

THE CATHOLIC RECORD.

PALMS

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

BY THE WAY OF THE CROSS THEY WIN THEIR PALMS.

"I have come, dear child," said Camilla, as they entered the cool, shaded atrium, "to stay until the sun gets low; then thou wilt come with me to my old villa near the Via Latina, where thy noble father and my husband Tertullus will meet us. The holy Pontiff has signified a wish to see thee. Will thou come?"

"Oh, joyfully! I have thought constantly of the holy man, and that wonderful day that seemed to be the first day of my life. And his face was the first I saw when my eyes were opened. Thou art very kind, dear lady, to a foolish child," said Claudia, kissing the hand she held more.

To kneel once more at the holy Pontiff's feet and receive his benediction, like a perfumed flame, penetrating her heart, while it glowed and sang its new song to Him whose name was graven upon it, and to know that her father would be there to share her happiness, was almost too much; only the language of Heaven could voice her felicity; and, although she made no attempt to give its expression, it shone in her eyes, smiled upon her lips, and crowned her also with a strange, spiritualized loveliness, of which she was as unconscious as is a flower when the glory of the sunshine rests upon it.

"I thought it would make thee glad," said the noble matron, noting the celestial expression of her countenance, while she thought: "How near the highest innocent soul!" Two of the household slaves now entered, each bearing a tray, one of which held crystal cups of snow-cooled orange juice, light, sweet cakes, great golden pears, and clusters of white and purple grapes; on the other were brodered napkins of fine Egyptian linen, two small gold basins containing perfumed water, and garlands of summer lilies and Damascus roses. After arranging the refreshments on a malachite table, whose green, highly-polished surface gave beautiful effect to the vands, they withdrew; and Claudia, always a gracious hostess, invited her friend to the light repast, which the summer heat made especially grateful.

Camilla had arisen at an early hour that morning, to assist at the divine Sacrifice of the Altar in the palace of a friend who was a recent convert to Christianity—a widow, whose two half-grown daughters received baptism at the same time as herself. She gave secret shelter to a priest, and one or two converts of the patrician class, on whom the authorities determined to take signal vengeance as soon as they could be hunted down. Many of the ancient palaces of Rome had been constructed with concealed places of refuge within their walls, to which their inmates could fly for safety in times of invasion and violence. This and one or two others like it had become not only hiding-places for the persecuted priest, but sanctuaries where the mystery of the Holy Eucharist was often celebrated.

When the Divine Sacrifice was finished, and each devout soul had received the Bread of Eternal Life, and offered fervent thanksgiving for the mystic feast, the little congregation silently rose to depart. In the corridor Camilla spoke to Nemesius, who had been present. She warned him that there were whispered rumors about—none could tell whence they came—that his child had been cured of her blindness by the Pontiff Stephen, and that suspicion and surmise were rife. Some declared that a famous Eastern physician had given her sight, but others preferred the more sensational side of the story—that it was by the sorceries of the Christian Pope, who was well known to be a magician, that her blindness was cured.

"Discovery is inevitable. I do not seek it, and will not evade it. My will is the holy will of God. I have prepared my little one for that which is in prospect. And she is willing to suffer for Christ. Nature has given her a brave heart; divine grace will give her strength and constancy in the hour of trial. She knows the voice of her true Shepherd, who will deliver her from the claws of the wolves seeking to devour her; and He will bestow in His arms to His own heavenly pastures," answered Nemesius, as if commanding with himself.

Camilla's eyes filled with tears. "I am going to her this morning," she said. "The holy Pontiff has asked to see her, and with thy consent, I will take her with me to my villa, where we will spend the night. Tertullus will be there, and, if it be possible, will thou not join us? In the morning our Holy Father offers the Divine Sacrifice in the old tower-chapel."

"It is my turn to serve him at the altar. I will be with you this evening. Tell my little maid to expect me," he answered, and they parted.

