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AURELIA;

OR,

THE JEWS OF CAPEA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quinton

PART THIRD.—THE VESTAL.

CHAPTER XVIII.—(CONTINUED.)

The flutist and his wife should be tortured at the same time. So Regulus had decided after due reflection; for, should either possess personal firmness, he still hoped to conquer Misi-tius through Gellia's sufferings, and Gellia through her husband's tortures.

The confessions of these young people were of more importance even than Palæstrion's, for, Misi-tius, who carried Metellus Celer's letters, and most probably Cornelia's answers, must have known what this correspondence contained; and Gellia must have learned it from Misi-tius.

Then, had not Misi-tius played the flute whilst Regulus was being tossed in the air!

We shall not dwell upon the description of the rack which distended horribly the limbs, breaking the articulations; nor the clogs which, placed above the angles, crushed them slowly by a gradual pressure. Neither shall we describe the hot steel points, the sharp claws and hundred like implements used to multiply the sufferings of the victims. These fearful inventions of Roman barbarity will be found fully described in the works of ancient writers, and particularly in the 'Acts of the Martyrs.'

The sufferings of these young people, their youth and Gellia's beauty, presented such a moving sight that Helvius Agrippa, who had already shown pity at Palæstrion's tortures, proposed to release Misi-tius and his wife before their limbs were hopelessly injured.

Marcus Regulus darted a sinister look at this too humane priest.

The other pontiffs replied that the orders of the Emperor were to spare no pains to arrive at a complete proof.

Misi-tius claimed that the declaration given to him by Regulus was a safeguard which could not be violated without perjury.

'What are you complaining about?' replied the informer, with ironical and frightful calm.—'You are not persecuted for Lucius Antonius conspiracy. The matter for which you are here is simply concerning Metellus Celer and the Grand Vestal, whose culpable intrigues you have favored, and whose incest you have prepared.'

'That is false,' cried the unfortunate flutist, 'I know nothing of this....'

'We shall see about that, directly,' replied Regulus.

'I am a citizen!.... Gellia is a woman.... These titles protect us!.... We cannot be put to the torture!....'

Under the Republic, in Cicero's time, this Roman cry, this invocation of the city's rights, would have saved Misi-tius and Gellia; but the era of the Tiberius, the Neros and the Domitians did not admit this means of escaping from the cruelty of tyrants. Had not the Emperor shed the blood of the most illustrious citizens, and invented the most horrible tortures for them?

Ravinius turned the crank of the rack; his aid tightened the clogs.

'Dear Misi-tius!'

'Poor Gellia!'

Such were the first cries simultaneously uttered.

'I lost you!.... I lost you!' repeated the unhappy husband, who seemed to feel only his wife's pain.

'Misi-tius!.... dear Misi-tius!.... is it not to you I owe my life and happiness?' exclaimed Gellia, who, having lost all hope, commenced to show an admirable courage.

'Confess! confess what you know, and the torture will stop!' said the pontiffs.

'You are monsters!' replied Gellia groaning painfully. 'It is a good time to stop, when my poor crushed feet will never bear me up any more!.... Do what you will with me, now! I know nothing!.... You cannot wrench a single word of falsehood from me!'

The aid increased the pressure of the clogs to such an extent, that the unfortunate little woman writhed with pain and uttered fearful shrieks but she still repeated with energy:

'I know nothing!.... I shall say nothing.... I will not lie.... It shall not be said that I have been an accomplice in your crimes!'

Misi-tius, although bound fast, was making tremendous efforts to come to his wife's assistance.

'My lords, my lords,' cried the unfortunate Misi-tius, and his voice would have moved a wild

beast. 'I call the gods to witness! Gellia knows nothing.... Cease torturing her.... I alone received the letters....'

'What were their contents?'

'I have never read them.'

'Who handed them to the Grand Vestal?'

'An unknown person.'

'You know something else?'

'No.... For mercy's sake, my lords, release Gellia....'

