

## **Prisca in Rome**

*Prisca tells me that she soon grew to miss the affections of her brothers; but I rather think she was beginning to feel her womanhood and therefore began to have natural feelings of desiring the attentions of a man.*

*Shortly after Prisca reached her thirteenth year, Demas informed her without explanation that they were moving to Rome where, he announced, he would seek for her a Roman husband so that she might continue to enjoy the blessings of the wealth he had found...*

Since it was early spring when his family departed from Ephesus, Demas decided not to risk the sea voyage from Ephesus even though ships had begun leaving the winter shelter of the harbor. He had heard stories of ships that ventured into the sea before May, when it was considered safe to do so. Many of these, rather than securing the profit they sought from an additional voyage, found themselves crushed upon rocks when driven off course by strong winds. That survivors of such foolhardiness never again left port in spring served to confirm Demas' decision.

He therefore planned to travel overland to Troas, and then find passage for the short crossing to Philippi. From there they would continue overland through Macedonia and Achaia, again boarding a ship to cross to Brundisium. Once at Brundisium, they would complete their journey on the fine imperial roads into Rome. In truth, Demas thought they might stay on land all the way to Rome, even though it would take much longer, for he was terrified of the sea.

Of course, traveling overland often involved braving equally dangerous circumstances, for as soon as the traveler put a city at his back, robbers and murderers might set him upon. So it was that Demas hired, in addition to the comfortable coach he and his family would travel in, four stout guards to accompany them as far as Troas. He carried a substantial amount of coinage with him in a bronze moneybox, but the bulk of his money he converted to a bank note, which he would later claim in Rome.

What Demas neglected to consider, however, was the fraudulent character of many innkeepers along the Roman roads, not to mention the questionable nature of their establishments. Demas was appalled at the prices these inns charged for crude, often filthy accommodations; and he particularly disliked the fee collected any time he, Leah, or Prisca wished to relieve themselves.

But it was not the expense that caused Demas to abandon the inns in favor of spending some nights in their coach. At a shabby inn midway between Thyatira and Pergamum, where they had spent two fine nights in the municipal hotel of the provincial capital, Prisca awoke during the night with severe stomach pains.

Fearing she would not reach the common lavatory on the ground floor if she took the time to put on her robe and thinking no one would be about at this time of night, she ran toward the stairs dressed only in her linen undergarment. As she reached the staircase, however, she met a large man coming up after himself using the lavatory.

“Finished with one guest are you, whore?” he said drunkenly. Grabbing her arm and pulling her toward his room, he continued, “You certainly are a pretty one for such a foul place; and I wager the innkeeper charges a large fee for you.”

He reached around with his free hand and tore Prisca’s chemise off her shoulder, but she quickly gathered the fabric and covered herself. “Take your hands away from me,” she said, but further words caught in her throat as her protesting stomach brought forth the evening’s meal.

The very condition that had placed her in this frightful circumstance now served to save her, for as her vomit splattered onto the man’s chest, he stepped back, releasing his grip on her arm. She turned and fled, gagging and weeping, back toward her family’s room. The man roared and began to chase her but immediately slipped on her vomit and fell heavily to the floor, his leg twisting underneath his substantial body. Despite her own fear, Prisca winced as she heard the man’s bone snap and his instant howl of pain.

Realizing the man was not likely to continue to pursue her in this condition, she stopped, collected herself, turned and said, “I, sir, am no prostitute, but like you, a guest. I regret that you are hurt, but I believe it is no less than you deserve for your treatment of me.”

The man shouted out a stream of obscenities, and Prisca continued her previous course, bursting into her room and slamming the door behind her. Demas, who had been awakened by the tumult outside the door, was just getting to his feet when Prisca arrived. He saw her torn garment and understood immediately. He stood for a moment, torn between scolding Prisca for leaving the room in her half-naked state and protecting her from the man he presumed was at her heel.

Reason and paternal instincts won out and he turned to Leah, saying, “Care for our daughter.” He then stormed past her and into the hallway, expecting to encounter an enflamed pursuer who “...what?” he thought. But even as he began to understand the danger he might have put himself in, he saw the object of his trepidation lying back screaming and weeping as another man leaned over him.

“She broke my leg!” the man screamed. “That whore broke my leg! I will kill her.”

The innkeeper came running up the steps at that moment and surveyed the situation quickly. “What is happening here?” he asked.

“One of your whores has broken my leg then fled into that room,” the injured man said, pointing toward Demas’ door.

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“If one of my women is up here, I will have her whipped. You know full well that I do not allow them in guest rooms,” the innkeeper said.

“The girl he attacked,” Demas interrupted, “is my daughter, not one of the brothel women.”

“I felt sick and was going down to the lavatory when I encountered this man.” Prisca had returned to the hall, and Demas was relieved when he turned and saw she had put on her robe. “He grabbed me, causing me great fear, which in turn caused me to vomit,” she said, pointing to the puddle under the man’s leg. “He fell when he tried to chase me.”

“The girl is not one of mine,” the innkeeper said to the injured man. “If you had fewer drinks tonight, you would have known that was so.”

