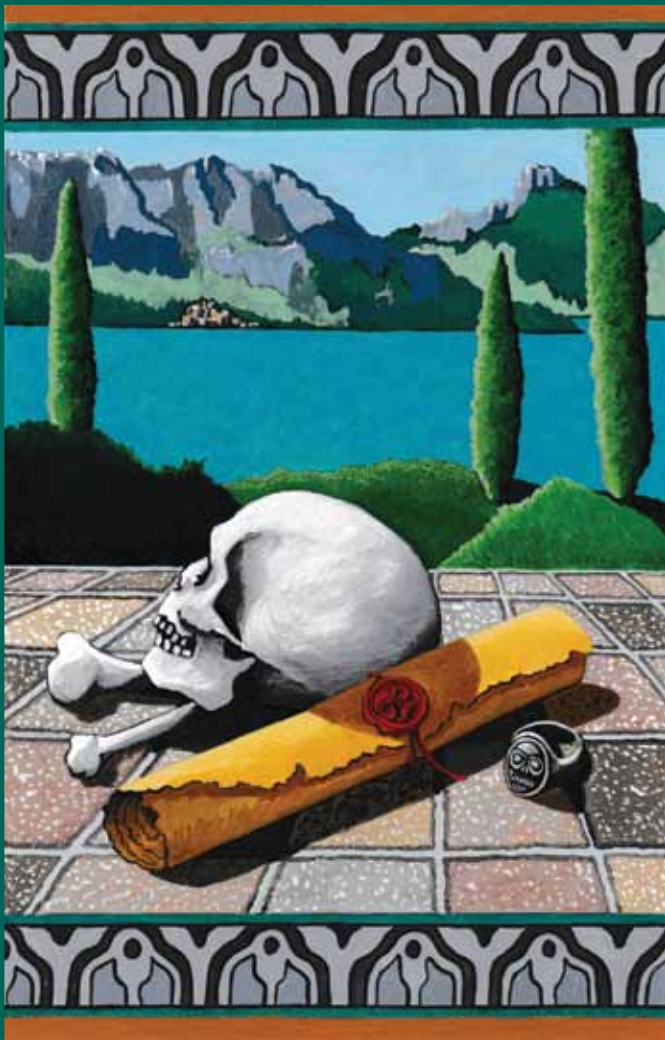


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THE NOTEBOOKS OF
PLINY THE YOUNGER



ALBERT A. BELL, JR.

MMXVII

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PALO ALTO / MCKINLEYVILLE, CALIFORNIA

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A Perseverance Press Book
Published by John Daniel & Company
A division of Daniel & Daniel, Publishers, Inc.
Post Office Box 2790
McKinleyville, California 95519
www.danielpublishing.com/perseverance

Distributed by SCB Distributors (800) 729-6423

Book design: Eric Larson, Studio E Books, Santa Barbara
www.studio-e-books.com

Cover painting: "Fortune's Fool" © by Chi Meredith
Egg tempera on panel
www.sites.google.com/site/meredithchiartist

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Bell, Albert A., 1945- author.

Title: Fortune's fool : a sixth case from the notebooks of Pliny the Younger
/ by Albert A. Bell, Jr.

Description: McKinleyville, California : John Daniel & Company, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016046131 | ISBN 9781564745873 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Pliny, the Younger—Fiction. | Tacitus, Cornelius—Fiction. |

Family secrets—Rome—Fiction. | Murder—Investigation—Fiction. |

GSAFD: Historical fiction. | Mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3552.E485 F68 2017 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016046131>

FORTUNE'S
FOOL

I

Fortune makes fools of those she favors too much.

—Horace

YOU'RE GOING TO make me get *married*?" My servant Aurora, usually so gentle with horses, drew hers to such an abrupt stop that he stumbled. She jerked the reins and turned him to face me. "Why?"

