

2 In the Catacombs

Hail, Gladdening Light

We hymn the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Divine
Worthiest art thou at all times to be sung
With undefiled tongue,
Son of our God, Giver of life, alone!
Therefore in all the world thy glories, Lord,
they own.

(TRANSLATED BY JOHN KEBLE)

The next morning, Annie gripped Mr. Pipes's hand and strained her eyes unblinkingly into the darkness. The morning sunlight of the Via Appia now behind them, she inched her feet forward into the black recesses of the narrow tunnel. The only sound came from the scraping of their feet on the sandstone floor of the cavern. She heard Drew breathing heavily behind her.

“Better watch out around the next corner,” he hissed in her ear. “I’m sure I saw something sort of wispy peeking out at—you.”

“Kn-nock it off, Drew,” said Annie, poking him in the ribs with her elbow.

Drew snickered. “Tut, tut. Remember, ‘She who hates her brother walks in darkness.’”

“Now, Drew,” Mr. Pipes’s voice scolded out of the darkness, “one mustn’t tamper with the text of Holy Scripture.”

Annie reached out with her free hand to steady herself; her fingers touched the clammy dampness of the subterranean passage. She pulled back in alarm.

“I-is there going to be a light down here?” Her voice quavered and sounded hollow against the stone walls.

“I see a little light just ahead,” said Drew, looking past his sister. “In fact, it looks like things open up into a bigger cave.”

“Until then, I shall switch on my torch, my dear,” said Mr. Pipes, fumbling in the blackness for his flashlight. Then he added to Annie, “My dear, you will need to relinquish your grip on my fingers, if you please, for only a moment, whilst I discover where I’ve stowed it.”

Annie reluctantly let go. Mr. Pipes opened and closed his fingers until the blood began circulating and he regained some feeling in them. With a click, a shaft of light shone down the crude walls of the tunnel, casting eerie shadows on every side. They shuffled forward.

“I-it’s so still.” Annie attempted a laugh, but it sounded higher-pitched and louder than she had hoped.

“Quite still, indeed,” agreed Mr. Pipes. “The English novelist Charles Dickens found the catacombs ‘so sad, so quiet, so sullen; a desert of decay, somber and desolate.’”

With these words, he turned toward Annie, hoping to reassure her. Quivering light from his flashlight struck his face from below, casting grotesque shadows above his chin and nose. But worse yet, spidery shadows from his bushy eyebrows stretched menacingly onto his forehead.

Annie threw her hand up in an only partially successful attempt at stifling a squeal. Her hand knocked Mr. Pipes's arm. The flashlight clattered to the floor and went out.

"Nice work, Annie," said Drew. "Now we don't have any light."

"Surely we might use one of your torches," said Mr. Pipes, feeling on the cold stone floor for his flashlight.

Annie groaned. "I left mine back at our hotel by my bed."

"Hold the phone," said Drew. "I've got mine!"

Foil from chocolate bars rustled out of the darkness from where Drew stood, and Mr. Pipes and Annie heard the muffled thudding of contents from Drew's knapsack landing on the floor of the tunnel.

"Drew, my boy," said Mr. Pipes, "do be careful. All your portable property will lie strewn about the cave, never to be recovered."

"Whew! I hope he *does* lose some of it. What's that smell?" asked Annie. "We've only been traveling for a few days, and your backpack already smells like dirty socks. How do you do it?"

"Here it is!" Drew sang out in the darkness, ignoring his sister.

He flicked on his flashlight, and a dull amber light ventured a few feet into the darkness.

"Oh," he said. "I guess I sort of used it up last night."

"Reading under your blanket?" asked Annie.

"Fact is, I was writing a poem," said Drew, defensively.

"Indeed, I must see this poem," said Mr. Pipes. "That is, when light returns. Now, then, gather your things, Drew, join hands, and we shall make our way carefully toward Drew's hint of light. Yes, yes, I do believe I, too, see light just ahead."

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"Ah, is this not better, Annie, my dear?" asked Mr. Pipes, smiling at her moments later.

Annie did feel better in the warm glow of the terra-cotta lamps shining on the decorated walls of the tiny underground chapel into which the tunnel had opened.

With a sigh of relief she smiled in return. "And it's so pretty here with all these wall paintings. Who did them, and what do they mean?"

