



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XX.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, OCT. 22, 1869.

No. 10

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

AURELIA;

OR,

THE JEWS OF CAPENA GATE.

Freely Translated from the French of M. A. Quignon

PART SECOND.—THE SLAVE.

CHAPTER XII.—THE OMEN TREE.

When Aurelia returned home, she went at once, followed by Vibius Crispus, to the room occupied by the Grand Vestal. Cornelia, still overwhelmed by the shame of the punishment which had impaired her health, was reclining on the richly embroidered, purple cushions of her couch. Near her sat Metellus Celer, who since the Vestal's arrival at Aurelia's house, scarcely ever left her.

Cornelia was then about thirty-five years old. Her features wore an august and imposing expression, and her tall figure was full of majesty. Her face had become wan and thin from deep-seated sorrow, and in her black, sunken eyes glittered a sinister fire. And yet, when she smiled, there was on her features an undefinable blending of touching kindness and secret tenderness, of virgin pride and long treasured resignation. She wore the plain and elegant dress of the virgins of Vesta: a long stole of the finest linen which fell over her feet, and a short white tunic, worn over the stole, and reaching a little lower than her waist; narrow bands held the heavy tresses of her raven black hair; and the 'subulum' or square veil, fell in graceful folds over her neck.

Metellus Celer was seven years younger than the Grand Vestal. He was clad in the 'angusticlavæ,' or tunic ornamented with a narrow purple band, by which the simple knights were distinguished from the senators. His face wore the bloom of youth, and yet sorrow had left its unmistakable marks upon it. His smile was sad, and his clouded brow often betrayed the secret anxiety which embittered his life. Metellus loved the Vestal with a son's tenderness and a brother's passionate devotion. This feeling is easily explained: he owed his life to her: she had rescued him from a fearful death.

It seemed as if some great danger again threatened him, for there was an involuntary despondency in his manner; and Cornelia was gazing at him with a sort of terror. When Aurelia came in they were conversing in a low voice, as if they feared being overheard. At her sight they ceased speaking.

'Cornelia,' said the young girl, joyfully, 'I have just bought a charming little slave, to fill the place of Doris. Now don't you get her killed as you did the other,' she added addressing also Metellus.

The Vestal and the young man exchanged a rapid glance.

'Dear child,' said Cornelia, 'you do not know you cannot know all the harm that Doris has done! Metellus was speaking of it when you came in. We are both denounced!'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Vibius. 'It is a positive fact,' said Metellus, 'for I have it from a Pontif, who got his information from Helvius Agrippa himself.'

'And who made this denunciation?' asked Vibius.

'I have every reason to believe that it is that infamous Regulus, upon the information obtained from Doris.'

'It could not be otherwise,' remarked Vibius, simply; and turning to the divine Aurelia:

'My dear ward,' he added, 'you cannot keep this new slave of yours a single day! She must be sold without delay!'

'And why, if you please, my dear guardians?' asked Aurelia in a tone of playful irony, for she thought Vibius had spoken in jest.

'Because,' replied Vibius seriously, 'that young girl belongs to Regulus! because it is he who sold her to you, he who introduced into your house!'

'Ah!' exclaimed Cornelia and Metellus in a tone of alarm, for they realized the fearful import of this discovery.

'But, my dear guardian,' resumed Aurelia, who could not understand all this terror, 'why did you not prevent me from purchasing her? You should have told me!...'

'You are perfectly right, my august ward, but on our way here I have reflected upon certain circumstances, and I am sure my conclusions are correct. I shall explain my meaning, listen. This young girl has recently been the object of a lawsuit that made a good deal of noise in Rome, although I am not acquainted with the particulars. However, I was told by Phylax-the-Younger who pleaded against Regulus, that this wretch had succeeded in having your slave adjudged to him under the name of one

Parmenon—the very man who has just sold her to you!'

Vibius Crispus paused, for it seemed to him that Metellus Celer had made an involuntary motion of surprise upon hearing the name of Parmenon. But the young man said nothing.

