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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 XVII.—(CONTINUED.)

In one word Palæstrion, as we have already stated, was the hero of the saturnalia. He had been proclaimed the king of the festive board; and when from the 'trichopia' were carried to the Forum the last scenes of this festival of liberty, upon which another sun was not to shine, the unanimous voice of his comrades enthusiastically proclaimed Palæstrion worthy of the dignified office of pretor.

Palæstrion donned bravely the magisterial robe, appointed his lictors; and sitting in the pretor's chair, prepared to perform his judicial duties. But a judge without a case to try cuts a sorry figure, and poor Palæstrion saw with embarrassment the disappointed looks of the audience as the hours passed without a single pleader presenting himself into court, though the criers made themselves hoarse in inviting the people to test the prudence and justice of the learned judge.

Palæstrion's face was growing purple with shame as he listened to the increasing titter which circulated in the mirthful crowd, and the big sweat drops rolled from his brow. It was at this perplexing juncture that he caught sight of Regulus. The slave pretor recognised immediately his quondam tempter, and, in a censorious voice, ordered his arrest. He intended to carry his revengeful joke as far as the license of the saturnalia permitted, and with this view he called to his dog. The animal, who was circulating freely among the crowd, in two bounds, took his place near his master's curule chair.

'Ah, Cerberus!' said Palæstrion, patting him on the back, 'attention, old boy, we are going to have some fun.'

The dog wagged his tail and showed his double row of sharp teeth, as if he understood what was coming.

Marcus Regulus saw this and his cheeks grew pale, as he asked himself what the slave's intentions might be.

The most savage clamors greeted the informer who had been recognised by the crowd. Palæstrion had reconquered all his waning popularity, for curiosity was awakened and every one looked for scenes of more than usual interest. A thousand voices mingled with the growls of the dog who, his glowing eyes fixed on his master's, only awaited a signal to spring upon the trembling wretch whom the lictors had brought to the bar of the tribunal.

'Io, Io, Saturnalia! Io, Io, Palæstrion!' repeated the multitude with wild excitement.

Palæstrion was enjoying his own triumph and the terror of Marcus Regulus. His silence and the ironical expression of his looks increased the intolerable anguish of his victim. At last, the slave pretor extended his hand to command attention, and the tumult ceased as if by magic.—The slaves looked on in breathless expectation.

'What is your name?' asked the magistrate, addressing Regulus.

'I am a citizen, and I protest against all acts of personal violence,' replied the informer, trying to give some assurance to his voice.

'Very well,' said the slave-pretor, 'but this is the time of the saturnalia, and you are accused....'

'What charge can be trumped against me?' asked Regulus.

'Was it not you,' replied Palæstrion, 'who, by corrupt means, tempted the fidelity of the woman Doris, a slave in the household of the divine Aurelia, and brought upon her the punishment which caused her death?.... What have you to reply?'

The informer shuddered, but remained silent. 'Was it not you again,' resumed the magistrate, 'who, concealing your name, came to a poor slave named Palæstrion to offer him his freedom, and who endeavored by your insidious questions to surprise the secrets of the divine Aurelia's household, thereby exposing said Palæstrion to perish, like Doris, under the public executioner's lash?'

'Palæstrion, Palæstrion,' exclaimed Regulus in a supplicating tone, 'I swear that my intentions towards you were sincere and it is was not my fault if they were not realized.'

'Hush, wretch!.... Here I am no longer Palæstrion, I am a judge who interrogates.... Come, are these facts true or false?.... By Saturn! take care that you do not prevaricate!'

But, instead of replying to this question, Regulus sprang back, uttering a piercing cry.—This unexpected incident was caused by the dog Cerberus. Pending the interrogatory, the dog had gradually approached the informer, and had finally inserted his sharp fangs into the latter's thigh; such, at least, appeared to be the fact, from the manner in which the animal still held on to his tunic.

'Cerberus, Cerberus!' cried Palæstrion angrily.