And so Camilla had come on her loving errand to the villa on the evening, the explanation of which brings herself and Claudia to the end of their light repast. Rising from the table, the little hostess led her friend up to the beautiful summer room where she was born, and in which her fair young mother had died, since which sad event no changes had been made in it, except to remove a shine on which had stood a statue of some deity, to which formerly divine honors had been daily offered, and certain images of the Penates that had for many years looked down from their pedestals with stony smiles of promise, which they are powerless to fulfill. In their places, carved in alabaster by a young Christian sculptor in the Catacombs, were small statues of Christ the Good Shepherd, the Virgin Mother and Her divine Babe, the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, who had suffered martyrdom in Rome, and others

who had given glorious testimony, even unto death, for their Faith.

Here, sitting together, Camilla and her young neophyte held long, sweet converse, and the noble Christian matron discovered, as the latter laid her heart bare to her, that her dispositions were singularly perfect; that her faith, love, simplicity of mind, and directness of purpose were in advance of the brief period of her Christian life, and were supernaturally combined with an utter, childlike humility which pervaded all. They talked much of their ordeal by which the martyrs won their palms, but Claudia was presently silent, then at last she gave expression to her feelings.

"Their terrible sufferings do not last long," she said, "and when all is over they fly like doves to the dear Christ; then their joy begins, never to end. The wicked ones may frighten me by their violence when they take me away to kill me, and I may cry out with pain for I am only a child; but my tongue shall never deny Him, and my soul, that came from Him, shall cling to Him and praise Him until my flesh and my body are torn to pieces; then He will bring me alive out of their hands, to dwell with Him forever and forever."

Camilla now explained to her more fully the meaning of the Holy Eucharist, having several times before only approached the august subject; she told her that Jesus Christ Himself was really present in the divine Sacrifice of the Altar, and that His faithful ones received Him whole and entire from the hands of the priest, in the Holy Communion, a true Food and their Guest, to strengthen and sustain them in life, and as their Viaticum in death, to defend, console, and give them safe passage from time to eternity.

"O! tell me how soon I may receive Him into my heart!" she besought. "It is not usual, dear child, for one so young as thyself to be admitted to this great mystery; but our Holy Father Stephen will judge. I think I may give thee hope," answered Camilla, feeling these words, that an exception would be made in favor of this child of many graces, over whose head the sword of martyrdom hung suspended; for it was one of those unusual cases in which years do not count.

The day passed happily and swiftly, heaven had seemed so near, and at sunset Camilla, accompanied by Claudia, drove out of the city gates, along the dusty stretches of the Agro Romano, where all the beauty of the peaceful, smiling scene, touched with the flickering gold of the sunset, made eloquent protest against the inhuman cruelties by which mortals marred the divine harmony of nature.

Within an hour after their arrival at the old walled villa, Nemesius and Tertullus came, and, after brief but cordial greetings, they went together down into the Catacombs, to present themselves to the Pontiff, and receive from him certain instructions in relation to measures for a more extended distribution of aid to the needy, suffering Church.

Early on the following morning Claudia was summoned to the chapel of the ruined tower. Following her guide, she was ushered into the presence of the holy Bishop, who regarded her with tender interest, as with glad yet reverent steps she approached and knelt at his feet. Giving her his blessing, he questioned her, leading her by gentle steps from one point to another, until her pure heart, with all its faith, fervor and courage, lay open before him, and he discerned her spirit so clearly as to be assured that she might indeed receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, and that in her angelic heart Our Blessed Lord would find an abiding place in which it would delight Him to dwell. The Pontiff gave her holy absolution; for, although her life was without a stain of mortal sin, there were doubtless venial shadows, from which it would release and purify her. Then he bade her go in peace; and her face beamed with joy and happiness when she joined her father and Camilla, and told them that she was invited to the wedding feast.

"It will be her Viaticum," thought Camilla, whose eyes were dim with tears; "but oh! supreme selfishness! oh, human weakness! ye shall not have power to make me for a moment wish to keep such a soul from heaven!"

Camilla had prepared the altar, draping it with precious embroideries of gold, not the cast-off luxury of her worldly life, but new and costly fabrics, and thinking nothing too rich or priceless for His temple-throne. She had brought forth her jeweled vases, and arranged them, filled with flowers, on each side of the tabernacle, and placed among them golden lamps, which contained perfumed oil, and gave a clear, brilliant light. And now the saintly Pontiff, in vestments of white, with silver brodered crosses upon the back, attended the altar dress, and celebrated the Divine Sacrifice with singular devotion, knowing that for all there present, including himself, this might be their last, and the Communion their Viaticum. The same thought was in every mind, and so with adoring faith, exalted love, and solemn benediction of His ineffable presence, their interview with their heavenly Guest was so full of fervor that in pouring forth the ointment of their love upon Him, they forgot their needs and all they had meant to ask for; but He knew—He would remember, and they were satisfied.

