



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler
Lovelace Family Papers.

Copyright Notice:

This material may be protected by copyright law (U.S. Code, Title 17). Researchers are liable for any infringement. For more information, visit www.mnhs.org/copyright.

FLIGHT FROM HEROD

By Delos W. Lovelace

Author of

Journey to Bethlehem

1960 Version

WESTERN COTTON FIBRE
SUBEVSSE BOND
GIBBES

FLIGHT FROM HEROD

By Delos W. Lovelace

Author of

Journey to Bethlehem

The Virgillian verses in this novel are quoted by permission from THE SINGING FARMER, an evocative translation of the Georgics of Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 B.C.) by L. A. S. Jermyn in memory of his son, Peter, dead in World War II. (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, England, Publisher.)

FOR MY WIFE

32% COTTON FIBRE
SUPERFINE BOND
EMERALD

CHAPTER ONE

"Keep walking!" Helius Naepor warned, scarcely moving his thick lips. "We won't go in until the street is empty. We don't need to run any extra risk. We have plenty of time."

The Primus Pilus of the Tenth Legion was sometimes compared to a bull, and even to a hippopotamus. He was very fat, and lurched when he walked. He drank and ate at all hours to take his mind off the disappointment which always gnawed at him because of the honors and successes he had missed. But when, on rising in the morning, he sucked in his paunch and cinched it tight with a belt as wide as both his hands, he looked less the hippopotamus he had grown to resemble and more the fighting man he once had been.

Back in the Fortress of Antonia early this morning he had left behind everything--helmet, garrison cloak, hobnailed marching shoes--everything which would readily identify a Roman officer, and he had made the Centurion Panthera do the same. They had kept breastplates, swords and daggers but long, striped native robes hid these; and as they walked along the quiet Jerusalem street they might have passed for any two early-rising citizens. They went around a maze of alleys and lanes and approached the mansion again.

"Wasn't that boy watching when we went by before?"

Panthera asked, motioning across the street. The centurion was taller and much younger than Naepor, with bold sleepy eyes in an olive-skinned face, and a small sensual mouth.

"Don't point! And the answer is 'No!" Naepor's growl had an old campaigner's assurance. "The first time it was a girl, and her cloak was gray but his is blue. Still, it won't hurt to go around again."

He wanted a drink, he was getting downright dry, but he was willing to be cautious. Not only because their errand was perilous. Most legionnaires who had won his rank, only a little below a legion's general, would have wiped their feet on such a summons. Pride, if nothing else, would have made them refuse. Naepor's greed and jealousy had made him accept, as he had accepted summonses from the same source before.

It was impossible, he reassured himself, that anyone could have discovered their mission. How could anyone have had time? They had set out as soon as he received the Chief Eunuch's message. Of course, the Fortress might well be under the eyes of spies for the High Priest in the Temple next door, or for Herod the king in his palace across the bridge which spanned the Tyropean valley, or for General Proculinus, or even for all three. You never knew and caution was always desirable. So they went around again and when they approached the mansion for the third time the street was, at last, empty.

"Quick, now!" Naepor elbowed Panthera and lurched after

him. The door was unlocked as the Chief Eunuch had promised. Measuring the contents of the broad hall with a shrewdness gained from many lootings, Naepor told himself that the Chief Eunuch--or whoever was paying--could pay very well for the thing he wanted done.

"Come in!" The Chief Eunuch advanced soundlessly across a rug so rich, soft and thick that it must have cost, Naepor reckoned, twenty times his own year's pay as Primus Pilus. "I hope you understand why I set this place for our meeting. It is so much more away from everything and everybody than the Fortress."

The Chief Eunuch spoke in a voice so deliberately hushed that it sounded more like a hiss. This was because he spoke most often within the hearing of Herod who was ailing and racked beyond endurance by louder sounds.

He was a mincing, bony man, usually arrogant. This morning, however, he was conciliatory, an attitude which the officers of Herod's court seldom assumed toward lesser Romans. His dress was elaborate. A multi-colored robe parted, as he moved, to reveal a tunic of lavender silk more suitable for a Greek or a Persian. His shoes were stitched across the toes with gold and silver thread.

"Any place suits me," Naepor growled. "But the walk has left me drier than sand in the sun."

"There is wine," the Chief Eunuch said. "Some from my best Hebron vines. He led the way to a great, open, flowery court and Naepor, eyeing his host's rich clothing in the increased light, set his price higher.

He'll pay! he resolved and, shaking off his robe, lumbered in his own soiled, knee-length tunic to the cushions scattered around a wine table. He was the more resolved because he knew that he could hope for only a few more such profitable assignments. He knew that General Proculus would not permit him to stay on as Primus Pilus of the Tenth Legion much longer. The exacting little general was after nothing less than the best legion in the Emperor Augustus's army. In battle a Primus Pilus who fought like a bull helped give it to him. But the general was showing unmistakable dissatisfaction with a garrison Primus Pilus who enforced discipline poorly and drank much too much.

Naepor knew he was on his way out, and he knew that on retirement he would never be offered any such fine civil post as the one for which his predecessor, Vedius Rusco, had been drafted when he retired as Primus Pilus of the Tenth. All his life Naepor had tried to rival Vedius Rusco, but now he was fat and nearly finished and Rusco was still rising. Naepor sat down sullenly, broad head sinking between thick shoulders, coarse hair bristling, thick lips parched for wine.

