

Or, the Church of the Catacombs.

Written by His Eminence
Cardinal Wiseman.

[Published by special request.]

CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

If the beautiful alabaster statue, with a bronze head, in the niche beside the table, had fallen forward, and been smashed on the marble pavement, it could not have caused a more fearful sensation than this sudden announcement. All were startled for a moment. Next, a long blank pause ensued; after this, each began to show his feelings in his features. Fabius looked exceedingly foolish, as if conscious that he had brought his guests into bad company. Calpurnius puffed himself out, evidently thinking himself ill-used, by having a guest brought in, who might absurdly be supposed to know more about Christians than himself. A young man opened his mouth as he stared at Torquatus; and a testy old gentleman was evidently hesitating whether he should not knock down somebody or other, no matter whom. Corvinus looked at the poor Christian with the sort of grin of delight, half ironic, half savage, with which a countryman might gaze upon the vermin that he finds in his trap in a morning. Here was a man ready to hand, to put on the rack, or the gridiron, whenever he pleased. But the look of Fulvius was worth them all. If ever any microscopic observer has had the opportunity of witnessing the expression of the spider's features, when, after a long fast, it sees a fly, plump with others' blood, approach its net, and keenly watches every stroke of its wing, and studies how it can best throw only the first thread round it, sure that then all that forces it shall be its own; that we fancy would be the best image of his looks, as certainly it is of his feelings. To get hold of a Christian, ready to turn traitor, had long been his desire and study. Here, he was sure, was one, if he could only manage him. How did he know this? Because he knew sufficient of Christians to be convinced that no genuine one would have allowed himself either to drink to excess, or to boast of his readiness to court martyrdom.

The company broke up; everybody slunk away from the discovered Christian as from one pest-stricken. He felt alone and depressed, when Fulvius, who had whispered a word to Fabius, and to Corvinus, went up to him, and taking him by the hand, said, courteously: "I fear, I spoke inconsiderately, in drawing out from you a declaration which may prove dangerous."

"I fear nothing," replied Torquatus, again excited. "I will stand to my colors to the last."

"Hush, hush!" broke in Fulvius, "the slaves may betray you. Come with me to another chamber, where we can talk quietly together."

So saying, he led him into an elegant room, where Fabius had ordered goblets and flagons of the richest Falernian wine to be brought, for such, as, according to Roman fashion, liked to enjoy a commensal, or drinking-bout. But only Corvinus, engaged by Fulvius, followed.

On a beautifully inlaid table were dice. Fulvius, after playing Torquatus with more liquor, negligently took them up, and threw them playfully down, talking in the meantime on indifferent subjects. "Dear me!" he kept exclaiming, "what throws! It is well I am not playing with any one, or I should have been ruined. You try, Torquatus."

Gambling, as we learnt before, had been the ruin of Torquatus; for a transaction arising out of it he was in prison, when Sebastian converted him. As he took the dice into his hand, with no intention, as he thought, of playing, Fulvius watched him, as a lynx might his prey. Torquatus's eye flashed keenly, his lips quivered, his hand trembled. Fulvius at once recognized in all this, coupled with the poisoning of his hand, the knowing cast of the wrist, and the sharp eye, to the value of the throw, the violence of a first temptation to resume a renounced vice.

"I fear you are not a better hand than I am at this stupid occupation," said he, indifferently; "but, I dare say, Corvinus here will give you a chance, if you will stake something very low."

"It must be very low indeed,—merely for recreation; for I have renounced gambling. Once, indeed—but no matter."

"Come on," said Corvinus, whom

Fulvius had pressed to his work by a lock.

They began to throw for the most trifling stakes, and Torquatus generally won. Fulvius made him drink still, from time to time, and he became very talkative.

"Corvinus, Corvinus," he said at length, as if recollecting himself, "was not that the name that Cassianus mentioned?"

"Who?" asked the other, surprised. "Yes, it was," continued Torquatus to himself, "the bully, the big brute. Were you the person, he asked, looking up to Corvinus, who struck that nice Christian boy Pantratus?"

Corvinus was on the point of bursting into a rage, but Fulvius checked him by a gesture, and said, with timely interference:

"That Cassianus whom you mentioned is an eminent schoolmaster; pray, where does he live?"

This he knew his companion wished to ascertain, and thus he quieted him. Torquatus answered:

"He lives, let me see,—no, no; I won't turn traitor. No; I am ready to be burnt, or tortured, or die for my faith, but I won't betray any one,—that I won't."

"Let me take your place, Corvinus," said Fulvius, who saw Torquatus's interest in the game deepening. He put forth sufficient skill to make his antagonist more careful, and more intent. He threw down a somewhat larger stake. Torquatus, after a moment's pause of deliberation, matched it. He won it. Fulvius seemed vexed. Torquatus threw down both sums. Fulvius seemed to hesitate, but put down an equivalent, and lost again. The play was now silent; each won and lost; but Fulvius had steadily the advantage, and he was the more collected of the two.

