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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 XV.—CLEMENS FULFILLS THE ENGAGEMENTS OF GURGES.

The Pontiff was the first to break this silence. He said as he handed a letter to Cornelia: 'Madam, this letter from Metellus Celer is not of a recent date.... It is some time since I promised to deliver it into your hands; but I had to reflect before fulfilling this mission. It may be attended with serious consequences and I wished to be prepared to avert them.'

Cornelia scarcely heard these words. She was absorbed in the perusal of that much wished for letter in which she found, besides the revelation of public events which must have great influence on her future projects, the immense joy of knowing that she was loved.

Knowing but too well what a terrible blow he would deal to her happiness, Clemens waited in silence for the moment when he could speak without causing too great a shock to the unfortunate Vestal.

Cornelia turned at last, her eyes beaming with happiness, on the venerable Pontiff, and remarked, with a sweet smile:

'My lord, it would be ridiculous in me to evoke in your presence the gods I serve, to thank you for all the good you have done me by bringing me news that I had long and anxiously expected. But I shall willingly ask the God of the Christians to repay my debt of gratitude.'

Clemens bowed without speaking, and the Grand-Vestal resumed:

'So, my lord, Domitian will soon be overwhelmed by Lucius Antonius, and his grand nephews will be proclaimed emperors in his place. This event is of immense importance to you and me. To you, for it will be the triumph of your doctrine. To me, for my implacable persecutors and the terrible fears which besiege me must disappear with the tyrant. I repeat it, my lord, you do not.... you cannot know all the good you have done me.'

The moment had come for Clemens to fulfill the painful task he had assumed.

'Madam,' he said sadly, but with exquisite kindness of tone, 'an old man may have the right to manifest his regard for you.... and nothing—forgive me this secret devotion—nothing that concerns you or that you may have to fear is unknown to me!.... But have you been told that when Domitian left Rome it was to march with all his forces against Lucius Antonius?'

'Great gods!.... Can this be true, my lord?'

'It is an event known to everybody in Rome. The whole Senate accompanied the Emperor.—I wonder that this news should surprise you.'

'I knew, my lord, Domitian's departure for Germany; but there was no one to inform me of Lucius Antonius' projects. It is only now, after what you have told me, that I can understand the importance of that expedition. But the General will doubtless triumph. Domitian is universally hated!'

'Lucius Antonius will be crushed, madam.... From positive information I have received, I can affirm this. Do not, therefore, entertain vain hopes!'

'Madam, the letter you have just now read passed through the hands of the Emperor.'

'The Emperor has read this letter?' exclaimed the unfortunate Vestal, with a cry of terror.

She had sprung from her seat, and stood before the pontiff, rigid as a statue, her face ashy pale, her burning eyes distended by fear. Then, this death-like rigidity of the muscles gradually gave way; tears moistened her eyes, and uttering a groan of anguish, she fell heavily upon the cushions. She had not fainted, but was in prey to a paroxysm of tears.

The holy pontiff prayed fervently whilst waiting for the unfortunate young woman to recover sufficiently to listen to his words of consolation and perhaps of hope.... A long silent pause ensued. The Grand-Vestal seemed to be interrogating her own heart, to discover whether there existed not some grounds for doubt, some uncertainty connected with the fearful revelation which one word from the venerable pontiff presented in such terrible light. At last, she made an effort to speak:

'My lord,' she said slowly, 'your word is sacred and your character holy; you would not frighten a wretched woman with vain dangers; but is it not possible that you are mistaken or that you have been deceived?'

'Would to heaven that I were, madam,' replied Clemens with heartfelt emotion; 'unfortunately, I am certain of what I say.'

'You said, my lord,' resumed the Grand Vestal, 'that this letter had been in the Emperor's hands; how came it, then, to pass into yours?'

'This, madam, is the only mystery I have not succeeded in unravelling. I know who gave me the letter. It is the designator Gurgus, whose name is not unknown to you. He told me that during the night a stranger had brought him this letter, and had stated to him that it had been read by the Emperor. But, how the stranger knew this, and how this important document passed out of Domitian's hand, he could not say. However, I understand that you should look upon these facts as vague and uncertain—this is what you would say. But I went further, and I can assert that Gurgus was not deceived. Yes, the Emperor has read this letter—this is the most important fact, and it matters little that we do not know why he has not kept it.'

'You are right, my lord,' said the Grand-Vestal in a calm and dignified tone, 'it matters little. Domitian's memory never fails him, and he does not require written proofs.... And,' she added with bitterness, 'when you became certain that this letter contained my death-warrant, you hastened to bring it to me.... Such is, indeed, the mission of Pontiffs!'

