

Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that feared God."

Marcellus was born in Gades, and had been brought up in the stern discipline of a Roman army. He had been quartered in Africa, in Syria, and in Britain, where he had distinguished himself not only by bravery in the field but also by skill in the camp. For these reasons he had received honors and promotions, and upon his arrival at Rome, to which place he had come as the bearer of dispatches, he had so pleased the emperor that he had been appointed to an honorable station among the Pretorians.

Lucullus had never been out of Italy, scarcely indeed out of the city. He belonged to one of the oldest and most noble Roman families, and enjoyed corresponding wealth and influence. He was charmed by the bold and frank nature of Marcellus, and the two young men had become firm friends. The intimate knowledge of the capital which Lucullus possessed enabled him also to be of service to his friend, and the scene which has been described in the preceding chapter was one of the first visits which Marcellus had made to the renowned Coliseum.

The Pretorian camp was situated close to the city wall, to which it was joined by another wall which inclosed it. The soldiers lived in rooms like cells made in the wall itself. They were a numerous and finely appointed body of men, and their situation at the capital gave them a power and an influence so great that for ages they controlled the government of the capital. A command among the Pretorians was a sure road to fortune, and Marcellus could look forward with well-grounded prospects of future honors.

On the morning of the following day Lucullus entered his room. After the usual salutation he spoke of the fight which they had witnessed.

"Such scenes are not to my taste," said Marcellus. "They are cowardly. I like to see two well-trained men engage in a fair combat, but such butchery as you have in the Coliseum is detestable. Why should Macer be murdered? He was a brave man, and I honor his courage. And why should old men and young children be handed over to wild beasts?"

"It is the law. They are Christians."

"That is always the answer. What have the Christians done? I have seen them in all parts of the world, but have never known them to be engaged in disturbances."

"They are the worst of mankind."

"So it is said, but what proof is there?"

"Proof? It is too well known. Their crime is that they plot in secret against the laws and the religion of the state. So intense is the hatred which they bear toward our institution, that they will die rather than offer sacrifice. They own no king or monarch but the crucified Jew who

they believe is alive now. And they show their malevolence to us by asserting that we shall all hereafter be tortured in Hades for ever."

"This may be true. I know not. I know nothing at all about them."

"The city is swarming with them; the empire is overrun. And mark this. The decline of our empire, which all see and lament; the spread of weakness and insubordination, the contraction of our boundaries, all this increases as the Christians increase. To what else are these evils owing if not to them?"

"How have they produced this?"

"By their detestable teachings and practices. They teach that fighting is wrong, that soldiers are the basest of men, that our glorious religion under which we have prospered is a curse, and that the immortal gods are accursed demons. In their teachings they aim to overthrow all morality. In their private practices they perform the darkest and foulest crimes. They always keep by themselves in impenetrable secrecy, but sometimes we overhear their evil discourses and lewd songs."

"All this is indeed serious, and if true they deserve severe punishment. But according to your own statement they keep by themselves, and but little is known of them. Tell me, did those who suffered yesterday seem like this? Did that old man look as though he had passed his life in vicious scenes? Did those fair young girls sing lewd songs as they waited for the lions?"

"Unto Him that loved us;

To Him that washed us from our sins:"

And Marcellus sang in a soft voice the words which he had heard.

"I confess, my friend, that I mourned for them."

"And I," said Marcellus, "could have wept had I not been a Roman soldier. Consider for a moment. You tell me things about these Christians which you confess only to have learned from those who themselves are ignorant. You assert that they are infamous and base, the offscouring of the earth. I see them confronted with a death that tries the highest qualities of the soul. They meet it nobly. They die grandly. In all her history Rome can produce no greater scene of devotion than that of yesterday. You say they detest soldiers, yet they are brave; you tell me that they are traitors, yet they do not resist the laws; you declare that they are impure, yet if purity is on earth it belonged to those maidens who died yesterday."

"You are enthusiastic for those outcasts."

