

FABIOLA.

Or, the Church of the Catacombs.

Written by His Eminence
Cardinal Wiseman.

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CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

Stretching across the wavy campagna, here bedstrid by colossal aqueducts, crossed by lines of roads, with their fringes of marble tombs, and bespangled all over by glittering villas, set like gems in the dark green enamel of laurel and cypress, the eye reached, at evening, the purple slope of hills on which, as on a couch, lay stretched luxuriously Alba and Tusculum, with 'their daughters,' according to oriental phrase, basking brightly in the setting sun. The craggy range of Sabine mountains on the left, and the golden expanse of the sea on the right, of the beholder, closed in this perfect landscape.

It would be attributing to Maximian a quality which he did not possess, were we to give him credit for loving a residence so admirably situated, through any taste for the beautiful. The splendor of the buildings, which he had still further adorned, or possibly the facility of running out of the city for the chase of boar and wolf, was the motive of this preference. A native of Sirinum in Sclavonia, a reputed barbarian therefore, of the lowest extraction, a mere soldier of fortune, without any education, endowed with little more than a brute strength, which made his surname of Hercules most appropriate, he had been raised to the purple by his brother-barbarian Diocles, known as the emperor Dioclesian. Like him, covetous to meanness, and spendthrift to recklessness, addicted to the same coarse vices and foul crimes, which a Christian pen refuses to record, without restraint of any passion, without sense of justice, or feeling of humanity, this monster had never ceased to oppress, persecute and slay whoever stood in his way. To him the coming persecution looked like an approaching feast does to a glutton, who requires the excitement of a surfeit, to relieve the monotony of daily excess. Gigantic in frame, with the well-known features of his race, with the hair on his head and face more yellow than red, shaggy and wild, like tufts of straw, with eyes restlessly rolling in a compound expression of suspicion, profligacy, and ferocity, this almost last of Rome's tyrants struck terror into the heart of any beholder, except a Christian. Is it wonderful that he hated the race and its name?

In the large basilica, or hall, then, of the Aedes Laterane, Maximian met his motley council, in which secrecy was ensured by penalty of death. In the semi-circular apse at the upper end of the hall, sat the emperor, on an ivory throne richly adorned, and before him were arranged his obsequious and almost trembling advisers. A chosen body of guards kept the entrance, and the officer in command, Sebastian, was leaning negligently against it on the inside, but carefully noted every word that was spoken.

Little did the emperor think, that the hall in which he sat, and which he afterwards gave, with the contiguous palace, to Constantine, as part of the dowry of his daughter, Fausta, would be transferred by him to the head of the religion he was planning to extirpate, and become, retaining its name of the Lateran Basilica, the church of Rome, of all the churches of the city and of the world the mother and chief. Little did he imagine, that on the spot whereon rested his throne, would be raised a Chair, whence commands should issue, to reach worlds unknown to Roman sway, from an immortal race of sovereigns, spiritual and temporal.

Precedence was granted, by religious courtesy, to the priests; each of whom had his tale to tell. Here a river had overflowed its banks, and done much mischief to the neighboring plains; there an earthquake had thrown down part of a town; on the northern frontiers the barbarians threatened invasion; at the south, the plague was ravaging the pious population. In every instance, the oracles had declared, that it was all owing to the Christians, whose toleration irritated the gods, and whose evil charms brought calamity on the empire. Nay, some had afflicted their votaries by openly proclaiming, that they would utter no more, till the odious Nazarenes had been exterminated, and the great Delphic oracle had not hesitated to declare, 'that the

Just did not allow the gods to speak.' Next came the philosophers and orators, each of whom made his own long-winded oration; during which Maximian gave unequivocal signs of weariness. But as the Emperors in the East had held a similar meeting he considered it his duty to sit out the annoyance. The usual calumnies were repeated for the ten-thousandth time, to an applauding assembly; the stories of murdering and eating infants, of committing foul crimes, of worshipping martyr's bodies, of adoring an ass's head, and inconsistently enough of being unbelievers and serving no God. These tales were all most firmly believed; though probably their readers knew perfectly well, they were but good sound heathen lies, very useful in keeping up a horror of Christianity.

But, at length, up rose the man, who was considered to have most deeply studied the doctrines of the enemy, and best to know their dangerous tactics. He was supposed to have read their own books, and to be drawing up a confutation of their errors, which would fairly crush them. Indeed, so great was his weight with his own side, that when he asserted that Christians held any monstrous principle, had their supreme pontiff in person contradicted it, every one would have laughed at the very idea, of taking his word for his own belief, against the assertion of Calpurnius.