A new turn of the crank prevented Misi-tius from saying more. The poor fellow uttered a piercing shriek.

Astonished by a resistance to which he was not accustomed Ravinius multiplied his efforts. His cruel laugh no longer added to the horror of the scene. Helvius Agrippa mingled his useless prayers with the agonizing groans of the victims.

Soon their limbs were reduced to a sort of bloody pulp which could not be distended any further by the rack or crushed by the clogs.—The hot copper blades and iron claws were then brought into use to revive pain in those exhausted bodies which hardly preserved strength enough to writhe under the burning embrace of the heated iron instruments.

Helvius Agrippa, as Dion Cassius testifies, could bear no longer the sight of this fearful agony, and dropped dead from sheer horror.

This incident did not stop the cruel work.—Ravinius and his men called in aid all their ingenuity, while Marcus Regulus and the pontiffs, bending over the dying victims, listened eagerly for their last words. But their lips clung in the last throes of death, now uttered but faint groans. Misi-tius, however, made a supreme effort:

'Save Gellia! he said faintly; 'save Gellia! I am going to confess....'

'Misi-tius.... Misi-tius?' cried the brave young woman, gathering the little strength that was left in her for this noble appeal, 'my body is but a crushed, bleeding mass, you cannot save me.... Do not give those monsters the satisfaction of having uselessly vanquished us.... I am dying.... Farewell.... dear husband.... farewell!'

'She is dead!' exclaimed a pontiff.

Misi-tius uttered a cry of rage, and expired, hurling a last curse at his torturers.

Ravinius could gloat over his work. Four dead bodies were lying at his feet.

Marcus Regulus and the pontiffs got into their chariot and hastened to meet Domitian, who awaited them with the college of pontiffs to decide upon this serious religious accusation.

This is all that was ever known concerning the manner in which Cornelia's death was resolved on that fatal night.

CHAPTER XIX.—CLEMENS CALLS ON GURGES'

The venerable pontiff of the Christians was kneeling in prayer before the image of the Crucified Saviour, when two young women, panting with haste and emotion, and their faces bathed with tears, entered precipitately his humble abode.

'My lord, my lord!.... save the Grand-Vestal!.... She has been condemned!.... The sentence is being executed!.... She will perish!....'

Thus spoke, together, Aurelia and Cecilia, for it was they who had sought the venerable Clemens.

'My lord, my lord!' repeated the former as she embraced the pontiff's feet; 'save Cornelia!.... Save her who has been a mother to me!.... Oh save her, my lord....'

'Rise, madam,' said the holy priest, 'it is God alone to whom we must pray kneeling.... What,' he resumed, 'can it be that they have pronounced that barbarous sentence?....'

Clemens, since his interview with the Grand-Vestal, watched over her with fatherly solicitude. He foresaw that the day was not far when he should hear of her condemnation. He was not surprised, therefore, at this news, although the march of events had been so rapid that he would be so soon called upon to keep the promise made to her for whom he implored the assistance of heaven.

'My lord.... she is in the hands of the pontiff,' exclaimed the divine Aurelia, in answer to the question of the man of God. 'They have torn her from my arms.... The cruel men.... They would not listen to my prayers.... And when I spoke as the niece of the Emperor, they told me I must submit to his orders.... Ah, my lord.... You alone can help Cornelia.... I have beseeched Domitian himself.... and I have been harshly repulsed.'

The tears of the young girl would not permit her to proceed.

'My lord,' said Cecilia, scarcely less moved than her friend, 'what we have seen is fearful.'

'What has happened?' asked Clemens. 'My daughter, it is important that I should be completely informed.... Conceal nothing from me....'

'Father,' replied the young woman, 'for several days past my noble mistress and I have not left the Grand-Vestal, who was continually in prey to the most sinister forebodings.... Yes, these sad presentiments increased so fearfully that we remained with her the whole night.... Alas! her involuntary terror was but too well founded!'