"Yeah, and they've got to be really old," added Drew, running his hand along a painted ledge with words Drew couldn't understand etched into the rock.

"Do you see the three symbols adorning that archway?" asked Mr. Pipes. "The early Christians painted them as visual reminders of the foundations of their faith and of Christian virtues taught and practiced by Christ and his followers."

"The cross must have reminded Christians of Jesus' death for their salvation," said Annie. "But what does the bird mean—looks like it might be a dove?"

"You will remember from your reading in Scripture," replied Mr. Pipes, "that the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus after his baptism. The dove symbol also reminded early Christians of eternal rest, inspired by the psalmist's longing, 'Oh that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.'"

"How about the anchor painted next to the cross?" said Drew. "It's shaped a bit different from *Toplady's* anchor, but it must be an anchor." Drew thought of fishing and sailing back in England on the quiet waters of The River Great Ouse in Mr. Pipes's little boat.

"Indeed, it is an anchor," replied Mr. Pipes. "Early Christians suffering for their faith in the Lord used an anchor to symbolize their sure and steadfast hope in Christ and the promises of eternal glory with him."

"I get it," said Drew, remembering how Mr. Pipes had taught them to set *Toplady's* anchor securely in the mud along the banks of the river. "If you don't have an anchor, you lose the boat with the current."

"Yes, my boy. And when a storm descends on a ship anchored in harbor, the anchor keeps the ship from smashing to

pieces on the rocky shore. Important things are anchors. Yes, the Christian's hope was sure and certain when firmly set on Christ's redeeming work alone."

"How about those fish?" asked Drew, brightening as he pointed to a pattern of fish drawn above a shallow alcove set in the wall. "What do they stand for?"

Setting his shoulder bag down on a worn shelf, Mr. Pipes smiled at Drew.

"I knew you'd ask," said Mr. Pipes. "For your answer I must give you a Greek lesson."

"Huh?" said Drew.

"Greek?" said Annie.

Mr. Pipes laughed. "You see, the fish symbol is in part based on the Greek word for 'fish': *Ichthys*."

"But what's so important about fish?" asked Annie.

Drew frowned at his sister.

"But there must be some other reason why they used a fish," said Annie.

"Indeed, there is," said Mr. Pipes. "Several theories predominate, but most likely it stems from many of the apostles' making their living as fishermen."

"And didn't Jesus tell them," added Drew, "to be fishers of men? I like that part."

"He did," replied Mr. Pipes. "And St. Augustine explained this most beloved symbol as derived from the parallel of Christ living 'without sin in the abyss of this mortality as in the depth of waters.' In any case, the symbol may have first appeared in Alexandria and was often mentioned by Clement. As you can see," he said, turning around slowly in the decorated chapel and pointing at the many fish symbols, "Roman Christians used this symbol throughout their catacombs."

Annie turned around, gazing at the dim ceiling and crude arches adorned with simple paintings commemorating the persecutions and triumphs of the early saints.

"What did they do in these caves?" asked Annie.

“From time to time they met underground for worship,” replied Mr. Pipes. He looked carefully at Annie as if trying to decide if she was ready for what he had to say next. “But the hundreds of miles of catacombs zigzagging underneath Rome were principally tombs where Christians, who rejected the pagan practice of cremation, buried their dead loved ones.”

Annie moved closer to Mr. Pipes in the dim cavern.

“So they buried dead people down here?” asked Drew, slowly.

“Thousands upon thousands of them, and for several centuries,” replied Mr. Pipes.

“Did you say hundreds of miles of tunnels?” asked Drew.

“You could get lost,” said Annie in hushed tones, “d-down here.”

“Did the Romans let them do it?” asked Drew.

“Yes and no,” said Mr. Pipes. “They were happy for Christians to dispose of their own dead; that saved the Romans the trouble of doing it. But worship of Christ was forbidden and of course Christians worshiped the Lord when they buried their dead.”

“How did they find their way in all those miles of caves?” asked Annie.

“That’s where the fish symbol helped out again,” said Mr. Pipes. “When a Christian met another person but wasn’t sure if he was a follower of Christ, as they talked, the Christian might casually draw part of a fish in the sand with his foot; if the other man responded by finishing the symbol with his foot, they talked openly. Plans could be discussed and directions given for where Christians would be meeting. Some of the gatherings in the catacombs were marked with a fish, its head pointing which way to turn in the dizzying labyrinth of tunnels.”