The dog immediately let go his hold. 'Lictors, chastise this insubordinate animal who will not wait for the signal.'

The lictors, detaching a few rods from their fasces, struck the dog who howled with pain.—The crowd applauded this act of justice.

'Regulus,' resumed the slave, evidently gratified by these public marks of approbation, 'have you anything to say in justification of these charges?... Speak.... I listen.'

The wretched man could only find words of cowardly supplication.

'So,' said Palæstrion, 'you admit the truth of these allegations.... and you have nothing more to say....'

'Palæstrion, I swear it to you again.... I did not know.... I could not know that I was exposing you to any danger.'

'I am not concerned in this case, Regulus; cease, therefore, misunderstanding my words and pronouncing my name; the question at issue is the trade you follow and the misfortunes which result from your informations. Is it not enough that you have attempted to introduce treachery under the roof of my noble mistress, and that a young girl has perished, a victim to the temptations of your gold?... This is what you must justify yourself from.... Or otherwise you can not escape punishment. As for me, I despise the solicitations with which you tried to deceive me, and as a judge I must forget them. For the last time I charge you to answer without equivocation.'

Palæstrion had spoken these words with great dignity and firmness. The humble slave seemed to be gradually penetrated with the greatness of his functions, and he introduced the majesty of truth in the fiction undertaken for amusement.

Marcus Regulus completely overwhelmed, could think of nothing except how he should effect his escape; his eyes wandered about anxiously, watching a favorable opportunity.—But flight was no easy matter. Cerberus was there, an attentive sentinel, and all around, the serried ranks of the multitude presented an impassable barrier. No friendly face met the informer's eager glance; he saw, everywhere, nothing but cruel smiles which told him plainly how much the spectacle of his anguish was enjoyed by those who waited for Palæstrion's judgment.

The pretor, silent and collected, was thinking of what sentence he should pronounce. A new incident here distracted the attention of the crowd. The melodious sounds of a flute were heard in the direction of the portico of Saturn's temple, and the pontiff was seen issuing from the sacred edifice, where he had been performing he had been performing an expiatory sacrifice. He was accompanied by Misius playing the harmonious instrument used upon such occasions. The crowd made way, respectfully, and the pontiff and his musician soon found themselves in front of the slave-pretor's court.

A drowning man catches at straws, and Regulus no sooner recognized the priest than he sprang towards him, claiming his protection in the most piteful accents.

'Saturnalia!' cried Palæstrion, to stop the movement which the pontiff, surprised at finding Regulus in this embarrassing predicament, was about to make in his favor; 'Saturnalia! this man belongs to me until the sentence I am going to pass shall have been executed!'

'It is true,' said the priest, 'we are in the days of Saturnalia, and you are the masters!—Regulus, may the gods protect thee, I can do nothing.'

The pontiff went away, leaving to his fate Regulus who trembled with rage and gave vent to his disappointment in the most fearful imprecations. Misius would have followed the pontiff, but Palæstrion would not permit it.

'Flute-player,' he cried, making a gesture of command, 'your presence is required here.—Your instrument must mark time for the exercise to which I must condemn Regulus as a just punishment for his crimes. I command you to stay!'

The unfortunate Misius would have rather been a hundred miles from Rome than to find himself in the presence of the wretch he had so much cause to fear; but it was as impossible for Misius to disobey Palæstrion, as for Regulus to escape from the punishment about to be inflicted.

Misius stopped, and waited patiently for further orders. The look that Regulus gave him made the poor fellow shudder.

Palæstrion, seated on his curule chair proclaimed silence and announced that he would now pronounce the sentence of the culprit.

The crowd listened with eager curiosity.

'It appears,' said the slave-pretor in a solemn voice, and using the consecrated formula, 'that Marcus Regulus, informer, here present, is the author, through his seductions, of the death of a young girl named Doris, a slave in the household of the divine Aurelia. Consequently, I order that he shall be tossed in a blanket, and that the flute-player shall accompany with the sounds of his instrument the execution of this sentence!'