'I spoke to her of you, father, and of the strength with which our God has clothed you; but she said your hopes were vain.... and that if she were to fall into the abyss your hands would be powerless to rescue her. I endeavored to drive away those thoughts of bitter despair the best way I could.... I read to her passages from our sacred books, where Christian souls find comfort in learning resignation.... My noble mistress united her efforts with mine.... She spoke of her influence near the Emperor whose beloved niece she was....'

'I believed it!.... Oh, yes, I believed it.... but it is not so....' interrupted Aurelia, and her voice was tremulous with emotion and wounded pride.

'But,' resumed Cecilia, 'it was impossible to soothe the involuntary anguish which now and then caused the unfortunate Vestal to start and shudder. At other times her courage would revive, and she would try to smile at her fears.—But there was an hour when a strange delirium came upon her suddenly.... Was it a vision.... or simply the effect of a morbid fancy? It seemed as if she were surrounded by shadows, and bloody spectres had risen before her in the darkness.... She moved her hands to push them back, and cried in broken words full of an anguish: 'I see them.... They are dying.... They are murdered.... I am innocent.... This is horrible.... Oh, the monsters.... They triumph.... Torture has put me in their power!....' And she fell back, exhausted by this scene of feverish excitement, which was the last during that night of woes

'When morning came she was calm; it seemed that her fears had vanished.... She was conversing quietly with us, and expressing regret at the uneasiness and trouble she had caused us, when a great tumult of voices was heard at the doors—still closed at that early hour—of the Atrium Regium.

'Here they are,' she cried shuddering, 'I had not deceived myself.... They come to lead me to execution.... They sentenced me during the night.'

'But, singular to relate, her voice no longer had that wild tone which had so much frightened us.... The pontiffs then entered the room in which we were assembled, and apprized her very abruptly, that the Emperor had pronounced her guilty, and she must follow them. We remained thunderstruck, while Cornelia, raising her hands to heaven invoked Vesta and her other gods, and repeated this exclamation: 'What! Cæsar pronounces me incestuous, I whose sacrifices have made him conquer, have made him triumph!'

'Oh, father, as a Christian, I suffered to see her thus confiding still in the false gods who caused her loss.... But I admired her courage, and I was astonished at her proud demeanor.... I am but a poor daughter of the people, and I had but my tears with which to move those who had already seized this innocent virgin. My noble mistress, the daughter of the Cæsars, humbled herself before these men, and beseeched them—she had told you so, herself, O father they would not even listen to her....'

'My lord,' resumed Aurelia, 'when she whom from my infancy I have venerated as my own mother, had disappeared, I ran, almost distracted to the palace, to ask her release of the Emperor.... He, also, had returned to Rome with all haste, doubtless to preside as High-Pontiff at this barbarous execution.

'How can I describe to you my anguish.—My lord, I dragged myself in the dust.... I called upon Domitian in the dearest names.... But he remained immovable.... implacable.... He repulsed me, his niece, with angry gestures and passionate words, among which your name, that of my relations and my own were frequently mingled.... He spoke of the Christians with fearful threats.... His vengeance would soon reach them.... Finally, the Emperor, from whom I had hitherto received but kindness, no longer controlled his passion.... he even went so far as to designate me as the accomplice of I know not what secret scheme, which he intended to punish in the most striking manner.

'After an hour of vain efforts to move his pity, I left the palace, feeling less fear of Domitian's anger than despair at not having obtained mercy for the dear friend about to perish amidst the most fearful tortments.... I then remembered, my lord, that Cornelia, in her delirium, last night, said that the pontiff of the Christians had promised to save her, but she placed little reliance on this promise, as its fulfillment was impossible.

'I have come to you with Cecilia, who has sustained my courage, by telling me that I must have faith in your words, and if you had made this promise, it would be realized.... My lord, my lord, perhaps the Grand Vestal, notwithstanding her doubts, still entertains some hope.... It would be dreadful if at the supreme hour she could think that you have deceived her.... Oh, I conjure you, if indeed it be in your power to save her from that awful fate!'