“Wow! It would have been fun to live back then,” said Drew, his eyes sparkling in the light of the terra-cotta lamps.

Annie and Mr. Pipes turned and looked at him incredulously.

“Drew, you mustn’t forget their suffering,” said Mr. Pipes.

“Oh, I suppose that would take some of the fun out of it,” said Drew.

They sat silently in the cavern for several moments. Then Annie asked, “Did they sing—when they buried people?”

“These very walls rang with their singing, my dear. I imagine that when a mother and father laid their young child to rest in a burial niche along these walls, they might have sung ‘Christ our triumphant king, we come thy name to sing, hither our children bring. . . .’”

Annie and Drew hummed along with the old man as he sang several lines from the hymn.

In the stillness that followed, Annie sighed. She looked around the simple cave chapel and decided that it wasn’t quite so scary down here as she had first thought. She, too, imagined the cavern filled with grieving loved ones, whispering condolences and not quite meeting the eyes of the mourning parents; she felt something of their hope in the Lord Jesus who rose from the dead. Then, as she studied the walls of the cave, she caught sight of another crude drawing.

“I know it’s dark in the catacombs,” she said, “but what does that lamp symbol represent?”

“Yeah,” said Drew. “Just painting one on the wall doesn’t help with the lighting problem down here.”

“I believe you might know the answer to your own question, my dears,” replied Mr. Pipes. “What were God’s first words recorded in the Bible?”

“Let there be light!” said Annie.

“And didn’t Jesus call himself the Light of the world?” added Drew.

“Yes, to you both,” said Mr. Pipes. “And of the Bible the psalmist wrote, ‘Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’ Throughout Scripture Christ dispels the darkness and sin of the soul, just as the light of a lamp dispels the darkness in a room.”

“Or in a catacomb,” added Drew.

“Early Christians celebrated Lord’s Day evening worship services,” continued Mr. Pipes, “on some occasions right here in the catacombs, with a symbolic lighting of the lamps. Ministers and elders lit a candle and passed its flame to the unlit candle held by each member of the congregation, thus symbolizing the flame of the gospel of Christ passed from one sinner to the next through the preaching of the good news, and so throughout the world.”

“Oh, I can just see it,” said Annie. “The warm glow of candlelight filling these chambers—and that dark tunnel we came through. It must have been lovely.”

“No doubt it was a most moving ceremony,” agreed Mr. Pipes.

“What did they do while lighting all those candles?” asked Drew.

“Ah, they sang,” replied Mr. Pipes.

“With instruments?” asked Drew. “I can’t imagine there ever being an organ down here.”

“No organs in the catacombs,” agreed Mr. Pipes with a chuckle. “Organs came later when Christians gained the freedom to build churches and worship openly without persecution. No, those early saints sang unassisted by instruments. But cast your mind back to a service, perhaps here in this chamber. What with the solemnity of the tombs of the martyred dead lining the walls, the quivering flames of candles, the worshipers uniting their voices in praise—it must have seemed, very much indeed, like heaven.”

“What did they sing?” asked Annie.

“Most scholars agree that the hymn ‘Hail, Gladdening Light’ must have been one of the very earliest written. It was most likely sung by rich and poor, senator and slave, united in the worship of Christ, as each Lord’s Day drew to its close throughout the empire.”

“How’s it go?” asked Drew.

Mr. Pipes hummed a chantlike melody that began softly and then rose and fell, steadily getting louder until his voice seemed to soar.

“Now let us blend the melody with its grand words,” he said, clearing his throat. “But to sing as our early forebears did, one must learn to chant several syllables on the same note. Do listen first, and then we shall sing together,” he said.

Annie and Drew listened as Mr. Pipes chanted the first six words without any note change; his voice then rose and fell with the simple melody.

Hail, gladdening Light, of his pure glory pour'd
Who is th'immortal Father, heav'nly, blest,
Holiest of Holies, Jesus Christ, our Lord!
Now we are come to the sun's hour of rest—

He broke off and explained, “These next lines grow louder, rising with real energy to ‘We hymn the Father,’ and so forth.” He demonstrated:

The lights of evening 'round us shine;
We hymn the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Divine.