The priest, astonished at this remark, gave the Vestal a reproachful look, in which she read so much sincere compassion, that blushes suffused her pale features.

'Madam,' said Clemens, 'I go to those of my brethren whom the hand of God has chastized, to tell them it is time to confide in His mercy, and to hope in His almighty power. Why then should I not have come to you with the same words of comfort, if Providence threatens you with some great misfortune?'

The Grand-Vestal made no reply; her eyes were fixed abstractedly upon the floor; she seemed indifferent to what she had heard. A transformation had suddenly taken place in her, and Clemens had no longer before him a weak woman crushed by her sorrow, but a proud patrician accepting with heroic calmness an inevitable fate. Cornelia belonged to one of those grand Roman races whose firmness may be shaken in a moment of surprise, but who soon recover their energy, and display the most admirable courage.

'Madam,' resumed the pontiff, 'has that young woman, who was conversing with you when I came in, never told you that the ministers of Christ hasten near the afflicted only to bring them hope, and sometimes also, only to promise them salvation?'

'Oh!' said the Grand-Vestal, 'hope!.... salvation!.... There can be none for me if ever I fall into the hands of the pontiffs!....'

'And I, madam, say I will save you!' cried the priest with such solemn assurance that Cornelia started. 'How this will be, I cannot say yet; but have confidence, and remember my words.... Yes, even if you should be already entombed in the vault of the Campus Sceleratus, I will save you! I will not let that abominable sacrifice be accomplished under my eyes!'

At this sudden mention of the dread abyss upon which her thought so frequently dwelt, the poor Vestal shuddered, and terror was depicted on her countenance.

'My lord, my lord,' she murmured faintly, 'it would be a prodigy!.... And I must not hope for one!.... Pray to your God that He may inspire my enemies and the Emperor to forget this letter—the proof of an innocent affection in which others may see a crime.... I have no right to ask or hope more!'

'My God, madam, is the God of miracles.—He has promised to His servants who would invoke His name, to manifest His power by the greatest wonders.... He is the God of truth and of life; I shall ask Him to reveal His power for you.... and He will do it!....'

'Am I then one of you, my lord, that this Almighty God should deign to come to me even in the tomb.... and to take me out of it at your request?'

'Virgin of Vesta!' exclaimed the venerable priest, 'for thirty years you have worn the immaculate garment which the brides of Christ also wear.... You have not indeed made the sacrifice of the heart which pleases Him above all; but chastity has bloomed in you, and so beautiful is this flower, that our God looks upon it with loving eyes even when it dwelleth in souls that have not known Him.... Be comforted, my daughter, and hope in His mercy!'

The Grand Vestal was deeply moved by these simple words. As she gazed silently at the venerable old man who had spoken them, she remembered the words of another pontiff whom she had seen near her in similar circumstances. What a difference between the pagan priest and the minister of Christ! between Helvius Agrippa and Clemens. Both had spoken of the same threatening perils; but how different their language. What harshness—what pitiless rigor—what cold indifference in the former! What gentleness—what compassion—what devotion in the latter!

The vaguest suspicions had sufficed Helvius Agrippa to pronounce her guilty; the purity of her past life had had no weight with him. Even when knowing the weakness of her heart and her secret feelings, Clemens honored the virgin whose past was irreproachable; and abstained from condemning her for asking of the future some consolation for the sufferings of a life of sadness.

This indulgence was what the Grand-Vestal felt most keenly in the pontiff's reply.

'I return you thanks, my lord,' she said simply, but the grateful look she gave Clemens was more eloquent than words.

'Farewell, madam,' said he, 'my mission is accomplished.... Should worse days come, you will see me again?'

The venerable old man left the Grand-Vestal to her meditations.

'O my God!' murmured the pontiff, as he wended his way towards the Capena Gate, and he turned to cast a last look on the Atrium Regium, 'there is in that asylum, a poor woman to whom I have promised Your help, and who knows not how near may be the hour of danger! Let not my promise be vain. O Lord!.... but permit me to glorify Your name by saving this virgin who will wish to know You and to consecrate herself to You!'

Clemens extended his hand to bless invisibly the afflicted Vestal who, at that very moment, was beseeching the God of the Christians to protect her from the fury of her enemies.

A few days after these events the news came that Lucius Antonius had been killed, and the insurrection was crushed. In less than a month, Domitian returned to Rome, with rage in his heart, and preparing to carry out his long delayed schemes of vengeance.