'What convinces me now that I do not mistake, is that whilst the form of mancipation was being gone through with, I recognized Regulus, who seemed to take a great interest in it, for he approached the girl and whispered something in her ear which I could not hear. Well! is this clear enough? What do you think of it?'

'Ob! there can be no doubt,' replied the Grand-Vestal and Metellus Celer. 'This young girl must be a new spy sent by Regulus!'

'So,' added Metellus, 'you are quite sure that the slave dealer's name is Parmenon?'

'Quite sure,' replied Vibius, looking at the young man with surprise. 'Do you know him?'

'No,' said Metellus thoughtfully. 'And yet, this coincidence is very remarkable!... This man, Parmenon, interests me more than you can think!'

'Ah!' said Vibius, curiously. 'Come,' continued Metellus, but speaking to himself, 'Sositheus will return directly, and I shall know what to think about it.'

'But, after all,' asked Aurelia, 'is that man Regulus so much to be feared? What would be his object in setting spies to watch what takes place here?'

'My dear ward,' replied Vibius, 'permit us to not reply to your question. Only, if you don't wish the death of your friend,' he added, pointing at the Grand Vestal who shuddered, 'sell that slave, do not keep her in your house!'

Metellus Celer was pacing the room in deep thought. The troubled condition of his mind was visible.

'My lord,' he said, at last, stopping to address Vibius, 'there is something passing strange in all this. I cannot move a step without finding Regulus in my path; his name is like a sword continually suspended over my head! Once already I well nigh perished!... Listen to me, my lord, I have strange and terrible things to tell you. You will know then why I am so devoted to the Grand Vestal, and whether there is anything criminal in our intimacy. You may then perhaps discover the cause of Regulus' persecution, and tell us whether or not we should tremble.'

'I listen, young man,' said Vibius, in whom this preamble excited a lively curiosity.

'As for me,' remarked Aurelia, 'I shall retire. I must, question, myself, my new slave, and find out if there is really any cause to distrust her.... She is charming, and I warn you that I am not at all inclined to deprive myself of her services.... It is enough that Doris has been sacrificed to Regulus.... Great gods! that Regulus is like the 'Swaggering Soldier' in the comedies of Plautus, he disturbs everything here! But this state of things cannot last. I shall complain to uncle Domitian.'

Metellus Celer and Cornelia made no effort to detain the young girl. Her going was a relief to them, for there were certain circumstances connected with the events the young man was about to relate, that concerned Domitian, and which could not well be mentioned in the hearing of the emperor's niece.

'Proceed, Metellus,' said Vibius with impatient curiosity.

'You know, my lord,' began the young man, 'that my father, Lucius Metellus, had the honor of being the dearest friend of the Emperor Vespasian. He was much younger than that prince; but his family, living in Reata, in the Sabine country, had always been intimate with the Flavian family, which had been established in that city many years, and Vespasian carried back to my father, whom he had seen in his cradle, all the love he had received from our family.'

'In Phalacrina, not far from Reata, the Flavian family had a modest country house. It was there Vespasian was born, on the fifteenth day of the calends of December, during the Consulship of Quantus Sulpicius Camerinus and Caius Peppæus Sabinus. There he was brought up by his paternal grand mother, Tertulla; there he died on the eighth of the calends of Julius, at the age of sixty-nine years, one month and seven days. It was there also that the Emperor Titus, of glorious memory, died at the age of forty-one years, of the swift and mysterious disease which carried him to his grave two months and twenty days after he had succeeded to his father.'

'I insist on these details because I believe them necessary for a proper appreciation of the events which I have to relate. The Emperor Vespasian was passionately fond of this poor country house. He went there frequently and would never allow any change to be made to a place where everything reminded him of his infancy; his son, the great Titus, entertained the same worshipful veneration for that humble cradle of his illustrious family.'

