

FABIOLA.

Of the Church of the Catacombs.

Written by His Eminence Cardinal Wiseman.

[Published by special request.]

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

Fabiola was disappointed. She expected some new theory, some striking principle, to come out. Instead, they had sunk down into what she feared was mere superstition, though not so much as she once had deemed it.

'Far indeed from it; I loathe their very names, and I detest the wickedness which their histories or fables symbolize on earth. No, I spoke not of gods and goddesses, but of one only God.'

'And what do you call Him, Syra, in your system?'

'He has no name but God, and that only men have given Him, that they may speak of Him. It describes not His nature, His origin, His qualities.'

'And what are these?' asked the mistress, with awakened curiosity. 'Simple as light is His nature, one and the same everywhere, indivisible, undefinable, penetrating yet diffusive, ubiquitous and unlimited. He existed before there was any beginning; He will exist after all ending has ceased.'

'Power, wisdom, goodness, love, justice too, and unerring judgment belong to Him by His nature, and are as unlimited and unrestrained as it. He alone can create, He alone preserve, and He alone destroy.'

Fabiola had often read of the inspired looks which animated a sybil, or the priestess of an oracle; but she had never witnessed them till now. The slave's countenance glowed, her eyes shone with a calm brilliancy, her frame was immovable, the words flowed from her lips, as if these were but the opening of a musical rind, made vocal by another's breath. Her expression and manner forcibly reminded Fabiola of that abstracted and mysterious look, which she had so often noticed in Agnes, and though in the child it was more tender and graceful, in the maid it seemed more earnest and oracular.

'How enthusiastic and excitable an Eastern temperament is, to be sure!' thought Fabiola, as she gazed on her slave. 'No wonder the East should be thought the land of poetry and inspiration.' When she saw Syra relaxed from the evident tension of her mind, she said, in as light a tone as she could assume: 'But Syra, can you think, that a Being such as you have described, far beyond all the conception of ancient fable, can occupy Himself with constantly watching the actions, still more the paltry thoughts, of millions of creatures.'

'It is no occupation, lady, it is not even choice. I called Him light. Is it occupation or labor for the sun to send his rays through the crystal of this fountain, to the very pebbles in its bed? See how, of themselves they disclose, not only the beautiful, but the foul that harbors there: not only the sparkles that the falling drops strike from its rough sides; not only the pearly bubbles that merely rise, glisten for a moment, then break against the surface; not only the golden fish that bask in their light, but black and loathsome creeping things, which seek to hide and bury themselves in dark nooks below, and cannot for the light pursue them. Is there toil or occupation in all this, to the sun that thus visits them? Far more would it appear so, were he to restrain his beams at the surface of the transparent element, and hold them back from throwing it into light. And what he does here he does in the next stream, and in that which is a thousand miles off, with equal ease; nor can any imaginable increase of their number, or bulk, lead us to fancy, or believe, that rays would be wanting, or light would fall, to scrutinize them all.'

'Your theories are beautiful always, Syra, and, if true, most wonderful,' observed Fabiola, after a pause, during which her eyes were fixedly contemplating the fountain, as though she were testing the truth of Syra's words. 'And they sound like truth,' she added; 'for could falsehood be more beautiful than truth? But what an awful idea, that one has never been since, has never had a wish to one-

self, has never held a single thought in secret, has never hidden the most foolish fancy of a proud or childish brain, from the observation of One who knows no imperfection. Terrible thought, that one is living, if you say true, under the steady gaze of an Eye, of which the sun is but a shadow, for he enters not the soul! It is enough to make one any evening commit self-destruction, to get rid of the torturing watchfulness! Yet it sounds so true!

Fabiola looked almost wild as she spoke these words. The pride of her pagan heart rose strong within her, and she rebelled against the supposition that she could never again feel alone with her own thoughts, or that any power should exist which could control her inmost desires, imaginings, or caprices. Still the thought came back: 'Yet it seems so true! Her generous intellect struggled against the writhing passion, like an eagle with a serpent; more with eyes, than with beak and talons, subduing the quailing foe. After a struggle, visible in her countenance and gestures, a calm came over her. She seemed for the first time to feel the presence of One greater than herself, some one whom she feared, yet whom she would wish to love. She bowed down her mind, she bent her intelligence to his feet; and her heart too owned, for the first time, that it had a Master, and a Lord.'