'Madam, said the pontiff, a poor old man like me is weaker than all other men, and by myself I can do nothing.... But the God I serve is master of life and death, and it was in His name I made a promise which I have not forgotten.... Be comforted, madam, and hope in His almighty power.... I am going to ask Him to guide my steps and to assist me in what I shall undertake.... I have an abiding confidence that your desires and mine will be granted.'

The priest knelt and raised his venerable hands to heaven. Cecilia, kneeling at his side, commenced to pray fervently. The daughter of the Cæsars imitating this example, bowed her head for the first time to the God of the Christians.

After a short invocation, the pontiff rose, and taking his pilgrim's staff, prepared to depart.

'Madam,' he said to Aurelia, return to your home.... and let hope follow you.... I shall not prevent the barbarous execution which all Rome will witness.... But I shall give back to you the friend whose life you came to ask me.... Go, madam.... and let me commence my work.'

'What, my lord,' exclaimed the young girl deeply moved by so much devotion, but surprised and uneasy about the old man's safety; 'what! you are starting alone!.... Whither are you going?.... Is it thus you will save the Grand Vestal?.... Permit me to unite my efforts to yours.... Riches.... slaves.... litters.... all that I possess is yours.... You will need these resources to insure success.'

'Madam,' replied Clemens, with a gentle smile, 'I am the pastor of a people, little numerous it is true, but which would rise as one man and accompany me to Rome, if I said but one word. You see that arms would not be wanting, and that I can dispense with your slaves.... I do not wish to corrupt any one, and therefore, all the treasures of the earth would be of no use to me.... As for your litters, 'his staff will suffice to sustain my old age.... I need only the protection of my God.... Return to Rome, madam, and carry with you the hope that Providence will design to rescue from the abyss, the innocent virgin for whom we have prayed together.'

Aurelia took the hand of the venerable priest and carried it respectfully to her lips, bathing it with grateful tears, and Clemens then departed.

From the day the holy old man had acquired the conviction that sooner or later, Domitian would plunge the Grand Vestal into the vault of the Campus Scleratus, he had resolved to save her. He knew that the Vestal buried alive would live two days and perhaps more, in that subterranean abode where everything was arranged to secure the lingering death of the victim. When, therefore, the slab which closed the entrance to the shaft would be sealed and covered with earth, and superstitious terror would make the spot a solitude, prayer, that mute supplication to Him who is all powerful, would ascend above this abyss of despair, and God would manifest his power.

But Clemens did not wish a crowd of spectators to witness the miracle, which faith, that power by which mountains are moved, already showed him as being accomplished in the darkness of night. He sought not to astonish Rome by some prodigy which might draw persecution upon his brethren, but merely to save from a horrible death the virgin who, at the last hour, would remember perhaps his promise.

One devoted man would suffice besides, and from the first time he had met him, he had foreseen that Gorges would be this man. And the more he had studied him, the more he had become convinced that the designator of funerals would not refuse to give shelter to the Grand-Vestal, and conceal her from all investigations, if it should be suspected that the virgin buried in the bowels of the earth, had been rescued from a certain death.

This is why Clemens had told Gorges that he would probably come to him one day. And this why the holy priest, entering Rome by the Capena-gate, went to knock at the door of the most fervent worshippers of Venus-Libitina, the goddess of funerals.

'The pontiff of the Christians,' exclaimed Gorges, astonished beyond measure at the sight of the old man; 'Oh! my lord!.... my lord!....'

And the designator, unable to restrain his emotion, burst into tears. The poor fellow was in great trouble. Not only he had learned, like everybody else in Rome, the great news of the Grand-Vestal's sentence, but the pontiffs—and this was what made him indignant as well as sor-

rowful—had sent for the finest funeral litter in his shop, to carry the victim to the place of execution. Gorges had refused, had even offered resistance; but the pretorians who brought the order, made short work of the designator and his vespidos, and the litter, forcibly obtained, might be even now bearing the Grand-Vestal towards the Campus Scleratus.

