

The Death of the Old Year.

Full knee deep lies the winter snow,
And the winter winds are wailing and howling;

He lieth still he doth not move;
He will not see the dawn of day,

He hath no more life above,
He gave me a friend, and a true true lover,

He hath no more life above,
He gave me a friend, and a true true lover,

How hard he breathes over the snow
I heard just now the crowing cock,

His face is growing sharp and thin,
Alas! our friend is gone,

FABIOLA:

THE CHURCH OF THE CATACOMBS

BY HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL WISEMAN.

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

"What is it?"

"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, 'Nomen Imperatorum.'"

"What?"

"Nomen Imperatorum."

"Nomen Imperatorum was the watchword?"

"Nomen or Nomen, 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 thing. How should I know the fine points of language?"

Corvinius was enraged at himself; for he saw how much better he would have gained his ends, by putting a sharp, intelligent pretorian 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 this; and you know that he is not accustomed to pass over offences."

"Look you now, Herr Krummbelmer," returned the soldier, with a look of sly stolidity; "as to that; we are pretty well in the same boat." Corvinius turned pale, for he knew it was true.

"And you must contrive something to free me, if you wish to save yourself. It was you the emperor made responsible for the what-d'ye-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 concealed himself. A few days after, the dead body of a Dacian, evidently murdered, was washed on the banks of 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 Corvinius could have given the best account of the transaction. Before, however, he could do so, he was called to 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 the 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, crowded 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 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 Thermae a group of regular frequenters were talking it over. There were Scaurus, the lawyer, and Proculus, very busy with some misty volumes, and several others.

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

"Say rather, what a reasonable outrage against the divine emperors!" answered Fulvius.

"How was it done?" asked a third.

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

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

"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 those wretched men should possess it

more than their betters. Come, Calpurnius," he continued, "put that old hoodlum in a question. 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 pompousness, as follows:—"There is no reason to suppose such a thing impossible; for the power of magic has no bounds. To prepare a powder that would 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 are pulvis or lentis, according to the ancients. 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 energized by certain mysterious words by a skilful magician, then reduced to powder in a mortar made out of an aconite, and blown up into the sky, will come 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 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 deified Fabius's table, if I remember right, I mentioned that the sect came originally from Chaldea, a country always famous for its occult arts. But we have a most important evidence bearing on this matter, recorded in the history of the emperor, that here in Rome, certain Simon, who was sometimes called Simon Magus actually in public, flew up high into the air; but his charm 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 living emperors themselves."

"Dreadful!" all cried out.

"Then, again," resumed Calpurnius, "we all know what a frightful crime some of them committed last night, in tearing down a supreme edict of the imperial deities; and even suppose (which the gods avert) that they carried their treason still further, and attempted to desecrate an altar, or to kill the emperor, and ask for pardon; and if he gives it, they consider themselves as perfectly guiltless."

"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 any 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, a thief, a drunkard, a profligate, or a thief. For of being any of these, no one charges the poor Christian."

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 knife in Fulvius's 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 intensely now to add that feeling."

Sebastian went out, and his thoughts got vent in familiar words of prayer. How long! How long! How long! What a weary and uncertain 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 calumny spoken against; treasuring up, from age to age, every fable and fiction about us; and refusing even to inquire into our doctrines, because they have taken 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 the gospel; and he has given thee light in thy heart, only blinded the seeing let us be as dust beneath His feet, if we wish to become His means of enlightening the eyes of 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 noble words. Whether tripping on so early on this first day of danger?"

"Do you know that I have been named guide of the cemetery of Callistus? I am going to take possession. Pray, that I may be the first flower of this coming spring."

And she passed on, singing blithely. But Sebastian begged her to stay one moment.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WOLF IN THE FOLD.

After the adventure of the night, our youths had not much time for rest. Long before daybreak the Christians had to be up, and assemble at their several tables, so as to dispose before day. It was to be their last meeting there. The oratories were to be closed, and divine worship had to begin from that day, in the subterranean churches of the cemeteries. It could not, indeed, be expected, that all would be able to travel with safety, even on Sunday, some miles beyond the gate. A great privilege, however, was granted to the chief pastor, at such times of trouble, that of preserving the Blessed Eucharist in their houses, before taking other food, as Tertullian expresses it. (*Advocatum*, lib. ii. c. 5.)

