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CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

When we accompanied Diogenes and his party through the catacombs, we stopped short of the subterranean church, because Severus would not let it be betrayed to Torquatus. In this the Christian congregation was now assembled, under its chief pastor. It was constructed on the principle common to all such excavations, for we can hardly call them edifices.

The reader may imagine two of the cubicles or chambers, which we have before described, placed one on each side of a gallery or passage, so that their doors, or rather wide entrances, are opposite one another. At the end of one will be found an arcosolium or altar-tomb, and the probable conjecture is, that in this division the men under charge of the ostiarii, and in the other the women, under care of the deaconesses, were assembled. This division of the sexes at divine worship was a matter of jealous discipline in the early Church.

Often these subterranean churches were not devoid of architectural decoration. The walls, especially near the altar, were plastered and painted, and half columns, with their bases and capitals, not ungracefully cut out of the sandstone, divided the different parts or ornamented the entrances. In one instance, indeed in the chief basilica yet discovered in the cemetery of Callistus, there is a chamber without any altar, communicating with the church by means of a funnel-shaped opening, piercing the earthen wall, here some twelve feet thick, and entering the chamber, which is at a lower level, at the height of five or six feet, in a slanting direction; so that all that was spoken in the church could be heard, yet nothing that was done there could be seen, by those assembled in the chamber.

This is very naturally supposed to have been the place reserved for the class of public penitents called audientes, or hearers, and for the catechumens, not yet initiated by baptism.

The basilica, in which the Christians were assembled, when Sebastian sent his message, was like the one discovered in the cemetery of St. Agnes. Each of the two divisions was double that is, consisted of two large chambers, slightly separated by half columns, in what we may call the women's church, and by flat pilasters in the men's, one of these surfaces having in it a small niche for an image or lamp. But the most remarkable feature of this basilica is a further prolongation of the structure, so as to give it a chancel or presbytery. This is about the size of half each other division, from which it is separated by two columns against the wall, as well as by its lesser height, after the manner of modern chancels. For while each portion of each division has first a lofty-arched tomb in its wall, and four or five tiers of graves above it, the elevation of the chancel is not much greater than that of those arcosolia or altar-tombs. At the end of the chancel, against the middle of the wall, is a chair with back and arms, cut out of the solid stone, and from each side proceeds a stone bench, which thus occupies the end and two sides of the chancel. As the table behind the chair is higher than the back of the throne, and as this is immovable, it is clear that the divine mysteries could not have been celebrated upon it. A portable altar must, therefore, have been placed before the throne in an isolated position in the middle of the sanctuary; and this, tradition tells us, was the wooden altar of St. Peter.

We have thus the exact arrangements to be found in the churches built after the peace, and yet to be seen in all the ancient basilicas in Rome—the episcopal chair in the centre of the apse, the presbytery or seat for the clergy on either hand, and the altar between the throne and the people. The early Christians thus anticipated underground, or rather gave the principles which directed the forms of ecclesiastical architecture.

It was in such a basilica, then, that we are to imagine the faithful assembled, when Corvinus and his satellites arrived at the entrance of the cemetery. This was the way which Torquatus knew, leading down by steps from a half-ruinous building,

shook up with beggars. They found the coast clear, and immediately made their arrangements. Fulvius, with one body of ten or twelve men, lurked to guard the entrance, and seize all who attempted to come out or go in. Corvinus, with Torquatus and a smaller body of eight, prepared to descend.

'I don't like this underground work,' said an old, grey-bearded legionary. 'I am a soldier, and not a rat-catcher. Bring me my man into the light of day, and I will fight him hand to hand, and foot to foot; but I have no love for being stifled or poisoned, like vermin in a drain.'

This speech found favor with the soldiers. One said, 'There may be hundreds of these stinking Christians down there, and we are only half a dozen.'

'This is not the sort of work we receive our pay for,' added another.

'It's their sorceries I care for,' continued a third, 'and not their valor. It required all the eloquence of Fulvius to screw up their resolution. He assured them there was nothing to fear; that the cowardly Christians would run before them like hares, and that they would find more gold and silver in the church than a year's pay would give them. Thus encouraged, they went groping down to the bottom of the stairs. They could distinguish lamps at intervals, stretching into the gloomy length before them.'

'Hush,' said one, 'listen to that voice!'

From faraway its accents came, softened by distance; but they were the notes of a fresh youthful voice, that quailed not with fear, so clear, that the very words could be caught as it intoned the following verses:

'Dominus illuminatio mea, et salus mea, quem timebo?'

'Dominus protector vite mee; a quo trepidabo?'

Then came a full chorus of voices, singing, like the sound of many waters:

'Dum appropriant super me nocentes, ut edant carnes meas; qui tribulant me, intromittet me, ipse infirmavit et occiderunt.'

A mixture of shame and anger seized on the assailants as they heard these words of calm confidence and defiance. A single voice again sang forth, but in apparently fainter accents:

'Si consistant adversum me castra, non timebit cor meum.'