CHAPTER XVI.—THE STORM GATHERING.

The reader will remember that Hirsutus, having been an invisible witness of the conversation in which Marcus Regulus had revealed to the Emperor the existence of the conspiracy headed by Lucius Antonius, had immediately dispatched a courier to the general, inviting him to march at once upon Rome, where a powerful party would support him.

The events of the following day induced Hirsutus to modify considerably his plans. When Domitian announced to the assembled courtiers that he would march immediately against Lucius Antonius, and subsequently informed Regulus that he would defer the execution of his vengeance in order to make it more complete, the hideous dwarf saw that all would be lost if Lucius Antonius happened to be vanquished, the documents and plans of the conspiracy should fall into Domitian's hands.

Now, Hirsutus foresaw the defeat of Lucius Antonius who had not had time to assemble the forces necessary to the success of his undertaking, and would be taken by surprise. How could he avert the misfortunes which would follow Domitian's probable victory? how check his cruelty if he came back to Rome having in his possession the names of those who had meditated his overthrow?

Here is what Hirsutus imagined to save so many persons who might, at a later day, and by new conspiracies less compromised than the one recently discovered, serve his secret resentment and avenge him upon the master whose ruin he had sworn. Between Rome and Germany, a General named Lucius Maximus was stationed at the head of strong legions. Like many

others, he was in the plot, and his forces were to strengthen Lucius Antonius when the latter would move upon Rome. Hirsutus informed this Lucius Maximus of Domitian's early departure, and advised him to turn immediately against Antonius in order to preclude all possibility of the Emperor fighting in person against that General, and thereby to prevent Domitian from obtaining possession of documents to which hung the fate of the senate and the life of so many illustrious citizens. The trustworthy messenger selected by him communicated moreover with the principal leaders of the conspiracy, and received their private instructions.

It was represented to Lucius Maximus that this was the only feasible plan in the new situation brought about by the revelations of Marcus Regulus; that Domitian disposed of immense resources and would inevitably crush Antonius; that it was therefore advisable to forestall him, to fall suddenly upon the General of the army of Germany, defeat him, take and destroy his papers, and thereby prevent the Emperor from wreaking vengeance upon all who had participated in the plot for his overthrow. With nothing but vague suspicions, Domitian would probably not dare to order the murders he already contemplated.

It is true that this would be sacrificing Antonius; but what was the life of one man when so many were in danger; and would not Maximus himself be one of the victims, if Domitian learned the share he was to have taken in the proposed insurrection?

Those whom fortune abandons seldom find friendships strong enough to remain faithful in the hour of adversity. Maximus, frightened by the serious news sent to him from Rome; knowing better than any one else that Antonius was not yet ready either to attack or resist; and fearing for his own safety, resolved at once to abandon his accomplice. He raised precipitately his camp, and marched with his legions against Lucius Antonius. A sudden rise of the Rhine had complicated the embarrassment of this General, who, separated from the greater portion of his troops, was reduced to inactivity. Maximus attacked him at once, and gained an easy victory.

Lucius Antonius was killed in this battle. A soldier cut off his head, and preserved this bloody trophy to present it to Domitian. The latter arrived shortly after to reap the fruits of his lieutenant's victory. But his hopes were disappointed. Maximus had hastened to destroy every document concerning the plan of insurrection. Domitian was in a fearful rage when he learned that he could get no clue to the accomplices of Antonius, and that the designs formed against him must remain an impenetrable mystery. He did not punish Maximus, however, for the latter's hasty zeal. But he committed unheard of atrocities in Germany, where he remained some time trying to discover the lost thread of the conspiracy.

When he returned to Rome his resentment knew no bounds. Then commenced a reign of terror for the capital of the world. Tacitus has described with inimitable energy of language those scenes of horror. Death or banishment were the fate of the wealthiest and most virtuous citizens. The informers attained the greatest favors; the rewards they reaped were as odious as the infamous acts by which they earned them.

Pliny the Younger, in his letters, has also described those days of universal desolation.—But he mourns, above all, the numerous friends of which he was robbed by death and banishment.

But Domitian's relentless persecutions were not confined to men whose political influence could have given him umbrage. The philosophers had already been driven away, by him, from Rome and Italy; scholars, historians and poets were now comprised in the renewed edicts of expulsion. For some secret motive the Christians were spared, and neither Flavius Clemens nor his two sons were molested at the time. It is only two years later that the Christian persecution commenced in which Flavius Clemens suffered martyrdom.

