

FABIOLA.
Or
The Church of the Catacombs.
By
His Eminence Cardinal Wiseman.
[Published by special request.]

CHAPTER I.
THE CHRISTIAN HOUSE.

It is on an afternoon in September of the year 302, that we invite our reader to accompany us through the streets of Rome. The sun has declined, and is about two hours from his setting; the day is cloudless, and its heat has cooled, so that multitudes are issuing from their houses, and making their way towards Caesar's gardens on one side, or Sallust's on the other, to learn the news of the day.

But the part of the city to which we wish to conduct our friendly reader is that known by the name of the Campus Martius. It comprised the flat alluvia, plain between the seven hills of older Rome and Tiber. Before the close of the Republican period, this field, once left bare for the athletic and warlike exercises of the people, had begun to be incroached upon by public buildings. Pompey had erected in it his theatre; soon after, Agrippa raised the Pantheon and its adjoining baths. But gradually it became occupied by private dwellings, while the hills, in the early empire, the aristocratic portion of the city, were seized upon for greater edifices. Thus the Palatine, after Nero's fire, became almost too small for the imperial residence and its adjoining Circus Maximus. The Esquiline was unsuited by Titus's baths, built on the ruins of the Golden House, the Aventine by Caracalla's; and at the period of which we write, the Emperor Diocletian was covering the space sufficient for many lordly dwellings, by the erection of his Thermae (Hot-baths) on the Quirinal, not far from Sallust's garden just alluded to.

The particular spot in the Campus Martius to which we will direct our steps, is one whose situation is so definite, that we can accurately describe it to any one acquainted with the topography of ancient or modern Rome. In republican times there was a large square space in the Campus Martius, surrounded by boarding, and divided into pens, in which the Comitia, or meetings of the tribes of the people, were held, for giving their votes. This was called the Comitatus, or Comitatus, from its resemblance to a sheepfold. Augustus carried out a plan, described by Cicero in a letter to Atticus, (Lib. iv. ep. 16.) of transforming this homely contrivance into a magnificent and solid structure. The Septa Julia, as it was thenceforth called, was a splendid portico of 1000 by 500 feet, supported by columns, and adorned with paintings. Its ruins are clearly traceable, and it occupied the space now covered by the Doric and Verospalaces (running thus along the present Corso), the Roman College, the Church of St. Ignatius, and the Oratory of the Caravita.

The house to which we invite our reader is exactly opposite, and on the east side of this edifice, including in its area the present church of St. Marcellus, whence it extended back towards the foot of the Quirinal hill. It thus found to cover, as noble Roman houses did, a considerable extent of ground. From the outside it presents but a blank and dead appearance. The walls are plain, without architectural ornament, not high, and scarcely broken by windows. In the middle of one side of this quadrangle is a door, in antis, that is, merely relieved by a tympanum or triangular cornice, resting on two half columns. Using our privilege as artists of fiction, of invisible ubiquity, we will enter in with our friend, or shadow, as he would have been anciently called. Passing through the porch, on the pavement of which we read with pleasure, in mosaic, the greeting SALVE, or WELCOME, we find ourselves in the atrium, or first court of the house, surrounded by a portico or colonnade.

In the centre of the marble pavement a softly warbling jet of pure water, brought by the Claudian aqueduct from the Tusculan hills, springs into the air, now higher, now lower, and falls into an elevated basin of red marble, over the sides of which it flows in downy waves; and before reaching its lower and wider recipient, scatters a gentle shower on the rare and brilliant flowers placed in elegant vases around.

Under the portico we see furniture disposed, of a rich and sometimes rare character; couches inlaid with ivory, and even silver; tables of oriental woods, bearing candelabra, lamps, and other household implements, of bronze or silver; delicately chased busts, vases, tripods, and objects of mere art. On the walls are paintings evidently of a former period, still, however, retaining all their brightness of color and freshness of execution. These are separated by niches with statues, representing indeed, like the pictures, mythological or historical subjects; but we cannot help observing, that nothing meets the eye which could offend the most delicate mind. Here and there an empty niche, or a covered painting, proves this is not the result of an accident.

As outside the columns, the coving roof leaves a large square opening in its centre, called the impluvium; there is drawn across it a curtain, or veil of dark canvas, which keeps out the sun and rain. An artificial twilight therefore alone enables us to see all that we have described; but it gives greater effect to what is beyond. Through an arch, opposite to the one whereby we have entered, we catch a glimpse of an inner and still richer court, paved with variegated marbles, and adorned with bright gilding. The veil of the opening above, which, however, here is closed with thick glass or talc (lapis specularis), has been partly withdrawn, and admits a bright but softened ray from the evening sun on to the place, where we see, for the first time, that we are in no sequestered hall, but in an inhabited house.