The whole Forum shook under the thunder of applause which greeted the judgment of the wise Palæstrion. No sentence could have been imagined to crown with a more diverting practical joke the feast of the Saturnalia and to reach, at the same time, the much feared and hated man upon whom it was to be played.

A large circle was formed around the down-cast informer; twelve athletic slaves seized him and, despite his struggles stretched him at full length on a wide carpet, which impatient hands were already lifting; and Misius commenced playing a symphony amidst the plaudits of the delighted crowd and the cries, repeated by a thousand voices, of:

'Saturnalia! Io! Saturnalia! Io! Palæstrion!' Regulated by the modulations of Misius' flute, the cadenced motion was accomplished with a perfection that gave it additional force.—The informer's body scarcely touched the carpet than it was again thrown to a prodigious height. These aerial evolutions could be witnessed from all parts of the Forum, and the savage exclamations which greeted it showed how keenly the multitude enjoyed the distress of the wretched Regulus. His most cruel enemy must have pitted him!

At last, not perhaps through merciful feelings, but because every punishment must have an end, Palæstrion ordered the tossers to stop. Marcus Regulus fell back once more on the carpet, whence he was permitted to roll on the pavement. In a moment he stood on his feet. His face was deathly pale; his eyes flashed with rage; but his voice failed him, he could not utter a word. Palæstrion ordered the crowd to give way and let Regulus go where he pleased. The wretch, still dizzy from his recent performance, and assailed by the jeers of his tormentors, availed himself of this permission and fled with the precipitancy of one who escapes from some terrible danger.

Palæstrion had come down from his curule chair.

'Regulus,' he cried, when the informer was at some distance, 'I am no longer thy judge, but I made an oath and it must be fulfilled!'

Then, calling Cerberus, he pointed out to him the retreating form of the informer. The dog sprang after him with the speed of an arrow. A few bounds sufficed him to overtake Regulus, who uttered a terrible cry and turned to throw on Palæstrion a look full of deadly hate.

'Cerberus, Cerberus, enough! come back, sir!' Palæstrion called to his dog; and his voice had a satisfied and triumphant tone. He had kept his word and consummated his vengeance. At the sound of his master's voice, the obedient dog had let go the leg into which he had inserted his sharp-pointed row of teeth, he returned quietly bringing with him a piece of Regulus' tunic as a trophy.

Palæstrion was carried in triumph to the banquet of the last night of the Saturnalia.

On the next morning he had resumed his chair in the porter's lodge for another year. So he thought at least, for the poor wretch could not foresee what was about to happen.

Regulus, notwithstanding his cruel mishap, had not renounced his design of advising the Emperor of Metellus Celer's capture. He arrived at the Palatine-House, still trembling with rage and fear, and thirsting for revenge, but prepared to dissemble in order the better to secure it. At sight of the informer's haggard looks and disordered dress, Domitian was struck with surprise.

'What is the matter with you, Regulus?' he asked, 'and what has happened?'

'Nothing worth mentioning, my lord.... As I passed through the Forum some miserable slaves insulted me.... But I would not delay the important news I bring you.... Metellus Celer will be in Rome to-morrow.... He is in sure hands.'

'Have you witnesses to secure his condemnation?' asked the Emperor with an eagerness which proved that this news did not find him indifferent.

'Yes, my lord, we have three whose confession leave no doubt as to the intimate relations existing between Metellus Celer and the Grand Vestal. Those three witnesses are: Misius, the flutist at the sacrifices, the same who corresponded with Lucius Antonius, and who also had charge of delivering to Cornelia the letter of Metellus Celer which you have read; Gellia, the

wife of the same Misius, and, finally Palæstrion, the porter-slave of your piece Aurelia.'

'Have those people said what they know?'

'No, my lord,' replied the informer, with a wicked smile. 'But Ravinus is there, and he is a great master in the art of making those speak who wish to preserve an ill timed silence.'

