

PALMS

ANNA HANSON DORSEY, AUTHOR OF "COANA," "FLEMINGS," "TANGLED PATHS," "MAY BROOKE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER VI.

LIFE IN ROME—ELEAZER BEN ASA.

The jealous suspicions which had made the beautiful Lodiæe so unhappy being lulled to rest, she began with fresh zest to exercise her most fascinating wiles to captivate Nemesius. That he has reputed invulnerable did not deter her in the least, for the fact would only increase her triumph should her efforts to win him be crowned with success; but he, all unconscious of her purposes, received her coquettish advances with such genuine unconcern, and an indifference almost verging on rudeness, that she was sometimes furious, and again discouraged and despondent.

She tried to reach his heart whenever the opportunity offered, by showing a tender interest in his child, by affecting the deepest sympathy for her misfortune and his sorrow, by glowing praise of her loveliness, and offering repeated entreaties that she should be brought to make her a visit, promising that nothing should be spared to give her happiness; but Nemesius, knowing exactly what constituted his little Claudia's happiness, and how ineffectual all efforts would be to give her either pleasure or content separated from himself and the simple joys of her home life, felt it best to decline what he supposed was a well-meant kindness.

In the egoism of his great love for his blind child, it was no surprise to the fond father to hear Claudia's loveliness admired, and tender, caring, pitying words spoken of her sad case—for who that once looked upon her could avoid seeking his own fortune, and test his skill. But where was he? Fabian Cæcilius had told him, shortly after the Emperor's visit to the villa, that the Jew had returned to Rome; but since that occasion weeks had elapsed, and he had seen neither one nor the other.

Obediently the impulse, Nemesius went direct to Fabian's palace, and was informed by the porter that his master had been suddenly called to Neapolis on some urgent affair. Not satisfied with such meagre information, he directed the man to summon the steward, who promptly appeared, bowing obsequiously, and with deprecatory grimace, to learn his will. But when questioned, he could only repeat the fact as stated by the porter, and the additional information that his master had named no time for his return. Nemesius was about to leave the house when the words, "But there's a letter, noble sir, perhaps for you," arrested his steps, and, confronting the steward, he said: "Where is the letter? Fetch it here, that I may see if it is addressed to me."

There was authority in his air and tone, which suggested to the man's dull mind that he had possibly got himself into difficulties by his negligence; and he quickly returned with the missive, which Nemesius at a glance saw directed to himself.

"Why was this sent to me immediately?" he demanded. "The name upon it is plainly written, and there are none in Rome to whom it is unknown, so there is no excuse for its detention."

"None, noble sir; at the very moment you summoned me, it was in the hands of a messenger, who had orders to place it in your illustrious hands. The delay was owing altogether to my master's having charged old Bianca—a perfect marplot, believe me—with the letter, instead of myself; and what did she do but put it under a little silver statue of Prosperity, that stands on my master's table, to keep it from blowing out of the window, while she gathered up his things, and he left strewn over everything; and by the time she got through, she couldn't remember where she put it, and had had the whole house in a stir searching for it; and it was only about an hour ago—on my veracity, noble sir!—that it was found. And I hope I shall not be blamed for the misdoings of an old woman, who has no merit to boast of except having nursed my master's noble mother; and he is that soft-hearted about her that if she burnt the house down over his head, he'd not even give her a frown. Will the illustrious captain be pleased to walk into the atrium, out of this scorching heat, while he reads the letter and refreshes himself."

Nemesius stood listening to the voluble stream of words without seeking to interrupt it; and although inwardly fuming, his countenance, as usual, showed no trace of his irritation, and he followed the steward through the vestibule into the atrium, preferring to be alone when he read Fabian's letter. Here the delicious shade, the fragrant air, and the soft play of the fountain, brought instant and soothing refreshment; and, throwing himself upon a couch, he snatched the letter with feverish haste to get at the contents. It was only a few hastily-scribbled lines, after all, that met his eye:

"The Jew has again flitted from Rome. May Cerberus devour him! I go to Neapolis in great haste, but, unless the Fates decree otherwise, I shall be back within ten days. "FABIAN."

Nemesius crumpled the scrap of papyrus in his hand, swallowed a draught of the cooled wine brought for his refreshment, and, drawing his toga around him, went away with a heavy heart to occupy himself with duties which, although revolting to his noble instincts, were, according to his lights, imperative on him as a loyal Roman and high official of the imperial Government.