Once Torquatus looked up, and started. He thought he saw the good Polycarp behind his adversary's chair. He rubbed his eyes, and saw it was only Corvinus staring at him. All his skill was now put forth. Conscience had retreated, faith was wavering; grace had already departed. For the demon of covetousness, of rapine, of dishonesty, of recklessness, had come back, and brought with him seven spirits worse than himself, to that cleansed, but ill-guarded soul, and as they entered in, all that was holy, all that was good, departed.

At length, worked up, by repeated losses and draughts of wine, into a frenzy, after he had drawn frequently upon the heavy purse which Fabiola had given him, he threw the purse itself upon the table. Fulvius coolly opened it, emptied it, counted the money, and placed opposite an equal heap of gold. Each prepared himself for a final throw. The fatal bones fell, each glanced silently upon their spots. Fulvius drew the money towards himself; Torquatus fell upon the table, his head buried and hidden within his arms. Fulvius motioned Corvinus out of the room.

Torquatus beat the ground with his foot; then moaned, next gnashed his teeth and growled, then put his fingers in his hair, and began to pull and tear it. A voice whispered in his ear, "Are you a Christian?" Which of the seven spirits was it? Surely the worst.

"It is hopeless," continued the voice; "you have disgraced your religion, and you have betrayed it too."

"No, no," groaned the despairing wretch.

"Yes, in your drunkenness you have told us all, quite enough to make it impossible for you ever to return to those you have betrayed."

"Begone, begone," exclaimed pitiously the tortured sinner. "They will forgive me still. God—"

"Silence, utter not his name; you are degraded, perjured, hopelessly lost. You are a beggar, to-morrow you must beg your bread. You are an outcast, a ruined prodigal and gambler. Who will look at you? will your Christian friends? And nevertheless you are a Christian, you will be torn to pieces by some cruel death for it; yet you will not be worshipped by them as one of their martyrs. You are a hypocrite, Torquatus, and nothing more."

"Who is it that is tormenting me?" he exclaimed, and looked up. Fulvius was standing with folded arms at his side. "And if all this be true, what is it to you? What have you to say more to me?" he continued.

"Much more than you think. You have betrayed yourself into my power completely. I am master of your money"—(and he showed him Fabiola's purse)—"of your character, of your peace, of your life. I have only to let your fellow-Christians know what you have done, what you have

done, what you have done, and you are lost forever. I will only to let them know that you are a brute, as you called him, but who is son of the prefect of the city, loose upon you, (and no one else, can now restrain him after such provocation), and to-morrow you will stand before his father's tribunal to die for that religion which you have betrayed and disgraced. Are you ready now, any longer to reel and stagger as a drunken gambler, to represent your Christianity before the judgment-seat in the Forum?"

The fallen man had not courage to follow the prodigal in repentance, as he had done in sin. Hope was dead in him, for he had relapsed into his capital sin, and scarcely felt remorse. He remained silent, till Fulvius aroused him by asking, "Well, have you made your choice, either to go at once to the Christians with tonight on your head, or to-morrow to the court? Which do you choose?"

Torquatus raised his eyes to him, with a stolid look, and faintly answered, "Neither."

"Come, then, what will you do?" asked Fulvius, mastering him with one of his falcon glances.

"What you like," said Torquatus, "only neither of those things."

Fulvius sat down beside him, and said, in a soft and soothing voice, "Now, Torquatus, listen to me, do as I tell you, and all is mended. You shall have house, and food, and, apparel, ay, and money to play with, if you will only do my bidding."

"And what is that?"

"Rise to-morrow as usual, put on your Christian face, go freely among your friends, act as if nothing had happened; but answer all my questions, tell me everything."

Torquatus groaned, "A traitor at last."

"Call it what you will, that or death! Ay, death by inches. I hear Corvinus pacing impatiently up and down the court. Quick! which is it to be?"

"Not death! Oh, no! anything but that!"

Fulvius went out, and found his friend fuming with rage and wine; he had hard work to pacify him. Corvinus had almost forgotten Cassianus, in fresher resentments, but all his former hatred had been re-entailed, and he burnt for revenge. Fulvius promised to find out where he lived, and used this means to secure the suspension of any violent and immediate measure.

Having sent Corvinus sulky and fretting home, he returned to Torquatus, whom he wished to accompany, that he might ascertain his lodgings. As soon as he had left the room, his victim had arisen from his chair, and endeavored, by walking up and down, to steady his senses and regain self-possession. But it was in vain, his head was swimming from his inebriety, and his subsequent excitement. The apartment seemed to turn round and round, and float up and down, he was sick too, and his heart was beating almost audibly. Shame, remorse, self-contempt, hatred of his destroyers and of himself, the desolateness of the outcast, and the black despair of the reprobate, rolled like dark billows through his soul, each coming in turn uppermost. Unable to sustain himself longer on his feet, he threw himself on his face upon a silken couch, and buried his burning brow in his icy hands, and groaned. And still all whirled round and round him, and a constant moaning sounded in his ears.

