

# MARIUS THE EPICUREAN.

HIS SENSATIONS AND IDEAS

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Χειμερινὸς ὄνυχος ~~καὶ~~ μήνη καὶ νύκτες

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## CHAPTER I

### "THE RELIGION OF NUMA"

As, in the triumph of Christianity, the old religion lingered latest in the country, and died out at last as but paganism—the religion of the villagers, before the advance of the Christian Church; so, in an earlier century, it was in places remote from town-life that the older and purer forms of paganism itself had survived the longest. While, in Rome, new religions had arisen with bewildering complexity around the dying old one, the earlier and simpler patriarchal religion, "the religion of Numa," as people loved to fancy, lingered on with little change amid the pastoral life, out of the habits and sentiment of which so much of it had grown. Glimpses of such a survival we may catch below the merely artificial attitudes of Latin pastoral poetry; in Tibullus especially, who has preserved for us many poetic details of old Roman religious usage.

At mihi contingat patrios celebrare Penates,  
Reddereque antiquo menstrua thura Lari :

—he prays, with unaffected seriousness. Something liturgical, with repetitions of a consecrated form of words, is traceable in one of his elegies, as part of the order of

a birthday sacrifice. The hearth, from a spark of which, as one form of old legend related, the child Romulus had been miraculously born, was still indeed an altar; and the worthiest sacrifice to the gods the perfect physical sanity of the young men and women, which the scrupulous ways of that religion of the hearth had tended to maintain. A religion of usages and sentiment rather than of facts and belief, and attached to very definite things and places—the oak of immemorial age, the rock on the heath fashioned by weather as if by some dim human art, the shadowy grove of ilex, passing into which one exclaimed involuntarily, in consecrated phrase, Deity is in this Place! *Numen Inest!*—it was in natural harmony with the temper of a quiet people amid the spectacle of rural life, like that simpler faith between man and man, which Tibullus expressly connects with the period when, with an inexpensive worship, the old wooden gods had been still pressed for room in their homely little shrines.

And about the time when the dying Antoninus Pius ordered his golden image of Fortune to be carried into the chamber of his successor (now about to test the truth of the old Platonic contention, that the world would at last find itself happy, could it detach some reluctant philosophic student from the more desirable life of celestial contemplation, and compel him to rule it), there was a boy living in an old country-house, half farm, half villa, who, for himself, recruited that body of antique traditions by a spontaneous force of religious veneration such as had originally called them into being. More than a century and a half had past since Tibullus had written; but the restoration of religious usages, and their retention where they still survived, was meantime come to be the fashion through the influence of imperial example; and what had been in the main a matter of family pride with his father, was sustained by a native

instinct of devotion in the young Marius. A sense of conscious powers external to ourselves, pleased or displeased by the right or wrong conduct of every circumstance of daily life—that *conscience*, of which the old Roman religion was a formal, habitual recognition, was become in him a powerful current of feeling and observance. The old-fashioned, partly puritanic awe, the power of which Wordsworth noted and valued so highly in a northern peasantry, had its counterpart in the feeling of the Roman lad, as he passed the spot, “touched of heaven,” where the lightning had struck dead an aged labourer in the field: an upright stone, still with mouldering garlands about it, marked the place. He brought to that system of symbolic usages, and they in turn developed in him further, a great seriousness—an impressibility to the sacredness of time, of life and its events, and the circumstances of family fellowship; of such gifts to men as fire, water, the earth, from labour on which they live, really understood by him as gifts—a sense of religious responsibility in the reception of them. It was a religion for the most part of fear, of multitudinous scruples, of a year-long burden of forms; yet rarely (on clear summer mornings, for instance) the thought of those heavenly powers afforded a welcome channel for the almost stifling sense of health and delight in him, and relieved it as gratitude to the gods.

The day of the “little” or private *Ambarvalia* was come, to be celebrated by a single family for the welfare of all belonging to it, as the great college of the Arval Brothers officiated at Rome in the interest of the whole state. At the appointed time all work ceases; the instruments of labour lie untouched, hung with wreaths of flowers, while masters and servants together go in solemn procession along the dry paths of vineyard and cornfield, conducting the victims whose blood is presently to be shed for the purification from all natural or supernatural