Just at this time several events occurred, attended by circumstances which gave a renewed impetus to the

persecution against the Christians. One day there was a special entertainment at the imperial palace in honor of Valerian's birthday, at which all the most illustrious, beautiful, and distinguished persons who composed Roman society were present. Among these was a noble matron, whose personal charms were only surpassed by her virtues and the dignity of her character. Her husband was a high official of the Empire, and they had two sons, beautiful striplings, who both gave promise of a distinguished future. She was a daughter of the Ancelini, a family which had always ranked high among the old patrician houses of the Empire.

On this occasion she became her usual richly attired, and was as usual the centre of all that was best worth knowing in the highest circles of Rome. Among those who aspired to her friendship and now thronged around her was Lodiæe, who would not be repulsed, although her advances heretofore had been civilly but coldly received. The apartments being overcrowded, the heat, combined with the stifled perfume of flowers with which they were profusely decorated, became insupportable, and the beautiful matron Sabina fainted in the arms of her friends, who bore her to a room, and were zealous in their efforts to restore her; none being more so than Lodiæe, who, kneeling beside her, unclasped, who jewelled cincture around her waist and was removing the folds of spangled Syrian gauze from her throat and bosom when a large ruby, a single stone set in gold of Etrurian workmanship, which was suspended from her neck by a long string of fine pearls, fell out in full view. (Roman ladies of rank who were secretly Christians wore gems on which were cut the image of the Redeemer, or that of His sinless Mother. Very small images of both, in silver and gold, were also worn concealed on the person.)

The size and splendor of the gem, gleaming under a strong light before their eyes, attracted the attention of the group around Sabina, especially of Lodiæe, whose passion for precious stones was so inordinate that, involuntarily, she lifted the ornament in her long white fingers, and holding it up to the light, scanned the carving upon it, then, with a ray of horror, threw it from her as if it had been an asp. Another, more represented on the face of a ruby, in fine, skillfully cut lines, the "image of Him who was crucified," and it was known by this sign that she who wore it was a Christian. The fact was instantly reported to Valerian, who purple with rage, approached the noble lady just as she recovered consciousness.

"What means this, woman?" he roared, almost inarticulate with fury, as he held the gem dangling on the string of pearls before her eyes. She gazed upon the blood-red gleaming object for an instant, while a strange smile irradiated her features; then, rising and fixing her calm eyes upon his, she answered aloud, so that all might hear: "It means that I am a Christian!"

It was but a short distance from this scene of imperial splendor to the torture-chamber, and not far thence to the horrible dungeons of the Tullian, to which her broken body, still palpitating with life, was a few hours later conveyed. In one of the twenty feet by twelve surfaces of the earth, shut in by immense walls reeking with noisome mildews, and closed overhead by a vaulted roof of stone, through which no ray of light could penetrate, no breath of air come to sweeten the foul smells arising from the great sewer underground, that drained off the filth of the Mamertine, dark, and filled with dripping things, this noble matron, delicately nurtured from her cradle, and accustomed to all that was beautiful and luxurious, was consigned to perish, cut off from every dearest earthly tie, for her unflinching confession of Jesus Christ.

On the same day the palace of Sabina was surrounded by soldiers, and searched. Her husband and sons, being absent from Rome, were ignorant of what had occurred, and all that awaited their return. The quest of the persecutors was rewarded by a confirmation of the fact they had come to ascertain. What else did it mean but that the entire family were Christians, when the intruders found upon the shrines, in place of the Pæthia, who had so long reigned, small figures in silver and gold representing Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mother, and the Apostles? What more evident proof was necessary? On being arrested under their own roof, where the soldiers were in ambush awaiting their arrival, the heroes of Christ replied to the accusations against them by declaring themselves Christians, and glorying in their confession. The trial was made short by their resolute firmness: they were tortured, cajoled, bribed, tortured again, and finally condemned to die. They were sentenced to be turned into the arena with tigers from India, and when the hour came the Flavian Amphitheatre was packed.

The circumstances, and the high rank of the victims, made the present occasion more memorable than any which had preceded it. The Emperor and his court, occupying their usual conspicuous place under gold-broidered and gold-fringed canopies, presented an array of imperial splendor that dazzled the multitude. The appearance of the victims in the arena, in short white tunics, girded about the waist by a cord of gold and noble bearing, full of dignified courage and high resolve,—as greeted with a savage roar, and outcries and yells from the tens of thousands who were present to enjoy the spectacle, and who were hushed to a breathless silence only when the iron door that separated the cages of the wild beasts from the arena was thrown open, and, through the bars that still ramped and raging about the narrow space that confined them, while the sound of their savage growls filled the Amphitheatre.

