

FABIOLA.

Or, the Church of the Catacombs.

Written by His Eminence
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CHAPTER XIII. CHARITY.

As we do not choose to enter the house of Agnes, either with the wolf or with the fox, we will take a more spiritual mode of doing so, and find ourselves at once in the inside.

The parents of Agnes represented nobles of ancestry, and her family was not one of recent conversion, but had for several generations professed the faith. As in heathen families was cherished the memory of ancestors who had won a triumph, or held high offices in the state, so in this, and other Christian houses, was preserved with pious reverence and affectionate pride, the remembrance of those relations who had, in the last hundred and fifty years or more, borne the palm of martyrdom, or occupied the sublimer dignities of the Church. But though ennobled thus, and with a constant stream of blood poured forth for Christ, accompanying the waving branches of the family tree, the stem had never been hewn down, but had survived repeated storms. This may appear surprising, but when we reflect how many a soldier goes through a whole campaign of frequent actions, and does not receive a wound; or how many a family endures untainted through a plague, we cannot be surprised if Providence watched over the well-being of the Church, by preserving in it, through old family successions, long unbroken chains of tradition, and so enabling the faithful to say: 'Unless the Lord of Hosts had left us seed, we had been as Sodom; and we should have been like to Gomorrah.'

All the honors and the hopes of this family centred now in one, whose name is already known to our readers, Agnes, the only child of that ancient house. Given to her parents as they had reached the very verge of hope that their line could be continued, she had been, from infancy blest with such a sweetness of disposition, such a docility and intelligence of mind, and such simplicity and innocence of character, that she had grown up the common object of love, and almost of reverence, to the entire house, from her parents down to the lowest servant. Yet nothing seemed to spoil, or warp, the compact virtuousness of her nature; but her good qualities expanded, with a well-balanced adjustment, which at the early age in which we find her, had ripened into combined grace and wisdom. She shared all her parents' virtuous thoughts, and cared as little for the world as they. She lived with them in a small portion of the mansion, which was fitted up with elegance, though not with luxury; and their establishment was adequate to all their wants. Here they received the few friends with whom they preserved familiar relations; though, as they did not entertain, nor go out, these were few. Fabiola was an occasional visitor, though Agnes preferred going to see her at her house; and she often expressed to her young friend her longing for the day, when, meeting with a suitable match, she would open all the splendid dwelling. For, notwithstanding the Vooonian law on the inheritance of women, now quite obsolete, Agnes had received, from collateral sources, large additions to the family property.

In general, of course, the heathen world, who visited, attributed appearance to avarice, and calculated what immense accumulations of wealth the miserly parents must be putting by; and concluded, that all beyond the solid screen which shut up the second court, was left to fall into decay and ruin.

It was not so, however. The inner part of the house, consisting of a large court, and the garden, with a detached dining-hall, or triclinium, turned into a church, and the upper portion of the house, accessible from those parts, were devoted to the administration of that copious charity, which the Church carried on as a business of its life. It was under the care and direction of the deacon Reparatus, and his exorcist Secundus, officially appointed by the supreme Pontiff to take care of the sick, poor, and strangers, in one of the seven regions into which Pope Cajus, about five years before, had divided the city for this purpose; committing each region to one of the seven deacons of the Roman Church.

Rooms were set apart for lodging strangers who came recommended by other churches; and a frugal table was provided for them. Upstairs were apartments for a hospital for the bed-ridden, the decrepit, and the sick, under the care of the deaconesses, and such of the faithful as loved to assist in this work of charity. It was here that the blind girl had her cell; though she refused to take her food, as we have seen in the house. The tablinum, or muniment-room, which generally stood detached in the middle of the passage between the inner courts, served as the office and archives for transacting the business of this charitable establishment, and preserving all local documents, such as the acts of martyrs, procured or compiled by one of the seven notaries, kept for that purpose, by institution of St. Clement I., who was attached to that region.

A door of communication allowed the household to assist in these works of charity; and Agnes had been accustomed from childhood to run in and out, many times a day, and to pass hours there, always beaming, like an angel of light, consolation and joy on the suffering and distressed. This house, then, might be called the almonry of the region, or district of charity and hospitality in which it was situated, and it was accessible for these purposes through the posticum or back-door, situated in a narrow lane, little frequented. No wonder that with such an establishment, the fortune of the inmates should find an easy application.

