

# FABIOLA.

Or, the Church of the Catacombs.

Written by His Eminence  
Cardinal Wiseman.

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## CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

Something like this did Sebastian think, perhaps, as he gazed abstractedly on the expiring embers of the pompous and cruel edict which they had torn down, not for a wanton frolic, but because it contained blasphemies against God and His holiest truths. They knew that if they should be discovered, terrible tortures would be their lot, but Christians in those days, when they contemplated and prepared for martyrdom, made no calculation on that head. Death for Christ, whether quick and easy, or lingering and painful, was the end for which they looked; and, like brave soldiers going to battle, they did not speculate where a shaft or a sword might strike them, whether a death-blow would at once stun them out of existence, or they should have to writhe for hours upon the ground, mutilated or pierced, to die by inches among the heaps of unheeded slain.

Sebastian soon recovered, and had hardly the heart to reprove the perpetrators of this deed. In truth, it had its ridiculous side, and he was inclined to laugh at the morrow's dismay. This view he gladly took; for he saw Pancratius watched his looks with some trepidation, and his centurion looked a little disconcerted. So, after a hearty laugh, they sat down cheerfully to their meal; for it was not midnight, and the hour for commencing the fast, preparatory to receiving the holy Eucharist, was not arrived. Quadratus' object, besides kindness, in this arrangement, was partly, that if surprised, a reason for their being there might be apparent, being to keep up the spirits of his younger companion and of Diogenes' household, if alarmed at the bold deed just performed. But there was no appearance of any such feeling. The conversation soon turned upon recollections of Diogenes' youth, and the good old fervent times, as Pancratius would persist in calling them. Sebastian saw his friend home, and then took a round, to avoid the Forum in seeking his own abode. If any one had seen Pancratius that night, when alone in his chamber preparing to retire to rest, he would have seen him every now and then almost laughing at some strange but pleasant adventure.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE DISCOVERY.

At the first dawn of morning, Corvinus was up; and, notwithstanding the gloominess of the day, proceeded straight to the Forum. He found his outpost quite undisturbed, and hastened to the principal object of his care. It would be useless to attempt describing his astonishment, his rage, his fury, when he saw the blank board, with only a few shreds of parchment left, round the nails; and beside it standing, in unconscious stolidity, his Dacian sentinel.

He would have darted at his throat, like a tiger, if he had not seen, in the barbarian's twinkling eye, a sort of hyena squint, which told him he had better not. But he broke out at once into a passionate exclamation:

'Sirrah! how has the edict disappeared? Tell me directly!'

'Softly, softly, Herr Kornweiner,' answered the imperturbable Northern. 'There it is as you left it in my charge.'

'Where, you fool? Come and look at it!'

The Dacian went to his side, and for the first time confronted the board, and after looking at it for some moments, exclaimed: 'Well is not that the board you hung up last night?'

'Yes, you blockhead, but there was writing on it, which is gone. That is what you had to guard!'

'Why, look you, Captain, as to writing, you see I know nothing, having never been a scholar; but as it was raining all night, it may have been washed out.'

'And as it was blowing, I suppose the parchment on which it was written was blown off?'

'No doubt, Herr Kornweiner, you are quite right.'

'Come, sir, this is no joking matter. Tell me at once, who came here last night?'

'Why, two of them came.'

'Two of what?'

'Two wizards, or goblins, or worse.'

'None of that nonsense for me. The Dacian's eye flashed drunkenly again. 'Well, tell me, Arminius,

what sort of people they were, and what they did.'

'Why, one of them was but a stripling, a boy, tall and thin, and went round the pillar, and I suppose must have taken what you miss, while I was busy with the other.'

'And what of him? What was he like?'

The soldier opened his mouth and eyes, and stared at Corvinus for some moments, then said, with a sort of stupid solemnity, 'What was he like? Why, if he was not Thor himself, he wasn't far from it. I never felt such strength.'

'What did he do to show it?'

'He came up first, and began to chat quite friendly; asked me if it was not very cold, and that sort of thing. At last, I remembered that I had to run through any one that came near me.'

'Exactly,' interrupted Corvinus; 'and why did you not do it?'

'Only because he wouldn't let me. I told him to be off, or I should spear him, and drew back and stretched out my javelin; when in the quietest manner, but I don't know how, he twisted it out of my hand, broke it over his knee, as if it had been a mountebank's wooden sword, and dashed the iron-headed piece fast into the ground, where you see it, fifty yards off.'