We were out for a ride along the shore of Lake Comum, at the foot of the Alps. My mother had asked me to bring my *familia* here, to the smallest of my villas, one which I inherited from my natural father. We hadn't been here in several years, and I knew she thought she was coming to see, for one last time, the place where she began her married life and to say good-bye to people she has known most of her life. She appears to be in good health, but the disease that I'm not supposed to know she has—a *karkinos* in her breast—is a death sentence, whether it takes a few months or a couple of years to be carried out. My great fear is that she might have come back here to end her life where it began.

This was where I was born and lived until my father died, when I was quite young. The house sits on a small rise on the peninsula ten miles north of the town of Comum, giving it an unequalled view down the length of the narrow lake and up into the mountains. At this time of year, on a perfect morning in mid-July, no place in Italy is cooler or more lush. Aurora had been quiet, as though she had something on her mind.

"Answer me, Gaius. Why are you making me get married?" Aurora gripped the long reins tightly, as though she was thinking about slapping me with them.

My horse whinnied and shook his head as I reined him in. He had been fighting me for control since we rode out of the stable. "Livia says I have to. I've put her off for several months, but she's given me an ultimatum. Her exact words were, 'Either have that girl married before I come to Comum or get rid of her.'"

"That girl? Does she even know my name?"

"I assure you, she knows it well enough to curse it."

"And you feel you have to do everything Livia tells you to?" She put a defiant hand on her hip.

"She is my wife."

Aurora snorted derisively. "We both know what *that* means."

"It means nothing except that I have to keep peace with her, for your sake as well as mine."

"Gaius, why don't you just divorce her?" The pain she showed on her face was as profound as what I felt. "You only married her to please your mother. You don't love her and she doesn't love you. When you got married she seemed to accept our relationship, as long as we didn't flaunt it."

"She seems to feel that I am doing exactly that."

"How?"

I patted my horse's neck, trying to calm him, the way I've seen Aurora settle an animal down. My touch had little effect, but then I know how different—how wonderful—it feels to have *her* hands on any part of one's body. Something magical passes through those hands into whatever she's touching. "You have to understand. We've been married for barely six months. If I were to embarrass her by divorcing her like that, there's no telling what sort of revenge she would—"

"Do you still think she killed her first husband?"

Fortunately there was no one in sight at the moment. Still, careless words have an uncanny knack for worming themselves into the wrong ears. "Be careful what you say. I have no way of knowing what happened to the man, but nothing would surprise me, given the fits of rage I've seen from her. At the very least I'm sure Livia would spread

stories about us—you and me—and cause my mother great distress. *That* I will not allow, so I cannot divorce her, at least as long as my mother is alive.”

“You know I could never wish her death.” Aurora’s face darkened. As beautiful as she is—with her olive complexion, long brown hair, and dark eyes—she can also be alarming when she gets angry. I think it’s her Punic heritage, the visage that enabled Hannibal to terrify us Romans for nearly twenty years. “Gaius, you’re a brave man. I’ve seen you stand up to all kinds of danger. And yet you cower before these two women like a...”

“I believe ‘coward’ is the word you’re searching for. Or perhaps ‘craven coward,’ just for the alliteration. I truly would rather face a man with a sword in his hand. Then I could judge what my opponent was capable of and have some idea of how to counter his blows. I once saw a fox gnaw off one of its legs to get out of a trap. In the last few months I have come to understand that degree of desperation.”

Aurora let out a long breath. “So I’m to be sacrificed, like Iphigenia on the altar at Aulis. Why now?”

“Livia and her mother are coming up here. They’ll arrive in a day or two.”

“Oh, wonderful!” She threw her head back, as if raising a protest to the gods, or looking to be whisked away, the way some versions of the story say Iphigenia was, to be replaced by a deer. “This was such a pleasant holiday. I should have known it was too good to last.”