There was plenty of wine. Six jars! Two were half-buried in snow brought all the way from Mount Hermon under sawdust. There was also water for guests who desired their drinks thinned. Naepor pushed the water aside. Settling heavily among his cushions, he filled a goblet, drank noisily, wiped his mouth with a ham-like hand, wiped the hand on his already stained tunic and poured again.

Panthera sat opposite. He also had one insistent appetite. Other men dreamed of honors, estates, power, friendship, honorable sons, virtuous daughters. Panthera dreamed only of women and he dreamed with a singleness of desire that made inevitable his nickname which was the synonym, in his time and world, for lust. He took one drink but did not refill his goblet. He had been told to watch his tongue as long as he was in the Chief Eunuch's house.

"We'll have to bargain about pay as soon as we find out what he wants done," Naepor had warned. "And when you bargain with this hissing snake of Herod's you want a clear head."

Although Naepor went on drinking, he kept an entirely clear head. He did not appear in the least drunk. But then, Panthera reflected, he never appeared drunk.

The Chief Eunuch patiently waited to talk business until Naepor should pause long enough between drinks, and meantime he looked calculatingly at the olive-skinned, sleepy-eyed young Centurion.

"I am sure," he felt forced at last to say to the Primus Pilus, "that you would not bring an ally of too little experience, but I know almost nothing of your friend here, scarcely more than his rank and name."

"The General of the Tenth thinks well of him. That ought to be enough for you," Naepor said, and Panthera's small mouth curved into a self-satisfied smile. "Only yesterday, on my recommendation, General Proculinus promoted him to be Pilus Prior of the Eighth Cohort. Don't worry. Just tell us what you need."

The Chief Eunuch settled softly among cushions on his side of the table and folded his womanish hands.

"Herod," he said, "requires that a thing be done which I cannot do."

"Pay enough and I'll get it done for you," Naepor said.

"Herod," the Chief Eunuch said, "has heard rumors of a child lately born who is supposed to fulfill old prophecies."

"Who hasn't?" Naepor said. "The rumors have been up and down every highway for days. Every time people have seen a woman near bearing, they have wondered."

"That's right," Panthera broke in. "Only a few days ago, in Sebaste, I ran into some Galileans travelling this way to pay the new tax, and I tried..."

But Naepor was not interested in anything Panthera had tried in the distant Samaritan city of Sebaste, and he interrupted.

"Then, there was all that light the other night. And some say voices in the sky, and singing."

"Nonsense!" the Chief Eunuch said.

"Nonsense, nothing! I certainly heard something and saw something, too." Naepor grinned. "But maybe Panthera will agree with you. He was kept under covers by personal business and he didn't see any lights and didn't need any, and the only voice he heard wasn't from the sky."

The Chief Eunuch, because of his condition, always suspected a double meaning in any such loose talk and he gave Naepor a look full of resentment.

"I, myself," he said, "do not hold with lights and voices."

"But many do," Panthera broke in again. "Some say they mean a great leader has been born to the Jews; one who will help them lord it over all other people."

"Let me do the talking," Naepor said. "And don't worry about any Jews lording it over Romans. Not while the Tenth holds the Fortress of Antonia and can throw a cohort into the Temple, day or night."

"This new-born--whoever he is--who may not have been born at all--" The Chief Eunuch spoke with a rush. "Herod commands that he be found."

"Crazy old fox!" Naepor grunted. "Did he tell you where to look?"

The Chief Eunuch hesitated. He did not intend to say one word which could later be traced back to make trouble for him. He valued his Palace post too highly.

On the whole that had few disadvantages beyond the required subservience to Herod. Such subservience to any whole man or woman was displeasing to the goddess whom the Chief Eunuch served, a southern goddess who gave such as himself her special care. He had, however, been careful to propitiate her and he did not intend to be frightened into total silence by the revived prophecies which recently had frightened so many in the palace.

In seven hundred years they had failed to produce a Messiah. They would fail now.

Only he must not say too much. This loose-mouthed Roman might blurt out enough to make Jews charge that the Chief Eunuch had betrayed their latest hope. Such a charge

would lessen his value to Herod and Herod rarely protected, let alone kept, a servant of lessened value.

There was the chance, too, that the aging tyrant would forget his order. He seldom forgot. Still--it happened sometimes. If Herod forgot, the Chief Eunuch would surely be left unprotected and alone with swarms of furious Jews to overwhelm him.

The Chief Eunuch mused over his problem with the limber conscience which had enabled him, for so many years, to carry out Herod's every order. He must, he decided, pretend at least to further the search Herod had ordered, but he did not need to pinpoint it.

"No," he said, "Herod has told me nothing. Of course if you ask in any street you will get the same answer. Bethlehem! Ever since the prophets Micah and Isaiah, Bethlehem has been linked with a Messiah's coming. Besides, King David was born in Bethlehem a thousand years ago and that makes it famous, although only a little place." He gave his next words careful emphasis. "But many places are famous and should be searched as carefully--Tekoa, which was the home of the prophet, Amos; Beth-Shemesh, where the law of Moses long rested; Gibeah, where King Saul lived; and Anathoth, where the prophet, Jeremiah, was born. I mention only these which are near. There are scores more, all the way from Dan to Beersheba. All should be searched."

He paused, satisfied. That was certainly confusing the trail.