Fulvius found him in this state, and touched his shoulder to rouse him. Torquatus shuddered, and started, then exclaimed: "Can this be Charybdis?"

PART SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

The scenes through which we have hitherto led our reader have been laid in one of those slippery truces, rather than peace, which often intervened between persecution and persecution. Already rumors of war have crossed our path, and its note of preparation has been distinctly heard. The roar of the lions near the Amphitheatre, which startled but dismayed not Sebastian, the reports from the East, the hints of Fulvius, and the threats of Corvinus, have brought us the same news, that before long the horrors of persecution will re-appear, and Christian blood will have to flow, in a fuller and nobler stream than had hitherto watered the Paradise of the New Law. The Church, ever calmly provident, cannot neglect the many signs of a threatened combat, nor the preparations necessary for meeting it. From the moment she earnestly begins to arm herself, we date the second period of our narrative. It is the commencement of conflict.

It was a young man, not unknown to us, already mentioned in the first part of the story, it was dark and rather chill, might be seen threading his way through the narrow alleys of the district called the Subura, a region, the extent and exact position of which is still under dispute, but which lay in the immediate vicinity of the Forum. As he was unfortunately too often linked with poverty, the two found a common asylum here. Pantratus did not seem much at home in this part of the city, and made several wrong turns, till at length he found the street he was in search of. Still, without numbers on the doors, the house he wanted was an unsolved problem; but yet not quite insoluble. He looked for the nearest dwelling in the street, and being particularly struck with the cleanliness and good order of one beyond the rest, he boldly knocked at its door. It was opened by an old man, whose name he had already appeared in our pages, Diogenes. He was tall and broad-shouldered, as if accustomed to bear burdens, which, however, had given him a stoop in his gait. His hair was a perfect silver, and hung down at the sides of a large massive head; his features were strongly marked in deep melancholy lines; and though the expression of his countenance was calm, it was solemnly sad. He looked like one who had lived much among the dead, and was happiest in their company. His two sons, Majus and Severus, fine athletic youths, were with him. The first was busy carving, or scratching rather, a rude epitaph on a piece of marble, the reverse of which still bore traces of a heathen sepulchral inscription, rudely effaced by its new possessor. Pantratus looked over the work in hand and smiled, there was hardly a word rightly spelt, or a part of speech correct; indeed, here it is, DE MANA POLICELA QVE ORDRE MENDE DE MANA. (From New Street. Policela, who sells barley in New Street.) The other son was making a rough design, in which could be distinguished Jesus devoured by the whale, and Lazarus raised from the dead, both most conventionally drawn with charcoal on a board; a sketch evidently for a more permanent painting elsewhere. Further, it was clear, that when the knock came to the door, old Diogenes was busy fitting a new handle to an old pick-axe. These varied occupations in one family might have surprised a modern, but they did not at all the youthful visitor; he well knew that the family belonged to the honorable and religious craft of the Fossums, or excavators of the Christian cemeteries. Indeed, Diogenes was the head, and director of that confraternity. In conformity with the assertion of an anonymous writer, contemporary with St. Jerome, some modern antiquarians have considered the Fossums as forming a lesser ecclesiastical order in the primitive Church, like the lector, or reader. But although this opinion is untenable, it is extremely probable that the duties of this office were in the hands of persons appointed and recognized by ecclesiastical authority. The uniform system pursued in excavating, arranging, and filling up of the numerous cemeteries round Rome, a system too; so complete from the beginning, as not to leave positive signs of improvement or change as time went on, gives us reason to conclude, that these wonderful and venerable works were carried on under one direction, and probably by some body associated for that purpose. It was not a cemetery or necropolis company, which made a speculation of burying the dead, but rather a pious and recognized confraternity, which was associated for the purpose.

A series of interesting inscriptions, found in the cemetery of St. Agnes, proves that this occupation was continued in particular families, grandfather, father, and sons having carried it on in the same place. We can thus easily understand the great skill, and uniformity of practice observable in the catacombs. But the Fossums had evidently a higher office, or even jurisdiction, in that underground world. Though the Church provided space for the burial of all her children, it was natural that some should make compensation for their place of sepulture, if chosen in a favorite spot, such as the vicinity of a martyr's tomb. These sections had the management of such transactions, who are often recorded in the ancient cemeteries. The following inscription is preserved in the Capitol:

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SEPTIMO LOCVS AB ANTONINVS VIVONTVS HOC EST ST PATRIVS DATVS FOROSIVS HILARIO IDEST SOL NOOD FRATRO SVLVVS SEVLY FOR ST LAURENTI.

That is—

This is the grave for two bodies, bought by Artemidius; and the price

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