'Very well, Regulus. This very night I shall convene the college of Pontiffs.... and to-morrow....'

'My lord' said the informer, interrupting Domitian, 'to-night will be the last night of the Saturnalia; during which no sentence can be pronounced.... It will be perhaps better to wait until to-morrow night.... I require this delay, moreover, in order to give you more complete proofs.'

'So be it, then,' said the Emperor. 'I shall be to-morrow night in my house in Alba.... See that the evidence be laid in proper time before the pontiffs, so as to avoid all hesitancy.... Go, I rely on your zeal.'

Regulus made an obeisance to the Emperor and left the Palatine-House, with his heart filled with the first joy he had tasted on that fatal day. Instead of returning home, he now sought the shortest road to arrive at the cave dug into the most rugged side of Mount Esquiline, and which served as an habitation for the mysterious Ravinus. It was late in the night when he reached the cave. Ravinus was asleep.

'Get up! Ravinus, I must speak to you!' cried the informer, shaking him roughly.

Ravinus growled, pretty much as a bear would if disturbed in his lair, and arising from the wild beast's skin which served him the purpose of a bed, stood up in all the majesty of his colossal stature.

'It is me, it is Regulus!' the informer prudently hastened to say.

Ravinus blew upon the ashes in his hearth and lighted a pine torch which he made fast against the rocky wall of the cave:

'Here I am,' he then replied to Regulus, as he seated himself on a rough bench. 'What is it that you wish?... Speak....'

CHAPTER XVIII.—THE DEN OF WOES.

The pine torch lighted two things: the cave of Ravinus, and Ravinus himself. Both were horrible to look at.

Imagine a recess of moderate width, but the depth of which, shrouded in darkness, could not be estimated. Rough masonry work, whose stones were blackened by time or green-coated by dampness, supported the earth and prevented slides. In whichever direction the eye wandered in this fearful abode, it met not a single familiar article of household furniture, but objects of strange and terrible shapes—some suspended from the ceiling or hung on the walls, others lying on the floor or sealed into some enormous block of wood or stone.

These fearful objects which make one shudder as he looks at them, are instruments of torture. It would be difficult to enumerate them all, and we have no desire to entertain the reader with their hideous nomenclature.

Ravinus is the public executioner, the torturer, who lives alone, far from all human beings, rejected by Rome which he is not permitted to inhabit. There never was a more frightful type of ancient barbarity. Over his hairy shoulders, to which hang athletic arms, appears an enormous head crowned with red hair as coarse and shaggy as that of Calydon's boar.

No feeling of pity ever softened his savage features, lighted by round eyes that roll vacantly under bushy eyebrows. Ravinus is the embodiment of stupidity, but it is cruelty, not idiocy which has destroyed his intellect. The shrieks of suffering can alone rouse him from his apathy. When the victim begs for mercy, he replies by a frightful smile; when the bones crushed by the instrument of torture pierce through the flesh, Ravinus is in ecstasies.

The life of this wretch had passed amidst the tears and groans of victims. Almost every day he was sent for by matrons whose delicate hands would have tired chastising their slaves. He would then strike with such fury that, unless he was stopped, death inevitably followed, as it happened in the case of the unhappy Doris.

Sometimes also, but much less often, poor wretches were sent to his cave, to be tortured; he marked those days with a white pebble and dreamed of them in his sleep.

Such was the man whose services Regulus came to secure. Their interview was short and decisive.

On the evening of the following day, towards the tenth hour, the interior of Ravinus' den was illuminated by the red glare of a large fire. Two aids were already preparing the instruments of torture. Prominent amidst the iron claws, the pincers and the sharp blades heating in this fire was an iron chair which had been brought to a white heat and emitted sparks.

Without, the night was dark and the icy December wind blew furiously. The snow-flakes

fell thick and fast, and swept by the storm, penetrated into the cave and fell, hissing, on the red coals.