At length—how long it seemed to those who thirsted for blood! how long to those who awaited the moment of their eternal deliverance and triumph!—the creaking bars were drawn aside, and tigers bounded into the arena, and, after making a short circle around the wide open space in which they so suddenly found themselves, their lithe, sinuous forms undulating with wondrous grace as they moved, they suddenly halted, uttering low, savage growls, their eyes gleaming like scintillating flames, their jaws and their tails swaying slowly to and fro. The delay was but for a moment; then followed the deadly spring, which buried their teeth and sharp iron claws in the unresisting flesh of the noble Christians, which had been set as a banquet before them.

How it happened—whether the people were suddenly and mysteriously touched by some electric force of humanity which revolted at so cruel and unequal a contest, or experienced for the moment the natural impulse of man against beast, which made them involuntarily take sides with the men who were being rent and torn by the tigers before their eyes; or whether they shed blood, and beginning to sicken at the sight of such horrors; or whether it was given as a sign and warning to the imperial tyrant whose vile heart gloated over the inhuman spectacle—none may say; but all at once, by a sudden, simultaneous movement, the great multitude, who but a few moments before were raving for blood, sprang to their feet, their hands raised, thumbs turned down (the sign expressed the will of the audience that the cruelties of the arena should cease) uttering roars that made the canvas roof of the Amphitheatre rise and strain its fastenings, as if a hurricane raged under it. But Valerian, enraged nearly to frenzy, turning a deaf ear to the voice of the people and a blind eye to their down-turned thumbs signalled to the guards below that the struggle should continue to the death as it did—no, not to death, except that of the body, but unto a glorious and eternal life, whose joys it had not entered into the heart of man even to conceive! And so, not with despairing cries and moans of bitter pain, but with loud, exulting words of praise, the husband and sons of the noble Roman matron Sabina glorified their confession of Christ, and sealed their testimony with their blood.

Nothing that had yet happened had so infuriated Valerian as the late demonstration of the people in the Flavian Amphitheatre. Was it a sign that the new faith system was infecting the populace? In his secret soul he was afraid, and knew not whom to trust, since some even of his own household, and other whom he had most honored and caressed in, had abandoned the old sacred traditions of Rome for the novelties which cast dishonor on the gods and threatened a disruption of the Empire. His hatred of the Christians, Nero, that collectively they had but one head, and that he might destroy them by a single blow. Then he remembered that they had a chief bishop, their Pontifex Maximus, whom they claimed as their head—Pope he was called—Stephen, of whom Valerian's spies reported many wonderful things. In his horrible plan of extermination, he vowed that this Stephen should be destroyed, and made a signal example of, to strike greater terror into the hearts of his followers. He would set a price on his head, and when he was put to death he would employ every engine of power and his command to root out and exterminate the abhorred sect.

To rout great armies and destroy kingdoms were the achievements most gloried in by imperial Rome, the subjugation of nations her pastime; but that these arrogant heathen did not know that as long as time endured, the Pope, the head of the despised Christian Church, would survive all that the powers and principalities, the kings, hell itself, could do for his destruction. They believed the story of the phoenix, that failed to read the mysterious significance of the symbol.

It is recorded that after the long and furious persecution under Maximian and his associates in power, the former boasted that at last Christianity was exterminated, and that ere the light of another day he would destroy the Pope, Innocence fairer than sculptor had ever wrought, or Nemesius ever imagined, and which never faded from his memory. Then back to the cool atrium, to the light morning repast awaiting them, where, after pouring the customary libation as a thank-offering in honor of the gods, they partook of the meal with appetites to which the sweet morning had given healthful zest.

While the moments sped joyously on, the happiness of Nemesius was tempered by forebodings and expectation. Were his hopes to be realized, or forever crushed? Would the Jew appear? He knew that his thinking more or less would not alter or change matters in the least, but only unite him for so; so restraining his impatience and dread, he drew a roll of papyrus from his bosom, and began to read to his little Claudia the fables of one Æsop, which had just appeared in Rome. Enchanted, she leaned against his shoulder, listening to every word, and keenly appreciating the moral so wittily conveyed through the medium of beasts and birds, as well as of men. While they were thus engaged, Symphronius appeared, to announce the arrival of "an old man, who waits without, with samples of wine, and insists on seeing the master of the villa."