“This next line is chanted more softly, then swells to ‘Son of our God . . .’ And the last two lines rise to an ecstasy of praise calculated to thrill the very soul.

Worthiest art thou at all times to be sung
With undefiled tongue,
Son of our God, Giver of life, alone:
Therefore in all the world
Thy glories, Lord, they own.”

“I can almost hear them singing,” said Annie.

“This is a grand expression of worship, indeed, and most worthy of its object,” agreed Mr. Pipes. “Now, shall we join our voices with theirs?”

“Oh, yes. I only wish we had candles,” said Annie, her eyes sparkling in the dim light of the lamps.

“And an organ wouldn’t hurt,” said Drew.

For several moments, the ancient sandstone cavern rang with their singing. When they had sung through the hymn several times, Annie asked, “Who wrote the poetry?”

“We do not know, my dear,” replied Mr. Pipes, shouldering his leather bag. “With persecution pressing them on every side, early Christians wrote none of their hymns down until much later. But who actually wrote these psalmlike words remains a mystery.”

“Too bad,” said Annie. “But it is a lovely hymn.”

“You know,” said Drew, falling in behind Annie and Mr. Pipes as they walked back into the dark tunnel, “the words talk about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but mostly about the Son, I think. Why is that?”

“Well observed, my boy,” said Mr. Pipes, nodding his white head approvingly. “The hymn-writer wanted to clarify the important doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ—that he is fully God, a truth rejected by Jews and Roman pagans.”

Annie’s grip on Mr. Pipes’s hand tightened as they left the light of the underground chapel behind. With a sigh of relief she caught sight of a spot of sunlight against the wall. And moments later they stepped out into the remains of the Villa Quintili, the bone-white ruins of the ancient town warm from the late-morning sun.

“Furthermore,” said Mr. Pipes, resting against the fluted remains of an ancient column, “those who have made it their life’s work to study the great hymns have observed three important functions served by them. The first is codifying doctrine, in this case, that Jesus is God—giver of life alone.”

“You told us about the importance of doctrine in hymns last Christmas, remember?” said Annie.

“Yeah,” said Drew. “Wasn’t it Ray Palmer whose hymns included important doctrinal truths when much of the church didn’t like the doctrinal part of Christianity anymore?”

“Yes, indeed, it was Palmer,” said Mr. Pipes. “Most of the hymn-writers of the Reformation, along with Watts, Newton, and so many others, understood that without the objective doctrines of Christianity, we have no basis for our praise. And one of the strengths of hymns is their ability to adorn—to show the beauty of—the great and high doctrines of Holy Scripture.”

“What else do hymns do?” asked Drew.

“Hymns should be able to be sung by everyone,” said Mr. Pipes, “not only those living at any given time. In fact, great hymns will be sung by generations of Christians, thus unifying the body of Christ from age to age.”

“Like we just did in the catacombs,” said Drew, rifling through his knapsack.

“And as I trust you will continue to do throughout your lives,” replied Mr. Pipes. “One hymn-writer put it like this: ‘In lofty songs exalt his name, in songs as lasting as his love.’ Do not settle for whimsical praise, enslaved to the changeable tastes of a moment.”

“Drew, what are you looking for?” asked Annie.

“Oh, nothing. Only I think I might just keel over and die from hunger, that’s all,” said Drew, wincing as he rubbed his stomach. “D’you have anything in your knapsack?”

Annie pulled out three sandwiches wrapped in plain brown paper, three bottles of mineral water, and three apples. She arranged the little picnic on a slab of ancient marble.

“Now, what was it you and Mr. Pipes were going to eat?” asked Drew, grinning as he sat down on the grass near the food.

Annie rolled her eyes.

“Any chocolate?” asked her brother.

“After we’ve eaten the real food,” said Annie.

Then, turning back to Mr. Pipes, she said, “Now, let me see if I can guess the last function of hymns.” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “Would it be glorifying God?”

“Precisely,” said Mr. Pipes. “Hymns must be written in such a way that the glory of God is their clear object. Thus, timeless

hymns, ones that endure and should endure, lift our mind and heart above ourselves to God.”

“To lead us from ourselves to thee,” quoted Annie, leaning against a warm slab of marble and gazing at a wispy cloud passing lazily overhead. “That was in one of the hymns you taught us last Christmas at Whittier’s house.”