'Then why did you not rush on him with your sword, and despatch him at once? But where is your sword? It is not in your scabbard.'

The Dacian, with a stupid grin, pointed to the roof of the neighboring basilica, and said: 'There, don't you see it shining on the tiles, in the morning light?' Corvinus looked, and there indeed he saw what appeared like such an object, but he could hardly believe his own eyes.

'How did it get there, you stupid booby?' he asked.

The soldier twisted his moustache in an ominous way, which made Corvinus ask again more civilly, and then he was answered:

'He, or it, whatever it was, without any apparent effort, by a sort of conjuring, whisked it out of my hand, and up where you see it, as easily as I could cast a quilt a dozen yards.'

'And then?'

'And then, he and the boy, who came from round the pillar, walked off in the dark.'

'What a strange story!' muttered Corvinus to himself; 'yet there are proofs of the fellow's tale. It is not every one who could have performed that feat. But pray, sirrah, why did you not give the alarm, and rouse the other guards to pursuit?'

'First, Master Kornweiner, because, in my country, we will fight any living men, but we do not choose to pursue hobgoblins. And secondly, what was the use? I saw the board that you gave into my care all safe and sound.'

'Stupid barbarian!' growled Corvinus, but well within his teeth; then added: 'This business will go hard with you; you know it is a capital offence.'

'What is?'

'Why, to let a man come up and speak to you, without giving the watchword.'

'Gently, captain, who says he did not give it? I never said so.'

'But did he though? Then it could be no Christian.'

'Oh yes, he came up, and said quite plainly, "Numen Imperatorum."'

'What?' roared Corvinus.

'Numen Imperatorum' was the watchword, shrieked the enraged Roman.

'Numen or Numen, it's all the same, I suppose. A letter can't make any difference. You call me Arminius, and I call myself Hermann, and they mean the same. How should I know your nice points of language?'

Corvinus was enraged at himself, for he saw how much better he would have gained his ends, by putting a sharp, intelligent praetorian on duty, instead of a sottish, savage foreigner.

'Well,' he said, 'in the worst of humors, you will have to answer to the emperor for all this; and you know he is not accustomed to pass over offences.'

'Look you now, Herr Krummbelner,' returned the soldier, with a look of sly stolidity; 'as to that, we are pretty well in the same boat.' (Corvinus turned pale, for he knew this was true.) 'And you must contrive something to save me, if you want to save yourself. It was you the emperor made responsible, for the what-dye-call-it—that board.'

'You are right, my friend; I must make it out that a strong body attacked you, and killed you at your post. So shut yourself up in quarters for a few days, and you shall have plenty of beer, till the thing blows over.'

The soldier went off, and announced himself. A few days after, the dead body of a Dacian, evidently murdered, was washed on the banks of the Tiber. It was supposed he had fallen in some drunken row; and no further trouble was taken about it. The fact was indeed so; but Corvinus could have given the best account of the transaction. Before, however, leaving the ill-omened spot in the Forum, he had carefully examined the ground, for any trace of the daring act; when he picked up, close under the place of the edict, a knife, which he was sure he had seen at school, in possession of one of his companions. He treasured it up, as an implement of future vengeance, and hastened to provide another copy of the decree.

## CHAPTER XV.

### EXPLANATIONS.

When morning had fairly broken, crowds streamed from every side into the Forum, curious to read the tremendous edict so long menaced. But when they found only a bare board, there was a universal uproar. Some admired the spirit of the Christians, so generally reckoned cowardly; others were indignant at the audacity of such an act; some ridiculed the officials concerned in the proclamation; others were angry that the expected sport of the day might be delayed.

At an early hour the places of public fashionable resort were all occupied with the same theme. In the great Antonian Thermæ a group of regular frequenters were talking it over. There were Scaurus the lawyer, and Proculus, and Fulvius, and the philosopher Calpurnius, who seemed very busy with some musty volumes, and several others.

'What a strange affair this is, about the edict!' said one.

'Say rather, what a treasonable outrage against the divine emperor!' answered Fulvius.

'How was it done?' asked a third.

'Have you not heard,' said Proculus, 'that the Dacian guard stationed at the Puteal, was found dead, with twenty-seven penitential wounds on him, nineteen of which would have sufficed each by itself to cause death?'

