest on Domitian. As the High Pontiff, it will be his duty to place his hand upon her, and consign her to the infernal gods. But he hesitates; he dares not look at the victim he has condemned without a hearing.

"What stops you, Caesar, and why not consummate your work?" cried Cornelia, in a voice so ringing and clear, that all heard it. "If I am guilty and incestuous, what is it that you wait for, to hurl me into the abyss?"

The Emperor, angered and troubled by these scornful words, advanced hastily towards the Grand-Vestal, and raising his hands to heaven, recited in a low voice the secret prayers consecrated by the religious rites for this fearful atonement.

Cornelia listened attentively.

"Caesar," she said, when the Emperor had finished his invocation, "you ask of the gods not to punish Rome for my crime... And I have prayed a God more powerful than those you invoke, not to visit upon the Roman people the injustice of my sentence. May you, Caesar, feel one day remorse and repentance for having ordered my execution..."

And turning to the people: "Romans," she cried in a loud voice, "I die innocent of all crime!... The purity of this body which is about to perish, was never sullied... Priestess of Vesta... I shall descend into my tomb with the virginity of my youth... Remember my last words..."

She held out her hand to the Emperor.

"Caesar," she said, "guide me."

According to the rites, it was the duty of the High Pontiff to place the Vestal on the first steps of the ladder, after which he withdrew with the pontifical college, leaving to the executioner the care of leading the victim to the bottom of the shaft, and installing her in the vault. Domitian fulfilled this duty hastily, and led, followed by the pontiffs, who hastened away like guilty wretches from a spectacle which inspired them with remorse and shame.

Cornelia tarried awhile, standing alone on the first step of the ladder. Remembering the promise of the Christian priest, she scanned the sea of faces around her, to detect a sign, a motion which would bid her hope. But she saw nothing

but the pitiless curiosity of a crowd anxious to enjoy a promised spectacle. She had nothing to hope from man.

Her eyes, filled with an expression of supreme anguish, then turned slowly towards heaven.—Was it a reproach addressed to that God whom she had implored, and who remained mute like the others? Was it a last prayer to beseech him again to manifest His power?

When she looked down, she saw only Ravinius, who, smiling horribly, offered her his hand.—She rejected it with disgust, and began the descent unaided. But at the first steps, her stole got caught around the end of the ladder. She turned quickly, with a gesture of alarmed modesty, and released it.

Then she soon disappeared into the vault. Ravinius pulled up the ladder. The slab was placed over the opening. Then, Ravinius and his aids began to throw earth into the mouth of the shaft so as to conceal the slab. Soon, every vestige of the opening had disappeared, and the ground was levelled at a great distance, so that not even the spot could be recognised where the incestuous priestess was entombed, separated from the living and the dead.

And all was over.

CHAPTER XXI.—THE DELIVERANCE.

If, some thirty hours after the consummation of this fearful atonement, a citizen should have ventured, notwithstanding the darkness, in this deserted section of Rome, he would have noticed with surprise, four slaves bearing a litter, and who, silent and motionless like so many shadows, waited patiently under the solitary porticoes of the temple of Safety.

Then, if this belated citizen, inclining a little to the right, had ascended by the way of the Agger of Servius as far as the Collina Gate, he would have discovered by the pale light of the stars, an old man kneeling on a slight mound in the naked plain and praying with fervor.

Now, at the very time we speak of, an individual was precisely accomplishing this nocturnal excursion; walking with noiseless step, peering carefully into every dark recess and corner, and stopping, from time to time, to listen anxiously to the slightest noise. These extraordinary precautions were justified by the very singular appearance of this night prowler, which would have certainly excited the suspicions of the capital triumvir if he had suddenly come upon him.

The mysterious wayfarer carried a rope-ladder rolled around his body a spade in one hand, and an iron crow-bar in the other. He was, moreover, provided with a dark lantern. The chief of the urban police would have doubtless asked our friend Gurgus—the reader has already recognized him—what he intended to make of these suspicious instruments, and whether he was not undertaking one of his old expeditions and preparing to desecrate the grave and rob the dead for the benefit of his friend the tonsor.

Gurgus was making all haste to join Clemens in the Campus Sceleratus, but he had to use a great deal of caution to avoid dangerous meetings on the way. At last he reached the further end of the Vicus Cyprius, and before ascending the Quirinal, he paused in the shadow of the temple of Fortune, and peered through the gloom at the porticoes of the temple of Safety, close by, to ascertain whether his vespillio had carried out his instructions.