Naepor, however, did not seem confused. "Crazy old

fox!" he repeated. "He must be really scared. What does he mean to do if he does find this Messiah? Strangle him, as he strangled his own uncle? Smother him, as he smothered his queen Miriamme? Drown him, as he drowned Miriamme's brother? Execute him on a false charge of treason, as he executed that ear-less High Priest, Hyrcanus?"

"Herod only wishes to join other Jews in worshipping," the Chief Eunuch said, flushing.

Naepor bellowed scornful laughter.

"Since when has Herod ever worshipped anybody except Herod? And when did he get to be a Jew? He is still a swine of an Idumaeen in spite of what he calls his conversion."

The Chief Eunuch raised his hand in shocked protest, but Naepor would not stop. Disrespect of Herod would involve him in no trouble; he was too useful to this agent of Judea's client king. Moreover, Roman citizens, sure of the far-flung protection of the Empire, dared be independent. They were in no way like Jews who were forced to bend these days under a double oppression: the conquering sword of Rome and the tyrant heel of Herod the Great.

"Herod's sand-flea grandfathers below Beersheba bit the backsides of Jews at every chance," Naepor bellowed. "And Herod bites their backsides, too. Remember the golden Roman eagle he tried to put up in the Temple? I wouldn't give this goblet of wine for any Messiah's chances if Herod finds out where he is."

The Chief Eunuch had no good answer so he tried to make a quick one convincing.

"Herod doesn't harm anyone any more," he said. "He's just a sick, feeble..."

"He's a killer!" Naepor grunted. "And he'll be one till he dies."

"He's a feeble old man," the Chief Eunuch insisted. "But he has as much shrewdness as ever and that tells him to honor any Messiah who may appear. If he does this, he may win over many Jews who now hate him."

He drew up grandly, as though conferring a favor.

"It is because I thought you would like to win Herod's patronage, and make a little money also, that I asked you here. I shall be glad to let you both make this search that Herod has commanded."

"Of course we will make it," Panthera said eagerly.

Naepor scowled at the man he had just succeeded in elevating to the command of six hundred legionnaires. "You talk too much, Panthera," he growled. He turned to the Chief Eunuch.

"Why do you need us? Herod could use the High Priest's spies and never pay out a copper."

"We--we prefer not," the Chief Eunuch said coldly.

"Come now," Naepor said. "Why do you have to buy our help?"

As the Chief Eunuch hesitated, Naepor suddenly leaned closer, his heavily veined nose almost touching the other's flushed face.

"I see! I see!" he shouted. "You're afraid to use Jews. You know what could happen, even to the Chief Eunuch

of the Palace, if a Jewish spy talked, and spread word of what you were up to. Those who believe in the old prophecies, any honest Jew, would chop your head clear from your neck for helping this dirty plan of Herod's along."

"Herod means no harm," the Chief Eunuch shouted. He pushed erect and strode to the end of the court, his multi-colored robe swinging like a tumbled rainbow.

"A favor to Herod might be worth our while," Panthera said at Naepor's ear. "I'm willing if you are."

"Of course I am willing!" Naepor spoke quietly also. "But let's not tell this hissing snake too soon. We have him where we want him. Herod has told him to get this thing done; and he doesn't dare do it himself, or use the Palace spies, for fear he'll be tied in. He must use us, and the more we hold off, the more he will be willing to pay." The Primus Pilus was triumphant when their host returned, his manner once more conciliatory, and sat down again.

"Very well!" the Chief Eunuch confessed softly. "I am inviting you in because I need you. But do not over estimate my necessity. What I need is not much and I shall not pay much. Herod wants only to find a lately-born child whom some Jews call their Messiah, if any such has been born at all."

"We will find him--if--" Naepor's pause made the Chief Eunuch wince "--you make it worth our while. It won't be easy, you know."

He paused, ruminating on the assignment. He and Panthera, he saw clearly, could not handle it alone. The military

Tribune of Panthera's Cohort must be brought in.

Luckily this Tribune could be bribed. He was a Roman patrician, but not rich. Sly, foxy, pink-faced Julius Muso always needed money.

"It won't be easy," Naepor repeated, "and there must be three of us..."

"Three!" The Chief Eunuch's shrill tone showed dismay.

"Myself and Panthera and the Tribune Muso." Naepor fixed the nervous little man with challenging eyes. "I can send Panthera and some of his cohort out to search, and if General Proculus asks questions I have a fine answer. The new tax which is being collected for Rome. Thousands are complaining. I'll merely be using Panthera to hunt for the beginnings of tax riots here and there.

"But I can't tell such a story to my General unless the Tribune Muso supports me. Muso is assigned to the Eighth Cohort. He won't be there long; the General is assigning him to headquarters to make room for a new Tribune, and a good thing, too. As a fighting officer, Muso is worthless. But he will be around while this search is on, and if he suspects, he could spoil everything. You will have to pay him, too."

"No," the Chief Eunuch said. "Not Julius Muso. Patrician though he is, I have never trusted him."

"Muso won't let himself be squeezed out. He needs money too much," Naepor said. "He is on leave, on the sea-coast, at Caesarea; but when he comes back he will have to be taken in. At that, you're lucky. It isn't often Herod can

buy three such Romans. A Panthera, yes. But not a Primus Pilus. And what chance do you think you would have of buying another tribune of the patrician order?"