We heard Reparatus request Sebastian, to arrange for the distribution of his plate and jewels among the poor, without its being known to whom they belonged. He had not lost sight of the commission, and had fixed on the house of Agnes, as the fittest for this purpose. On the morning which we have described, the distribution had taken place; other regions had sent their poor, and their deacons had accompanied them; and Sebastian, Reparatus, and other persons of higher rank had come in to assist in the division. Some of these had been seen to enter by Corvinus.

CHAPTER XIV. EXTREMES MEET.

A group of poor coming opportunely towards the door, enabled Corvinus to tack himself to them,--an admirable counterfeiter, in all but the modesty of their deportment. He kept sufficiently close to them to hear that each of them, as he entered in, pronounced the words, 'Deo gratias,' 'Thanks be to God.' This was not merely a Christian, but a Catholic pass-word; for St. Augustine tells us that heretics ridiculed Catholics for using it, on the ground that it was not a salutation but rather a reply; but that Catholics used it because consecrated by pious usage. It is yet employed in Italy in the same manner.

Corvinus pronounced the mystic words, and was allowed to pass. Following the others closely, and copying their manners and gestures, he found himself in the inner court of the house, which was already filled with the poor and infirm. The men were ranged on one side, the women on the other. Under the portico at the end were tables piled with costly plate, and near them was another covered with brilliant jewelry. Two silver and gold smiths were weighing and valuing most conscientiously this property; and beside them was the money which they would give, to be distributed amongst the poor, in just proportion.

Corvinus eyed all this with a gluttonous heart. He would have given any thing to get it all, and almost thought of making a dash at something, and running out. But he saw at once the folly or madness of such a course, and resolved to wait for a share, and in the meantime take note for Fulvius of all he saw. He soon, however, became aware of the awkwardness of his present position. While the poor were all mixed up together and moving about, he remained unnoticed. But he soon saw several young men of peculiarly gentle manners, but active, and evidently of authority, dressed in the garment known to him by the name of Dalmatic, from its Dalmatian origin; that is, having over the tunic, instead of the toga, a close-fitting shorter tunic, with ample, but not over long or wide, sleeves; the dress adopted and worn by the deacons, not only at their more solemn ministrations in church, but also when engaged in the discharge of their secondary duties about the sick and poor.

These officers went on marshalling

the attendants, such evidently knowing those of his own district, and conducting them to a particular spot within the porticoes. But as no one recognized or claimed Corvinus for one of his poor, he was at length left alone in the middle of the court. Even his dull mind could feel the anomalous situation into which he had thrust himself. Here he was, the son of the prefect of the city, whose duty it was to punish such violations of domestic rights, an intruder into the innermost parts of a nobleman's house, having entered by a secret, dressed like a beggar, and associating himself with such people, of course for some sinister, or at least unlawful, purpose. He looked towards the door, meditating an escape; but he saw it guarded by an old man named Diogenes and his two stout sons, who could hardly restrain their hot blood at this insolence, though they only showed it by scowling looks, and repressive biting of their lips. He saw that he was a subject of consultation among the young deacons, who cast occasional glances towards him; he imagined that even the blind were staring at him, and the decrepit ready to wield their crutches like battle-axes against him. He had only one consolation; it was evident he was not known, and he hoped to frame some excuse for getting out of the scrape.

At length the Deacon Reparatus came up to him, and thus courteously accosted him:

'Friend, you probably do not belong to one of the regions invited here to-day. Where do you live?'

'In the region of the Alta Semita. This answer gave the civil, not the ecclesiastical, division of Rome; still Reparatus went on: 'The Alta Semita is in my region, yet I do not remember to have seen you.'

While he spoke these words, he was astonished to see the stranger turn deadly pale, and totter as if about to fall, while his eyes were fixed upon the door of communication with the dwelling-house. Reparatus looked in the same direction, and saw Reparatus, just enter, and gathering some hasty information from Secundus, Corvinus' last hope was gone. He stood the next moment confronted with the youth (who asked Reparatus to retire), much in the same position as they had last met in, only that, instead of a circle round him of applauders and backers, he was here hemmed in on all sides by a multitude who evidently looked with admiration upon his rival. Nor could Corvinus help observing the graceful development and manly bearing, which a few weeks had given his late school-mate. He expected a volley of keen reproach, and, perhaps, such chastisement as he would himself have inflicted in similar circumstances. What was his amazement when Reparatus thus addressed him in the mildest tone:

'Corvinus, are you really reduced to distress and lamed by some accident? Or how have you left your father's house?'

