

FABIOLA.

Or, the Church of the Catacombs.

Written by His Eminence
Cardinal Wiseman.

[Published by special request.]

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

While this domestic interview was going on, a conference was taking place between Fulvius and his amiable uncle. The latter, entering late, found his nephew sitting stullen and alone in the house, and thus scooped him.

'Well, Fulvius, is she secured?'

'She is, uncle, as fast as bars and walls can make her; but her spirit is free and independent as ever.'

'Never mind that, sharp steel makes short work of spirit. Is her fate certain?—and are its consequences sure?'

'Why, if nothing else happens, the first is safe; the second I have still to encounter imperial caprice. But I own I feel pain and remorse at sacrificing so young a life, and for an insecure result.'

'Come, Fulvius, said the old man sternly, looking as cold as a grey rock in the morning mist; 'no softness, I hope, in this matter. Do you remember what days to-morrow?'

'Yes, the twelfth before the calends of February.'

'The critical day always for you. It was on this day that you gained another's wealth you committed—'

'Peace, peace!' interrupted Fulvius in agony. 'Why will you always remind me of everything I most wish to forget?'

'Because of this; you wish to forget yourself, and that must not be. I must take from you every pretence to be guided by conscience, virtue, or even honor. It is folly to affect compassion for any one's life, who stands in the way of your fortune, after what you did to her.'

Fulvius bit his lip in silent rage, and covered his crimson face with his hands. Eulalia roused him by saying: 'Well then, to-morrow is another and probably a final critical day for you. Let us calmly weigh its prospects. You will go to the emperor, and ask for your rightful share in the confiscated property. Suppose it is granted?'

'I will sell it as quick as possible, pay my debts, and retire to some country where my name has never been heard.'

'Suppose your claims are rejected?'

'Impossible, impossible!' exclaimed Fulvius, racked by the very idea; 'it is my right, hardly earned. It cannot be denied me.'

'Quietly, my young friend; let us discuss the matter coolly. Remember our proverb: 'From the stirrup to the saddle there has been many a fall.' Suppose only that your rights are refused you?'

'Then I am a ruined man. I have no other prospect before me, of retrieving my fortunes here. Still I must fly hence.'

'Good; and what do you owe at Janus arch?'

'A good couple of hundred sesteria, between principal and compound interest at fifty per cent, to that unconscionable Jew Ephraim.'

'On what security?'

'On my sure expectation of this lady's estates.'

'And if you are disappointed, do you think he will let you fly?'

'Not if he knows it, most assuredly. But we must be prepared from this moment for any emergency; and that with the utmost secrecy.'

'Leave that to me, Fulvius; you see how eventful the issue of to-morrow may be to you, or rather of to-day, for morning is approaching. Life or death to you hang upon it; it is the great day of your existence. Courage, then, or rather an inflexible determination, steel you to work out its destiny!'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SAME DAY: ITS SECOND PART.

The day is not yet dawning, and nevertheless we speak of having reached its second part. How may this be? Gentle reader, have we not led you to its first vespers, divided as they are between Sebastian of yesterday, and Agnes of to-day? Have not the two sung them together, without jealousy, and with fraternal impartiality, the one from the heaven which he ascended in the morning, the other from the dungeon into which she descended in the evening? Glorious Church of Christ! great in the unslaking combination of thy unity, stretching from heaven to beneath the earth, wherever exists a prison-house of the just.

From his lodgings Fulvius went out into the night, which was crisp and sharp, to cool his blood, and still his throbbing brow. He wandered about, almost without any purpose, but found himself imperceptibly drawing nearer and nearer to the Tullian prison. As he was literally without affection, what could be his attraction thither? It was a strangely compounded feeling, made up of as bitter ingredients as ever filled the prisoner's cup. There was gnawing remorse, there was baffled pride, there was goading avarice, there was humbling shame, there was a terrible sense of the approaching consummation of his villainy. It was true he had been rejected, scorned, baffled by a mere child, while her fortune was necessary for his rescue from beggary and death,—so at least he reasoned; yet he would still rather have her hand than her head. Her murder appeared revoltingly atrocious to him, unless absolutely inevitable. So he would give her another chance.

He was now at the prison-gate, of which he possessed the watchword. He pronounced it, entered; and, at his desire, was conducted to his victim's cell. She did not flutter, nor run into a corner, like a bird into whose cage the hawk has found entrance; calm, and intrepid, she stood before him.