"Three are too many," the Chief Eunuch said warily. "I will give up the whole thing."

"You can't and you know you can't," Naepor scoffed. "Herod's sickness may make him forget, and it may kill him tomorrow, but if he lives, and remembers, and you haven't done what he ordered, you will end in one of the dungeons he is filling up all over Judea!"

"I can pay only what Herod has allowed me," the Chief Eunuch said slyly, "and that isn't much."

"How much?"

"Five thousand denarii."

"You'll do better than that." Naepor grinned. "Five thousand will have to go to Panthera alone. And twice as much to Muso, and twice again as much to me. I wouldn't stir for less than twenty thousand."

"Impossible!" The Chief Eunuch dry-washed his soft hands of the whole proposition.

"You know Herod gave you more than five thousand." Naepor eyed his host. "Probably thirty or thirty-five thousand."

"Thirty-five thousand?" The Chief Eunuch fell back on his cushions as though he had been struck.

"I caught you!" Naepor roared with laughter. "As sure as I'm drinking your prize Hebron wine, you are getting thirty-five thousand."

"I can give you only ten thousand! Not a penny more," the Chief Eunuch cried desperately. He knew he was cornered but he continued to try for a way of escape.

"Five thousand for Panthera. Ten for Muso. Twenty for me."

"No!" the Chief Eunuch cried.

"No?" Naepor brimmed his goblet slowly.

"No!"

Naepor lurched up from his cushions. "Come on!" he told Panthera and snatched his robe.

"Fifteen thousand!" The Chief Eunuch was now a man willing to reason even with the most unreasonable.

Panthera got up reluctantly. Naepor was already in the court's exit.

"Twenty thousand!"

"You're wasting our time! Thirty-five."

"All right, all that you ask," the Chief Eunuch wheezed.

Naepor lumbered back to his cushions.

"Give Panthera a thousand now," he grunted. "And I want two for the Tribune and five for myself. And let's have a drink."

The Chief Eunuch clapped his hands for a moneybox and paid. Tight-lipped, defeated, he watched while the Primus Pilus poured from a snow-chilled jar, drank and poured again and again before lurching once more to his feet.

o-o-o

Out in the street Naepor refused to share Panthera's

mood of triumph. This hunting down a baby! Any way you looked at it, the thing made a man feel sick.

His thoughts turned to Vedius Rusco, the rival he most envied and most desired to surpass. He knew how Vedius Rusco would have replied to the offer of such a commission.

Panthera started to gabble jubilantly but Naepor hushed him, and clumped along in silence.

Fuzzy with wine, he found himself recalling an experience of his youth. When he was the newest of recruits he had been marched over the Alps and had found himself high above the clouds. On every side a fleecy white meadow stretched as far as he could see, and he had marvelled in youthful awe and reverence. This, he had thought, was a meadow for the gods.

"This," he had whispered, "is what Jupiter, Ceres and Venus walk on when they stroll from their palaces." He had almost cried out, thinking he glimpsed, upon the immaculate field, the majesty of Jupiter, the purity of Ceres, the rosy robe of Venus.

"Why not?" he had whispered. "This meadow must run all the way to Olympus. Some of the gods could be here this very day. I might see any of them this very minute."

Never before, or later, had he felt so strong a desire to be swift after virtue, to be wrapped in the cloak of truth, so that he, even he, might deserve the favor of the Olympians who seemed so near.

The desire had not lasted. He had scarcely got down the mountains when he felt only his usual thirst, a budding

torment even then, and in the first town he had drowned his vision of fleecy meadows, strolling Olympians and virtue and truth. But it had come back sometimes, although less and less often, to be sure. It was years now, he realized, since it had come back.

And it had never come, his fumbling mind recalled, except when he was ashamed, when, as now, he had some dim awareness of letting slip a virtue which, briefly, he had almost had in his hand.

Helius Naepor shook his head. He decided that he needed another drink.

"It's the Chief Eunuch's worry," he grunted, pulling free of his own worries. He nodded two or three times. "This hunt isn't a thing to be held against us. We are just taking orders. We are just doing what we are hired to do. If any harm comes, the blame will be on the one who did the hiring. That will be the Chief Eunuch, or maybe Herod."

"I suppose you're right," Panthera said.

"I know I'm right." Naepor nodded craftily and blinked against the bright early sunlight. For the first time in Panthera's experience the Primus Pilus did not seem quite sober.

CHAPTER TWO

At intervals, as the bright early sunlight reached farther through the window, the strapping, copper-haired girl glanced toward the curtain which cut off one end of the room she was cleaning. No sound came from that quarter. The baby behind the makeshift partition did not rouse to cry and his mother turned on her invisible pallet only once, so softly that it scarcely rustled.

The copper-haired girl was named Judith and she was a girl only in years. She was a wife, and her own six-weeks-old son blinked placidly on a sheepskin in the middle of the newly swept dirt floor. She glanced again at the curtain and, reassured again by silence, soundlessly opened wider the shutters of the room's single window to coax in more warmth.

Outdoors the sun was pouring down warmth all around, and on the surrounding brown hills the night frost had melted everywhere except in a few bleak pockets.

"It's too bad," Judith whispered to the sun, "that you couldn't have been up to warm us when we brought them here."