'Not quite come to that yet, I hope,' replied the bully, encouraged to insolence by the gentle address, 'though, no doubt, you would be heartily glad to see it.'

'By no means, I assure you; I hold no grudge. If, therefore, you require relief, tell me; and though it is not right that you should be here, I can take you into a private chamber where you can receive it unknown.'

'Then I will tell you the truth: I came in here merely for a frank; and I should be glad if you could get me quickly out.'

'Corvinus, said the youth, with some sternness, 'this is a serious offence. What would your father say, if I desired these young men, who would instantly obey, to take you as you are, barefoot, clothed as a slave, counterfeiting a cripple, into the Forum before his tribunal, and publicly charge you with what every Roman would resent, forcing your way into the heart of a patrician's house?'

'For the gods' sakes, good Reparatus, do not inflict such frightful punishment.'

'You know, Corvinus, that your own father would be obliged to act towards you the part of Junius Brutus, or forfeit his office.'

'I entreat you by all that you love, by all that you hold sacred, not to dishonor me and mine so cruelly. My father and his house, not I, would be crushed and ruined for ever. I will go down on my knees and beg your pardon for my former injuries, if you will only be merciful.'

'Hold, hold, Corvinus, I have told you that was long forgotten. But

behold me now. Every one but the blind around me is a witness to this outrage. There will be a hundred evi-

dences to prove it. If ever, when you speak of this assembly, still more if you attempt to molest any one for it, we shall have it in our power to bring you to trial at your own father's judgment-seat. Do you understand me, Corvinus?'

'I do, indeed,' replied the captive in a whining tone. 'Never, as long as I live, will I breathe to mortal soul that I came into this dreadful place. I swear it by the--'

'Hush, hush! we want no such oaths here. Take my arm, and walk with me. Then turning to the others, he continued: 'I know this person; his coming here is quite a mistake.'

The spectators, who had taken the wretch's supplicating gestures and tone for accompaniments to a tale of woe, and strong application for relief, joined in crying out, 'Pancratius, you will not send him away fasting and unaccompanied?'

'Leave that to me,' was the reply. The self-appointed porters gave way before Pancratius, who led Corvinus, still pretending to limp, into the street, and dismissed him, saying: 'Corvinus, we are now quits; only, take care of your promise.'

Fulvius, as we have seen, went to try his fortune by the front door. He found it, according to Roman custom, unlocked; and, indeed, no one could have suspected the possibility of a stranger entering at such an hour. Instead of a porter, he found, guarding the door, only a simple-looking girl about twelve or thirteen years of age, clad in a peasant's garment. He one else was near; and he thought it an excellent opportunity to verify the strong suspicion which had crossed his mind. Accordingly, he thus addressed the little portress:

'What is your name, child, and who are you?'

'I am,' she replied, 'Emmentiana, the Lady Agnes's foster-sister.'

'Are you a Christian?' he asked her sharply.

The poor little peasant opened her eyes in the amazement of ignorance, and replied: 'No, sir.' It was impossible to resist the evidence of her simplicity; and Fulvius was satisfied that he was mistaken. The fact was, that she was the daughter of a peasant who had been Agnes's nurse. The mother had just died, and her kind sister had sent for the orphan daughter, intending to have her instructed and baptised. She had only arrived a day or two before, and was yet totally ignorant on the subject.

Fulvius stood embarrassed what to do next. Solitude made him feel as awkwardly situated, as a crowd was making Corvinus. He thought of retreating, but this would have destroyed all his hopes; he was going to advance, when he reflected that he might commit himself unpleasantly. At this critical juncture, whom should he see coming lightly across the court, but the youthful mistress of the house, all joy, all spring, all brightness and sunshine. As soon as she saw him, she stood, as if to receive his errand, and he approached with his blandest smile and most courtly gesture, and thus addressed her:

'I have anticipated the usual hour at which visitors come, and, I fear, must appear an intruder. Lady Agnes; but I was impatient to inscribe myself as an humble client of your noble house.'

'Our house,' she replied, smiling, 'boasts of no clients, nor do we seek them; for we have no pretensions to influence or power.'