'I thought I knew that voice,' muttered Corvinus. 'I ought to know it out of a thousand. It is that of my niece, the cause of all last night's chase and this day's trouble. It is that of Panorati, who pulled down the edict. Oh, my men; any reward for him, dead or alive!'

'But, stop,' said one, 'let us light our torches.'

'Hark!' said a second, while they were engaged in this operation, 'what is that strange noise, as if of scratching and hammering at a distance? I have heard it for some time.'

'And, look!' added a third, 'the distant lights have disappeared, and the music has ceased. We are certainly discovered.'

'No danger,' said Torquatus, putting on a boldness which he did not feel. 'That noise only comes from those old moles, Diogenes and his sons, busy preparing graves for the Christians we shall seize.'

Torquatus had in vain advised the troop not to bring torches, but to provide themselves with lamps of waxen tapers, which he had brought for himself; but the men swore they would not go down without plenty of light, and such means for it as could not be put out by a draught of wind, or a stroke on the arm. The effects were soon obvious. As they advanced, silently and cautiously, along the low narrow gallery, the resinous torches crackled and hissed with a fierce glare, which heated and annoyed them; while a volume of thick pitchy smoke from each rolled downwards onto the hearers from the roof, half stifled them, and made a dense atmosphere of cloud around themselves, which effectually dimmed their light.

Torquatus kept at the head of the party, counting every turning right and left, as he had noted them; though he found every mark which he had made carefully removed. He was staggered and baffled, when, after having counted little more than half the proper number, he found the road completely blocked up.

The fact was, that keener eyes than he was aware of had been on the look-out. Severus had never relaxed his watchfulness, determined not to be surprised. He was near the entrance to the cemetery below, when the soldiers reached it above; and he ran forward at once to the place where the sand had been pre-

pared for closing the road; and which his brother and several other stout workmen were stationed, in case of danger. In a moment, with that silence and rapidity to which they were trained, they set to work lustily, shovelling the sand across the narrow and low corridor from each side, while well directed blows of the pick brought from the low roof behind, huge flakes of sandstone, which closed up the opening. Behind this barrier they stood, hardly suppressing a laugh as they heard their enemies through its loose separation. Their work it was which had been heard, and which had screened off the lights, and deepened the song.

Torquatus's perplexity was not diminished by the volley of oaths and imprecations, and the threats of violence which were showered upon him, for a fool or a traitor. 'Stay one moment, I entreat you,' he said. 'It is possible I have mistaken my reckoning. I know the right turn by a remarkable tomb a few yards within it; I will just step into one or two of the last corridors, and see.'

With these words, he ran back to the next gallery on the left, advanced a few paces and totally disappeared. Though his companions had followed him to the very mouth of the gallery, they could not see how this happened. It appeared like witchcraft, in which they were quite ready to believe. His light and himself seemed to have vanished at once. 'We will have no more of this work,' they said; 'either Torquatus is a traitor, or he has been carried off by magic.'

Worried, heated in the close atmosphere almost inflamed by their lights, begrimed, blinded, and choked by the pitchy smoke, crest-fallen and disheartened, they turned back; and since the road led straight to the entrance, they flung away their blazing torches into the side galleries one here and one there, as they passed by, to get rid of them. When they looked back, it seemed as if a triumphal illumination was kindling up the very atmosphere of the gloomy corridor. From the mouths of the various caverns came forth a light which turned the dull sandstone into a bright crimson; while the volumes of smoke above, hung like amber clouds along the whole gallery. The sealed tombs, revealing the unusual reflection on their yellow tiles or marble slabs, appeared covered with golden or silver plates, set in the red damask of the walls. It looked like a homage paid to martyrdom, by the furies of heathenism, on the first day of persecution. The torches which they had kindled to destroy, only served to shed brightness on monuments of that virtue which had never failed to save the Church.

But before these folled beams with drooping heads had reached the entrance, they recoiled before the sight of a singular apparition. At first they thought they had caught a glimpse of daylight; but they soon perceived that it was the glimmering of a lamp. This was held steadily by an upright, immovable figure, which thus received the light upon itself. It was clothed in a dark dress, so as to resemble one of those bronze statues, which have the head and extremities of white marble and startle one, when first seen; so like are they to living forms.

'Who can it be? What is it?' the men whispered to one another. 'A sorceress,' replied one. 'The genius loci,' observed another.

'A spirit,' suggested a third.

Still, as they approached stealthily towards it, it did not appear conscious of their presence: there was no speculation in its eyes; it remained unmoved and unscared. At length, two got sufficiently near to seize the figure by its arms.

'Who are you?' asked Corvinus, in a rage.

'A Christian,' answered Cecilia, with her usual cheerful gentleness.

'Bring her along,' he commanded, 'some one at least shall pay for our disappointment.'

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIRST FLOWER.