When the moment of departure came, the Pontiff blessed them individually and with deep emotion. "Pray for my little Lucia," he said, laying his hand on Claudia's golden head. "Let us remember each other, my children, in our prayers; pray for your old Bishop, that when proved his gold may not be found to be dross; and pray for the persecuted Church. As often as I celebrate the holy mysteries I will have you in mind."

He was turning away, and they were about separating, when Claudia, with a voice full of entreaty, asked him if she might come again.

"We will meet soon, my lamb," he answered, gently. The spirit of

prophecy was on him; he knew what he knew, but held his peace.

That night two youths, wrapped in sober-hued gages, met in the shadow of a stately palace in the neighborhood of the Forum Trajano, evidently intent on some appointment. There was a fog, through which altered a soft drizzle of rain; and while they stood conversing a movement, a low-voiced stranger drew near, and, having courteously saluted them, said that he had accidentally overheard them while standing under the arched door-way close by, where he had taken shelter from the rain, and judging by their words that they were Christians, he besought them to guide him where he could be baptized and instructed, as that very day a martyrdom which had opened his eyes to the truth.

Zealous but inexperienced, as well as credulous, the young men invited him to accompany them; they were only catechumens, they said, but would introduce him to a holy deacon, who would give him the instruction he desired. He expressed his thanks with proper humility and gratitude, and they proceeded on their way together. Had they only known that this plausible wretch was a miserable apostate, how swiftly they would have avoided his companionship! But there was none to tell his brief, infamous history—how once, in a moment of excitement, and ungovernable curiosity to penetrate the secrets of a mysterious sect, he afterwards hater than a Christian and been declared himself a heretic, and had sworn after, with several of his new companions, and confronted with the rack and flame, had denied and cursed Christ as required, burnt incense to Jupiter, and accused his friends of having deluded him by their sorceries. He witnessed their sufferings, and, to prove himself a true servant of the gods, he ridged and joined the holy martyrs until their souls passed to their eternal reward.

Having thus saved his worthless life, and being without means to sustain it, he turned to honest toil, and a stranger in Rome, he was without friends, without shelter, and perishing for food. At this crisis of his fate he was approached by the saintly deacon, a lady of rank, who wished to hire him as a servant, and there were not mistaken when they counted on his necessities for his abject and unqualified assent. He had no scruples; his price was protection and good pay; hence he betrayed no hesitation when he learned from the lips of the beautiful woman, to whom he blindly swore unconditional obedience, that he was to assassinate a certain illustrious young patrician, whose love she had trifled with, encouraged, and rejected, and who out of revenge had threatened to blazon abroad a secret that involved her honor, which by some means he had possessed himself of. A few days later the body of the unfortunate youth was found under the main entrance to his own palace, with a single wound, so deep and mortal, that it penetrated his heart through and through. (In medieval times in Italy, the hired professional assassins were known as "Bravos.")

Do we recognize in these two partners in crime Laodice and the wily Cypriot, and at last understood the hold she had on him? For, although she should a person of her wealth and consequence denounce him. As her slave, she protected and learned to confide in him; while he, as patient as he was wily, bided his time. Thus the tie that united these two in the bonds of iniquity is explained.

The true motive of the Cypriot in addressing the two catechumens was that he hoped to gain possession of the noble Desca, Nemesius, whom they were going to meet, and he felt that his opportunity to win a rich reward, and release from Laodice's service—she had promised it—was at hand; for, could they be persuaded to let him accompany them, he would see with his own eyes, and be able at last to report something conclusive.

The youths now stopped before a narrow door in a wall which enclosed one of the palace gardens; a single low tap was responded to inside by the withdrawing of a bolt; the door was cautiously opened, and the three entered. Groping through long, dimly-lighted corridors, they joined the little assembly of the catechumens, old and young, who at the invitation of Nemesius met in one of the lower apartments of his own palace, in the mysteries of the Christian faith.