'No, that is quite a false report,' interrupted Scaurus; 'it was not done by violence, but entirely by witchcraft. Two women came up to the soldier, who drove his lance at one, and it passed clean through her, and stuck in the ground on the other side, without making any wound in her. He then hacked at the other with his sword, but he might as well have struck at marble. She then threw a pinch of powder upon him, and he flew into the air, and was found, unhurt, this morning, on the roof of the Æmilian basilica. A friend of mine, who was out early, saw the ladder up, by which he had been brought down.'

p>Wonderful! many exclaimed.

'What extraordinary people these Christians must be!'

'I don't believe a word of it,' observed Proculus. 'There is no such power in magic; and certainly I don't see why these wretched men should possess it more than their betters. Come Calpurnius, he continued, 'put by that old book, and answer these questions. I learnt more, one day after dinner, about these Christians from you, than I had heard in all my life before. What a wonderful memory you must have, to remember so accurately the genealogy and history of that barbarous people! Is what Scaurus just told us possible or not?'

Calpurnius delivered himself with great pomposeness as follows:

'There is no reason to suppose such a thing impossible; for the power of magic has no bounds. To prepare a powder to make a man fly in the air, it would be only necessary to find some herbs in which air predominates more than the other three elements. Such for instance as pulses, or lentils, according to Pythagoras. These, being gathered when the sun is in Libra, the nature of which is to balance even heavy things in the air, at the moment of conjunction with Mercury, a winged power as you know, and properly energised by certain mysterious words, by a skillful magician, then reduced to powder in a mortar made out of an aserite, or stone that had flown up into the sky, and down again, would no doubt, when rightly used, enable, or force, a person to fly up into the air. It is well known, indeed, that the Thessalian witches go at pleasure through the clouds, from place to place, which must be done by means of some such charm.'

'Then, as to the Christians; you will remember, excellent Proculus, that in the account to which you

have done me the honor to allude, which was at the death of Fabius, I mentioned that the sect, originally came from Chaldea, a country always famous for its occult arts. But we have a most important evidence bearing on this matter, recorded in history. It is quite certain, that there in Rome, a certain Simon, who was sometimes called Simon Peter, and at other times Simon Magus, actually in public, flew up high into the air; but his charms having slipped out of his belt, he fell and broke both his legs; for which reason he was obliged to be crucified with his head downwards.'

'Then are all Christians necessarily sorcerers?' asked Scaurus.

'Necessarily; it is part of their superstition. They believe their priests to have most extraordinary power over nature. Thus, for example, they think they can bathe the bodies of people in water, and their souls acquire thereby wonderful gifts and superiority, though they may be slaves, over their masters, and the divine emperors themselves.'

'Dreadful!' all cried out.

'Necessarily,' resumed Calpurnius, 'we all know what a crime some of them committed last night, in tearing down a supreme edict of the Imperial decree; and even suppose, (which the Gods avert!) that they carried their treason still further, and attempted their sacred lives, they believe they have only to go to one of those priests, own the crime, and ask for pardon; and, if he gives it, they consider themselves as perfectly guiltless.'

'Fearful!' joined in the chorus.

'Such a doctrine,' said Scaurus, 'is incompatible with the safety of the state. A man who thinks he can be pardoned by another man of every crime, is capable of committing any.'

'And that, no doubt,' observed Fulvius, 'is the cause of this new and terrible edict against them. After what Calpurnius has told us about these desperate men, nothing can be too severe against them.'

Fulvius had been keenly eyeing Sebastian, who had entered during the conversation; and now markedly addressed him.

'And you, no doubt, think so too, Sebastian, do you not?'

'I think,' he calmly replied, 'that if the Christians be such as Calpurnius describes them, infamous sorcerers, they deserve to be exterminated from the face of the earth. But even so, I would gladly give them one chance of escape.'

'And what is that?' sneeringly asked Fulvius.

'That no one should be allowed to join in destroying them, who could not prove himself free from crime than they. I would have no one raise his hand against them, who cannot show that he has never been an adulterer, an extortioner, a deceiver, a drunkard, a bad husband, father or child, a profligate or a thief. For of being any of these, no man charges the poor Christians.'

Fulvius winced under the catalogue of vices, and still more under the indignant but serene glance of Sebastian. But at the word 'thief,' he fairly leapt. Had the soldier seen him pick up the scarf in Fabius' house? Be it so or not, the dislike he had taken to Sebastian, at their first meeting, had ripened into hatred at their second; and hatred in that heart was only written in blood. He had only intensity now to add to that feeling.