"It is he of whom I spoke some time ago," answered Nemesius. "Bring him hither."

"I beg my noble master to be careful of wines at hazards from irresponsible persons," replied Symphronius, in a tone of remonstrance.

"My kinsman, Fabian Cæcilius, recommends him to me; but be assured, my faithful Symphronius, that no wine shall go into my vaults without thy approval; for I put thy skill as a taster and judge before that of the world," said Nemesius; upon which

his escape from their coils seemed impossible, he resume the thread of the narrative.

One day, as he was mounting his horse near the Forum, Nemesius heard a gay and familiar voice behind him, and turning his head as he vaulted into the saddle, saw Fabian Cæcilius spring from his chariot, and, with a graceful wave of his hand, come towards him, his short curly locks bare, as was the Roman fashion, his fine white lamb-wool toga gracefully disposed over his rich attire, and his countenance wearing its accustomed bland expression of amiable cynicism. There was the usual crowd on the spot; much hurrying of those who were full of business, and loitering of idlers, who were either there for amusement or as spies; there either for the gaudy patrician with the illustrious commander did not fail to attract attention, both of them being well known by sight to the people.

"I salute thee, Nemesius! Accept my embrace on trust, unless thou wouldst prefer my spring up behind thee, or thou discount for it—only it is not worth the trouble," he said, laughing lightly, while he drew as near as he could without getting his feet under the horse's hoofs.

"Hast been taking a drive with Phaeton, and been dropped out of the clouds?" returned Nemesius, with a grin smile. "No! Finding I never know whether thou art here, or there."

"Here I am, at least for the present," was the good-natured reply. "But hold! what in the name of Æthon is the matter with this bit? Thy grooms deserve the rack for such carelessness. See what they have done!"

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"I would commend thee, my Achatas, to moderate in that respect. The Fates hold the threads, and my experience has taught me that he who hopes the less gets the more. Now farewell, my Nemesius! I am on my way to visit the fair Lodiæe, whose spells have not yet, I fear, subdued thy obdurate heart. Afterwards, lest thou shouldst deem me altogether frivolous, I am going the rounds of the porticoes, to try and discover if the philosophers have yet found an antidote for this miserable existence, the mortal necessities of which render life unendurable. I learn that some letters of Seneca have just been—originally it is said—and as his life was not of a piece with the austere morals of his pen, I may get from them a hint of what I seek."

Nemesius laughed. Fabian's affectations always amused him, for he knew how keenly he sought and enjoyed the sensuous pleasures of life, and that he was at heart a perfect Sybarite. Then a quick farewell was exchanged, and they separated.

With the Emperor's permission, Nemesius spent the following day at his villa. That morning when Claudia, half-awake, called Zilla, a soft kiss upon her rosy mouth and his voice told her who was there waiting beside her couch until she should stir from her slumbers. She was soon in readiness for a stroll with him through the fragrant, dewy gardens, loitering here and there beside the fountains, pausing in the shaded alleys to listen to the clear, sweet warblings of thrushes and nightingales; then to the dove-cote to feed her white-winged pets, and laugh delightfully when they fluttered carelessly to her shoulder, some alighting on her golden head, and others on her outstretched hand,—a group symbolizing innocently to which the sculptor had ever wrought, or Nemesius ever imagined, and which never faded from his memory. Then back to the cool atrium, to the light morning repast awaiting them, where, after pouring the customary libation as a thank-offering in honor of the gods, they partook of the meal with appetites to which the sweet morning had given healthful zest.

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the old steward, well pleased, bowed his thanks, and went away to bring in the stranger.

"Do not be frightened, my timid dove, when this man enters; he comes by my request, and I trust him. But perhaps thou wouldst prefer to go to Zilla for a little while?" said Nemesius, an imperceptible tremor in his voice, his brave heart strained to the utmost on the issue of this last effort to give sight to his child.

"No! no! I would not leave thee for one single moment of this precious day; for when shall I have thee all myself again? Let the old man—ten old men, if thou wilt—come; I am not afraid—here!" she exclaimed, with impetuous fondness, as she clung closer to him, his arm around her.