'Respect me here, Fulvius, at least, she gently said. I have but few hours to live: let them be spent in peace.'

'Madam, he replied, 'I have come to lengthen them, if you please, to years; and, instead of peace, I offer happiness.'

'Surely, sir, if I understand you, the time is past for this and vanity. Thus to address one whom you have delivered over to death, is at best a mockery.'

'It is not so, gentle lady; your fate is in your own hands, only your own obstinacy will give you over to death. I have come to renew, once more, my offer, and with it that of life. It is your last chance.'

'Have I not told you before that I am a Christian; and that I would forfeit a thousand lives rather than betray my faith?'

'But now I ask you no longer to do this. The gates of the prison are yet open to me. Fly with me, and, in spite of the imperial decree, you shall be a Christian, and yet live.'

'Then have I not clearly told you that I am already espoused to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and that to Him alone I keep eternal faith.'

'Folly and madness! Persevere in it till to-morrow, and that may be awarded to you which you fear more than death, and which will drive this illusion forever from your mind.'

'I fear nothing for Christ. For know, that I have an angel ever guarding me, who will not suffer his Master's handmaid to suffer scorn. But now, cease this unworthy importunity and leave me the last privilege of the condemned—solitude.'

Fulvius had been gradually losing patience, and could no longer restrain his passion. Rejected again, baffled once more by a child, this time with the sword hanging over her neck! A flame irrepressible broke out from the smouldering heat within him; and, in an instant, the venomous ingredients that he had described as mingled in his heart, were distilled into one black solitary drop.—HATRED. With flashing look, and furious gesture, he broke forth:

'Wretched woman, I give thee one more opportunity of rescuing thyself from destruction. Which wilt thou have, life with me, or death?'

'Death even will I choose for her, rather than life with a monster like thee!' exclaimed a voice just within the door.

'She shall have it,' he rejoined, clenching his fist, and darting a mad look at the new speaker; 'and thou, too, if again thou dar'st to fling thy baneful shadow across my path.'

Fabiola was alone for the last time with Agnes. She had been for some minutes unobserved watching the contest, between what would have appeared to her, had she been a Christian, an angel of light and a spirit of darkness, and truly Agnes looked like the first, if human creature ever did. In preparation of her coming festival of full espousals to the Lamb, when she should sign her contract of everlasting love, as he had done, in blood, she had thrown over the dark garments of her mourning white and spotless bridal robe. In the midst of that dark prison, lighted by a solitary lamp, she looked radiant and almost da-

zing; while her tempter, wrapped up in his dark cloak, crouching down to rush out of the low door of the dungeon, looked like a dark and vanquished demon, plunging into the abyss beneath.

Then Fabiola looked into her countenance, and thought she had never seen it half so sweet. No trace of anger, of fear, of fury, or agitation, was there; no paleness, no flush, no alternations of hectic excitement and pallid depression. Her eyes beamed with more than her usual mild intelligence; her smile was so placid and cheerful as it ever was, when they discoursed together. Then there was a noble air about her, a greatness of look and manner, which Fabiola would have compared to that of a saint and statesman, and that ethereal atmosphere by which, in poetical mythology, a being of a higher sphere was recognised on earth. It was not inspiration, for it was passionless; but it was such expression and manner, as her highest conceptions of virtue and intellect, combined in the soul, might be supposed to stamp upon the outward form. Hence her feelings passed beyond love into a higher range; they were more akin to veneration.

Agnes took one of her hands in each of her own, crossed them upon her own calm bosom, and looking into her face with a gaze of blandest earnestness, said:

'Fabiola, I have one dying request to make you. You have never refused me any; I am sure you will not this.'

'Speak not thus to me, dearest Agnes; you must not request; you command me now.'

'Then promise me, that you will immediately apply your mind to master the doctrines of Christianity. I know you will embrace them; and then you will no longer be to me what you are now.'

'And what is that?'

'Dark, dark, dearest Fabiola: When I look upon you thus, I see in you a noble intellect, a generous disposition, an affectionate heart, a cultivated mind, a fine moral feeling, and a virtuous life. What can be desired more in woman? and yet over all these splendid gifts there hangs a cloud, of my eyes, of gloomy shadow, the shade of death. Drive it away, and all will be lightness and bright.'