To the sorrow felt by the good designator was now mingled a bitter anxiety; what if the unfortunate Cornelia should think that he, Gorges—a man whom she had honored with her esteem—had consented to furnish one of the instruments of her torture. And besides, how could he bear the idea that she had been carried to her death in the very litter which he used on great occasions only, when he wished to do special honor to Venus Libitina.

'On, my lord, my lord,' repeated Gorges in his trouble, 'if you only knew!'

'I know it, my son,' replied Clemens, who did not understand the full import of this exclamation. 'Yes, the Grand-Vestal is going to perish.'

And as the apparent grief of the designator seemed to offer a good opportunity for broaching the important subject, he continued:

'Do you remember, Gorges, that I told you once: Some day perhaps I shall come to you as you have come to me? and you replied: In any place, at any time, and for any cause, I devote myself to the pontiff of the Christians!.... I have remembered those words, and here I am.... My son, I come to you to propose that together we shall save the Grand Vestal.'

Gorges recoiled upon hearing this unexpected proposition. But it was not simply with surprise; there was fear in his involuntary motion. He looked around anxiously; and sure that no indiscreet ear could hear his words, he approached near the pontiff.

'Can you think of it, my lord,' he whispered in his ear. 'What! I save the Grand-Vestal!.... That is impossible!'

'It can be done, Gorges. The victims buried in the vault of the Campus Scleratus die only after a lingering agony.... You see therefore that it is possible.'

Gorges understood, or thought he did, what the old man intended undertaking, and he shuddered as he muttered in a scarcely audible voice: 'And religion? my lord.... And the anger of the gods?....'

Clemens could not refrain a smile. Gorges, in his great trouble, did not remember that he was speaking to the pontiff of the Christians.—But the hesitations to be conquered were inspired by the vain terrors of ancient superstition.

'My son,' said the pontiff 'you seem to fear that we may be overheard.... Take me to the most retired room in your house.... Perhaps I may prove to you that you condemn, yourself, a religion which commands such atrocities, and that you have nothing to fear from the anger of your powerless gods.'

The mysterious interview between the pontiff of the Christians and the designator of pagan ceremonies, was quite protracted. When Gorges returned, accompanying Clemens to the door, he had accepted the proposal to unite his efforts with those of the old man. Yet, it could be seen that, notwithstanding his resolution, he was anxious and troubled.

The pontiff continued to encourage him:

'Farewell, my son,' he said, as they parted; 'your promise to serve me when I would call on you has not been in vain.... Thanks for your assistance.... Now, have confidence in the result; we shall succeed. At the appointed hour I shall wait for you near the tomb of that unfortunate woman whom I have promised to save. Until that solemn hour, farewell!'

Clemens when he found himself on the public way, was struck with the general silence and solitude of those streets and places, hitherto so noisy and full of life.

The old man understood that this universal desolation was in consequence of the great atonement which was being accomplished in the Campus Scleratus. He stopped and looked in the direction of the fatal spot.

'O Rome,' he murmured, 'city of cursed impurities.... Thou mournest because thou believest that one of thy virgins has broken her vows of chastity.... Almighty God! receive this homage to one of the greatest virtues of Thy faith, but Oh, do not permit that this fearful sacrifice be consummated.... Sustain the victim against her own despair.... until I shall come to deliver her in Thy name!....'

The pontiff returned among his brethren, withdrew to the solitude of his chamber, and remained wrapped in prayer until the time appointed for his meeting with Gorges.

Meanwhile, the designator was plunged in deep meditation. His feelings, when thinking of the awful undertaking in which he was about to embark, will be easily understood. However, Gorges did not hesitate. He even smiled at the thought that he would be the deliverer of the