He struck up a different strain, and his learning quite astonished his fellow-sophists. He had read the original books, he said, not only of the Christians themselves, but of their forefathers the Jews; who, having come into Egypt in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, to escape from a famine in their own country, through the arts of their leader, Joseph, bought up all the corn there, and sent it home. Upon which Ptolemy imprisoned them, telling them, that as they had eaten up all the corn, they should live on the straw, by making bricks with it for building a great city. Then Demetrius Phalerus, hearing from them of a great many curious histories of their ancestors, shut up Moses and Aaron, their most learned men in a tower, having shaved half their beards, till they should write in Greek all their records. These rare books Calpurnius had seen, and he would only mention a few facts from them. This race made war upon every king and people, that came in their way, and destroyed them all. It was their principle, if they took a city, to put every one to the sword, and this was all because they were under the government of their ambitious priests; so that when a certain king, Saul, called also Paul, spared a poor captive monarch whose name was Agag, the priests ordered him to be brought out and hewed to pieces.

'Now,' continued he, 'these Christians are still under the domination of the same priesthood, and are quite as ready to-day, under their direction, to overthrow the great Roman empire, burn us all in the Forum, and even sacrilegiously assault the sacred and venerable heads of our divine emperors.'

A thrill of horror ran through the assembly, at this recital. It was soon hushed, as the emperor opened his mouth to speak.

'For my part,' he said, 'I have another and a stronger reason for my abhorrence of these Christians. They have dared to establish in the heart of the empire, and in this very city, a supreme religious authority, unknown here before, independent of the government of the State, and equally powerful over their minds as this. Formerly, all acknowledged the emperor as supreme in religious, as in civil, rule. Hence he bears still the title of Pontifex Maximus. But these men have raised up a divided power, and consequently bear but a divided loyalty. I hate, therefore, as a usurpation in my dominions, this sacerdotal sway over my subjects. For I declare, that I would rather hear of a new rival starting up to my throne, than of the election of one of these priests in Rome.'

This speech, delivered in a harsh grating voice, and with a vulgar foreign accent, was received with immense applause; and plans were formed for the simultaneous publication of the Edict throughout the West, and for its complete and exterminating execution.

Then turning sharp upon Tertellus, the emperor said: 'Prefect, you said you had some one to propose, for superintending these arrangements, and for merciless dealings with these traitors.'

'He is here, sire, my son Corvinus.' And Tertellus handed the youthful candidate to the grim tyrant's foot-stool, where he knelt

Maximian eyed him keenly, burst in to a hideous laugh, and said: 'Upon my word, I think he'll do. Why, prefect, I had no idea you had such an ugly son. I should think he is just the thing; every quality of a thorough-paced, unconscious scapgrace is stamped upon his features.'

Then turning to Corvinus, who was scarlet with rage, terror, and shame, he said to him: 'Mind you, sirrah, I must have clean work of it; no hacking and hewing, no blundering. I pay you well, if I am well served; but I pay off well, too, if badly served. So now go; and remember, that if your back can answer for a small feat, your head will for a greater. The victor's faces contain an axe as well as rods.'

The emperor rose to depart, when his eyes caught Fulvius, who had been summoned as a paid court-spy, but who kept as much in the background as possible. He, there, my eastern worthy, he called out to him; 'draw nearer.'

Fulvius obeyed with apparent cheerfulness, but with real reluctance; much the same as if he had been invited to go very near a tiger, the strength of whose chain he was not quite sure about. He had seen from the beginning, that his coming to Rome had not been acceptable to Maximian, though he knew not fully the cause. It was not merely that the tyrant had plenty of favorites of his own to enrich, and apes to pay, without Dioclesian's sending him more from Asia, though this had its weight; but it was more. He believed in his heart that Fulvius had been sent principally to act the spy upon himself, and to report to Nicomedia the sayings and doings of his court. While, therefore, he was obliged to tolerate him, and employ him, he mistrusted, and disliked him, which in him was equivalent to hating him. It was some compensation, therefore, to Corvinus, when he heard his more polished confederate publicly addressed, as rudely as himself, in the following terms:

'None of your smooth, put-on looks for me, fellow. I want deeds, not smirks. You came here as a famous plot-hunter, a sort of stoat, to pull conspirators out of their nests, or suck their eggs for me. I have seen nothing of this so far; and yet you have had lots of money to set you up in business. These Christians will afford you plenty of game; so make yourself ready, and let us see what you can do. You know my ways, you had better look sharp about you, therefore, or you may have to look at something very sharp before you. The property of the convicted will be divided between the accusers and the treasury; unless I see particular reasons for taking the whole to myself. Now you may go.'

Most thought that these particular reasons would turn out to be very general.

CHAPTER VII.

DARK DEATH.