taint of the lands they have "gone about." The old Latin words of the liturgy, to be said as the procession moved on its way, though their precise meaning was long since become unintelligible, were recited from an ancient illuminated roll, kept in the painted chest in the hall, together with the family records. Early on that day the girls of the farm had been busy in the great portico, filling large baskets with flowers plucked short from branches of apple and cherry, then in spacious bloom, to strew before the quaint images of the gods—Ceres and Bacchus and the yet more mysterious Dea Dia—as they passed through the fields, carried in their little houses on the shoulders of white-clad youths, who were understood to proceed to this office in perfect temperance, as pure in soul and body as the air they breathed in the firm weather of that early summer-time. The clean lustral water and the full incense-box were carried after them. The altars were gay with garlands of wool and the more sumptuous sort of blossom and green herbs to be thrown into the sacrificial fire, fresh gathered this morning from a particular plot in the old garden, set apart for the purpose. Just then the young leaves were almost as fragrant as flowers, and the scent of the bean-fields mingled pleasantly with the cloud of incense. But for the monotonous intonation of the liturgy by the priests, clad in their strange, stiff, antique vestments, and bearing ears of green corn upon their heads, secured by flowing bands of white, the procession moved in absolute stillness, all persons, even the children, abstaining from speech after the utterance of the pontifical formula, *Favete linguis!*—Silence! Propitious Silence!—lest any words save those proper to the occasion should hinder the religious efficacy of the rite.

With the lad Marius, who, as the head of his house, took a leading part in the ceremonies of the day, there was a devout effort to complete this impressive outward

silence by that inward tacitness of mind, esteemed so important by religious Romans in the performance of these sacred functions. To him the sustained stillness without seemed really but to be waiting upon that interior, mental condition of preparation or expectancy, for which he was just then intently striving. The persons about him, certainly, had never been challenged by those prayers and ceremonies to any ponderings on the divine nature: they conceived them rather to be the appointed means of setting such troublesome movements at rest. By them, "the religion of Numa," so staid, ideal and comely, the object of so much jealous conservatism, though of direct service as lending sanction to a sort of high scrupulosity, especially in the chief points of domestic conduct, was mainly prized as being, through its hereditary character, something like a personal distinction—as contributing, among the other accessories of an ancient house, to the production of that aristocratic atmosphere which separated them from newly-made people. But in the young Marius, the very absence from those venerable usages of all definite history and dogmatic interpretation, had already awakened much speculative activity; and to-day, starting from the actual details of the divine service, some very lively surmises, though scarcely distinct enough to be thoughts, were moving backwards and forwards in his mind, as the stirring wind had done all day among the trees, and were like the passing of some mysterious influence over all the elements of his nature and experience. One thing only distracted him—a certain pity at the bottom of his heart, and almost on his lips, for the sacrificial victims and their looks of terror, rising almost to disgust at the central act of the sacrifice itself, a piece of everyday butcher's work, such as we decorously hide out of sight; though some then present certainly displayed a frank curiosity in the spectacle thus permitted



them on a religious pretext. The old sculptors of the great procession on the frieze of the *Parthenon* at Athens, have delineated the placid heads of the victims led in it to sacrifice, with a perfect feeling for animals in forcible contrast with any indifference as to their sufferings. It was this contrast that distracted Marius now in the blessing of his fields, and qualified his devout absorption upon the scrupulous fulfilment of all the details of the ceremonial, as the procession approached the altars.

The names of that great populace of "little gods," dear to the Roman home, which the pontiffs had placed on the sacred list of the *Indigitamenta*, to be invoked, because they can help, on special occasions, were not forgotten in the long litany—Vatican who causes the infant to utter his first cry, Fabulinus who prompts his first word, Cuba who keeps him quiet in his cot, Domiduca especially, for whom Marius had through life a particular memory and devotion, the goddess who watches over one's safe coming home. The urns of the dead in the family chapel received their due service. They also were now become something divine, a goodly company of friendly and protecting spirits, encamped about the place of their former abode—above all others, the father, dead ten years before, of whom, remembering but a tall, grave figure above him in early childhood, Marius habitually thought as a *genius* a little cold and severe.

Candidus insuetum miratur limen Olympi,  
Sub pedibusque videt nubes et sidera.—

Perhaps!—but certainly needs his altar here below, and garlands to-day upon his urn. But the dead *genii* were satisfied with little—a few violets, a cake dipped in wine, or a morsel of honeycomb. Daily, from the time when his childish footsteps were still uncertain, had Marius taken them their portion of the family meal, at the second course, amidst the silence of the company.

They loved those who brought them their sustenance; but, deprived of these services, would be heard wandering through the house, crying sorrowfully in the stillness of the night.