Beside a table, just outside the columns of Phrygian marble, sits a matron not beyond the middle of life, whose features, noble yet mild, show traces of having passed through sorrow at some earlier period. But a powerful influence has subdued the recollection of it, or blended it with a sweeter thought; and the two always come together, and have long dwelt united in her heart. The simplicity of her appearance strangely contrasts with the richness of all around her; her hair, streaked with silver, is left uncovered, and unconcealed by any artifice; her robes are of the plainest color and texture, without embroidery, except the purple ribbon sewed on, and called the segmenium, which denotes the state of widowhood; and not a jewel or precious ornament, of which the Roman ladies were so lavish, is to be seen upon her person. The only thing approaching to this is a slight gold cord or chain round her neck, from which apparently hangs some object, carefully concealed within the upper hem of her dress.

At the time that we discover her she is busily engaged over a piece of work, which evidently has no personal use. Upon a long rich strip of gold cloth she is embroidering with still richer gold thread; and occasionally she has recourse to one or another of several elegant caskets upon the table, from which she takes out a pearl, or a gem set in gold, and introduces it into the design. It looks as if the precious ornaments of earlier days were being devoted to some higher purpose.

But as time goes on, some little uneasiness may be observed to come over her calm thoughts, hitherto absorbed, to all appearance, in her work. She now occasionally raises her eyes from it towards the sun; then perhaps turns her glance towards a clepsydra or water-clock, on a bracket near her; but just as a feeling of more serious anxiety begins to make an impression on her countenance, a cheerful rap strikes the house-door, and she bends forward with a radiant look to meet the welcome visitor.

CHAPTER II.
THE MARTYR'S BOY.

It is a youth full of grace, and sprightliness, and candor, that comes forward with light and buoyant steps across the atrium, towards the inner hall; and we shall hardly find time to sketch him before he reaches it. He is about fourteen years old, but tall for that age, with elegance of form and manliness of bearing. His bare neck and limbs are well developed by healthy exercise; his features display an open and warm heart, while his lofty forehead, round which his brown hair naturally curls, beams with a bright intelligence. He wears the usual youth's garment, the short praetexta, reaching below the knee, and a golden ball, or hollow spheroid of gold suspended round his neck. A bundle of papers and vellum rolls fastened together, and carried by an old servant behind him, shows us that he is just returning home from school.

While we have been thus noting him, he has received his mother's embrace, and has set himself low by her feet. She gazes upon him for some time in silence, as if to discover in his countenance the cause of his unusual delay, for he is an hour late in his return. But he meets her glance with no frank a look, and with such a smile of innocence, that every cloud of doubt is in a moment dispelled, and she addresses him as follows:

"What has detained you to-day, my dearest boy? No accident, I trust, has happened to you on the way?"

"Oh, none, I assure you, sweetest mother; on the contrary, all has been delightful, so much so, that I can scarcely venture to tell you."

A look of smiling expostulation drew from the open-hearted boy a delicious laugh, as he continued:

"Well, I suppose I must. You know I am never happy, and cannot sleep, if I have failed to tell you all the bad and all the good of the day about myself. (The mother smiled again, wondering what the bad was.) I was reading the other day that the Egyptians each evening cast into the sea a white or a black stone, according as the day had been happy or unhappy; if I had to do so, it would serve to mark, in white or black, the days on which I have, or have not, an opportunity of relating to you all that I have done. But to-day, for the first time, I have a doubt, a faint consciousness, whether I ought to tell you all."

Did the mother's heart flutter more than usual, as from a first anxiety, or was there a softer solicitude dimming her eyes, that the youth should seize her hand and put it tenderly to his lips, while thus he replied?

"Fear nothing, mother; most beloved, your son has done nothing that may give you pain. Only say, do you wish to hear all that has befallen me to-day, or only the cause of my late return home?"

"Tell me all, dear Paneratus," she answered; "nothing that concerns you can be indifferent to me."

"Well, then," he began, "this last day of my frequenting school appears to me to have been singularly blessed, and yet full of strange occurrences. First, I was crowned as the successful competitor in a declamation, which our good master Cassianus set us for our work during the morning hours; and this led, as you will hear, to some singular discoveries. The subject was, 'That the real philosopher should be ever ready to die for truth.' I never heard anything so cold or insipid (I hope it is not wrong to say so), as the compositions read by my companions. It was not their fault, poor fellows! what truth can they possess, and what inducements can they have, to die for any of their vain opinions? But to a Christian, what charming suggestions such a theme naturally makes! And so I felt it. My heart glowed, and all my thoughts seemed to burn, as I wrote my essay, full of the lessons you have taught me, and of the domestic examples that are before me. The son of a martyr could not feel otherwise. But when my turn came to read my declamation, I found that my feelings had nearly fatally betrayed me. In the warmth of my recitation, the word 'Christian' escaped my lips instead of 'philosopher,' and 'faith' instead of 'truth.' At the first mistake, I saw Cassianus start; at the second, I saw a tear gleam in his eye, as he bent affectionately towards me, he said, in a whisper, 'Beware, my child; there are sharp ears listening.'"

"What, then," interrupted the mother, "is Cassianus a Christian? I chose his school for you because it was in the highest repute for learning and morality; and now indeed I thank God that I did so. But in these days of danger and apprehension we are obliged to live as strangers in our own land, scarcely knowing the faces of our brethren. Certainly, had Cassianus proclaimed his faith, his school would soon have been deserted. But go on, my dear boy. Were his apprehensions well grounded?"