'I remember that when I was six or seven

years old, the great Vespasian often took me by the hand and led me out to walk over the grounds. On several occasions we stopped before a magnificent tree, which received the assiduous care of the gardener, and the Emperor never failed to tell me, with a smile:

'Metellus, when you have a fine tree like this, in your garden, you will be cæsar and emperor like me.'

'This tree was a very old oak, consecrated to Mars. When Vespasian's mother, Vespasia Polla, gave birth to her first child—a girl—a weak shoot grew on the same day from this tree, but was soon withered. It was an omen of the child's destiny, for she died within the year.'

'Vespasia then had a son, and from the tree sprang a vigorous shoot, which caused the wonder of every one, and was interpreted as announcing a great fortune for the new-born infant.—And, in fact, this child was Sabinus Major, who became Prefect of the city, and with whom commenced the fame of the Flavia race.'

'Finally, at my birth,' said the Emperor Vespasian, who narrated these words to me, 'the shoot that grew from the oak was so strong that it looked like a young tree. This time,' continued the Emperor, laughing, 'my poor father Petronus, who had run to his oak, could not control himself. He hastened back into the house, crying: It is a Cæsar who is born unto me! Mother, it is a Cæsar!—Poor old Tertulla thought her son had lost her senses. She often quizzed him about it, and yet you see, Metellus, that the tree was right.'

'I shall abridge,' continued the young man, 'in order to come to more important facts. After the death of Vespasian and Titus, my father, through respect and affection for their memory, purchased the house where he had so often enjoyed the intimacy of these two great men. The Emperor Domitian did not like to preserve a villa which reminded him too much of his low origin. You are aware, my lord, that about that time Domitian was accused of having poisoned his brother, whom he had, nevertheless, placed among the gods; and it is certain that what had taken place at the death of Vespasian to whom he attempted to succeed, proves with what impatience he must have borne the reign of Titus....'

'Take care, young man,' said Vibius gravely, 'such accusations are dangerous in these times, and you would do wisely in not repeating them.'

'I know it, my lord,' replied Metellus, 'but I must speak of them, since I have been accused of originating them, together with other reports, and that this was what caused my condemnation....'

'Finally,' he resumed, 'having reached the age when it became necessary to complete my education, my father sent me to Rome to attend the public schools, and to listen to the teaching of the orators and philosophers. Meanwhile, he remained at his house in Reata, which he seldom left, for he despised the abject life of Domitian's court and feared its perils.'

'Now commenced an bright and happy period in my existence; I lived in the intimacy of the most charming minds and joyous companions; but this was of short duration. My father's frequent letters were filled with sad details and gloomy forebodings. He spoke of a growing state of discontent among the slaves, of attempts at revolt which it had been found necessary to put down by force, of threatening rumors, and of plots reported daily by reliable persons.'

'I must not omit to mention, my lord, that a short time before my departure Lucius Metellus had purchased from a slave dealer who had called at our house, a few slaves destined to agricultural labors of some importance which my father had undertaken with a view to the improvement of his new property. Among these slaves was one named Phædræ, whom I would recognize amidst a thousand, if I could ever find him.'

'This Phædræ enjoyed perfect health, and his uncommon strength and stalwart frame made him eminently fit for the arduous labor of the husbandman. He seemed, moreover to possess an experience in such matters which would relieve Metellus to a certain extent of the cares of personal surveillance. But, at the same time, Phædræ inspired one at first sight with an unaccountable feeling of fear and repulsion, from which I could not defend myself when I met him for the first time. His look was treacherous, and the assumed submissiveness and servility of his manner ill-disguised the native brutality and audaciousness of his nature.'

'I watched him closely during several days, and my apprehensions acquired a new strength. I spoke to my father about it, and urged him to get rid of this man; but he replied that my suspicions were without foundation, and moreover, he could easily check any attempt at insubordination. On the day of my departure from home I insisted again on this subject and communicated to my father new facts that had come under my observation; but it was in vain. My father had

got used to this man; he found him useful, and did not believe him dangerous. He therefore persisted in his resolution to keep him.'