A chariot stopped at the entrance of the den, and a party of men, alighting from it, entered the gloomy abode of Ravinus. These men were the pontiffs, accompanied by their scribe who was to take down the depositions of the victims. They were followed by Marcus Regulus.

Soon, the distant noise of numerous steps, with which mingled occasionally the most heart-rending shrieks, was heard. The victims were approaching. Three litters, borne by vigorous slaves, now halted at the mouth of the cave and were immediately surrounded by Ravinus and his aids. They drag out their prey and the slaves withdraw.

Ravinus returns near the fire, carrying in his arms a young woman, whose cries of terror he smothered with his large hand. He drops her on the damp soil of the cave. It is Gellia, the graceful, lively little woman. She has fainted.

Misius came in next, struggling manfully against one of the torturer's aids. At the sight of his wife, lying senseless on the soil, the poor flutist uttered a shriek of rage and made a desperate effort to free himself. But a fearful blow struck behind his head stretched him, lifeless, near Gellia. The aids, picking him up, carried him to the rack placed in readiness in an angle of the cave, and tied him securely by the bands and feet upon the fearful instrument.

Finally, Palæstrion made his appearance, led by one of the aids.

The poor fellow seemed struck with stupor.—He walked submissively, but staggering like a drunken man, not understanding why he was brought there, and scarcely able to see what was going on around him.

But his wondering eyes at last rested upon Regulus, whom he recognized by the lurid glare of the fire. At this sight, his chest heaved convulsively, his teeth chattered, but fear paralyzed his tongue. He knew now where he was and who had brought him there. Another glance had shown him Ravinus, the public executioner, the fearful spectre that haunted the dreams of slaves.

A few hours before, Palæstrion was sitting in his lodge, thinking of the glorious Saturnalia which could return only in another year; and thinking also, perhaps, with grim joy of the vengeance wreaked upon Marcus Regulus. Suddenly, armed men entered his lodge, struck off the fetters, mark of his bondage, and proceeded to bind his wrists. He invoked the name of his noble mistress whose house was thus forcibly entered, but the men replied that they acted by order of the Emperor, and the poor slave dare not resist the supreme authority.

It was also in the name of the Emperor that Misius and Gellia were ordered to enter the separate litters in which they had been brought. Gellia felt a fearful presentiment that Misius was lost and she would die with him. This is why she gave vent to her groans and shrieks, during the journey. Misius, remembering the declaration signed by Regulus to the effect that he had voluntarily revealed the conspiracy of Lucius Antonius, felt more hopeful. It was only when they alighted at the entrance of the torturer's cave, that new misgivings rushed to his mind, and the rough manner in which he saw his wife seized by Ravinus, roused his ire.

But the three victims were now in the power of their persecutors.

Ravinus, taking a huge pair of tongs, pulled the iron chair from the fire, and made a step towards Palæstrion. The poor slave threw himself at the feet of Marcus Regulus, crying in heart-rending accents:

'Mercy! O mercy, my lord!'

The informer smiled, and replied coldly: 'Palæstrion, yesterday at the Forum, did you listen to me, when I, also, craved mercy at your hands?... Moreover, I am not the master here; you are in the hands of the pontiffs who, themselves, only obey the will of the Emperor.'

And he made a sign to Ravinus. The torturer clasped the slave in his powerful arms, and lifting him, as he would have done a child, seated him on the red hot chair, where an iron band held him fast.

The shriek that escaped Palæstrion's lips would have moved the most obdurate heart; Ravinus replied to it by a savage laugh.... Palæstrion howled, screamed and foamed at the mouth; Ravinus revived the fire, lightened the screws and continued to laugh.

But God has not placed the misfortune in pain; there comes a time when in the midst of tortures the power to feel seems exhausted.

Soon, under the rapid action of the fire, Palæstrion only groaned feebly, and Ravinus no longer laughed. Nothing was heard now but the crepitation of the flesh as it burned, and the crackling of the bones as they were burned by