Symphronius now appeared, conducting a man who, but for his bowed shoulders, would have been of stately height. He was clad in dark, flowing garments, and his head, which he uncovered on entering, was white; his features were cast in a noble mould; his large black eyes, while full of keen intelligence, had yet a furtive expression, as if ever on the outlook for sudden danger; and his hands, half concealed by the folds of his wide sleeves, were long and shapely. Across his forehead, stretched an oblique scar, which, however, did not impair the dignity of his countenance. At his girdle were several straw-covered flasks, which contained samples of rare wines. He made a low obeisance to Nemesius, who returned a gracious salutation.

"Thy name?" he asked.

"Eleazer Ben Asa, my lord," replied the Jew, in a low but distinct voice.

"Thou art," then inquired as to the quality of his wines, their country, vintage, and age, with other questions familiar to epicures. The old steward was summoned, who brought small crystal cups as thin and transparent as air, and the samples were tasted, and found satisfactory.

"But this surpasses all!" said Nemesius, tasting some which he poured from the last flask; "I only wanted to taste a drop, but this is worth an aureus as a drop." Symphronius, at this, passing the cup to him; "and leave the merchant with me to settle terms. I have no wines to equal these samples; take the flasks with thee, and try them all."

The steward, jealous of the reputation of his wine-cellar, put up his under-lip, gave one or two quick intimations that the assertion was doubtful, and bore the flasks and cups to his own sunny apartment, where after subjecting them to the most critical and approved tests, he was obliged to acknowledge himself vanquished—which somewhat lowered his proud conceit.

In the meantime, this is what was passing in the atrium. As soon as the steward had left them (too well trained to return unless summoned) Nemesius said, in kindly, unobtrusive tones: "Be seated, I pray thee, Ben Asa."

But the Jew, who seemed not to hear him, was standing as if spellbound, his piercing gaze fixed on the blind child, whose head rested against her father's shoulder, her beautiful, wide-open eyes staring blankly. Some memory, that brought with it a sharp and cruel pang, swept through the man's heart, and arrested his face like a marble, and almost stifled his breath; but it was only for a moment; for he had been taught by fiery trials to hold his emotions under control, and appear as impassive as if he had no right to human passions. Presently, as if starting from a dream, he said:

"I am at thy service, illustrious sir; may I proceed?" answered Nemesius, wondering if the Jew were not some dreamy visionary.

"I have brought a pretty toy for thee, fair child," he said, gently, as he drew a small box from his bosom. "May I offer it, noble sir? It was fashioned by a skilful artist, and is mine by inheritance; it is very old, but never please her, I think."

"Our friend offers thee a pretty gift, my Claudia; what sayest thou?" asked Nemesius.

"His voice is kind and true; I like him. But why give me a thing he prizes himself?" she asked.

"It is thine, fair child; make me happy by accepting it," said Ben Asa; then murmured in his native tongue: "It was hers who was like thee; I thought, when I looked upon thee, that she had come back to me from the dead."

While these inarticulate words escaped his lips, he had produced a small key, with which he wound up some fine mechanism inside the box, and the lid of which suddenly opened, and a beautiful bird, its wings half open, sprang out, uttering a note, which poured out the most transporting notes.

Claudia's delight was unspeakable; she could not be persuaded that it was not a living bird; she touched it daintily with the tips of her fingers; she felt its eyes, its open bill and the vibrations of its body, as the fine mechanism forced the wild thrills and soft warblings through its throat. While she listened, her eyes distended with delight, the Jew suddenly flashed from a small, strong hand-mirror a sharp ray of sunlight full into her darkened eyes; but she neither bleached nor winked; they might have been of stone, so impervious were they to any impression. The bird sang on, she all intent, and Ben Asa produced a magnifying-glass of great power, and, leaning nearer to her, scanned her eyes through it, Nemesius watching every movement, as if life or death hung on the act.

"Just a nearer scrutiny, and I shall be more sure," murmured the Jew. "May I look into thy eyes, sweet child? may I touch them very lightly? I will not harm thee."

Claudia turned her face quickly towards her father; her lips quivered, a vague fright distressed her; she could not understand why this stranger should wish to touch her eyes.

"Thou wilt consent, my child? I wish it, and thou lovest me too well to refuse me so small a request," he said, holding her hand.

The bird was, being tenderly and gently touched with sweet, moist, perfumed crystals, remaining perfectly motionless. The examination he had ascertained, as he opened, he touched her eyes, contained, which perfume around eyes, and how art very kind, she said, holding her hand, then bent down her lips.

"I would see an undertone of Greek."

"Come, my now to Zid, the word of Nemesius, risk few words in here, then I will say 'May I take sir?' She is dear."

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