The faithful felt, not as sheep going to the slaughter, but as criminals preparing for execution, but as soldiers awaiting for fight. Their weapons, their food, their strength, their courage, were all to be found in the Lords table. Even the lukewarm and timid gathered fresh spirit from the bread of life. In churches, as yet may be seen in the cemeteries, were chairs placed for the penitentiaries, before whom the sinner knelt, and confessed his sins, and received absolution. In moments like this, the penitential code was relaxed, and the terms of public expiation shortened; and the whole night had

been occupied by the zealous clergy in preparing for, to 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 is it considered, as now, to be the Sacrifice of Our Lord's Body and Blood, not only were the ablution and consecration of the communion alike, but many of the prayers identical; so that a Catholic hearing them recited, and still more the priest reciting them, in the same language as the Roman Church in the catacombs spoke, may feel himself in active living communion with the married and unmarried mysteries.

On the occasion in hand, however, there were the time came for giving the kiss of peace—genuine embrace of brotherly love—sobs could be heard, and bursts of tears; for it was to many a parting salutation. Many a youth clung to his father's neck, scarcely knowing whether that day might not sever them forever.

They extended their hands, and their daughters to their bosom, and mothers press their love, which fear of long-separation quickened! Then came the communion more solemn than usual, more devout, more hushed to stillness. "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ," said the priest to each, as he offered him the sacred food. "Amen," replied the receiver, with thrilling accents, and an anxious look, which he received in 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 bosom wrapped in another and more precious covering, or even placed in a gold locket.

It was now that, for the first time, poor Scaurus, who would long before have been given to the poor, had she not studiously reserved it for such an occasion and such a use. Nor had her mistress been able to prevail upon her to accept any objects of value, without a stipulation that she might dispose of them as she liked, that was in charitable gifts.

The various necessities had been up before the discovery of the violated edict. But they may rather be said to have adjourned to the cemeteries. The frequent meetings of Torquatus with his two heathen confederates in the baths of Caracalla had been naturally watched by the caparatus and his wife, as we had already remarked, and Victoria had overheard the plot to murder the emperor, and the callistinus on the day after publication. The Christians, therefore, considered themselves safe the first day, and took advantage of the circumstance to inaugurate by solemn offices, the churches of the catacombs, which, after some years' disuse, had been put into good repair and order by the fosses had been repaired, and furnished with all requisites for divine worship.

But Corvinius, after getting over his first dismay, and having as speedily as possible another thing, not so grand a copy of the edict re-advised, began better to see the dismal probabilities of serious consequences, from the wrath of his imperial master. The Dacian was right; he could have to answer for that very day, which might wipe off the disgrace he had incurred, before again meeting the emperor's look. He determined to anticipate the attack on the cemetery, intended for the following day.

He repaired, therefore, while it was still early, to the baths, where Fulvius, ever jealously watching the progress of the emperor's expectation of Corvinius's coming to hold council with them. The worthy trio concerted their plans. Corvinius, guided by the reluctant apostate, at the head of a chosen band of soldiers who were at his disposal had to make incursion into the cemetery of Callistus, and drive, or drag, thence the clergy and priests and deacons, who, by the way, remained outside with another company, would intercept them and cut off retreat, securing the most important prizes, and especially the Pontiff and superior clergy, whom his visit to the ordination would enable him to recognise. This was his plan. "Let fools," he said to himself, "act the part of ferrets in the warren; will be the Spaniard's epithet, but he made make her busy dusting and cleaning, in the retired room where they were consulting without appearing to listen. She told all to Cucucino; and he, after much scratching of his head, hit upon a notable plan for conveying the discovered information to the proper quarter."

At the hour, when he had early attendance on divine worship, unable from his duties at the palace, to do more, had proceeded, according to almost universal custom, to the baths, to invigorate his limbs by their healthy refreshment, and also to remove from himself the suspicion, which his absence on that morning might have excited. While he was thus engaged, he saw the Spaniard's epithet, but he made mounted his horse unadvisedly, and went along the high-road, while the Christian soldier in a by-way was instructing his blind messenger.

