

PALMS
ANNA HANSON DORSEY.

AUTHOR OF "COIANA," "FLEMINGS," "TANGLED PATHS," "MAY BEHOLD," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XIV.
PAGAN GRIEF—ONCE MORE AT HOME—
A RENAISSANCE.

Early next morning, just as Fabian was preparing to go to the villa for the purpose of arranging a pretty device he had thought of for Claudia's welcome home, a servant appeared, and announced that a person was waiting in the vestibule—who said his business was urgent—and requested to see him.

Fabian had been expecting ever since he awoke that morning, to get some intelligence from the agent whom he had commissioned to ascertain where Evaristus was incarcerated, and if possible, to save him; he was not surprised, therefore, to see the lawyer himself, whom he received with grave courtesy, while his countenance expressed a questioning anxiety, of which he was scarcely conscious.

After both were seated at a table of carved citron wood, upon which lay scattered implements of writing, and unanswered letters, with one or two volumes of favorite authors, the lawyer without any preliminaries, entered at once on the business which had brought him. He related briefly that he had lost no time in entering upon a careful search for Evaristus. What made it so difficult, was the great number of persons that had been arrested at the same time, and a certain secrecy which had been thrown around his arrest, on account of the popular sentiment in his favor.

The lawyer stated that he did not succeed in discovering to which of the prisons he had been conveyed until after midnight, when he at once directed his efforts, by application to the proper officials, to procure access to him. This involved a delay of several hours; and when at last, near day-dawn the speaker found his way to the prison and showed the order for his admission, Evaristus had been executed. The best thing which he could do, after receiving a secret bribe, was to direct him to the place where the offender had paid the forfeit of his life.

"Here," added the lawyer, "I was not too late. It is true he was past recall, but I learned the particulars of his end. They first bound him on the wheel of torture, but before setting it in motion they tore out his tongue with red-hot tongs."

"Enough!" interrupted Fabian, raising his hand from the table on which it rested, and dropping it again, while a sick faintness nearly suspended the action of his heart.

"I secured his body," began the other, "supposing—"

"That is well. It is what I would have most desired, all else having failed," Fabian quickly responded.

"What disposition shall we make of it?"

"Deposit it in my family tomb on the Appian Way," said Fabian, opening a cabinet, and taking therefrom a bronze key, which he gave him. "This will open it."

"My request shall be faithfully attended to; but shall the remains be incinerated? I can have it done secretly, if such be thy wish."

"No," said Fabian, remembering to have heard, among other things, that the Christians did not burn the bodies of their dead, and in turn their ashes for burial. "No; there is a new coffin of Assian stone there. I bought it when I was at Assos in Troas, two years ago, intending it for my own interment. The stone has peculiar properties, from which one does not shrink as from the flame, although the Assian stone, much used by the ancients for sepulture, had the property of consuming the body forty days after interment, whence it received the name of sarcophagus—flesh-eater."

"And is this the only reward Rome could find for thee, my Evaristus—to drag out thy eloquent tongue and shatter the silver trumpet that sounded her fame! Gods! are ye gods, to look down indifferently upon a crime like this?"

Grief was new to Fabian; he had flattered himself that the philosophy he had adopted held him above the discordant passions of life; but found, to his shame, that like snow-crueted volcanic fires, they only waited the opportunity to burst into flames. He felt beaten by his own weakness, and thought a more lofty fortitude would have made his grief worthy of its object. He also realized for the first time how utterly futile and wasted is all conflict with the decrees of Fate.

He had nothing that reached higher than his head to look to for comfort or help; there was nothing in the theories and apothegms of the philosophers he had studied, that could give strength or tranquility to the troubled mind; or tranquillity to the fevered brain; so, pagan that he was, he relied, upon the resources of his own noble nature to live out his life as best he could, while he buried his sorrow deep in the sacred places of memory.

Fabian plunged his head in a vessel of cold perfumed water, and throwing himself upon a couch, took up a volume, which proved to be his favorite "Æneid," and sought to regain his usual tranquillity in its noble and poetic conceptions; then, when conscious that his composure was entirely restored, he wrapped his legs about him, descending to the street, where his chariot still awaited him, quickly mounted, and drove to the villa on the Aventine.