“Which phrase almost perfectly expresses,” agreed Mr. Pipes, “the third function of great hymns: they are written to help worshipers turn away from themselves and to the Lord.”

“Mr. Pipes, I’m afraid that if we don’t eat lunch, Drew’s going to pass out—or pretend to,” said Annie.

“I believe you might be correct, my dear,” said Mr. Pipes, smiling as he looked at Drew’s fluttering eyes and feigned agony.

When Mr. Pipes finished leading them in prayer, Drew asked, “What kind of sandwiches?”

“Pig,” said Annie, grinning and looking directly at her brother.

“That’s my kind of sandwich,” laughed Drew, unwrapping his and taking a bite.

“I almost can’t get my mouth around it,” said Annie, turning the thick slices of bread this way and that, looking for the thinnest part.

“Oh,” said Drew, “this bread is so fresh and crumbly. And the ham is just right: stringy with lots of mustard.”

“You might want to use a napkin on some of that mustard,” said Annie, pointing at a smear of yellow on Drew’s chin.

“*Porchetta*, I believe Italians call roasted pig,” said Mr. Pipes, swallowing and dusting breadcrumbs off his lap. “And it does make a lovely luncheon for us.”

“An’ for them!” said Drew, his mouth full as he pointed excitedly at three or four bright green lizards scurrying across the marble and darting away with the crumbs.

“Eek!” cried Annie, nearly spilling her bottle of mineral water. “Do they bite?”

“No, indeed,” said Mr. Pipes, gently lifting one and studying it in his hand. “They are most friendly creatures and nearly as tame as my dear cat, Lord Underfoot.”

“Really?” said Drew, cupping both hands and inching toward one of the lizards. “Gotcha!” he said, lifting one by its long green tail.

“Oh, don’t hurt it,” said Annie, torn between revulsion and curiosity.

“Here, Annie,” said her brother, “you can hold him—he’s not even slimy.”

Annie shuddered, but held out her hand hesitantly. Drew slid the little green body onto Annie’s hand. The lizard lay prone on her fingers, only its throat moving in and out as it breathed. She cautiously brought the little creature closer to her face to get a better look.

“Oh, you’re so cute!” she said softly.

Mr. Pipes looked at Annie’s face and stopped smiling. He looked back at the lizard and blinked several times. A slight frown crept over his face.

“And most happy, I am sure,” he said, clearing his throat, “when left to his own devices in the wild.”

Drew caught two more lizards and wrapped them loosely in his sandwich wrapper along with a mound of bread crumbs recovered from their picnic.

“These guys like us,” he said. “Did you see how easy it was to catch them?”

“I think they might be hungry,” said Annie, lightly stroking her lizard with her finger.

“Surely not, my dears,” said Mr. Pipes, blinking rapidly now and looking from side to side like a cornered animal trying to escape.

“And I’ll bet you don’t ever get enough food here in the wild,” continued Annie, in her best wounded-victim tone of voice, her nose nearly touching the lizard’s. “Oh, you sweet little thing.”

Drew looked at his sister and then back at the lizard. He scratched his head.

“They’re *lizards*, Annie,” he said.

“I know. Oh, Mr. Pipes, can’t we take them with us?” begged Annie. “It’ll be way easier than a kitten. Please?”

“Your kitten found in Germany last summer,” said Mr. Pipes, “if I may remind you, proved to be considerable trouble—as did your pet skunk last Christmas.”

“Oh, I do hope the caretaker at Whittier’s house,” said Annie, “is taking good care of Monochrome.”

“But Mr. Pipes, you said lizards make good pets,” said Drew.

“Surely I said no such thing!” said Mr. Pipes. “But my dears, lizards? It could prove most inconvenient.”

“So you’ll let us?” said Annie. And without waiting for an answer, she handed Drew her lizard and threw her arms around Mr. Pipes. “Oh, thank you!”

The rest of that afternoon they spent making a lizard cage. Drew found a scrap of wire screen in a garbage can behind a shop that repaired windows. And, with many gestures, Annie asked the owner of another shop for a small wooden box they found discarded in the alley behind his wine shop. Protesting all the while, Mr. Pipes soon found himself making suggestions and then actually assisting Annie and Drew as they constructed a portable home for four green lizards.