

## Omnia Vincit Amor

Tomorrow will be the 14<sup>th</sup> day of February. I was born that day in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Emperor Valerian, who ruled together with his son Gallienus. That was a long time ago. We lived in Rome then where my father was a jailer. They were troublesome times, my father told me. The west was breaking up and there was trouble in the east; indeed, Valerian was captured and killed there.

Gallienus tried to keep things together and then came Claudius II, who was surnamed 'Gothicus' because of his resounding defeat of the Goths. Gallienus had been tolerant towards Christians – I was not a Christian then and learnt that later – and Claudius was not particularly bothered by them. But someone called Valentine was reported to him for carrying out unauthorized marriages, saying he did so in the name of Christ.

Claudius could not ignore the report and had Valentine brought to court to be questioned. At first, they say, he took a liking to Valentine; but when Valentine tried to teach him about Christ, he became annoyed. By what right was this young man telling the Emperor what to believe – telling him, indeed, that the ancient gods of Rome were false? That was surely treason. So Claudius sent him to prison to await execution.

That was how I first met Valentine; he had been sent to my father's jail. On the first day that I took Valentine his food I sensed that he was a good man. I say sensed, for you must know that I was born blind. But by now I knew my way around the jail without any trouble at all.

Over the next few days I got to know Valentine better; he explained that he was what the Christians called a 'Presbyter', which is sort of priest. On his last day there, 14<sup>th</sup> February, I asked him if he were not afraid of being executed.

"Why should I be?" he replied. "I shall be with Christ himself today?"

"H-h-how can that be?" I stammered.

"One of your poets once wrote: 'Omnia vincit amor'," he replied, "and, indeed, love does conquer everything, for God Himself is love."

He went on to talk about Christian love; how Christ had shown that the infinite and intangible God is lovable and that the human heart can beat with real genuine charity for fellow human-beings, even for one's enemy.

I did not understand everything he said, but as he spoke it seem as if a brightness was glowing in my head, in my mind.

"How do I know that what you say is true?" I asked.

"My daughter," he replied, "Christ will open your eyes; he will let you see."

I thought he meant that the eyes of my mind would be opened and I would understand. But he meant my real eyes – those eyes that had seen nothing since I was born. I saw him standing in the cell; I saw the chains that held him; I saw the cell around me. I ran at once to my father to tell him that I could see.

But my joy was short-lived. That same day, my birthday, Valentine was taken from the cell and led through the Flaminian gate and outside the city, where he was beheaded.

Of course I became a Christian, and so did my father. I was his only child. I never knew my mother as she had died of a fever when I was only a year and half old. My father had never married again.

The Christians welcomed us as the last to be brought to Christ by Valentine. After instruction we were both baptized at Easter that year. It was later among the Christians I saw Fabian.

It was the custom of Christians to gather at the tomb of a holy martyr on the anniversary of his or her execution to honor the day the holy martyr had been received into glory. Many of these tombs were in the catacombs where, especially in earlier days, it had been safer to meet. But some, like Valentine's, were in the old Roman style beside roads leading out from the city.

So on the 14<sup>th</sup> February in the following year some of us gathered early at Valentine's tomb beside the Flaminian Way, north of the city. It was there I saw Fabian with the other worshippers. I felt as though Valentine himself were really there. I seem to hear him saying again "Omnia vincit amor." I glanced at Fabian. Did he notice? I do not think so. But I am sure I heard the holy Valentine whisper: "Yes, I shall marry you two this day next year."

I think I blushed a little because I did not even know Fabian then. Later that day I told my father about it.

"Well, my girl," he said. "it is about time you were thinking of marrying and maybe Valentine is looking after you. Maybe you have met your love on Valentine's Day."

That became a saying in the family, that I met my love on Valentine's day, for sure enough on February 14<sup>th</sup> in the following year Fabian and I were married. The priest was very nice; he had instructed us well and carried out the ceremony as well as anyone could wish. But how I longed that Valentine were still alive and that he could have been the priest who married us. All the same, I am sure Valentine was there. As Fabian and I exchanged vows, I am sure I saw Valentine next to the priest and that he whispered: "Omnia vincit amor."

There followed thirty happy years. I gave my father five grandchildren and there were even two great grandchildren by that time. My children used to like hearing me tell them about Valentine; how I had been blind as a little girl and how I had gained my sight on Valentine's Day; how I had met Fabian on Valentine's Day a year later and how we were married the year after that on Valentine's Day. They used to joke and wonder if they would meet their true-love on Valentine's Day. All through those thirty years we never missed going to Valentine's tomb on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February

Of course, we Christians always had to be a bit wary; but Gallienus' policy of toleration was generally observed by the Emperors who followed. In any case they were kept far too busy trying to keep the Empire together in the face of trouble from various German tribes and from peoples in the east. They were quite happy to let us get on with our lives as we wished.

Even Diocletian left us alone to begin with; but he grew more suspicious of us. He became convinced that Christians were hindering Apollo and the other Roman gods in their work, were corrupting the morals of the Roman race and were thus the reason the Empire was becoming weak.

So in the eighteenth year of his reign began the 'Great Persecution': all Christian buildings must be destroyed, all scriptures be burnt, all sacred chalices, ciboria and other objects be seized for his own treasury, all Christian ministers be arrested and all Christians be compelled to sacrifice to Apollo, Jupiter and the other Roman gods, or to suffer death.

Diocletian began his terrible work in the east and Fabian got wind of it before the worst hit Rome. We got the family together and made our way to Gaul; we were helped along the way by Christians in the different towns and cities we passed through. But it was a long and tiring journey. It took its toll on my father who was now into his seventies. It was not long after we had settled in Condatomagus that my father passed to glory.

I remember the day. It was Valentine's Day, and my father, who had taken to his bed a few days before, looked up and told me he could see Valentine waiting for him; and next to Valentine was another figure who was clothed with a long white robe with a golden girdle round his breast. His head and his hair were, said my father, as white as snow or white as washed, clean wool and his feet shone like burnished bronze. His face glowed with the radiance of the sun as he smiled at my father and beckoned to him.

Then my father passed peacefully to glory.

I told the priest here about the person my father said he had seen as he was dying. The priest told me it was Jesus, the Christ. He explained that the Apostle John had seen a similar vision of Christ at a time of persecution two hundred years before. He explained the symbolism of the vision and how it had sustained Christians at that troublesome time.

But those persecutions were as nothing compared with what was going on then. We had done well to leave Rome; as we learnt later many we had known had won the martyr's crown there. Britain and Gaul, however, thanks to the tetrarch, Constantius, were spared the worst of the persecution. In any case the persecution was a failure; it strengthened the resolve of Christians and, because of its excessive brutality, many pagans came to sympathize with us.

But that is all in the past now. Diocletian has gone, and the civil strife that followed his abdication has passed. Now, by God's grace, we live in peace under Constantius' son, Constantine.

Indeed, we have been fortunate here in Condatómagus; more grandchildren have come and we now have three great grandchildren.

Tomorrow many of our family will come to wish me happy birthday on Valentine's Day. They will greet one another with "Omnia vincit amor," and ask me again to tell the story of Valentine and how a jailer's daughter, blind from birth, gained her sight. They will listen as I tell them how I first saw my true-love on Valentine's Day and the younger ones will ask if they will meet their own true-love on Valentine's Day. So the good Valentine is remembered each year in our family. I wonder if future generations will remember him also.