'Soon after in Rome, I commenced to receive those letters which gave me so much uneasiness, but my father, far from complaining of Phædræ, was enthusiastic in his praise of him, and laughed at my fears. But he confided to me that he could not account for the insubordinate dispositions of his slaves; that he was threatened, and felt himself surrounded by a continual espionage, of which he could neither comprehend the motive or discover the object.'

'Finally, I received a letter containing such alarming facts, and so full of bitter complaints, that I judged my father's situation intolerable, and I resolved to hasten to his assistance. I left Rome that very evening, on horseback, and accompanied by a single slave. We travelled all night and towards the middle of the next day I arrived at the place where should have been my father's house, the former villa of Vespasian and Titus. I use this doubtful expression purposely, my lord, for my thought was that I had lost my way, or that an ominous divinity wanted to deceive me by false appearances.'

'I was standing in the middle of a vast plain; the soil around me was naked and as level as if the plow had passed over it. In the distance I could recognize all the familiar sites of the neighboring country, which convinced me that I was on our land; but there remained not a vestige of the house; the omen tree which stood so high and whose branches extended so far, had disappeared; if I was not the victim of a hideous dream, if I really stood on my father's land, it was evident that everything had been devastated, swept away, leaving nothing but a fearful wilderness.'

'But then, what had become of my father?.... At this thought, my lord, I felt my heart breaking! I shut my eyes and with a cry of anguish I fell on the barren soil!'

'When I opened my eyes,' resumed the young man, who had paused, in prey to a painful emotion, 'I saw a slight cloud of smoke rising from the spot where our house had stood; and, standing in the middle of the plain, a man who answered my cry.'

'Sositheus, Sositheus?' I cried from afar, 'where is my father? in the name of the gods, where is he?'

'And I heard him reply that my father was no more, and that Phædræ had murdered him during the night that preceded my departure from Rome.'

Metellus paused, overwhelmed by these sorrowful reminiscences. Vibius was silent and grave. The Grand Vestal wept with Metellus, and pressed his hands trembling with emotion.

'Sositheus,' resumed the young man when he had recovered his composure, 'told me in a few words the particulars of this mysterious and dreadful catastrophe. He was absent when it occurred, my father having sent him away on some important business, a few days previous.—On his return he had found the place as I now saw it. But he learned that our slaves, two hundred in number, incited to revolt, had suddenly attacked the house, armed with fire and sword. Phædræ led them; Phædræ excited them to bloodshed; it was Phædræ who plunged a knife in the heart of my father, who murdered the poor defenceless old man!'

'Everything was destroyed, scattered or burnt by those two hundred demons, whose rage seemed to accrue as the work of destruction progressed. A tempest sweeping over those fields, the breath of the gods seeking their annihilation could not have made the work of desolation more complete. Nothing was left standing! not a stone, not a tree! nothing! nothing! but the silence of death.'

'But,' asked Vibius, seeing that the young man stopped, 'could you discover no clue to the cause of this terrible event? What became of all those slaves? What was this Phædræ's fate?'

'The greater number of those wretches came back to implore my forgiveness, and to beseech me with tears to grant them life. I consented, for how could I punish when so many were guilty! But none of them could reveal to me the real cause of my father's murder and of the terrible disaster of that eventful night. I have recaptured, one after another, all the slaves who had not surrendered themselves. I used tortures to make them confess,.... but among all these men, some of whom had been spared by my indulgence and the others had felt my just severity, not one was found who could throw a light on this dark deed! I found in them only poor wretches excited to pillage by the hope of freedom, and led to crime by those cruel instincts unknown to our souls, but which boil over suddenly, in the mire of those abject natures.'

'As for Phædræ, whose perfidious schemes and murderous object all had confirmed, I have searched Rome and Italy, during six months, to wreak upon him my rage and just vengeance,

but I have failed in obtaining the least clue to his whereabouts.'

'All this is strange and terrible!' said Vibius who seemed plunged in deep thought.