A few days after Fabiola's return from the country, Sebastian considered it his duty to wait upon her, to communicate so much of the dialogue between Corvinus and her black slave, as he could without causing unnecessary mischief. We have already observed, that of this many noble youths whom Fabiola had met in her father's house, none had excited her admiration and respect except Sebastian. So frank, so generous, so brave, yet so unboasting, so gentle, so kind in acts and speech, so unselfish and so careful of others, blending so completely in one character nobleness and simplicity, high wisdom and practical sense, he seemed to her the most finished type of manly virtue, one which would not easily suffer by time, nor tire by familiarity.

When, therefore, it was announced to her that the officer Sebastian wished to speak to her alone, in one of the halls below, her heart beat at the unusual tidings, and conjured up a thousand strange fancies, about the possible topics of his interview. This agitation was not diminished, when after apologizing for his seeming intrusion, he remarked with a smile, that well knowing how already she was sufficiently annoyed by the many candidates for her hand, he felt regret at the idea that he was going to add another, yet undeclared, to her list. If this ambiguous preface surprised, and perhaps elated her, she was soon depressed again, upon being told, it was the vulgar and stupid Corvinus. For her father, even, little as he knew how to discriminate characters out of business, had seen enough of him at his late banquet

to characterize him, in his daughter's eyes, by those terms.

Sebastian, fearing rather the physical, than the moral activity of Africa's drugs, thought it right to inform her of the compact between the two dabblers in the black art, the principal efficacy of which, however, seemed to consist in drawing money from the purse of a reluctant dupe. He of course said nothing of what related to the Christians in that dialogue. He put her on her guard, and she promised to prevent the nightly enclosures of her nurse-maid slave. What Africa had engaged to do, she did not fear a moment believe it was ever her intention to attempt; neither did she share any which the utterly despised. Indeed Africa's last colloquy seemed satisfactorily to prove, that she was deceiving her victim. But she certainly felt indignant at having been bargained about by two such vile characters, and having been represented as a grasping avaricious woman, whose price was gold.

'I feel,' she said at last to Sebastian, 'how very kind it is of you, to come thus to put me on my guard; and I admire the delicacy with which you have unfolded so disagreeable a matter, and the gentleness with which you have treated every one concerned.'

'I have only done in this instance,' replied the soldier, 'what I should have done for any human being—save him, if possible from pain or danger.'

'Your friends, I hope you mean,' said Fabiola, smiling, 'other than your whole life would go, in works of unrequited benevolence.'

'And so let it go; it could not be better spent.'

'Surely, you are not in earnest, Sebastian. If you saw one who had ever hated you, and sought your destruction, threatened with a calamity, which would make him homeless, would you stretch out your hand to succor him?'

'Certainly I would. While I send his sunshine and his smile equally upon his enemies, as upon his friends, shall weak men form another rule of justice?'

At these words Fabiola wondered, they were so like those of her mysterious parchment, identical with the moral theories of her slave.

'You have been in the East, I believe, Sebastian,' she asked rather abruptly; 'was it there that you learnt these principles? For I have one near me, who is yet, by her own choice, a servant of a woman of rare moral perceptions, who has propounded to me the same ideas, and she is an Asiatic.'

'It is not in any distant country that I learnt them; for here I caught them in with my mother's milk, though, originally, they doubtless came from the east.'

'They are certainly beautiful in the abstract,' remarked Fabiola; 'but death would overtake us before we could half carry them out, were we to make them our principles of conduct.'

'And how better could death find us, though not surprise us, than if thus doing our duty, even if not to its completion?'

'For my part,' resumed the lady, 'I am of the old Egyptian persuasion. This world is a shadow, from which I shall be ready to depart when I have had my fill of sun and sator—and not till then. I will read life's book through, and close it calmly, only when I have turned the last page.'

Sebastian shook his head, smiling, and said, 'The last page of this world's book comes but to the middle of the volume, whereas death may happen to be written. But on the next page begins the illuminated book of a new life—without a last page.'

'I understand you,' replied Fabiola, good-humoredly; 'you are a brave soldier, and you speak as such. You must be always prepared for death from a thousand casualties; we soldiers see it approach suddenly; it comes more mercifully, and stealthily upon the weak. You no doubt are musing on a more glorious fate, on receiving in front full shelves of arrows from the enemy, and falling covered with honor. You look to the soldier's funeral pile, with trophies erected over it. To you, after death, opens its bright page the book of glory.'

'No, no, gentle lady,' exclaimed Sebastian, emphatically. 'I mean not so. I care not for glory, which can only be enjoyed by an anticipating fancy. I speak of vulgar death, as it may come to me in common with the poorest slave; consuming me by slow burning fever, wasting me by long, lingering consumption, racking me by slowly eating ulcers; nay, if

to characterize him, in his daughter's eyes, by those terms.

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