And those simple gifts, like other objects as trivial—bread, oil, wine, milk—had regained for him, by their use in such religious service, that poetic and as it were moral significance, which surely belongs to all the means of daily life, could we but break through the veil of our familiarity with things by no means vulgar in themselves. A hymn followed, while the whole assembly stood with veiled faces. The fire rose up readily from the altars, in clean, bright flame—a favourable omen, making it a duty to render the mirth of the evening complete. Old wine was poured out freely for the servants at supper in the great kitchen, where they had worked in the imperfect light through the long evenings of winter. The young Marius himself took but a very sober part in the noisy feasting. A devout, regretful after-taste of what had been really beautiful in the ritual he had accomplished took him early away, that he might the better recall in reverie all the circumstances of the celebration of the day. As he sank into a sleep, pleasant with all the influences of long hours in the open air, he seemed still to be moving in procession through the fields, with a kind of pleasurable awe. That feeling was still upon him as he awoke amid the beating of violent rain on the shutters, in the first storm of the season. The thunder which startled him from sleep seemed to make the solitude of his chamber almost painfully complete, as if the nearness of those angry clouds shut him up in a close place alone in the world. Then he thought of the sort of protection which that day's ceremonies assured. To procure an agreement with the gods—*Pacem deorum exposcere*: that was the meaning of what they had

all day been busy upon. In a faith, sincere but half-suspicious, he would fain have those Powers at least not against him. His own nearer household gods were all around his bed. The spell of his religion as a part of the very essence of home, its intimacy, its dignity and security, was forcible at that moment; only, it seemed to involve certain heavy demands upon him.

## CHAPTER II

### WHITE-NIGHTS

To an instinctive seriousness, the material abode in which the childhood of Marius was passed had largely added. Nothing, you felt, as you first caught sight of that coy, retired place,—surely nothing could happen there, without its full accompaniment of thought or reverie. *White-nights!* so you might interpret its old Latin name.\* “The red rose came first,” says a quaint German mystic, speaking of “the mystery of so-called *white* things,” as being “ever an after-thought—the doubles, or seconds, of real things, and themselves but half-real, half-material—the white queen, the white witch, the white mass, which, as the black mass is a travesty of the true mass turned to evil by horrible old witches, is celebrated by young candidates for the priesthood with an unconsecrated host, by way of rehearsal.” So, white-nights, I suppose, after something like the same analogy, should be nights not of quite blank forgetfulness, but passed in continuous dreaming, only half veiled by sleep. Certainly the place was, in such case, true to its fanciful name in this, that you might very well conceive, in face of it, that dreaming even in the daytime might come to much there.

The young Marius represented an ancient family whose estate had come down to him much curtailed

\* *Ad Vigilias Albas.*

through the extravagance of a certain Marcellus two generations before, a favourite in his day of the fashionable world at Rome, where he had at least spent his substance with a correctness of taste Marius might seem to have inherited from him ; as he was believed also to resemble him in a singularly pleasant smile, consistent however, in the younger face, with some degree of sombre expression when the mind within was but slightly moved.

As the means of life decreased, the farm had crept nearer and nearer to the dwelling-house, about which there was therefore a trace of workday negligence or homeliness, not without its picturesque charm for some, for the young master himself among them. The more observant passer-by would note, curious as to the inmates, a certain amount of dainty care amid that neglect, as if it came in part, perhaps, from a reluctance to disturb old associations. It was significant of the national character, that a sort of elegant *gentleman* farming, as we say, had been much affected by some of the most cultivated Romans. But it became something more than an elegant diversion, something of a serious business, with the household of Marius ; and his actual interest in the cultivation of the earth and the care of flocks had brought him, at least, intimately near to those elementary conditions of life, a reverence for which, the great Roman poet, as he has shown by his own half-mystic pre-occupation with them, held to be the ground of primitive Roman religion, as of primitive morals. But then, farm-life in Italy, including the culture of the olive and the vine, has a grace of its own, and might well contribute to the production of an ideal dignity of character, like that of nature itself in this gifted region. Vulgarity seemed impossible. The place, though impoverished, was still deservedly dear, full of venerable memories, and with a living sweetness of its own for to-day.

To hold by such ceremonial traditions had been a part of the struggling family pride of the lad's father, to which the example of the head of the state, old Antoninus Pius—an example to be still further enforced by his successor—had given a fresh though perhaps somewhat artificial popularity. It had been consistent with many another homely and old-fashioned trait in him, not to undervalue the charm of exclusiveness and immemorial authority, which membership in a local priestly college, hereditary in his house, conferred upon him. To set a real value on these things was but one element in that pious concern for his home and all that belonged to it, which, as Marius afterwards discovered, had been a strong motive with his father. The ancient hymn—*Jana Novella*!—was still sung by his people, as the new moon grew bright in the west, and even their wild custom of leaping through heaps of blazing straw on a certain night in summer was not discouraged. The privilege of augury itself, according to tradition, had at one time belonged to his race; and if you can imagine how, once in a way, an impressible boy might have an *inkling*, an inward mystic intimation, of the meaning and consequences of all that, what was implied in it becoming explicit for him, you conceive aright the mind of Marius, in whose house the auspices were still carefully consulted before every undertaking of moment.