Her whisper was a little breathless, which was understandable. She had been hurrying for hours, helping the two behind the curtain from a stable under the inn in Bethlehem, across hilly country to this house; and it had needed cleaning badly.

She was almost finished. There was only a single room, although that offered the decent elevated section which at night kept human occupants a few inches higher than the beasts they brought in for safety from leopards and wolves.

The new tenants had no beasts, except for a donkey named Briar. The master was tethering him now, Judith noticed, as she looked out at the boldly climbing sun.

o-o-o

The sun had been below the dark horizon when she and Aram, her husband, were awakened by the warm, insistent voice of a woman.

"I am Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias," the woman had said, adding that she needed a helper.

While Judith, on her pallet rubbed sleep from her eyes, the woman had looked down anxiously in the light of the wall lamp.

"Do come. The Innkeeper told me about you. I'll pay a penny."

At that wonderful offer Judith had bounced from her pallet, and while she braided her heavy bright hair, Elizabeth had explained.

A cousin of hers must be moved out of the inn's stable. The cousin--her name was Mary--had given birth to a child there.

"Which Mary?" Judith had asked drowsily. She knew a dozen Marys around Bethlehem, but she had not known that any of them was near bearing.

"My cousin is from Nazareth."

Judith, of course, did not know any Mary from that faraway place. She had barely heard of Nazareth; just a few houses, she had been told, around a crossroads farther north than most Judeans ever bothered to go.

"She came to Bethlehem with her husband because of the tax."

That tax, Judith had thought! It had brought crowds and crowds pouring into Bethlehem, but these had been less upsetting than the great strange light the other night. That had filled the sky and spread over the hills for miles. It had not been a light familiar to men, and people were talking of it still.

"Of course I'll come." Judith was sorry that she had rejoiced, even for an instant, over the penny, although her Aram was a farm worker who, himself, earned only a penny for a day's work. "And you don't need to pay me to do what any neighbor would be glad to do for nothing."

"I am the wife of Zacharias, a senior priest of the Temple," Elizabeth had repeated with meaning. And Judith had talked no more of working for nothing. A senior priest could afford a penny.

Not that she would have minded working for nothing. Work was a pleasure to Judith. It was part of living and she loved all living--sweeping a floor, preparing a meal, digging in the earth, having a husband, having a baby, nursing him, swaddling him.

"I must take my baby," she had said importantly.

"Well, naturally," Elizabeth agreed and had added that she, too, had a new son. Six months old. An only child.

The announcement had surprised Judith. Stealing a guarded respectful look, she had decided that this wife of a senior priest was lucky, at her age, to have had a first child. Her face was lined with years, even though her grey gaze was youthfully spirited and her tall body was erect.

Starting toward the stable, as the first rim of light began to glow at the dark edge of the world, Judith had been somewhat afraid of the determined Elizabeth. She had scolded as they hurried along because, it seemed, her cousin's husband had not reached Bethlehem in time to find a room in the Inn.

"A stable! Of all places for a child to be born! And it wasn't even a real stable, just a cave under the Inn, full of horses, cows, goats, even a couple of camels. And afterward what fuss and confusion! People coming. People going."

"Your poor cousin!" Judith had said. "Has she had any rest at all?"

"Not much, but she was serene through everything." That was Mary's way, Elizabeth had added in a softer tone, but then she began to scold again.

She had wanted, she complained, to move them into her own home. But Mary's husband, a carpenter named Joseph, thought that a senior priest's house would be too disturbing, with petitioners coming at all hours.

"So I had to find another place. It was pure luck that I came upon a little empty house less than a half-mile from

my own. And," Elizabeth had ended warmly, "luck that the innkeeper told me about you, and that you would come to help me with the cleaning."

Her scolding didn't mean a thing, Judith had decided as they walked. Her liking for the priest's wife increased with every step and she had liked the carpenter, too. Tall in the early gloom, he had been waiting outside the stable with the donkey on which his wife would ride to her new dwelling. He had rolled two blankets and tied them with cords to make a seat for her.

He too, had thanked Judith, and the women went into the cave.

When they set out for the house which Elizabeth had found for Mary, doves on the inn roof were beginning to send forth their soft consolations.

o-o-o

The house was small, made of plastered limestone and had the usual flat roof, topped by mixed clay, brush and grass, all rolled flat. It blended so inconspicuously into the countryside that passersby scarcely saw it, and there were few passersby. No road ran before it, only a by-way.

Judith looked down the by-way now, to see if Elizabeth were in sight. She had gone, a little while before, to make sure that servants in her own home were giving proper care to her own baby.

"Babies, babies!" Judith whispered merrily. Everyone was having babies in this warm cloudless world.

There was no sign of Elizabeth, but a beggar slouched into view along the unfrequented by-way. A beggar outside a house so humble and lonely! Whatever was he doing here, Judith wondered? He must believe he could get blood from a stone!

The sturdy son of Aram, on his sheepskin, murmured hungrily and Judith whirled. She stooped for her treasure, came erect, uncovered a blooming breast and filled his rose-bud mouth before any louder complaint could disturb the two behind the curtain. Mother and child there slept on.

And a good thing, too, after the time they had had! Judith thought back to the stable and said, "Imagine!" as her son nuzzled for a good hold.

A gentle knock fell on the door. She settled her child, now content with his milky ration, back on the sheepskin.

"If that's the beggar!" she said, "he'll get a piece of my mind." She opened the door trying to look determined like Elizabeth.