It may be that the uneasiness caused to the Emperor by the recently suppressed insurrection was the secret of his leniency towards his relatives. The young Caesars were very popular, and the people who had borne so long with Domitian's crimes, would probably not suffer him to sacrifice to his fury the princes they looked upon as their future rulers.

There may have been another cause for the tyrant's hesitancy. The strange adventure of Minerva's statue, disarmed by a God more powerful than Jupiter, was still present to his memory, and he could not help thinking that he would perhaps, himself succumb, if he dared to attack the worshippers of that mysterious and terrible divinity.

What became of the Grand Vestal amidst this general gloom and terror? Since the Emperor's return she had lived in continued anxiety. She found strength and courage to bear the

burthen of her sorrows only in the devoted friendship of Cecilia and Aurelia, who scarcely left her.

Cecilia, wishing to complete the work commenced, spoke to her with affectionate perseverance of the celestial hopes of Christianity, and of the contempt which the greatest misfortunes must inspire to those who see in another life an everlasting reward and eternal repose. But the Grand Vestal was too cruelly troubled to understand these words of comfort. She could think of nothing but the fearful prospect of a terrible death in the vault of the Campus Sceleratus, and it seemed to her that Christianity, far from saving her from this cruel fate, would only be another motive for the pontiffs to order the death of the unfaithful priestess who had renounced her creed.

She derived more comfort from the assurances given her by the divine Aurelia, who proposed to intervene near the Emperor as soon as she who had been to her a second mother would be seriously threatened, and to save her once more. Domitian would not resist when he should see his niece at his feet.

Domitian seemed to think no more of terrifying Rome with the execution of a Vestal, condemned in accordance with the most rigorous provisions of the ancient religious law whose traditions he wished to perpetuate. But, at last, this project, conceived long ago, presented itself anew to his mind. It would be the means of illustrating his reign.

He therefore sent Marcus Regulus, and stated to him that he would proceed as High Pontiff against the Grand Vestal, and this Metellus Celer, who had been initiated into the projects of Lucius Antonius, and consequently deserved death on two grounds of accusation.

'Yes, my lord,' replied Regulus; 'but Metellus Celer is not in your power; and without an accomplice to show to the people, the accusation against a Vestal becomes difficult to manage, and must, at all events, lose its intended effect.'

'Regulus, it is for you to find this man; you took charge of the management of this business, you must bring about its successful termination.'

The Emperor was dissatisfied. He dismissed the informer.

Decidedly, Regulus was unlucky. The two great undertakings to which he had devoted himself, and in which he had displayed so much activity, contributed little to strengthen his credit and to maintain him in favor. His denunciations against the Christians had doubtless, seemed rash and dangerous, for the Emperor, far from provoking new revelations, would not suffer him to refer to the subject. The accusation against the Grand-Vestal had succeeded better, since Domitian had resolved to proceed; but, nevertheless, there was always some circumstance happening to diminish in the prince's mind the high opinion he had formed of the informer's great ability.

The disappearance of Metellus Celer at the very time he was wanted was not likely to revive the Emperor's singularly weakened confidence. Regulus understood this, and made extraordinary efforts to find Cornelia's pretended accomplice. He neglected all other business and took very little part in the persecution of the citizens.—Yet, for a long time, he almost despaired of success. He had lost the spy he had boasted of having placed near Metellus. The young man having discovered that his servant was the agent of his worst enemy, treated him as he had done Parmeon.

At last, one day, when the disappointed informer was beseeching the gods to crown with success the search which was to lead an unfortunate young man to the most cruel death, a courier came to inform him that Metellus Celer had been seized in his retreat, and was now on his way to Rome, well secured in a closed litter, and under good escort.

The wretch hastened to carry this important news to the Emperor. But on his way to the Palatine House, Regulus met with an adventure so strange that we must devote to it a new chapter.

CHAPTER XVII.—THE SATURNALIA.

To go from his residence to the Palatine House, Regulus had to cross the Forum. He found that spacious place filled with an immense crowd of people, enjoying themselves in a noisy and disorderly manner.

The informer suddenly remembered that it was the day of the Saturnalia, and this delirious multitude was entirely composed of slaves—temporarily the masters of Rome—and who were there only to give themselves up to the wildest revels and all the license permitted by a few days of freedom.

Marcus Regulus would have turned back, but it was too late. A slave, who was seated on the pretor's chair, had perceived him, and cried out:

'By Saturn, here comes, I believe, that rascal, Marcus Regulus! Lictors, let that man be arrested and brought before me!'

The individual who gave this singular order—