About the same hour in which Fabian was passing through the ordeal just described, Nemesius had left Rome to make his daily visit to the camp of his legion, and, without an object—only that it was a delicious day, and he wished to prolong his ride—he took the Urban road along the Via Sacra. As he approached the house of Hippolytus, he could but contrast its present quiet with the uproar and strife that yesterday reigned in its neighborhood. The sun shone brightly on its grim tower, and touched with emerald green the ivy creeping over its dark walls; birds cawed above it, glad under the blue sky and golden light; and odors of mingled sweetness filled the air with subtle incense.

There was a solitary old beggar, clothed in tatters, sitting on the lowest step of the portico, as if to rest and gain breath before resuming his journey. Nemesius thought he had never beheld so miserable an object; perhaps because he saw this one singly, without others around to divide his attention. The mendicant's cheeks were hollow and pallid; his large black eyes, sunk far back in his head, were dim and wandering; while his hands were so palsied that the staff he clasped scarcely supported him.

Suddenly, from a door under the portico, a young slave appeared, with a small loaf of bread and some scraps of meat, which he hastily thrust into the beggar's hand, quickly covering them with his tattered cloak, whispered a few words, and was turning to go back into the house by the way he came out.

"Sudden," from a door under the portico, a young slave appeared, with a small loaf of bread and some scraps of meat, which he hastily thrust into the beggar's hand, quickly covering them with his tattered cloak, whispered a few words, and was turning to go back into the house by the way he came out.

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foreign wars, and was ignorant of many things of civic polity, which excited his wonder when his observation was directed to them. He pitied the aged beggar, and would—for the love of his blind child—have given him refuge and support, but had been prevented by an arbitrary law. Then he remembered that, in the past, filial devotion had been more than once rewarded, and immortalized by the Romans; that it was a virtue which ranked high in their ethics; and yet before his very eyes that day the virtue had been construed into a crime, to be followed by death instead of freedom and award. Truly, he thought, there must be more two-faced gods than Janus for such inconsistencies to rule, and the old sage Lentulus was right in declaring that the noble qualities of the Roman character had fallen to decay.

The house of Hippolytus seemed destined, all at once, to become the scene of extraordinary excitement; for towards noon another prisoner, guarded by soldiers, and attended by a jeering crowd, was conducted to his gloomy dungeons—the same one Nemesius saw only yesterday, borne along by a farion mob, and consigned to the Manerline—the Christian Deacon, Laurence; his dark eyes radiant now as then with ineffable joy, his beautiful face tinted by the warm suns of his native Spain, neither pallid nor affrighted, but glowing with the divine light from within.

It was to procure this transfer that Valerian had commanded the presence of Hippolytus, believing that, if placed in his power, the latter would, by means of his secret as to where the treasures of the Christian Church were concealed, it having been reported that he held charge of them. He was to be offered life, freedom, and honors, if he complied, and made the slightest sign of homage to the gods; if not, death by untold torments awaited him. Hippolytus, in his arrest, were to share in the spoils, if success attended their efforts.

Unresisting, the Christian Deacon was urged on with brutal force, down steep, dripping stairways, along dark, narrow corridors, until the iron-plated door of the lowest dungeons, where the wretched slaves were confined, was reached; the grim turnkey opened it, and he was thrust in among the furious, howling crowd, which in its impotent rage was ready to expend its violence on any new object that presented itself.

By the momentary glare of a torch as he entered, he saw a faint glimmer from a grate in the corridor outside, daylight was excluded—Laurence saw a youth supporting on his breast and upholding in his strong arms an aged and apparently dying man. Suddenly the torch was extinguished; the great door clanged to; the heavy bolts were shot into their sockets; and muffled yells of despair and fright and imprecations were heard in the wild roar. But what cared soldiers or guards? It was all a thing of too common occurrence to disturb them in the least; they had obeyed orders, and it was for those who had broken the laws to suffer, not for them, who meant to eat and drink and merry when they were not busy.

"Here," said the turnkey, "I have some shavings for thee, O Christ!" was the prayer that ascended from the soul of the Deacon Laurence, as, moved with divine charity for the benighted creatures around him he sank on his knees upon the flinty rocks to implore for them spiritual light, and a ray which they could not hope from man.