"Very well!" he muttered, as he discovered the lettica and its motionless bearers. "All is well! Those vespillios have understood me... By Venus Libitina... I can laugh now at the capital triumvir and his men!"

But Gurgus had scarcely muttered those defiant words, when he threw himself down flat on the pavement of the temple of Fortune, exclaiming:

"Hateful triumvir!... Unfortunate Vestal!..."

The regular tramp of a patrol could be heard in the distance, coming up the Vicus Cyprius. If Gurgus had had the good look of preceding the cohort, the cohort would not now have the advantage of pouncing upon Gurgus.

Still, things might have a different course.—The patrol might pass straight on without discovering the designator, but then they would necessarily come upon the vespillios and their suspicious lettica. Or they might turn to the right, but in this case they would surprise the pontiff of the Christians in the Campus Sceleratus.

The dilemma had three horns, and all equally dangerous. Hence the designator's exclamation and the curse he addressed the triumvir.

There was, however, still a chance of safety. About a hundred steps from Fortune's temple, there was to the left, a narrow lane which led to Caesar's Forum and finally to the Catularia Gate, after passing near the Atrium of Freedom. If the patrol followed this lane there would be nothing to fear, for it would lead them to distant quarters of the city, whence they would not be likely to return in this direction.—

The question was would they take the lane?—Meanwhile they advanced with their torches whose light caused Gurgus no little perturbation.

Another cry of alarm was very near escaping his lips when he recognized the voice of his personal enemy, the capital triumvir, ordering his men to ascend the Quirinal, near whose base was situated the Agger of Servius, whence it was an easy matter to survey the Campus Sceleratus.—But to the designator's great astonishment, the patrol stopped and refused to proceed further.—The triumvir surprised at this unusual resistance, repeated his order.

"Are you not aware," remonstrated some voices, "that this spot is cursed... and if we were to proceed we should see the shadow of the Grand-Vestal hovering near her grave... And such a sight announces death within the year to the beholder!"

"That is a fact," said the triumvir, not less superstitious than his men. "I had forgotten that execution... Let us get away from here."

The officer counter-marched his little troop who turned into the little lane.

When the noise of their steps had died away, Gurgus sprang to his feet.

"By Venus Libitina," he cried, "what cowards these fellows are... Who ever knew the dead to come back?... I have never seen any, and many a night I have passed amidst the tombs! I mean the veritable dead... for as to the Grand Vestal, I hope and trust she is still alive... and that I, Gurgus, will soon take her out of her vault... Never mind, those worthy patrol-men have given me a terrible scare!... But the pontiff of the Christians will be thinking that I have broken my word to him, and I would not have him think this for anything in the world. Let us make haste then, I shall explain to him what caused my delay... Good luck, my dear triumvir!... it is probable we shall not meet again this night."

Collecting his various instruments, Gurgus ascended the Quirinal as promptly as he could, embarrassed as he was with his load. A few minutes later he was near Clemens and apologized to him by telling his adventure with the triumvir.

"You see it, my son," said the priest with a quiet smile. "God watches over us; he proves it by turning off these first dangers... It will, perhaps, be the last mark of assistance He will give us. But what are you doing, Gurgus?"

The designator, after striking the soil several times with his crowbar, had thrown himself on the ground and was listening anxiously.

"What are you doing, Gurgus?" the pontiff repeated, no answer having been made to his first question.

Gurgus raised himself on his knees and looked at Clemens with an air of anguish.

"This is singular," he remarked. "I have made this noise to warn the Grand-Vestal that we are here, and I hear nothing, absolutely nothing... Not a cry, not a movement... Has she then already succumbed?... Oh!..."

And Gurgus laying hold of his spade began to dig with an ardor that amounted almost to rage. Clemens said nothing. It was well that the weakness of man should show itself before the greatness of God.

Three men had been employed piling up earth into the shaft; then they had trodden upon it and made it so compact and firm that Gurgus soon found himself struggling against an almost inseparable obstacle. It had been easy work at first, but when he stood up to his waist in this narrow aperture, hemmed in between four thick walls, he saw that it would be impossible for him to finish his task unaided. Every shovelful of earth that he threw out would crumble in again carrying with it the rubbish previously shovelled out, and which falling upon him and making his work still more difficult.

The poor fellow persisted manfully but his efforts were unavailing, and once, being nearly covered up by the crumbling sand, he uttered an exclamation of despair. But another voice replied to his cry of anguish, and Gurgus looking up saw Clemens standing in a halo of light, with his hands extended over the chasm.