'Pardon me; with such a ruler, it possesses the highest of influences and the mightiest of powers, those which rule, without effort, over the heart as a most willing subject.'

Incapable of imagining that such words could allude to herself, she replied, with artless simplicity:

'Oh, how true are your words! the Lord of this house is indeed the sovereign over the affections of all within it.'

'But I,' interposed Fulvius, 'allude to that softer and benigner dominion, which graceful charms alone can exercise on those who from near behold them.'

Agnes looked as one entranced; her eyes beheld a very different image before her from that of her wretched flatterer; and with an impassioned glance towards heaven, she exclaimed:

'Yes, He whose beauty sun and moon in their lofty firmament gaze on and admire; to Him is pledged my service and my love.'

Fulvius was confounded and perplexed. The inspired look, the rapturous attitude, the music of the thrilling tones in which she uttered these words, their mysterious import, the strangeness of the whole scene, riveted him to the spot, and

was losing the most favorable opportunity he could ever expect of opening his mind (affection it could not be called) to her, he boldly said, 'Is it of you I am speaking; and I entreat you to believe my expression of sincerest admiration, of you, and of your bounded attachment to you.' As he uttered these words, he dropped on his knee, and attempted to take her hand; but the maiden bounded back with a shudder, and covered her face with her trembling hands.

Fulvius started in an instant to his feet; for he saw Sebastian, who was come to summon Agnes to the poor, impatient of her absence, striding forward towards him, with an air of indignation.

'Sebastian,' said Agnes to him as he approached, 'be not angry! this gentleman has probably entered here by some unintentional mistake, and so doubt will quietly retire.' Saying this she withdrew.

Sebastian, with his calm but energetic manner, now addressed the intruder, who gazed dumbly at him, 'Fulvius, what do you here? what business has brought you?'

'I suppose,' answered he, regarding courage, 'that having met the lady of the house at the same place with you, her noble cousin's table, I take a right to wait upon her, in common with other voluntary clients.'

'But not at such an unreasonable hour as this, I presume?'

'The hour that is not unreasonable for a young officer, returned Fulvius haughtily, 'is not unreasonable so for a civilian.'

Sebastian laid to the left his finger of self-control to check his indignation, as he replied:

'Fulvius, do not talk in that way; say, but remember that your cousin may be in a very different position in a house. Yet not the longest familiarity, still less a one-day acquaintance, can authorize so gross the audacity of your bearing towards the young mistress of this house, a few moments ago.'

'Oh, you are jealous,' I repeat, have Sebastian replied, looking at his most refined domestic manners; but part says that you are a hypocrite, and not a hypocrite, as Sebastian's lips were moving, he said, 'no doubt, you are a hypocrite, but I am sure for yourself of the deepest of the other of these things, and two strings to each bow.'

This coarse and direct manner wounded the noble's feelings, and long before Sebastian's Christian meekness, in that moment, have proved too good for him.

It is not good for a man, said Fulvius, that you, cousin, are here. The courteous demeanor of the noble lady whom your time has suited has not, indeed, I must say, the ruder example of her cousin. Saying this, he took the mistress's arm in his powerful grasp, and conducted him to the door. When he had put his arm round her holding him fast, he added, 'Fulvius, in peace, and remember that you have this day made yourself inhospitable to the house of the state by this unwelcome presence; will spare you, if you know how to keep your own counsel, but I repeat that you should have been contented with your place in the region of Rome; and that I hold this momentary licence over your head, as a security that you will follow its dictates.'

Now, again I say, go! he said. But he had no sooner let go his grasp, than he felt himself seized from behind by an unseen, but evidently athletic assistant. It was the rotas, from whom Fulvius had concealed nothing, and to whom he had confided the intended interview with Corvinus, and had followed and watched him. From the black shadow he had before learnt the name and coarse character of this chief of the magical arts; and he found a trap. When he saw the seeming struggle at the door, he ran stealthily behind Sebastian, who he knew must be his pupil's new ally, and pounced upon him with a bear's rage.

But he had no opponent equal to deal with. He attempted in vain, though now helped by Fulvius, to throw the soldier heavily down, till, despairing of success in this way, he detached from his girdle a small but deadly weapon, a steel mace of finished Syrian make, and was raising it over the head of Sebastian's head, when he felt it wrenched in a trice from his hand, and himself twisted two or three times round, in its iron grip, and flung flat in the middle of the street.

'I am afraid you have hurt