It required faith as divinely strong as that of Laurence to ask in hope the conversion of those ignorant, degraded, and idolatrous ones, who were more like ravening wolves than human beings; but God has set no restrictions on what His servants shall ask, and has given His eternal word, that the faith of Laurence was greater than a grain of mustard-seed—an infinitely small measure, but of power sufficient to remove mountains.

It was on this very day that the old Casian palace was closed, the day fixed for the lovely blind daughter of Nemesius to go back to her beautiful home on the Aventine. At the moment the chariot, which bore the Princess Vivia, Claudia and her faithful Zilla, reached the great bronze gates of the avenue, the sun was low in the west, the sky suffused with delicate drifts of color; a transparent, luminous mist pervaded the air; and the summits of the long mountain range, stretching southward, were clothed with a shimmering line of gold. It seemed as if the heavens had garnered their loveliness wherewith to crown the dying day.

Fabian, who had spent a busy day at the villa, was waiting at the entrance of the avenue to receive them, with Grillo, around whose neck hung a huge garland of daisies and scarlet poppies, under which the silver bells of his collar jingled, and which he appreciatively tried to nibble at every opportunity.

Saluting the Princess with that suave, deferential manner in which he was so perfect, Fabian asked her permission to transfer Claudia from her side to Grillo's back, to which she gave a kind, ready assent; whereupon he gently lifted her on the saddle. She was trembling with joy at being once more at home to stay; and to be met by Fabian, and actually seated on Grillo's back, proved such a realization of her dreams, that it made her almost gasp for breath. But this was not all; for, as if to crown her happiness, Nemesius now joined them, and, having cordially embraced his guests, he dismounted to his darling, which were for no ear but her very own. Oh! the happiness of it—to be at home; to have around her the ones she loved best on earth; to feel the caressing touch of their hands, and hear their tender words!

Then came the bitter thought, stinging her with sharp pain, that she could not see them for the darkness—the dreadful, oppressive darkness! But, as a bird covers its wound with its wing, so she folded over hers the soft wing of silence, not wishing the pain of her

grief to reach the hearts so dear to her own. "This is our Queen returned to her kingdom, my cousin the Princess," said Fabian, with his irresistible smile, to the Princess Vivia; "and, if it please thee, she will take the lead to-day."

"Let us have no ceremony whatever," Fabian; it would mar all my enjoyment of the unrivalled loveliness spread out around me, and which I now see for the first time. No wonder the child's heart grew homesick! And it is as beautiful as the rest to see her on that mouse of a donkey, the like of which I never beheld," answered the Princess, beaming with smiles.

The little procession started, Claudia's hand in her father's as he walked beside Grillo, when Fabian, who was in advance, waved a branch of orange flowers over his head, at which signal a sudden shower of rose-leaves fluttered down upon them as if out of the sky; and at the same moment a choral peasant-song of welcome floated from the trees tops, filling the air with wild, sweet melody, which alternated with the clear tenor of the choragus, that was so flute-like in tone as to be distinctly heard from end to end of the avenue.

On every over-reaching bough of the old chestnuts was perched one or more of the young slaves of the villa, in whose Southern hearts, the love of music was an inherent gift, and a passion for anything spectacular as natural as the breath they drew. Each one was provided with panner of rose-leaves, and, having been drilled by Fabian, they performed their allotted parts with the most enthusiastic spontaneity. Wishing to make Claudia's welcome home one that she could most enjoy, he had devised this, which she could both feel and hear.

"Oh, Fabian!" she exclaimed, as the fragrant snow of rose-leaves fell over her face and hands, "what is it fluttering down so lightly upon me? And those voices, and that one voice like a flute in the air!"

"There are in the air, my pretty one—some strange birds that I snared, but not only sing, but scatter roses, leaves to welcome thee back," he answered, laughing.

"Birds! Oh! Fabian, do birds sing verses?"

"Mine do," he replied; "and they shall sing for their little lady whenever she wishes."

"Oh! my father! how sweet it is to here," she said to Nemesius, in soft, tremulous tones; then she laughed, and stretched out her hand to Fabian, which he bent over and kissed.