Then Gurgus felt that the ground upon which he stood was sinking rapidly, and he rolled suddenly into the open vault. When he rose to his feet, Clemens was standing by his side. No other light could be seen but the small funeral lamp still burning near the bed. By this flickering flame they saw the Grand-Vestal stretched motionless on her couch.

Gurgus laid a trembling hand upon the rigid form, and fell, sobbing, at the pontiff's feet.

"O my lord," he exclaimed, "she is dead! her body is icy cold!"

Clemens smiled as he looked at this poor man whose heart would not yet open to confidence, and said to him kindly:

"What my son, after what you have seen, do you still doubt?"

Gurgus then saw that the old man held in his hands a vase and some bread.

"My son," added the pontiff, the work of God is accomplished... The work of man must now commence..."

When Cornelia descended into the vault, she placed herself on the bed, in the attitude of one who has lost even the power of thinking. She did not weep but the fictitious strength which had sustained her during the execution, had completely vanished. She was in that state of stupor which causes a void in the mind and plunges the body into a rigid inertia.

Her eyes followed vacantly the motion of the earth shovelled at the entrance of the vault by Ravinius and his aids, and part of which, sliding into the vault, rolled to her feet and gradually covered them. This sand which moved as it spread into the vault, the noise made by the workmen above, all these fearful preparatives were life still, and the Grand Vestal clung to them as to a last hope.

Then all was hushed, and all motion ceased. Cornelia gazed slowly around her, with eyes distended by terror... She saw the bread, water, and milk, placed near the lamp. She remained thoughtful a long time, contemplating this food by which her remaining days were measured. Then, concluding doubtless, that all hope had vanished and it was better not to prolong sufferings which must end in death, she took the bowl of milk, brought it to her lips and poured the remainder of the contents on the ground. With a bitter smile she now took up the piece of bread, felt its weight, and breaking it into crumbs cast them about and trampled upon them.

The water she preserved. Was it from some secret hope? The sacrifice was consummated, life was no longer possible. Death could come now, and the Grand Vestal lay on her couch, to await its coming.

We shall not describe the mental tortures of this unfortunate young woman, the cruel sufferings caused by the want of air, or the first pangs of that terrible disease—hunger. When Gurgus found her rigid and cold as a corpse, she had fainted, exhausted by thirty hours of want and terror.

Finding Cornelia inanimate, Clemens raised her head, and poured drop by drop between her lips the cordial he had brought with him. A slight tremor of the rigid limbs soon proved to Gurgus that the Grand-Vestal still lived and would not be long recovering her senses.

Clemens again opened Cornelia's lips and repeated the dose at short intervals until the small amphora he had brought was emptied of its contents. Life was returning, but the exhausted girl was still unconscious. After a little while the good priest took a small loaf of bread made from the whitest flour kneaded in pure milk, and placing it between the Vestal's fingers, lifted her hand near to her face. By an instinctive motion, the Grand-Vestal brought the savory food to her mouth and ate it greedily. Still, she spoke not. So completely exhausted had been the victim, that her faculties could only be gradually restored.

Clemens waited, kneeling near the bed.—Gurgus, overcome by emotion and admiration, seemed plunged in a sort of dreamy stupor. His face was bathed with tears.

A deep sigh announced at last that the resurrection was complete. Cornelia raised herself on her elbow, and passing her hand on her forehead as if she awoke from a dream, exclaimed: "Where am I?"

But she fell back with another cry—a cry of terror and fearful despair. By the dim light of the lamp she had recognized the vault in which she had been left to die.

"You are saved! madam," said Clemens in a grave and calm voice, and he touched her hand. "Who are you?" asked the Grand-Vestal with astonishment, for she could not see the features of the speaker. "How did you gain access to this tomb?"

"Madam, have you forgotten the man who promised to rescue you even from the bowels of the earth... if you were ever made to descend into this abyss?... I have come to fulfil my promise..."

"The pontiff of the Christians!" exclaimed Cornelia, "ah!"

She sprang from her couch and fell at the feet of her preserver, holding them tightly clasped and bathing them with her tears. So great was her gratitude, so overpowering her emotion that she could not speak. Nothing was heard in this narrow space but the convulsive sobs of the poor woman miraculously restored to life.

"Madam," said Clemens, as he endeavored to raise her trembling form. "You are saved!—But you must now hasten to leave this dismal abode. A devoted man will take you to a place of concealment where your persecutors cannot reach you."

And turning to Gurgus: "My son," he added, "prepare your ladder..."