"I fear so; for while the great body of my school-fellows, not noticing these slips, vehemently applauded my hearty declamation, I saw the dark eyes of Corvinus bent scornfully upon me, as he bit his lip in manifest anger."

"And who is he, my child, that was so displeased, and wherefore?"

"He is the oldest and strongest, but unfortunately, the dullest boy in the school. But this, you know, is not his fault. Only, I know not why, he seems ever to have had an ill-will and grudge against me, the cause of which I cannot understand."

"Did he say ought to you, or do?"

"Yes, and that was the cause of my delay. For when we went forth from school into the field by the river, he addressed me indignantly in the presence of our companions, and said, 'Come, Paneratus, this, I understand, is the last time we must here (he laid a particular emphasis on the word); but I have a long score to demand payment of from you. You have loved to show your superiority in school over me and others older and better than yourself; I saw your supercilious looks at me as you spouted your high-flown declamation to-day; ay, and I caught expressions in it which you may live to rue, and that very soon; for my father, you will know, is Prefect of the city (the mother slightly started); and something is proper, which may slightly concern you. Before you go I must have my revenge. If you are worthy of your name, and it is not an empty word, let us fairly contend in more manly strife than that of the stylus and tablet. Wrestle with me, or try the basket against me. I burn to humble you as you deserve before these witnesses of your insolent triumphs.'"

The anxious mother bent eagerly forward as she listened, and scarcely breathed. "And what," she exclaimed, "did you answer, my dear son?"

"I told him gently that he was quite mistaken; for never had I consciously done anything that could give pain to him or any of my school-fellows; nor did I ever dream of claiming superiority over them. 'And as to what you propose,' I added, 'you know, Corvinus, that I have always refused to indulge in personal combats, which, beginning in a cool trial of skill, end in a angry strife, hatred, and pain for both parties. How much less I could think of interfering on them now, when you avow that you are anxious to begin them with those evil feelings which are usually their bad end?' Our school-mates had now formed a circle round us; and I clearly saw that they were all against me, for they wanted to enjoy some of the delights of their cruel games; I therefore cheerfully added, 'And now, my comrade, goodbye, and may all happiness attend you. I part from you as I have lived with you, in peace.' 'Not so,' replied Corvinus, now purple in the face with fury; 'but—'

The boy's countenance became crimsoned, his voice quivered, his body trembled, and, half choked, he sobbed out, 'I cannot go on; I dare not tell the rest!'

"I entreat you, for God's sake, and for the love you bear your father's memory," said the mother, placing her hand upon her son's head, " conceal nothing from me. I shall never again have rest if you tell me not all. What further said or did Corvinus?"

The boy recovered himself by a moment's pause and a silent prayer, and then proceeded:

"Not so!" exclaimed Corvinus, "nor so do you depart, cowardly worshipper of an ape's head! (one of the many calumnies popular among the heathen.) You have concealed your abode from us, but I will find you out; till then bear this token of my determined purpose to be revenged!" So saying, he dealt me a furious blow upon the face, which made me reel and stagger, while a shout of savage delight burst forth from the boys around us."

He burst into tears, which relieved him, and then went on:

"Oh, how I felt my blood boil at that moment! how my heart seemed bursting within me; and a voice appeared to whisper in my ear scornfully the name of 'coward!' It surely was an evil spirit. I felt I was strong enough—my rising anger made me so—to seize my impatient assailant by the throat, and cast him gasping on the ground. I heard already the shout of applause that would have hailed my victory and turned the tables against him. It was the hardest struggle of my life; never were flesh and blood so strong within me. O God! may they never be again so tremendously powerful!"

"And what did you do, then, my darling boy?" gasped forth the trembling matron.

He replied, "My good angel conquered the demon at my side. I thought of my blessed Lord in the house of Caiaphas, surrounded by scoffing enemies, and struck ignominiously on the cheek, yet meek and forgiving. Could I wish to be otherwise? I stretched forth my hand to Corvinus, and said, 'May God forgive you, as I freely and fully do; and may He bless you abundantly.' Cassianus came up at that moment, having seen all from a distance, and the youthful crowd quickly dispersed. I entreated him by our common faith, now acknowledged between us, not

to pursue Corvinus for what he had done; and I absented him from school, and now, sweet mother, I am in my father's house, the proudest man I may call this a happy day."

To be continued.

CATHOLIC NEWS NOTES.

Short hours of school from all parts of the Catholic world.

Religious Happenings Presented in a Condensed Form.

Archbishop, Cardinal, and Bishop, when the celebration of the feast of the Ascension, June 15, is celebrated, the Catholic world is reminded of the great feast of the Holy Trinity.

Fifteen thousand persons, according to the latest estimate, are expected to visit St. Peter's, in Rome, on the feast of the Ascension, June 15, 1888. The Pope is expected to be present.

An American, named William, who was in the city of Rome, on the feast of the Ascension, June 15, 1888, was arrested by the police, on the charge of being a spy.

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