'My lord, will you know my secret opinion?' asked Metellus.

'Well,' he continued, reading assent in the old man's eyes, 'these things happened at the time Domitian proclaimed himself a god and had his golden statue erected in the capitol. I am convinced that the disaster at the villa where Vespasian and Titus were born, was ordered to destroy the testimony of his plebeian origin written on its walls; that Phædræ was the instrument of Regulus, and Regulus the infamous agent of Domitian's secret wishes!'

'Oh! young man! young man!' exclaimed Vibius. 'But, why then, this murder of your father?'

'And why the son's condemnation?' replied Metellus, 'For you have yet to learn, my lord, what happened to me. I was hunting up Phædræ,' he continued, 'when I found myself all at once assailed by the most singular accusations. It was alleged that I was the author of the reports I have already alluded to, and which were circulated in Rome, concerning the sudden death of the Emperor Titus: and, moreover, that it was I who sought to throw the power of the Emperor into discredit by repeating to everyone that his ancestor was only a poor undertaker of public works. I protested against these allegations; but I was told—which is very significant—that I had got this story from my father, who had himself propagated it in Phalacrina and Reata.'

'One evening, as I was returning home, I was assailed by a cohort, dragged before a judge, and tried and sentenced, on that same night. I was marching in the midst of an escort of soldiers, to meet my fate, when.... But,' said the young man turning to the Vestal, with eyes beaming with gratitude, 'it is you, not I, who should inform Vibius of what then took place.'

'It was a very simple occurrence,' said Cornelia, 'and I claim no particular merit for acting as I did. You know, my lord, that one of our most ancient and indisputable privileges, is to pardon any citizen on his way to be executed, provided we can declare that we met him accidentally. The full exercise of this right is particularly guaranteed to the Grand-Vestal. No sentence of death, even if decreed by the Emperor, can be executed when the lictor who proceeds her has extended his fasces over the condemned man's head.'

'At an early hour on the morning of the calends of May, of last year, I was returning in my litter, from the Consul's house, where I had presided during the night at the mysteries of the Good Goddess, to the Atrium Regium, when, at the angle of the Sacred Way and the Forum, I met the escort which accompanied Metellus.—My lictor cried aloud: 'The Grand Vestal!' and extended his fasces towards the soldiers, who immediately halted. I asked the centurion whether he was taking this man, for I did not know Metellus. He replied that he was taking him to the Tullianum by order of the Emperor.'

'Young man, you are free,' said I to Metellus, and I made the prescribed declaration to the centurion.'

'This is all I have done for Metellus. It is much, since I saved his life, but it is little, since it only required a few words. And' added the Vestal, with a caressing look at the young man, 'it is nothing, for who knows how Metellus repaid his debt?'

'You forget, dear Cornelia,' remarked Metellus, 'that Regulus having sought to have me re-arrested during the day, pretending that you had no right to pardon me, you claimed me from Domitian himself, and the Emperor dared not forget the duty of the great Pontif.'

'Having avoided this danger,' continued Metellus, 'I soon fell into another. Regulus was not the man to give up the victim who had once escaped from his clutch. It is clear, my lord, that the wretch had been instrumental in my condemnation, for, otherwise, why should he have attempted to deny an indisputable prerogative? I am right in my suspicions, and my poor father was likewise the victim of an accusation, the principle of which is to be found in the facts I have alluded to. There can be no doubt of this.'

'Having failed in this first attempt, my enemies seek new means to injure me. But this time their object is two-fold. They wish to destroy not me alone, but also her to whose intervention I owed my safety. The Grand Vestal saved Metellus; she must perish with Metellus! Oh, this is dreadful!.... What more shall I say, my lord? I soon discovered that an implacable hatred was seeking to work out this atrocious revenge. Naturally, Cornelia had become, and is still for me the object of a pious worship and of a gratitude which will forever fill my heart. Well, they have calumniated these noble sentiments and given them the most odious