Turning to Demas, the innkeeper, always alert to the prospect of profit, announced, “You will pay me one denarius for the damage to this hallway.” Demas started to speak, but the innkeeper lifted his hand and continued on. “And another denarius for the doctor to set and splint this man’s leg.” Of course, there was no doctor within miles, but that was of no consequence.

“What?” Demas protested. “That man was the cause of this entire matter. Why should I pay for his crime?”

“As you can see,” the innkeeper said, “the man has paid with the use of his leg, and since I know him to be an imperial courier, I know the injury will cost him more than two denarii. Your daughter was out of her room in the middle of the night for no good reason. Therefore, she is at least as culpable in this affair as he is. Two denarii and be out at sunrise.”

Demas knew there was no purpose in further debate, so he turned and walked back into his room, pulling Prisca in with him. Now his anger turned to her and he told her to return to her bed and for no reason leave it again until sunrise. He took two silver coins from his purse and returned to the hallway, handing them to the innkeeper.

“We shall depart at sunrise; I regret this entire matter and my daughter’s role in it,” he said. When he returned to the room, however, he told Leah and Prisca to gather their belongings. As soon as the hallway cleared, which was only after several minutes of additional shouts and curses, they slipped out of the inn, awoke their escorts and headed along the road in the night.

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Upon reaching Troas, Demas’ true plan became apparent, for he proposed continuing overland; but Leah would not consider it and insisted that he seek shipping across the Aegean. He protested the additional cost, having to release the coach and guards and secure the same in Neapolis. But she stated she would not step foot from the hotel except to board a ship, so Demas really had no choice.

He managed to secure passage on a trade ship leaving two days later with a load of timber. He paid off the guards and coach driver after they loaded the family’s three large chests and other

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baggage onto the ship. Demas stopped at the plank, looking fearfully at the water below. He even suggested meekly that perhaps he should retrieve the coach and guard while there was still time, proceeding overland to meeting Leah and Prisca in Macedonia.

“Father,” Prisca protested, finally exasperated at Demas’ hesitancy, “ships come and go from Ephesus every day, departing on voyages many days longer than ours will be. You are willing to leave your home and challenge the dangers of the road, yet you tremble before a little water. Let us board before the crew casts the rope.” Prisca said these things as if she were accustomed to sea voyages; but she, like her father, had never before traveled by ship and, in truth, she shared his fear. She, however, could see no profit in delay, since her mother had made her position clear.

Demas glared at Prisca, saying “Hold your tongue, daughter.” But he took a deep breath and scurried onto the ship. No sooner were they on board than the shipmaster called for the crew to cast off. The winds caught the sail as soon as it was raised, pushing the small ship quickly away from the port.

The shipmaster had forecast a three-day voyage with good weather, but he was mistaken on both counts. Late in the afternoon of the first day, the wind shifted to the southeast and a strong gale swept in, pushing the ship off course. They were nearly driven into the rocks off Lesbos before the storm abated two days later, and the two women, forced to sleep on deck both nights, were sodden and dispirited, while Demas seemed nearly mad with fear. His insistence that the master of the ship put ashore at the nearest land was ignored, of course.

As dawn broke on the third day, it was apparent that the storm had not only extended their passage, it had also delivered sickness to Leah. By that evening, she was hot to the touch, and her rasping coughs brought up large amounts of fluid. Demas became particularly worried that evening as her fever increased as she raved in fitful sleep. The next morning brought no reduction in the fever, but her ravings were replaced with stupor. Her eyes became deeply sunken and her breathing shallow with an ominous rattle in her chest.

The master, noting her grave condition, allowed Demas to move her into his cabin, where Prisca covered her with robes Demas dipped in the sea, attempting to cool her. Despite the heat rising from her body, she often trembled with chills. Just before dawn on the fourth day, Prisca, who had remained in the cabin while Demas went on deck to get some fresh air, was awoken by a sound from the bed. She moved closer and realized her mother’s eyes were open for the first time in two days.

“Prisca, where is your father,” Leah whispered. Prisca leaned closer, barely able to hear.

“He is out on the deck. Shall I bring him?”

“No, I must speak to you.” Another cough, deep within her chest, continued for several long moments, bringing foam and water to her lips. Prisca wiped her mother’s mouth with a piece of cloth she had been using to cool her face. As she pulled the cloth away, she was terrified to see it tinged in red.

“I am dying, daughter,” Leah rasped.

“Do not speak such words. Tomorrow you will laugh at such foolishness.”

“No; this sickness is deep within me, and I can feel the hands of death clutching at my soul. I will not see tomorrow.”

Prisca fought back her tears, for despite what she had said, she believed her mother was correct. Even now, Leah’s face was gray and her breathing almost imperceptible. She took her mother’s hand and raised it to her lips.

“Do not mourn, child,” Leah said. “Your father has given me a good life, and I have had seven fine children. You are now a woman and have no further need of a mother.”

“That is not so. I feel the need of you now more than I ever have before.”

“Your father will find you a fine husband in Rome, and he will be blessed by you, for you have much to offer a man.” Another deep cough shook Leah, and more blood appeared on her lips. “All I ask is this—when you are married, do not forget your father.”