He was now standing before his eager listeners, explaining, in simple, logical, fervent words, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, where his eyes met those of the new-comer, who involuntarily shrank before the dignity of his presence and the manly, spiritualized beauty that he had met before the noble Christian in his tools quickly restored the vile creature's self-control, and he stood with downcast eyes, listening to the words of divine truth with apparently the most humble and absorbed attention. The instruction closed with a fervent invocation to the Most Holy Trinity for the grace of enlightenment, and a prayer to the *Pater Noster*, and to the *Virgo Mater Salvatoris, Advocata Nostra*.

The strange neophyte was then led forward and introduced to Nemesius, who welcomed him with Christian charity, asked no questions, but said a few words of encouragement, and invited him to come again; but this, it is needless to say, was his last appearance.

Laodice was sunk in the depths of a gloomy, retrospective mood, and the Cypriot, with his usual stealthy step, came into her presence to report his success. She had been thinking how deceitful and shallow was the sparkle of life, how swiftly it had vanished, and how worthless and bitter it had been made by the ruthless disappointment of her love for the only man towards whom she had felt a sentiment exalted enough—as she thought—to raise her to its

own height. With an heredity of the cruel blood of Egypt, the crafty blood of Greece, and the hot blood of Italy mingling in her veins, is it a wonder that her passionate pagan heart now hated as intensely as it had loved?

When she heard all that her slave had to report, and that revenge was at last in her power, a sudden thrill, as if a cold snake had suddenly glided down her back, almost arrested for a brief instant the functions of life—but it was brisk, business-like, "Glad to see you. Only have a few minutes, but thought I'd run in and let you know how things look for Christmas."

"Brighter, I hope, than they did last week," said Father Laurence. "Yet, Er—Secms to me you are not looking well."

"No?" said Father Laurence. "No, indeed. Don't break down until after Christmas. You should be like me. I am never sick, never. Always well. Always on the go. Always hustling and bustling, and striving and stirring."

"Yes," said Father Laurence. "Yes, I know that." "Mrs. Lennox says she does not understand how I do it. She is actually, I think, envious of my good health."

Father Laurence smiled a little wearily. "Anyone in Mrs. Lennox's position might well envy another who is as strong as you," he said. "She has a heavy cross to bear. We must pray for her."

"My prayer lies more in the doing of what good works I can find at hand to accomplish," said Mrs. Duncan, who had perused several books on theology. "Yes?" said Father Laurence. He did not feel able for argument tonight. "Yes," said Mrs. Duncan. "Mr. Dodson has promised to contribute \$25 toward the fund for the orphans. Mr. Dodson, Father!"

"Yes?" again asked Father Laurence. "That is good." Mrs. Duncan looked disappointed. "You know how hard it is to reach Mr. Dodson," she said in a slightly aggrieved tone. "He has been working him up for the last three weeks."

"God has rewarded your efforts," said Father Laurence, gently now. "It seems so," said Mrs. Duncan, with a sigh of satisfaction. "You're too easy-going, Father. You should get after them. They'll listen to you, and give more, perhaps. You should be more strict on the money question."

"Yes—perhaps I should," said Father Laurence, absently. "Perhaps—I should." "But when you have a few good workers it is not so bad," she went on encouragingly. "I never begrudge any time I give to the church—or any trouble or annoyance. In fact, I think I like the bother. That's why I say I believe in the prayer of good workers."

"Dear child," said Father Laurence, humbly. "God works as well, and God approves, since faith without works is dead. But, my dear, dear woman, the humility of the benediced knee, the outpouring of the heart alive to its own weakness, the rising up of the soul striving after perfection—"

He hesitated, remembering that pure soul that brave heart, that humble woman who had loved him so as to bring his name with her to the very brink of the grave. His voice failed him. "God bless you," he said brokenly. He made the sign of the cross above her, and she beat her head, a sense of shame compelling her to cast down her eyes. "God bless you, and keep you, and reward you for your kind efforts to help my poor little orphans. I will pray for you."