Cecilia, already forewarned, had approached the cemetery by a different, but neighboring entrance. No sooner had she descended than she snuffed the strong odor of the torches. 'This is none of our incense, I know,' she said to herself; 'the enemy is already within.' She hastened therefore to the place of assembly, and delivered Sebastian's note; adding also what she had observed. It warned them to disperse and seek the shelter of the inner and lower galleries; and begged of the Pontiff not to leave till he should send for him, as his person was particularly sought for.

Panorati urged the blind man

to save himself, but he replied, 'my office is to watch the door, and guide the faithful safe.'

'But the enemy may seize you.' 'No matter,' she answered laughing; 'my being taken may save much worthier life. Give me a lamp, Panorati.'

'Why, you cannot see by it,' observed he, smiling.

'True, but others can.'

'They may be your enemies.'

'Even so,' she answered, 'I do not wish to be taken in the dark. If my bridegroom comes to me in the night of this cemetery, must he not find me with my lamp trimmed?'

Off she started, reached her post, and hearing no noise except that of quiet footsteps, she thought they were those of friends, and held up her lamp to guide them.

When the party came forth, with their only captive, Fulvius was perfectly furious. 'It was worse than a total failure: it was ridiculous—a poor mouse come out of the bowels of the earth. He rallied Corvinus till the wretch winced and trembled; then suddenly he asked, 'And where is Torquatus?' He heard the account of his sudden disappearance, told in as many ways as the Decian guard's adventure; but it annoyed him greatly. 'He had no doubt,' he said, 'in his own mind, that he had been duped by his supposed victim, who had crept into the unwatched niche of the cemetery. If so, this captive would know; and he determined to question her. He stood before her, therefore, put on his most searching and awful look, and said to her sternly, 'Look at me, woman, and tell me the truth.'

'I must tell you the truth without looking at you, sir,' answered the poor girl, with her most abject smile and softest voice; 'so you can see that I am blind.'

'Blind!' all exclaimed at once, as they crowded to look at her. But over the features of Fulvius there passed the slightest possible emotion, just as much as the wave that runs, pursued by a playful breeze, over the ripe meadow. A knowledge had flashed into his mind, a clue had fallen into his hand.

'It will be ridiculous,' he said, 'for twenty soldiers to march through the city, guarding a blind girl. Return to your quarters, and I will see you are well rewarded. You, Corvinus, take my horse, and go before to your father, and tell him all—I will follow in a carriage with the captive.'

'No treachery, Fulvius,' he said, vexed and mortified. 'Must you bring her? The day must not pass without a sacrifice.'

'Do not fear,' was the reply.

Fulvius, indeed, was pondering whether, having lost one eye, he should not try to make another. But the calm gentleness of the poor beggar perplexed him more than the boisterous zeal of the gamsters, and her sightless orbs defied him more than the restless roll of the topers.

Still, the first thought that had struck him he could still pursue. When alone in a carriage with her, he assumed a soothing tone, and addressed her. He knew she had not overheard the last dialogue.

'My poor girl,' he said, 'how long have you been blind?'

'All my life,' she replied.

'What is your history? Whence do you come?'

'I have no history. My parents were poor, and brought me to Rome when I was four years old, as they came to pray, in discharge of a vow made for my life in early sickness, to the blessed martyrs Chrysantheus and Daria. They left me in charge of a pious lame woman, at the door of the title of Fabiola, while they went to their devotions. It was on that memorable day, when many Christians were buried at the tomb, by earth and stones cast down on them. My parents had the happiness to be among them.'

'And how have you lived since?'

'God became my only Father then, and His Catholic Church my mother. The One feeds the birds of the air, the other nurses the weakness of the flock. I have never wanted for anything since.'

'But you can walk about the streets freely, and without fear, as well as if you saw.'

'How do you know that?'

'I have seen you. Do you remember very early one morning in the autumn, leading a poor lame man along the Vicus Patrinus?'

She blushed and remained silent. Could he have seen her put into the old man's purse her own share of the alms?

'You have owned yourself a Christian?' he asked negligently.

'Oh, yes! how could I deny it?'

'Then that meeting was a Christian meeting?'

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'Yes, yes! how could I deny it?'

He paused, looking at her. Finally, he said, 'Do you know who you are going?'

'Before the judge of earth, I guess, who will send me to heaven or hell.'

'And he calmly,' he said, 'will prize his blind and simple soul to the consistory, and a small.'

'So joyfully, rather,' was her reply.

Having got all that he desired, he condescended his prisoner to Corvinus at the gate of the cemetery, and left her to her fate. He was a cold and distant man, and he proceeded straight to the consistory, and the incident of the night was kept down all the next morning. When the prefect told the consistory of the blind girl, who had been found in the cemetery, he said only, 'The blind girl was found in the cemetery, and she was taken away without any trial.'

Corvinus, who was the prefect's favorite, was the only one who could see the truth. He had no doubt, in his own mind, that he had been duped by his supposed victim, who had crept into the unwatched niche of the cemetery. If so, this captive would know; and he determined to question her. He stood before her, therefore, put on his most searching and awful look, and said to her sternly, 'Look at me, woman, and tell me the truth.'

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