Her reaction was precisely why I had decided to break this news to her while we were away from the house. There was no way to make it sound good. She was right. We had been enjoying ourselves for the last five days. My friend Tacitus and his wife, Julia, had come up with us, stopping over for a few days on their way to Tacitus’ estate in Transalpine Gaul. They know the nature of my relationship with Aurora and are happy with it, so we can all relax and enjoy one another’s company, as long as my mother isn’t in the room.

At times Julia even seems to forget that Aurora is a slave. They sit in the garden, talking and laughing with their heads together, like the women in a Tanagra figurine. Julia isn’t as well-educated as Aurora—not even as intelligent, I suspect—but the experience of losing a child

before birth almost two years ago has given her a different type of wisdom and maturity to complement her lively personality. If I were to let myself, I could imagine what it would be like to be married to Aurora and have Tacitus and Julia as our closest friends.

But I can't let myself.

Clicking her tongue, Aurora tapped her horse's sides with her heels and we resumed our ride, now turning back to the villa. I wasn't ready to go back, but it was clearly futile to hope for any more pleasant conversation today, or some time alone in the woods. I hadn't really expected any intimacy, knowing what I had to tell her. She looked out over the deep blue of the lake and the houses lining the opposite shore. Without turning back to me, she said, "So, who is to be my husband? He won't be a happy man. I'll guarantee you that, and I doubt you will be, either."

I reached over and put a hand on her arm. "Please, let me explain. I've got the perfect solution to this problem."

"Perfect" might have been too optimistic a word, but I did believe I had found an answer to our dilemma that would satisfy Livia and not impose too great a burden on Aurora.

I've never admitted to Livia that I've coupled with Aurora, but I've never denied it. She hasn't asked, just assumed, correctly. Merely to satisfy Livia, I wasn't going to marry Aurora to some young, virile man in my household. But, if I married her to my oldest, doddering, gray-haired slave, Livia would see through the subterfuge at once. Although our own marriage might be a sexless sham, at her insistence, she would never let me get away with putting Aurora into a similar relationship.

"Which of us should be wearing the Tyche ring now?" Aurora asked. When we were children we had found the ring—bearing an image of the goddess Tyche, or Fortune—in a cave near my house at Laurentum. Now we passed it back and forth between us, depending on who most needed the luck it was supposed to represent. At the moment it was on a leather strap around my neck.

"I think I'm going to need a good deal more fortune than you are over the next couple of days."

"Don't let Livia get her hands on the strap. She might strangle you with it. No, wait, a blow on the head is more her style, isn't it?"

"I wish you would stop talking like that. There's no evidence she did anything to her first husband."

"But you think she did."

I couldn't deny that, and I couldn't squelch my fear that she might harm Aurora, so we rode in silence for a while. We arrived back at the villa as several people were stepping out of a *raeda*.

"You said Livia wasn't due to arrive for a couple of days," Aurora said, not trying in the least to suppress her annoyance.

"That's not Livia. Come and meet your husband."



The people getting out of the *raeda* were servants from my estate in Tuscany. I had ordered several of them—three men and four women—to be moved up here permanently. And the moves were justified. This house at Comum, I now realized, was not being run efficiently. The income was adequate, but I didn't understand why it wasn't making more money. I had paid too little attention to it, and the *familia* here had gotten lazy. I thought these people from Tuscany had talents that would inject life into this place, but there was one man for whom I had a special assignment.

"Ooh, I hope it's him," Aurora said, pointing to a tall, blond Gallic fellow who was helping one of the young women down from the *raeda*. His name was Brennus, and I had brought him here to oversee the vines and wine-making on the estate. He had a most remarkable nose.

"I thought you were angry about this."

Aurora gave me a mock-serious expression. "Well, if I'm to be forced to bed down with some man I don't know, maybe I should make the most of my chance. You can think about that while you're not doing whatever it is you don't do with your wife."

"Don't get your hopes up," I said as we dismounted. "Or your gown either."

Her shoulders sagged. "I was only teasing, Gaius. You don't have to talk to me like I'm some whore."