"Not so, Lucullus. I wish to know the truth. All my life I have heard these reports. But yesterday for the first time I suspected that they might be false. I now question you earnestly, and I find that your knowledge is based upon nothing. I now remember that throughout all the

world these Christians are peaceable and honest. They are engaged in no riots or disturbances, and none of these crimes with which they are charged can be proved against them. Why, then, should they die?"

"The emperor has good reasons no doubt for his course."

"He may be instigated by ignorant or malicious advisers."

"I think it is entirely his own design."

"The number of those that have been put to death is very large."

"O yes, some thousands; but plenty more remain. These, however, are out of reach, and that reminds me of my errand here. I bring you the imperial commission."

Lucullus drew from the folds of his military mantle a scroll of parchment, which he handed to Marcellus. The latter eagerly examined its contents. It appointed him to a higher grade, and commissioned him to search out and arrest the Christians in their hiding-places, mentioning particularly the Catacombs.

Marcellus read it with a clouded brow, and laid it down.

"You do not seem very glad."

"I confess the task is unpleasant. I am a soldier, and do not like to hunt out old men and weak children for the executioner; yet, as a soldier, I must obey. Tell me something about these Catacombs."

"The Catacombs? It is a subterranean district that extends to unknown bounds underneath the city. The Christians fly to the catacombs whenever there is danger, and they also are in the habit of burying their dead there. Once there, they are beyond the reach of the utmost power of the state."

"Who made the Catacombs?"

"No one knows exactly. They have existed for ages. I believe that they were excavated for the sake of getting building sand for cement. At present all our cement comes from there, and you may see workmen bringing it into the city along any of the great roads. They have to go far away for it now, for in the course of ages they have excavated so much beneath us that this city now rests upon a foundation like a honeycomb."

"Is there any regular entrance?"

"There are innumerable entrances. That is the difficulty. If there were but few, then we might catch the fugitives. But we cannot tell from which direction to advance upon them."

"Is any district suspected?"

"Yes. About two miles down the Appian Way, near the tomb of Caecilia Metella, the large round tower, you know, bodies have frequently been discovered. It is conjectured that these

are the bodies of the Christians which have been obtained from the amphitheater and carried away for burial. On the approach of the guards, the Christians have dropped the bodies and fled. But, after all, this gives no assistance, for after you enter the Catacombs you are no nearer your aim than before. No human being can penetrate that infinite labyrinth without assistance from those who live there."

"Who live there?"

"The fossors, who still excavate sand for the builders. They are nearly all Christians, and are always at work cutting out graves for the dead of the Christians. These men have lived there all their lives, and are not only familiar with the passages, but they have a kind of instinct to guide them."

"Were you ever in the Catacombs?"

"Once, long ago, a fossor guided me. I remained but a short time. My impression was that it was the most terrible place in all the world."

"I have heard of the Catacombs, but never before knew anything about them. It is strange that they are so little known. Could not these fossors be engaged to lead the guards through this labyrinth?"

"No. They will not betray the Christians."

"Have they been tried?"

"Certainly. Some comply, and lead the officers of justice through a network of passages till they get bewildered. Their torches become extinguished, and they grow terrified. Then they ask to be led back. The fossor declares that the Christians must have fled, and so takes back the soldiers to the starting point."

"Are none resolute enough to continue on till they find the Christians?"

"If they insist upon continuing the search the fossor will lead them on forever. But he merely leads them through the countless passages which intersect some particular district."

"Are none found who will actually betray the fugitives?"

"Sometimes; but of what use is it? Upon the first alarm, every Christian vanishes through the side ways, which open everywhere."

"My prospect of success seems small."

"Very small, but much is hoped from your boldness and shrewdness. If you succeed in this enterprise it will be your fortune. And now, farewell. You have learned from me all that I know. You will find no difficulty in learning more from any one of the fossors."

So saying, Lucullus departed. Marcellus leaned his head on his hands, and lost himself in thought. But ever amid his meditations came floating the strains of that glorious melody which told of triumph over death:

"Unto Him that loved us,

To him that washed us from our sins -- "