Syra watched, with calm intensity of feeling, the workings of her mistress's mind, in silence. She knew how much depended on the issue, what a mighty step in her unconscious pupil's religious progress was involved in the recognition of the truth before her, and she fervently prayed for this grace. At length Fabiola raised her head, which seemed to have been bowed down in accompaniment to her mind, and with graceful kindness said, 'Syra, I am sure I have not yet reached the depths of your knowledge, you must have much more to teach me.' (A tear and a blush came to the poor handmaid's relief. 'But to-day you have opened a new world, and a new life, to my thoughts. A sphere of virtue beyond the opinions and the judgments of men, a consciousness of a controlling, an approving, and a rewarding Power too: am I right?') (Syra expressed approbation, standing by us when no other eye can see, or restrain, or encourage us; a feeling that, were we shut up forever in solitude, we should be ever the same, because that influence on us must be so superior to that of any amount of human principles, in guiding us, and could not leave us, such, if I understand your theory, in the position of moral elevation, in which it would place each individual. To fall below it, even with an outwardly virtuous life, is mere deceit, and positive wickedness. Is this so?')

'O my dear mistress,' exclaimed Syra, 'how much better you can express this than I do!'

'You have never flattered me yet, Syra,' replied Fabiola, smilingly; 'do not begin now. But you have thrown a new light upon other subjects, till to-day obscure to me. Tell me, now, was it not this that you meant, when once you told me, that in your theory there was no distinction between mistress and slave; that is, that as this distinction is only outward, social, and bodily, it is not to be put in comparison with that equality which exists before your Supreme Being, and that possible moral superiority which he might see of the one over the other, inversely of their visible rank?'

'It was in a great measure so, my noble lady, though there are other considerations involved in the idea, which would hardly interest you at present.'

'And yet, when you spoke that proposition, it seemed to me so monstrous, so absurd, that pride and anger overcame me. Do you remember that Syra?'

'No, no, no!' replied the gentle servant; 'do not allude to it, I pray!'

'Have you forgiven me that day, Syra?' said the mistress, with an emotion quite new to her.

The poor maid was overpowered. She rose and threw herself on her knees before her mistress, and tried to seize her hand; but she prevented her, and, for the first time in her life, Fabiola threw herself upon a slave's neck, and wept.

Her passion of tears was long and tender. Her heart was getting above her intellect; and this can only be by its increasing softness. At length she grew calm; and as she withdrew her embrace she said:

'One more thing, Syra: dare one address, by worship, this Being whom you have described to me? Is He not too great, too lofty, too distant, for this?'

'Oh, no! far from it, noble lady,' answered the servant. 'He is not distant from any of us; for as much as in the light of the sun, so in the very splendor of His power, His goodness, and His wisdom, we live and move and have our being. Hence, one may address Him, not as far off, but as around us and within us, while we are in Him; and He hears us not with ears, but our words drop at once into His very bosom, and the desires of our hearts pass directly into the divine abyss of His.'

'But, pursued Fabiola, somewhat timidly, 'is there no great act of acknowledgment, such as sacrifice is supposed to be, whereby He may be formally recognized and adored?'

Syra hesitated, for the conversation seemed trenching upon mysterious and sacred ground, never opened by the Church to profess feet. She, however, answered in a simple and general affirmative, 'And could not I, still more humbly asked her mistress, be so far instructed in your school, as to be able to perform this nobler act of homage?'

'I fear not, noble Fabiola, one must needs have a Victim worthy of the Deity.'

'Ah, yes! to be sure,' answered Fabiola. 'A bull may be good enough for Jupiter, or a goat for Bacchus; but where can be found a sacrifice worthy of Him, whom you have brought me to know?'

'It must indeed be one every way worthy of Him, spotless in purity, matchless in greatness, unbounded in acceptableness.'

'And what can that be, Syra?'

'Only Himself.'

Fabiola covered her face with her hands, and then looking up earnestly into Syra's face, said to her: 'I am sure that, after having so clearly described to me the deep sense of responsibility, under which you must habitually speak as well as act, you have a real meaning in this awful saying, though I understand you not.'

'As surely as every word of mine is heard, as every thought of mine is seen, it is a truth which I have spoken.'

'I have not strength to carry the subject further at present; I have need of rest.'

CHAPTER XVII. THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

After this conversation Fabiola retired, and during the rest of the day her mind was alternately agitated and calm. When she looked steadily on the grand view of moral life which her mind had grasped, she found an unusual tranquility in its contemplation; she felt as if she had made discovery of a great phenomenon, the knowledge of which guided her into a new and lofty region, whence she could smile on the errors and follies of mankind. But when she considered the responsibility which this light imposed, the watchfulness which it demanded, the unseemly and unrequited struggles which it required, the desolateness, almost, of a virtue without admiration or even sympathy, she again shrunk from the life that was before her, as about to be passed without any stay or help, from the only sources of it which she knew. Unconscious of the real cause, she saw that she possessed not instruments or means, to carry out the beautiful theory. This seems to stand like a brilliant lamp in the midst of a huge, bare, unfurnished hall, lighting up only a wilderness. What was the use of so much wasted splendor.