“I will not marry,” Leah said. “I will take care of father.”

“No, Prisca, you must marry; only do not forget your father.”

She whispered, “Yes” and pressed her mother’s hand against her cheek, as Leah closed her eyes and lapsed back into unconsciousness. When Prisca felt Leah’s arm go slack, she gently placed it across the dying woman’s cheek and quickly ran out of the cabin. She saw her father standing at the back of the ship, peering out across the water.

Running to him, she cried, “Father, mother is dying.”

Demas did not turn or even move, but Prisca noted a slight slumping in his shoulders; and it seemed almost as if he withered before her eyes. “I know,” he said so quietly that Prisca was not certain if he had spoken or if she had heard his thoughts. She had wanted him to tell her not to be foolish, that mother would recover soon; but his words struck her as the final death sentence.

“Is there nothing more we can do?” she pleaded.

“Only her God could save her now.”

“Then let us pray for her deliverance,” Prisca said and started to move to her knees.

“That will do no good, Priscilla. He already understands our wishes. If he wishes to take away her sickness, he will.”

This seemed logical to Prisca, so she returned to the cabin, leaving Demas still staring out at the waters. Prisca sat beside her mother on the bed, but she did not awaken again. Some time

later, Prisca heard her gasp softly three times then expel a long breath. When she did not reclaim the air she had given up, Prisca knew she was gone. She continued to hold her hand until she felt movement in the room.

She did not turn, but heard her father ask, “Is it over?” She nodded, and she heard him turn again and walk away. Suddenly, a new fear overwhelmed her, believing that her father might wish to join her mother in death. She leapt up and rushed onto the deck, frantically searching the small area. She did not see him for a terrifying moment until a sailor moved, revealing Demas again standing at the rail.

She walked over to him and asked, “Are you well, father?”

Demas grunted and said, “You have just lost your mother, and yet you still think of me? No, Prisca, I am not well, but I will go on.” She moved closer, and he put his arm around her. They stood together, staring but not seeing, for a long time—their thoughts not interrupted until the shipmaster approached.

“How does your wife fare?” he asked.

Demas did not answer, so Prisca turned and said, “She has died.”

The master blanched and expressed his sorrow; but then he thought about the dead body lying on his bed and, even though he was not a cruel man, asked them to wrap her and remove her to the deck. Demas nodded and, taking Prisca’s arm, walked to the cabin. Together they gently wrapped Leah’s body in her favorite robe.

“When we reach land, we shall wash and anoint her and provide a proper burial,” Demas said as they completed the grim task. “Her soul may not rest easily being buried in a foreign land, but there is nothing to be done.” The sailing master wanted to put her body overboard immediately, since a death of sea was the worst sort of omen, but Demas’ negotiating skills, in addition to several silver coins, superseded the man’s superstitions.

The next morning broke bright and clear and by noon they sighted the Macedonian coast, docking in Neapolis in mid-afternoon. Demas went off immediately to hire transport and an escort, returning surprisingly soon with a large coach and three men. The men loaded their baggage and Leah’s body onto the coach.

As they left the ship Prisca heard one of the crew speaking to another in a low voice, “It is good we reached port today. In the hot sun, that body would surely have stunk by tomorrow.” Prisca wheeled around, walked purposefully to the man, and without a word, slapped him across the face as hard as she could. The man staggered back, and then raised his hand to return the blow, but the other sailor grabbed his arm as she walked away.

In the coach Demas explained that no proper Jewish burial ground existed in Neapolis, but one did at Philippi, about ten miles inland. The short ride went quickly and their escorts took them

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directly to the synagogue, where Demas found the rabbi preparing for the next day's Sabbath observances. The rabbi quickly called for the professional mourners, whom Demas paid more than the usual fee, asking for profound lamentations. Once the traditional washing, anointing, and wrapping were completed, Prisca's mother was laid to rest in the Jewish burial ground in Philippi.

Demas and Prisca remained in Philippi for the Sabbath in order to say prayers for Leah, then headed west on the Roman Via Egnatia, arriving in Dyrrhachium on the west coast of Macedonia in the fifteen days. Demas commented several times en route about the Romans' workmanship in building the road over the rough mountainous Macedonian interior, but there was little other conversation between father and daughter.

At Dyrrhachium, Demas again weakly suggested an overland route. The escorts were willing, but when they told him the journey would take about two months, Prisca protested, and when they quoted an additional fee of twenty thousand sesterii, he quickly relented. He secured ship passage for a small fraction of that amount, and they crossed to Brundisium in three uneventful days.

Good Roman roads—the Via Appia from Brundisium to Beneventum and the Via Latina on into Rome—provided them relative comfort during the three hundred sixty mile final leg of their journey. Demas was particularly pleased when he discovered that the coach rental and escort fee were less than the Asian and Macedonian legs combined because of the greater availability of such services in Italy than in the provinces.

They arrived in Rome in late June in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius. The sight of the imperial capital filled Prisca with such awe and wonder that, for a time, she even forgot to mourn for her mother. She had loved the city of Ephesus, and none of the cities through which they had passed even approached its grandeur—until Rome.