Sebastian went out; and his thoughts got vent in familiar words of prayer. 'How long, O Lord! how long. What hopes can we entertain of the conversion of many to the truth, still less of the conversion of this great empire, so long as we find even honest and learned men believing at once every calumny spoken against us; treasuring up, from age to age, every fable and fiction about us; and refusing even to inquire into our doctrines, because they have made up their minds that they are false and contemptible!'

He spoke aloud, believing himself alone, when a sweet voice answered him at his side: 'Good youth, whoever thou art that speakest thus, and methinks I know thy voice, remember that the Son of God gave light to the dark eye of the body, by spreading thereon clay; which, in man's, would have only blinded the seeing. Let us be as dust beneath His feet, if we wish to become His means of enlightening men's souls. Let us be trampled on a little longer in patience; perhaps even from our ashes may come out the spark to blaze.'

'Thank you, thank you, Cecilia,' said Sebastian, 'for your just and kind rebuke. Whither tripping on so gaily on this first day of danger?'

been named guide of the journey of Calistius? I am going to take possession. Pray, that I may be the first flower of this coming spring. And she passed on, singing lightly. But Sebastian begged her to stay one moment.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE WELLS IN THE SOIL.

After the adventures of the night, our youths had not much time for rest. Long before daybreak, the Christians had to be up and at it, engaged in their several duties, so as to depart before day. It was to be their last meeting there. The countess' wife, to be sure, still divine worship had to begin, from that day, in the subterranean chambers of the cemetery. It could not, indeed, be expected, that all would be able to travel with safety, even on the Sunday, some miles beyond the gate. A great privilege was, consequently, granted to the faithful, at such times of trouble, that of preserving the blessed Eucharist in their houses, and communicating themselves privately in the morning, before taking other food. As Tertullian expressed it:

The faithful felt, not as sheep going to the slaughter, not as criminals preparing for execution, but as soldiers arming for fight. Their weapons, their food, their strength, their courage, were all to be found in their Lord's table. Even the "wild" and the "wild" gathered from spirit from the bread of life. In churches, as yet may be seen in the cemetery, were chairs placed for the penitential, before which the sinner stood, and confessed his sins, and received absolution. It is almost like this, the penitential and the sacrament, and the terms of public confession shortened; and the whole might have been occupied by the solemn clergy in preparing their souls for too many, their last public communion on earth.

We need not remind our readers, that the office then performed was essentially, and in many details, the same as they daily witness at the Catholic altar. Not only was it considered, as now, to be the Sacrament of Our Lord's Body and Blood, not only were the oblation, the consecration, the communion alike, but the prayers were identical, so that the Catholic hearing them, and still more the priest reciting them, in the same language as the Roman Church, of the catacombs spoke, may feel himself in active and living communion with the martyrs who celebrated, and the martyrs who assisted, at those sublime mystagogies.

On the occasion which we are describing, when the time came for giving the kiss of peace—a genuine embrace of brotherly love—some could be heard, and bursts of tears, for it was to many a parting salutation. Many a youth clung to a father's neck, scarcely knowing whether that day might not sever them, till they waved their palm-branches together in heaven. And how would mothers press their daughters to their bosoms, in the fervor of that day, when fear of long separation mingled with love. Then came the communion, more solemn than usual, more devout, more hushed to stillness. The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the priest to each, as he offered the sacred food. 'Amen,' replied the receiver, with thrilling accents of faith and love. Then, extending his hand an orarium, or white linen cloth, he received in it a provision of the bread of life, sufficient to last him till some future feast. This was most carefully and reverently folded, and laid in the bottom, wrapped up often in another and more precious covering, or even placed in a gold locket. It was now that, for the first time, poor Syra regretted the loss of her rich embroidered necker, which would long before have been given to the poor, had she not studiously reserved it for such an occasion, and such a use. Now had her mistress been able to prevail upon her to accept any object of value, without a stipulation that she might dispose of them as she liked, that was in charitable gifts.

The various assemblies had broken up before the discovery of the violated edict. But they may rather be said to have adjourned to the cemetery. The frequent meetings of Torquatus with his two heathen confederates in the baths of Cassius, had been narrowly watched by the caparius and his wife, as we had already remarked; and Victoria had overheard the plot, to make an inroad into the cemetery of Calistius on the day after publication. The Christians, therefore, considered themselves under the necessity of taking advantage of the day.

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