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 Christian congregation was no chief pastor, as the chief pastor, who was entrusted on the principle common to all such excavations, for we can hardly call them edifices.

The reader may imagine two of the *cubicula* or chambers, which we have before described, one on each side of a gallery or passage, so that the other, or rather wide entrance, were opposite to each other. In the end, one will be found an *arcosolium* or altar tomb; and the probable conjecture is that in this division the men under the charge of the *ostarii* (door-keepers,—an office constituting a lesser order in the Church, and in the other women, under the care of the deaconesses, were assembled. This division of the sexes at divine worship was a discovery of 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 entrance. In 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. This is very naturally supposed to have been the place reserved for the class of public penitents called *adventus* 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 one 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 chance of presbytery. This is about the size of half an ordinary basilica, 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 the ordinary basilica. At the end of the chancel, against the middle of the wall, is a chair with back and arm rest 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 of the arched-tomb behind the chair is higher than the back of the throne, and as this is immovable, it is clear that the divine rites 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 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 them. The early Christians thus anticipated underground, or rather gave the principles which directed, the ecclesiastical architecture.

It was in such a basilica, then, that we are to imagine the faithful assembled, when Corvinius and his satellites arrived at the entrance of the cemetery. This was the way which Torquatus knew, leading down by steps from a half ruined building, choked up with rubbish. They found the coast clear, and immediately made 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. Corvinius, with Torquatus and a smaller body of eight, prepared to descend.

"I don't like this underground work," said an old, greynosed soldier, who was a man in 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 skulking devils 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 valour."

It required all the eloquence of Fulvius to screw up the resolution of the soldiers. He assured them there was nothing to fear; that the cowardly Christians would run before them like larks, 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 at intervals, stretching into the gloom, the outlines of the altars, remaining outside with another company, would intercept them and cut off retreat, securing the most important prizes, and especially the Pontiff and superior clergy, whom his visit to the ordination would enable him to recognise. This was his plan. "Let fools," he said to himself, "act the part of ferrets in the warren; will be the Spaniard's epithet, but he made mounted his horse unadvisedly, and went along the high-road, while the Christian soldier in a by-way was instructing his blind messenger."

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

From far away its accents came, softened by distance, but they were 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:—"Illuminatio mea, et salus mea; quem tu metus."

"Dominius protector vite mee; a quo trepidabo?"

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the protector of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Then came a full chorus of voices, singing, like the sound of many waters,—and, in the distance, the sound of a trumpet super me incessans, ut elatam carnem meam; qui tribulant me, inimici mei, ipsi intremisunt et conturbantur. "While the wicked dream night me, to eat my flesh, my enemies that trouble me have themselves been weakened and have fallen."

A mixture of shame and anger seized on the assembled soldiers, and these words of calm confidence and defiance. The single voice again sang forth, but in apparently fainter accents:—"Si consistat adversum me castrum non timebit cor meum." ("If armies in camp shall stand together against me, my heart shall not fear.—Ps. xxxvi.)

"I thought I knew that voice," muttered Corvinius, "but I don't know it; it is not the voice of a man, but of a woman, the cause of all last night's curse and this day's trouble. It is that of Pancretius, who pulled down the edict. On, on, my men; my reward for him dead or alive!"

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

"Hark!" said a second, while they were engaged in lighting their torches, "that noise, only as if of scratching or 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 from those old modes, Diogenes and his company busy preparing graves for the Christians we shall see."

Torquatus had in vain advised the troop not to bring torches, but to provide themselves with such lamps as we see Diogenes represented as carrying in his picture, or 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 gallery, the resinous torches crackled and hissed with a fierce glare, which heated and annoyed them; and the noise of the torches, which rang noise, as if rolled downwards on to 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 re-marked. He was staggered and balked, when, after having counted little more than half the proper number, he found the road absolutely 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 and low corridor from each side while he had been far from it, and he had been prepared for closing the road; near which his brother and several 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 he had been far from it, and he had been prepared for closing the road; near which his brother and several stout workmen were stationed, in case of danger. 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