A reverent "Peace!" greeted her. A brown hand lifted from the doorpost box with its twenty-two sacred lines and a shepherd entered, passing the surprised Judith as confidently as though he had been invited.

Like most shepherds he seemed ferocious. He carried the usual staff with a crook big enough to hook a leopard. Draped over a shoulder he wore the usual villainous, red-dyed sheepskin and at his belt swung the usual pouch crammed, as though to mock the daintier fare of townfolk, with rank cheese, musty olives, dried figs and bread, all mixed in with stones

for his sling. The sling swung alongside the pouch. But in spite of all this he seemed only kind, perhaps because he carried under one arm a set of pipes, with their promise of gentle music.

"We thought there might be something we could do," he murmured. His brown hand waved vaguely to explain how uncertain "they" were of what might be needed and how willing--no matter what.

"I've heard about you," Judith whispered. She nodded toward the curtain in a signal for him to keep his voice low.

"There?" whispered the shepherd. Silently he touched his hand to head and heart.

"You are one of the four who came to see the baby at the stable," Judith whispered, "But where are the rest? The three who came with you before?"

"Well, somebody had to stay with the flocks."

"I don't remember your names, although Elizabeth told me."

"I am Esrom, and the others are Obed and Zorobabel and Beor."

"Oh, yes! Beor, Elizabeth said, has a yellow beard like a half-moon."

"That's Beor, all right. And the quiet one is Obed and the excited one is Zorobabel."

"But Esrom!" Judith threw her whisper like a stick. "We didn't say at the inn where we were going, and on the way we didn't meet a soul. So how did you know where to come?"

"Where else could I have come?" Esrom asked mildly.

The door opened and Joseph, tall and sun-blackened, with a crisp black beard, stooped clear of the lintel and entered.

"Judith!" he said in a low voice keyed to the curtain, "Do we have a little spare bread and cheese? A man can't turn his back on beggars strayed into such an out-of-the-way spot as this. And there are two outside."

Tardily, he noticed the shepherd. "Why, good morning, Esrom."

"Peace!" Esrom again put hand to head and heart.

"Two beggars?" Judith asked. "I saw only one." She turned back to the window. "Why, there are three!"

Joseph went to look, and there were, indeed, three. The newest arrival, skinny, barefooted, and wearing only a tattered loincloth, resembled Peleg, an odd beggar who had walked worshipfully alongside Mary for part of the journey down from Nazareth.

Three-fourths naked and apparently half-starved, Peleg nevertheless had been a braggart, drawing jeers from the travelling party which had joined together for protection against robbers. Mary, of course, had taken his part. Mary seemed to love everyone, Joseph marvelled.

But Peleg, Joseph remembered, had turned west for Meggido, fifty miles to the north. How then could he be down here now? Joseph decided that he had been deceived by a singular resemblance. His confusion at so many beggars, however, held on.

He had seen beggars in many places, but always there

had been a plain reason for their presence. He could not see any reason for their presence in this remote spot. He had hardly reached this conclusion when he was struck by a reason which was startling although still anything but plain. Plain? It was impossible. Just the same it stuck like a burr. He looked toward the curtain.

"I read a thing once," he said to no one in particular. "At least I think I read it. Or maybe someone said it to me. Or," he pulled down the corners of his strong mouth to discount in advance what he was about to add, "maybe I thought it up myself. When something must be defended, it is always the poor who first stand forth. They can afford to be brave, having only their lives to lose."

Judith widened her eyes at this talk.

Joseph smiled at Esrom and took a staff from behind the door. It exuded a faint cinnamon odor. He had made it of storax wood because storax wood never lost its pleasant, spicy smell.

"Well," he said to Judith, "Briar is tethered just a little way off, in plain sight. And I don't see anything here that needs me. I'll be off to work."

"You have found work already--" Judith stopped short. She hoped Joseph had not noticed the "already." Of course a master carpenter would find work easily, and at good wages. Her own husband was lucky to work three or four days a week picking grapes, spreading figs to dry, plowing, and at only his penny a day.

"I'm to repair a room in a villa over toward Jerusalem. If Mary asks where I am, tell her at the home of Vedius Rusco, the Roman Road Commissioner who helped us in Sebaste."

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus!" Judith said slowly, adding the honorary name which authority had bestowed, because of the distinguished achievements of the great ex-Primus Pilus. He was the one Roman in Judea whom most Jews admired.

"Your wife must be proud," she said, "Don't you want to say good-by? She will be waking soon."

"Let them sleep." Joseph shook his head smilingly and looked toward the curtain.

Behind that hastily hung shelter, in the shallow chest pressed into duty as a crib, the child would be sleeping safely in his white cocoon. A craft perfectionist, Joseph nodded approval as he recalled the skill with which Mary had drawn the swaddling cloth free of every wrinkle, almost, and criss-crossed its band from neck to toes.

Mary would be lying on her pallet, with the brown brook of her hair flowing over her blue dress embroidered in mellow yellow. One hand almost surely would be touching her spindle. That was always near. She had spun all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, looking happily around at the new sights and scenes, and spreading the gentle light of serenity and love which, he often told himself, belonged to Mary as to no one else.

He looked at the curtain with an expression of resolute protection which Judith had noticed before, on the walk over the hills from the Inn. Then he turned to the door and Esrom joined him.