The devotion of the father then had handed on loyally—and that is all many not unimportant persons ever find to do—a certain tradition of life, which came to mean much for the young Marius. The feeling with which he thought of his dead father was almost exclusively that of awe; though crossed at times by a not unpleasant sense of liberty, as he could but confess to himself, pondering, in the actual absence of so weighty and continual a restraint, upon the arbitrary power which Roman religion and Roman law gave to the parent

over the son. On the part of his mother, on the other hand, entertaining the husband's memory, there was a sustained freshness of regret, together with the recognition, as Marius fancied, of some costly self-sacrifice to be credited to the dead. The life of the widow, languid and shadowy enough but for the poignancy of that regret, was like one long service to the departed soul; its many annual observances centering about the funeral urn—a tiny, delicately carved marble house, still white and fair, in the family-chapel, wreathed always with the richest flowers from the garden. To the dead, in fact, was conceded in such places a somewhat closer neighbourhood to the old homes they were thought still to protect, than is usual with us, or was usual in Rome itself—a closeness which the living welcomed, so diverse are the ways of our human sentiment, and in which the more wealthy, at least in the country, might indulge themselves. All this Marius followed with a devout interest, sincerely touched and awed by his mother's sorrow. After the deification of the emperors, we are told, it was considered impious so much as to use any coarse expression in the presence of their images. To Marius the whole of life seemed full of sacred presences, demanding of him a similar collectedness. The severe and archaic religion of the villa, as he conceived it, begot in him a sort of devout circumspection lest he should fall short at any point of the demand upon him of anything in which deity was concerned. He must satisfy with a kind of sacred equity, he must be very cautious lest he be found wanting to, the claims of others, in their joys and calamities—the happiness which deity sanctioned, or the blows in which it made itself felt. And from habit, this feeling of a responsibility towards the world of men and things, towards a claim for due sentiment concerning them on his side, came to be a part of his nature not to be put

off. It kept him serious and dignified amid the Epicurean speculations which in after years much engrossed him, and when he had learned to think of all religions as indifferent, serious amid many fopperies and through many languid days, and made him anticipate all his life long as a thing towards which he must carefully train himself, some great occasion of self-devotion, such as really came, that should consecrate his life, and, it might be, its memory with others, as the early Christian looked forward to martyrdom at the end of his course, as a seal of worth upon it.

The traveller, descending from the slopes of Luna, even as he got his first view of the *Port-of-Venus*, would pause by the way, to read the face, as it were, of so beautiful a dwelling-place, lying away from the white road, at the point where it began to decline somewhat steeply to the marsh-land below. The building of pale red and yellow marble, mellowed by age, which he saw beyond the gates, was indeed but the exquisite fragment of a once large and sumptuous villa. Two centuries of the play of the sea-wind were in the velvet of the mosses which lay along its inaccessible ledges and angles. Here and there the marble plates had slipped from their places, where the delicate weeds had forced their way. The graceful wildness which prevailed in garden and farm gave place to a singular nicety about the actual habitation, and a still more scrupulous sweetness and order reigned within. The old Roman architects seem to have well understood the decorative value of the floor—the real economy there was, in the production of rich interior effect, of a somewhat lavish expenditure upon the surface they trod on. The pavement of the hall had lost something of its evenness; but, though a little rough to the foot, polished and cared for like a piece of silver, looked, as mosaic-work is apt to do, its best in old age. Most noticeable among the ancestral masks, each in its little



cedarn chest below the cornice, was that of the wasteful but elegant Marcellus, with the quaint resemblance in its yellow waxen features to Marius, just then so full of animation and country colour. A chamber, curved ingeniously into oval form, which he had added to the mansion, still contained his collection of works of art; above all, that head of Medusa, for which the villa was famous. The spoilers of one of the old Greek towns on the coast had flung away or lost the thing, as it seemed, in some rapid flight across the river below, from the sands of which it was drawn up in a fisherman's net, with the fine golden *laminæ* still clinging here and there to the bronze. It was Marcellus also who had contrived the prospect-tower of two storeys with the white pigeon-house above, so characteristic of the place. The little glazed windows in the uppermost chamber framed each its dainty landscape—the pallid crags of Carrara, like wildly twisted snow-drifts above the purple heath; the distant harbour with its freight of white marble going to sea; the lighthouse temple of *Venus Speciosa* on its dark headland, amid the long-drawn curves of white breakers. Even on summer nights the air there had always a motion in it, and drove the scent of the new-mown hay along all the passages of the house.

Something pensive, spell-bound, and but half real, something cloistral or monastic, as we should say, united to this exquisite order, made the whole place seem to Marius, as it were, *sacellum*, the peculiar sanctuary, of his mother, who, still in real widowhood, provided the deceased Marius the elder with that secondary sort of life which we can give to the dead, in our intensely realised memory of them—the “subjective immortality,” to use a modern phrase, for which many a Roman epitaph cries out plaintively to widow or sister or daughter, still in the land of the living. Certainly, if any such considerations regarding them do reach the shadowy people,