Father Laurence could have told her, indeed, had the proud woman stooped to question him. She did not. She went away, and Father Laurence, moving very softly, went into the church where the dim light burned.

That night, sleeping, she dreamed, she thought she stood in a beautiful meadow, green and glowing with flowers of many hue. She was striving to erect a little building in the middle of this beautiful place. All about her lay blocks of crystal, and shining in sun, points of light. Filled with a keen sense of pleasure she knelt, lifting block after block of the beautiful stone.

Under the touch of her finger they grew and shaped themselves, and her heart swelled with exultation as she noticed the glory of this building that she had erected. She did not know how long she had been at it, but suddenly, without warning, a keen sense of dissatisfaction filled her. Her hands fell idle. She sat and looked at the gleaming structure, at the material all about her. How cold it was, despite its shine and sparkle! How could she ever have dreamed it beautiful? There was no life in it—it lacked something.

What was it? The tears came to her eyes. She would not look at that of which she had been so proud, but bowing her head upon her hands sat there, weeping disconsolately. A low voice reached her—the voice of one in prayer. "I will pray for you," he had said. "The humility of the benediced knee, the outpouring of the heart alive to its own weakness."

That was it. She had prided herself on her strength, her purpose, and she was weak—weak, feeble, frail. That was why her beautiful building lacked warmth; that was why she had lost interest in it. Because she had been

erecting an edifice built upon her pride of soul and not upon its meekness. And the memory of that dream stayed with her.

He heard the bell again, and waited to finish the last Holy Mary of the decade before coming back to the sacristy.

"Is it you, Mrs. Lewis?" he asked. "And you have brought—How do you do, Mr. Lewis?" He held out his hand to the man who, red and shamed, stood before him with head sunk, his old hat in his fingers.

"How d'yd do, Father?" he mumbled. He gazed at the priest's outstretched hand a moment. Then he straightened his shoulders. "No, Father," he said. "No, I ain't a man now—I'm a beast an' a beast ain't fit to touch what belongs to God, Father. Wait. Mebbe some day I will be able to do it. Mebbe, some day I'll ask you to let me shake hands with you."

"God be praised!" said Mrs. Lewis, sobbingly. "God be praised. Amen. He's come to take the pledge, Father, for Christmas week."

"Only for Christmas week?" asked Father Laurence, sorrowfully. "Only for Christmas week?" "That's what I trust myself beyond that," said the man, in a low voice. "You dare not trust yourself not to make your home unhappy, miserable, your children poor, your wife worse than widowed? Oh, man, man, man. God open your eyes!"

"It's but a little drop I'm able to take, Father; a little sets me off; 'taint as if I was a hard drinker," said the man, half-apologetically. "There's a crime times that in the world. I know it's wrong, but I'm not so bad as them that sneer at religion, the tarneats, and talk about the priests and the church! I always respect my religion. I always stick up for being a Catholic."

"You do?" asked Father Laurence. "When were you to confession last?" "Silence." "I guess—were you to—confession—last?" insisted that calm, compelling voice. "Two years since, Father."

"Two years!" said the priest, and again his voice was sorrowful—and when Father Laurence took that tone it was harder to resist than any command. "Oh, what good is it to boast of your religion when every action of your life shames the faith you profess? And why? Oh, man, with your little, innocent children clinging to you for support and help, for guidance and for comfort, how can you stoop to so vile a thing as that which steals away all sense of right and wrong?"

breath. "Well, then, I'm sorry you wanted to see me in particular?"

"Well, Father—" she hesitated and blushed, dropped her eyelids, and fingers, nervously, getting married. "That's good news."

"That's good news," Laurence laughed outright. "Well, now, the young man be a parish?"

"No, Father." "No? Where does he live? He lives uptown, F. I want to get married a week from now. A week from now, the following day, mas Day."

"Yes, Father. You married before Christmas?" "This is the forbidden you know that? Marry solemnized in Advent, solemnized be filled with prayer."

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"That's pretty bad, he? What religion do you have?" "Oh, none, Father. I have every religion."

"You dare not trust yourself not to make your home unhappy, miserable, your children poor, your wife worse than widowed? Oh, man, man, man. God open your eyes!"

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