"I'm sorry," I said in little more than a whisper, hiding my face against my horse's shoulder. "I'm truly sorry. I hate having to do this. I

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Also see glossaries in previous books in this series.

aedile Roman magistrate whose duties included public works (roads, sidewalks, etc.), staging games and shows, and overseeing fair dealing in the marketplaces.

clientela Every Roman aristocrat was a patron and had lower-class persons who were dependent on him. The root *cli-* means to lean on, or rely on, someone. It's also found in *triclinium*, where three people reclined on a dining couch. Clients were expected to be at their patron's house early in the morning to greet him and receive a small donative to get them through the day and then accompany him as he went about his affairs in town. The size of a man's *clientela* was an unmistakable measure of his wealth and prestige.

collegium A business partnership, usually among wealthy equestrians. The term could also cover a group of people, even a religious sect, who needed authorization to act as a corporation. Being recognized as a *collegium* gave them the right to own property, to establish a treasury, or to inherit when someone died.

equestrians The class of wealthy Romans just below the senatorial class, originally so called because they could afford to ride a horse into battle. Senators were forbidden to engage in any business, which left room for ambitious men from the lower classes to make fortunes. To qualify for equestrian rank, one had to have a total fortune of 400,000 *sesterces* (1,000,000 for the Senate). Periodically the censors would go over people's accounts. If one's fortune had slipped below the required mark, one would lose the equestrian status. Members of this class wore

a narrow purple/red stripe on their clothing, the same color as, but not as broad as, the senatorial stripe.

bipposandals A kind of Roman horseshoes, strapped over a horse's hooves when the animal had to pull a particularly heavy load or travel over rough terrain.

municipium The Romans established towns with various degrees of rights. A *municipium* was originally a settlement in Italy, but the term is later used of towns across the empire.

pankration A type of "mixed martial arts" practiced by the Greeks.

papyrus/parchment Papyrus, made from a plant that grows along the Nile, was the favored type of writing material in antiquity. Pages were glued together to make scrolls. Parchment, or animal skin, was known as far back as the fifth century B.C., but was considered an inferior material. Both are labor-intensive to make. Parchment won out because it works better in the codex, or book form, which we now use.

Perusia Ancient name for the city of Perugia, one of the major towns of Umbria, founded about 300 B.C. It is near Lake Trasimene, site of one of Hannibal's major victories over the Romans in the Second Punic War.

Tanagra figurines Small terra-cotta statuettes depicting people, usually women, engaged in daily tasks or sitting and chatting. They were typically 4–7 inches high and originated in the Greek town of Tanagra, north of Athens, in the late fourth century B.C.

tunica rustica The gown traditionally worn by a Roman bride. It was white, with a saffron belt and veil.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I wrote the first Pliny mystery, *All Roads Lead to Murder*, I did not envision a second, let alone a sixth. I'm grateful for the encouragement that readers and reviewers have given me. I also need to express my gratitude to my writers' group, the West Michigan Writers' Workshop, which I began to attend in 2001. The make-up of the group has changed over the years, but our facilitator, Steve Beckwith, keeps us focused on the craft of writing. The group has established a web site: <https://sites.google.com/site/westmiww/>.

In the rest of this note I want to address three unrelated topics: the change in publishers, confusion about Pliny's family, and the epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter.

PUBLISHERS

In the interest of transparency, I would like to explain why the Pliny mysteries have been issued by different publishers. Ingalls Publishing Group published the first three, while the fourth and fifth were published by Perseverance Press. Several years ago Ingalls decided to focus on southeastern regional books, and ancient Rome didn't seem to fit that profile. I was fortunate to connect with Perseverance Press right away and enjoyed working with them on *Death in the Ashes* and *The Eyes of Aurora*. It was helpful to have a different editor's perspective for a couple of years. I learned quite a bit from Meredith Phillips and John and Susan Daniel.