"Thou art always so good to me, Fabian; and I love thee!"

"Listen, Fabian!" exclaimed Nemesius, as the sweet tenor of the choragus soared high up into the air like a lark; "it sounds like the voice we heard in the ilex grove yesterday."

"It does. I detect the same chord, the same tone. It is a rare voice. I heard him singing at his work the other day, and this little scene suggested itself. He is in some way related to Symphonius, as beautiful as a young Apollo; and his occupation is to keep the carnations in the gardens trained up and free from weeds."

"I knew they were not birds, Fabian," laughed Claudia, who had listened with interest to the conversation.

"I meant their voices," he laughed back, never at a loss.

thought how wonderfully beautiful she was. And so the old idyllic life at the villa on the Aventine was resumed, in all its material aspects the same, the only change being in the blind girl herself—a change which to a casual observer was not apparent, but which her father and Zilla noticed with silent but exquisite pain. This was her ever-present consciousness of being blind, which she involuntarily betrayed in many ways, now by a sudden shrinking back when in motion, as the child's heart grew homesick! And it was as beautiful as the rest to see her on that mouse of a donkey, the like of which I never beheld," answered the Princess, beaming with smiles.

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When I handed her the letter she turned it over several times in a puzzled way; then said, with an embarrassed smile.

"Maybe you would read it for me, Miss Florence, please? I don't know writing at all."

"I was surprised, as she seemed fond of reading.

"How is that, Kathleen?" I asked, "when you speak of great reading?"

"I am very fond of reading, ma'am," she rejoined; "but I can hardly make out writing at all. After my mother's death I never went to school."

"I am so sorry!" I said. "But after this we will have a writing lesson every evening, when the work is done."

"Oh, that will be just what I'd like!" she replied with radiant countenance. I opened the letter; it read as follows:

Dear Miss Blaine—This is to let you know that your stepmother is dead, and has left it upon you as her dying request that I am to be your husband. Times were bad, and my lending her money leaves her and you my debtors to the amount of one hundred pounds. The same I will remit if you promise to come home and marry me. It can not be that you will allow the good woman who raised you to languish in Purgatory for a debt you can repay.

By this time I should judge you were tired of the hard work in America, which I learn from Martin Clancy you have been doing. Kindly let me know if you receive this, and I will send passage money; forgiving the past, and always,

Your faithful friend, PETER BREEN.

Kathleen sat gazing into space with a troubled look in her grey eyes, her lips tightly shut, one foot nervously tapping the floor. At last she spoke.

"Tell me, Miss Florence, would that debt be mentious be on me at all, think you? Would there be any obligation? God knows I wouldn't like to be the means of keeping the woman one hour in suffering, though she was but a poor mother to me."

"No, not the slightest obligation," I answered promptly. "Of course I do not know the particulars, but unless you made a promise, Kathleen—"

"A promise is it! To that man?" she exclaimed. "I was on account of him mostly that I ran away to America."

as my duties did direction of their seen any of their mother as a very girls lovely, and handsome.

About 9 o'clock were in our little when some one kn "I beg your sweet voice as I told me you would let me kn I use to go in I can."

The lady had room while she thought I had a face, nor one a kindness. But she had my mother claiming: "Oh, Mrs. here! O dear, my mother I but I had al stranger."

"It is, Kath You remember "And you, I cried. "Ah, would never ha I was here— pened that you Why did you fo She drew us in the middle, at the other cheeks—indeed After we had she told how h tion of carpet lands which I value. For y deavored to I for I wanted fortune," she We talked in who, we hoped a better land, husband's dea whom we mist In the mid voice, followi "Mother, You have be "It is you, "Come in, c call Frank an and bring the "A black cou doorway to l extraordinary peared."

"I knew th in the world delighted to ward when w In a few m her brothers "Here, call Ileen, gatheri loving embri son and M and has be and of whom of times. Her But they w morrow mo They pro kindly, as a their mo spoiled ch chness, rejoic rounded us their own r feasted till were the h ashamed of we had kni blessed far everywhere numbered a in spite of give up m summer fo seashore co My dear after, with Kathleen's and girls a constantly ternal nes dear to the their little Florence."

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