The next morning had been fixed for one of those visits which used to be annually paid in the country, — that to the now ex-prefect of the city, Chromatius. Our reader will remember, that after his conversion and resignation of office, this magistrate had retired to his villa in Campania, talking with him a number of the converts made by Sebastian, with the holy priest Polycarp, to complete their instruction. Of these circumstances, of course, Fabiola had never been informed; but she had heard all sorts of curious reports about Chromatius' villa. It was said that he had a number of visitors never before seen at his house; that he gave no entertainments; that he had freed all his country slaves, but that many of them had preferred remaining with him; that if numerous, the whole establishment seemed very happy, though no boisterous sports or frolicsome meetings seemed to be indulged in. All this stimulated Fabiola's curiosity, in addition to her wish to discharge a pleasing duty of civility to a man who had

of hers from childhood; and she longed to see, with her own eyes, what appeared to her to be a very Platonic, or, as we should say, Utopian experiment.

In a light country carriage, with good horses, Fabiola started early, and dashed gaily along the level road across the 'happy Campania.' An autumnal shower had laid the dust, and studded with glistening gems the garlands of vine which bordered the way, fettered, instead of hedges from tree to tree. It was not long before she reached the gentle acclivity, for hill it could scarce be called, covered with bay, arbutus, and laurels, relieved by tall tapering cypresses, amidst which shone the white walls of the large villa on the summit. A change, she perceived, had taken place, which at first she could not exactly define, but when she had passed through the gate, the number of empty pedestals and niches reminded her that the villa had entirely lost out of its most characteristic ornaments — the number of beautiful statues which stood gracefully against the dipped evergreen hedges, and gave it the name, now become quite an empty one, of Ad Statuas.

Chromatius, whom she had just seen limping with a cane, now a bald old man, courteously received her, and inquired kindly after her father, asking if the report were true that he was going shortly to Asia. At this Fabiola seemed grieved and mortified; for he had not anticipated his intention to leave. Chromatius hoped it might be a false alarm; and asked her to take a stroll about the grounds. She found them kept with the same care as ever, full of beautiful plants, but still much missed the old statues. At last they reached a grotto with a fountain, in which formerly nymphs and satyrs danced, but which now presented a black unbroken wall. She could contain herself no longer, and, turning to Chromatius, she said:

'Why, what on earth have you been doing, Chromatius, to send away all your statues, and destroy the peculiar feature of your handsome villa? What induced you to do this?'

'My dear young lady,' answered the good-humored old gentleman, 'do not be so angry. Of what use were those figures to any one?'

'If you thought so,' replied she, 'others might not. But tell me, what have you done with them all?'

'Why, to tell you the truth, I have had them brought under the hammer.'

'What! and never let me know any thing about it? You know there were several pieces I would gladly have purchased.'

Chromatius laughed outright, and said, with that familiar tone, which acquaintance with Fabiola from a child authorized him always to assume with her, 'Dear me! how your young imagination runs away, far too fast for my poor old tongue to keep pace with! I meant not the auctioneer's hammer, but the sledge-hammer. The gods and goddesses have been all smashed, pulverized. If you happen to want a stray leg or a hand minus a few fingers perhaps I may pick up such a thing for you. But I cannot promise you a face with a nose or a skull without a fracture.'

Fabiola was utterly amazed, as she exclaimed: 'What an utter barbarian you have become, my wise old judge! What shadow of reason can you give to justify so outrageous a proceeding?'

'Why, you see, as I have grown older, I have grown wiser! And I have come to the conclusion that Mr. Jupiter and Mrs. Juno are no more gods than you or I; so I summarily got rid of them.'

'Yes, that may be very well, and I, though neither old nor wise, have been long of the same opinion. But why not retain them as mere works of art?'

'Because they had been set up here, not in that capacity but as divinities. They were here as impostors under false pretences, and as you would turn out of your house for an intruder any bust or image found among those of your ancestors but belonging to quite another family, so did I these pretenders to a higher connection with me, when I found it false. Neither could I run a risk of their being bought for the continuance of the same imposture. And pray, my most righteous old friend, is it not an imposture to continue calling your villa Ad Statuas, after you have a single statue left standing in it?'

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'If you thought so,' replied she, 'others might not. But tell me, what have you done with them all?'

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