'I feel it, dear Agnes,—I feel it. Standing before you, I seem to be as a black spot compared to your brightness. And how, embracing Christianity, shall I become light like you?'

'You must pass, Fabiola, through the torrent that sundered us.' (Fabiola started, recollecting her dream.) 'Waters of refreshment shall flow over your body, and oil of gladness shall embalm your flesh; and the soul shall be washed clean as driven snow, and the heart be softened as the babe's. From that bath you will come forth a new creature, born again to a new and immortal life.'

'And shall I lose all that you have but just now prized in me?' asked Fabiola, somewhat downcast.

'As the gardener,' answered the martyr, 'selects some hardy and robust, but unprofitable plant, and on it engraves but a small shoot of one that is sweet and tender, and the flowers and fruits of this belong to the first, and yet deprive it of no grace, no grandeur, no strength that it had before, so will the new life you shall receive ennoble, elevate, and sanctify (you can scarcely understand this word), the valuable gifts of nature and education which you already possess. What a glorious being Christianity will make you, Fabiola!'

'What a new world you are leading me to, dear Agnes! Oh, that you were not leaving me outside its very threshold!'

'Hark!' exclaimed Agnes, in an ecstasy of joy. 'They come, they come! You hear the measured tramp of the soldiers in the gallery. They are the bridesmaids coming to summon me. But I see above the white-robed bridesmaids borne on the bright clouds of morning, and beckoning me forward. Yes, my lamp is trimmed, and I go forth to meet the Bridegroom. Farewell, Fabiola, weep not for me. Oh, that I could make you feel, as I do, the happiness of dying for Christ! And now I will speak a word to you which I never have addressed to you before,—God bless you! And she made the sign of the Cross on Fabiola's forehead. An embrace, convulsive on Fabiola's part, calm and tender on Agnes's, was their last earthly greeting. The one hastened home, filled with a new and generous purpose; the other resigned herself to the shame-stricken guard.

Over the first part of the martyr's trials we cast a veil of silence, though ancient Father and the

Church in her office, dwell upon it, as doubling her crown. Suffice it to say, that her angel prepared her from hence; and that the purity of her presence converted a den of infamy into a holy and lovely sanctuary. It was still early in the morning, when she stood again before the tribunal of the prefect, in the Roman Forum; unchanged and unshaken, without a blush upon her suffering countenance, or a pang of sorrow in her innocent heart. Only her usual hair, the symbol of virginity, which had been let loose, flowed down, in golden waves, upon her snow-white dress.

It was a lovely morning. Many will remember it to have been a beautiful day on its anniversary, as they have walked out of the Roman Gate, now the Porta Pia, towards the church which bears the virgin-martyr's name, to see thence upon her altar the two lamps, three whose wick are made the palladium sent by the Pope to the archbishop of his communion. Already the almost trees are heavy, not with frost, but with blossoms; the earth is being loosened round the vine, and spring seems latent in the swelling buds, which are waiting for the signal from the northern breeze, to burst and expand. The atmosphere, rising into a cloudless sky, has just the temperature that was loved, of a sun, already vigorous, not heating, but enlivening; the slightly frosty air. Such we have frequently experienced St. Agnes' day, together with joyful thousands, hastening to her shrine.

The judge was sitting in the open Forum, and a sufficient crowd formed a circle around the tribunal, which few, save Christians, loved to enter. Around the spectators were two whose appearance attracted general attention; they stood opposite each other, at the ends of the semi-circle formed by the multitude. One was a youth, wrapped in his toga, with a clenching hat over his eyes, so that his features could not be distinguished. The other was a lady of aristocratic mien, tall and erect, such as one does not expect to meet with out of court.

Wrapped in the folds of her robe, and so simple as to be called the head to foot, like the beautiful statue of a saint, known among artists by the name of Modesty (Pudicitia), she had a countenance of angelic purity, and a voice of celestial sweetness.

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multitude. The judge, with a stern countenance, looked on her with the contempt of the inferior world, to be punished by the sword.

'On what road, and at what time, shall the judgment be made? said the headman.'

'Let it be carried into effect at once,' was the reply.

Agnes raised her face towards the judge, and eyes to heaven; then calmly bowed down. With her own hands she drew down her hair, and her eyes were fixed upon the judge, and her hands were clasped in prayer.

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