"I'll bid you good-by," the shepherd whispered. "I have an errand in Bethlehem."

"Thank you for coming," Joseph said.

"Here!" Judith called softly.

Joseph was lifting the latch, but he turned and she heaped his hands with slabs of bread and a wedge of pale, yellow cheese.

"For your three beggars," she reminded him.

Joseph and Esrom went out.

There were four beggars now.

CHAPTER THREE

Five men were approaching, from three converging directions, the new, walled, Roman-style villa of Vedius Rusco Philippicus, on a high hill south of Jerusalem.

One was Vedius Rusco himself, ex-Primus Pilus of four tough legions in his day and now, by special appointment of great Caesar Augustus, Road Commissioner of Palestine. He was trotting his black gelding southward through dangerous country, made a little less dangerous by the new Capernaum-Gaza highway lately completed to well below Jerusalem. He was followed, on a big roan, by giant, half-naked Bracae, his bodyguard abroad and his major-domo at home.

Another was a young Roman Tribune riding north near the end of a rugged journey with an infantry detachment up from Egypt. An armed slave as thick as a wrestler and as black as soot loped alongside the Tribune's mount, a finger hooked around a stirrup strap.

The last was Joseph. He strode north by east over roadless limestone hills, his sandalled feet now and then calling hollow echoes through the roofs of the caves with which the countryside was honeycombed.

As he began to follow a descending stream-bed, a distant, yellow-bearded shepherd drew away from two companions and, standing among browsing flocks, signalled with upflung arms.

The arms thrashed like small, energetic legs, then they made a gentle rocking. Joseph was quick at signals. He rocked his own arms gently and jovially to reassure his yellow-bearded questioner that the baby was doing very well.

o-o-o

Vedius Rusco still had several miles to ride and Joseph still had several hills to cross, so only the young Tribune was in view from the Rusco villa when Deborah, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the master, climbed a cramped stairway and came out onto a balcony. So isolated a villa in such a troubled land needed a look-out; and the balcony, facing east, provided an unbroken view along a great arc which began with Jerusalem's towers to the north and curved southward through brown hills to the walls of Bethlehem.

Deborah was a rounded, amber girl, wearing that morning a flowing green dress narrowed at the waist by a wide silver belt. Her foaming jet hair was bound by a bar of soft gold bent to form a small clasp. Her mouth was full and wide and very quick to smile. She was munching a honey cake.

About the beauty, more or less, of the only daughter and only child of the famous Vedius Rusco Philippicus there were, admittedly, several schools of opinion.

Beauty is as beauty does, was the only statement on record from Bria, the large, blonde Cantabrian wife of Bracae who ruled the Rusco household in his absence. She would not say more for fear of making her young mistress vain.

She is almost Naomi, Vedius Rusco often thought. For

him the remembered loveliness of the Judean wife he had lost when Deborah was born would always be matchless.

If I had her beauty the master would surely desire me, was the forlorn opinion of Numidian Candace, Deborah's dusky attendant--and companion and friend--for twelve years.

Give me nothing to do but smooth and sweeten myself and who would ever notice her, was the opinion of Egyptian Nepte. Nepte was the villa's newest slave, purchased a month before at the Joppa slave market outside Jerusalem where she had stood modestly downcast, her feet whitened with lime--sign that she was being sold into slavery for the first time. She was new in slavery but she had already proved her tawny charms over and over. And I will prove them again, she promised herself furiously.

The opinion of Deborah's suitors summed up to unqualified praise; and all bachelors fortunate enough to be invited into the home of Vedius Rusco were Deborah's suitors.

Taking the last crumbs of the honey cake with a quick tongue, Deborah stared up at the wintry sky. She had come to the balcony still hoping for some clue to explain the strange and lovely light over Bethlehem which had broken her sleep a few nights before, and the strange and lovely music which had accompanied the light.

"Just the moon and stars and nightingales!" Bria had said, frowning when Deborah grabbed the honey cake. A girl who had won the privilege of her own study, boudoir and bedroom and who was old enough to be receiving marriage offers ought to be able to wait for breakfast. Munching might be all

right in front of a foster mother. But in front of servants and slaves! Well!

"The moon and stars were fire-bright that night," Bria had said. "And you know very well that nightingales swarm around here from Persia every winter. They're singing everywhere. You didn't recognize them because you're used to sleeping like a baby. But lately you toss and turn because you have a proposal on your mind. Even if it is only from the Tribune Julius Muso!" Her shrug said that a proposal from the poorest tribune she had ever seen--and she had seen the best and worst that four legions could offer--was nothing to keep any girl awake.

Julius Muso! Deborah had tried for a crushing look as she turned her back on Bria and the others and especially on Nepte who was muttering something about magic. Nepte muttered about magic whenever the lights over Bethlehem were mentioned because, like all Egyptians, she saw evil in any unexplained portent.

"Julius Muso!" Deborah said now, abandoning her search of the sky. As though she would think twice of marrying that old man, past his twenty-seventh birthday! Bria knew very well that a proposal from the pink-faced patrician Tribune did not tempt her.

It was the persisting hope for some clue to the strange light and--she held to it--the strange, enchanting music, that had brought her to the balcony; but it was the approaching young Tribune who now brought her up on tip-toe.

