

VII. Id. 9th [9th of May]

419 When from that day the Evening Star shall thrice have shown his beauteous face, and thrice the vanquished stars shall have retreated before Phoebus, there will be celebrated an olden rite, the nocturnal *Lemuria*: it will bring offerings to the silent ghosts. The year was formerly shorter, and the pious rites of purification (*februa*) were unknown, and thou, two-labeled Janus, wast not the leader of the months. Yet even then people brought gifts to the ashes of the dead, as their due, and the grandson paid his respects to the tomb of his buried grandsire. It was the month of May, so named after our forefathers (*maiores*), and it still retains part of the ancient custom. When midnight has come and lends silence to sleep, and dogs and all ye varied fowls are hushed, the worshipper who bears the olden rite in mind and fears the gods arises; no knots constrict his feet; and he makes a sign with his thumb in the middle of his closed fingers,<sup>1</sup> lest in his silence an unsubstantial shade should meet him. [435] And after washing his hands clean in spring water, he turns, and first he receives black beans and throws them away with face averted; but while he throws them, he says: "These I cast; with these beans I redeem me and mine." This he says nine times, without looking back: the shade is thought to gather the beans, and to follow unseen behind. Again he touches water, and clashes Temesan<sup>2</sup> bronze, and asks the shade to go out of his house. When he has said nine times, "Ghosts of my fathers, go forth!" he looks back, and thinks that he has duly performed the sacred rites.

455 why the day was called *Lemuria*, and what is the origin of the name, escapes me; it is for some god to discover it. Son of the Pleiad,<sup>3</sup> thou reverend master of the puissant wand, inform me: oft hast thou seen the palace of the Stygian Jove. At my prayer the Bearer of the Herald's Staff (*Caducifer*) was come. Learn the cause of the name; the god himself made it known. When Romulus had buried his brother's ghost in the grave, and the obsequies had been paid to the too nimble Remus, unhappy Faustulus and Acca, with streaming hair, sprinkled the burnt bones with their tears. Then at twilight's fall they sadly took the homeward way, and flung themselves on their hard couch, just as it was. The gory ghost of Remus seemed to stand at the bedside and to speak these words in a faint murmur: "Look on me, who shared the half, the full half of your tender care, behold what I am come to, and what I was of late! A little while ago I might have been the foremost of my people, if but the birds had assigned the throne to me. Now I am an empty wraith, escaped from the flames of the pyre; that is all that remains of the once great Remus. [465] Alas, where is my father Mars? If only you spoke the truth, and it was he who sent the wild beast's dugs to suckle the abandoned babes. A citizen's rash hand undid him whom the she-wolf saved; O how far more merciful was she! Ferocious Celer,<sup>4</sup> mayest thou yield up thy cruel soul through wounds, and pass like me all bloody underneath the earth! My brother willed not this: his love's a match for mine: he let fall upon my death 'twas all he could—his tears. Pray him by your tears, by your fosterage, that he would celebrate a day by signal honour done to me." As the ghost gave this charge, they yearned to embrace him and stretched forth their arms; the slippery shade escaped the clasping hands. When the vision fled and carried slumber with it, the pair reported to the king his brothers words. Romulus complied, and gave the name of *Remuria* to the day on which due worship is paid to buried ancestors. In the course of ages the rough letter, which stood at the beginning of the name, was changed into the smooth; and soon the souls of the silent multitude were also called *Lemures*: that is

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<sup>1</sup> This was a gesture to ward off the evil eye still used today in Italy and called "the fig".

<sup>2</sup> Copper mines near Temusa in Bruttium.

<sup>3</sup> Hermes/Mercury, son of Maia.

<sup>4</sup> Who killed Remus according to Ovid.

the meaning of the word, that is the force of the expression. [485] But the ancients shut the temples on these days, as even now you see them closed at the season sacred to the dead. The times are unsuitable for the marriage both of a widow and a maid: she who marries then, will not live long. For the same reason, if you give weight to proverbs, the people say bad women wed in May. But these three festivals fall about the same time, though not on three consecutive days.