In the world of small-press publishing, we usually work one book at a time, so when Bob Ingalls called and asked if I would consider returning to Ingalls, I agreed to give the offer some thought. I knew I would gain something either way, but I would also give up something, no matter which publisher I went with. It wasn't as though I had St. Martin's and Random House bidding for my services, but... Several

factors led me to return to Ingalls—primarily my long and excellent working relationship with Judy Geary and Ingalls’s willingness to consider publishing some of my non-mystery projects, as they did a few years ago with *Perfect Game*, *Imperfect Lives*. (Perseverance Press is strictly a mystery publisher.)

Sadly, Bob Ingalls died early in 2015. His wife decided to shut down the publishing business. I posted on the DorothyL online list, asking if anyone could suggest a publisher. I was considering doing the book myself when Meredith Phillips contacted me and invited me to come back to Perseverance Press, which I was quite happy to do. I owe Perseverance a lot. They have kept my publishing career—insignificant as it is—going when I thought I might be done.

PLINY’S FAMILY

In this book, and in earlier ones, there are references to Pliny’s biological father, a Lucius Caecilius, and to a possible sibling. Pliny never mentions his father in his letters, nor is there any reference to any siblings. He always refers to his uncle (his adoptive father) as his uncle. Questions have arisen because of two inscriptions, both from the area around Comum (modern Como), Pliny’s hometown. One refers to a Lucius Caecilius Secundus, who began building a temple to the Eternity of Rome and Augustus in honor of his daughter, Caecilia, who scholars believe was deceased. The temple was completed by Caecilius Secundus *filius*, possibly our Pliny, but part of the name is missing.

Another inscription mentions a magistrate named Lucius Caecilius Cilo and two sons (or possibly brothers) and a concubine, Lutulla the daughter of Pictus. The Caecilius and Plinius families were numerous around Comum and the name Secundus is by no means rare, so we can’t be certain that either of these inscriptions has anything to do with Pliny the Younger. They do, however, provide just enough grist for the mills of a historical novelist.

Pliny was married two or three times, but we know the name of only his last wife, the teenaged Calpurnia. He writes letters to his mother-in-law, Pompeia Celerina, but he never mentions Pompeia’s daughter by name or the name of Pompeia’s husband. A wife of Pliny’s,

presumably Pompeia's daughter, died about the time Domitian was murdered (September A.D. 96), and he seems to have been married to her for some time.

The Pompeius family had many branches, so I don't think I have stretched the bounds of possibility too far to suggest that Pliny's mother-in-law may have had some connection with Pompeia Paulina, the much-admired wife of the philosopher Seneca.

Aurora is, of course, a fictitious character. She appeared briefly in the second book in the series, *The Blood of Caesar* (named by *Library Journal* one of the Five Best Mysteries of 2008). In each succeeding book she has come to play a larger role. In this book I have again given her a chance to speak in her own voice, as I began to do in *The Eyes of Aurora*. Sections written from her point of view are in italics. It is a challenge to write from the p. o. v. of a young, wealthy, slave-owning Roman aristocrat, since I am none of those things. It is an equally daunting challenge to write from the p. o. v. of a young female Roman slave, since I am not any of those things either.

CHAPTER EPIGRAPHS

Working on a novel with Fortune as its theme, I was impressed by how much the Greeks and Romans had to say on the subject. I have put epigraphs from various writers—all of whom could have been known to Pliny—at the head of each chapter. Some have more connection with the chapter than others. Once I got started, it was hard to stop. Perhaps someday a graduate student, desperate for a thesis topic, will try to figure out what the epigraphs have to do with the chapters. As Freud allegedly said (but probably didn't), "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALBERT A. BELL, JR. is a college history professor, novelist, and weekend gardener who lives in Michigan. He and his wife have four adult children and two grandsons. In addition to his Roman mysteries, Bell has written contemporary mysteries, middle-grade novels, and nonfiction. Visit him at www.albertbell.com and www.pliny-mysteries.com.



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