He had turned away from the dusty legionnaires of the

infantry detachment. They slogged steadily on toward Jerusalem under their usual seventy-five pound packs at their usual three miles an hour. He headed up the private lane which led to the villa high on its limestone hill, with his sooty slave keeping pace, an unstrung bow and a quiver of arrows bouncing on his back.

Deborah had to stand on tip-toe to keep him in sight. After a single look she sighed in satisfaction. She had known that he would be young. But who would have dreamed that he would be so handsome? And what beautiful armor! Gleaming helmet and shield, inlaid breastplate, thigh and shin guards!

The young Tribune wisely wore full armor since any tree or rock might hide a Roman-hating Judean who would die happy if he could run a dagger into an alien back, or robbers willing to risk prison for a try at a fat purse. His armor gave off blinding rays as, sighting Deborah considerably after she had sighted him, he jerked his horse to a halt.

Deborah smiled down and Julius Muso faded forever from her mind and exultantly she confessed that she must be falling in love. It was time, too! Wasn't she almost sixteen?

The young Tribune made himself tall in the saddle to catch all--all--of the sudden vision overhead, and paralleling Deborah's own confession, he told himself excitedly that it was astounding to come all the way from Egypt to find the girl for whom he had waited--without suspecting it--for almost twenty-one years.

At his side the sooty slave made a confession of his own.

As his broad nostrils trapped faint savory odors from the villa kitchen he confessed that he was hungry enough to eat half a horse.

o-o-o

Deborah and the Tribune continued to look at each other, both sure that the delight which flooded them, as it had flooded uncounted millions through uncounted centuries, had never before come to any man or woman.

"I hope this is the home of Vedius Rusco?" the Tribune called up.

"Of Vedius Rusco Philippicus!" Deborah corrected proudly. It was not every Roman who could boast an agomen so celebrated. Then, noting that beneath his helmet his hair, as she had hoped, was yellow, she smiled again.

"I have a letter to him," the Tribune said. "I've brought it from Egypt." He added this information casually, but he hoped she appreciated what it meant to have met and defeated the dangers of those wild, barren miles. "I am..."

"Don't tell me!" Deborah leaned toward him, her bare amber arms catching the light, the cool green of her dress seeming to float her an enchanting handsbreadth nearer. "Let me tell you!" And she laid a golden finger on her mouth and gave a sibylline Um-m-m-m!

"Um-m-m! You are Marcus Seclator Lucianus. You are the adopted son of Marcus Seclator who fought beside Vedius Rusco Philippicus twenty years and more ago. You are Greek-born and you are a military Tribune as your father used to be."

Marcus Seclator Lucianus showed little surprise at so much knowledge, but Deborah had not really expected much. No doubt he had suspected all along that she would be reading the letters which their fathers exchanged. She went on.

"You have been serving in Egypt, but the legions there are 'sleek, slack and rich.' That is what you once wrote. Half the soldiers have even traded off their helmets and breastplates. You want service with a fighting Legion. So your father turned to old friends, to my father and to General Orfitus Proculus of the fighting Tenth in Jerusalem. And you took your first chance to get out of Egypt as soon as the order for your transfer to the Tenth arrived."

She touched her lips again to indicate that the sibyl had spoken and made her dark blue eyes wide and fathomless. Even Bria had admitted, when she happened upon a practice session before the mirror in the lately won boudoir, that this was a tactic likely to disarm a young man.

"And now," Deborah said, "I'll tell you who I am."

"Don't tell me!" Lucianus imitated her sibylline tone and relaxed in his saddle. "Let me tell you!" He put a finger to his own smiling mouth. "Um-m-m! You are the daughter of a father whose agnomen has become famous from Gaul to Egypt although originally it was given as a joke to a little boy by Octavian who is now great Caesar Augustus. You are famous, too." He lowered his voice in pretended awe. "People say that you use sword, dagger and javelin better than many men because your father taught you, and he is still the best with all three and with spear, sling and bow and

arrow, too. And your mother was so great a beauty that people still remember her. And your name is Deborah." He accented the first syllable in a triumphant finish.

Deborah gave him an indignant look. She was still leaning forward, to reveal more fully her soft throat which was like honey poured in sunlight. This, also, was an effect which Bria had grudgingly admitted was likely to make a young man weak at the knees.

"My mother was not just 'so great a beauty.' She was the most beautiful woman in Judea," Deborah said. "And you mispronounced my name. It is the name of one of the ancient judges of my mother's people, who went to war even though she did not have, like me, a father to teach her how to use a sword. It all happened a long time ago but Jews will never forget how to say her name. It is Deborah." She bore down on the second, not the first syllable. Then she forgave him. "And now come into our house. You are just in time for breakfast."

A true daughter of Rome, notwithstanding her mother's blood, she made the promise every Roman preferred to hear. "Your bath will be ready before you are ready for your bath. I know a Roman wants his bath first, even ahead of food."

"A bath before food, even for an adopted Roman," Lucianus said. He swung off his horse to show that he made nothing of full armor.

Deborah, her blue eyes wide and fathomless again, vanished with a last green flutter.

"There will be a side gate somewhere, Micipsia,"

Lucianius said.

Micipsia did not change the expression of mild surprise which seemed carved into his sooty face. The expression was chiefly due to eyes which protruded and eyebrows which were roundly arched. Both seemed always to be reacting to some unexpected and startling event. In fact, however, Micipsia was rarely caught off guard and rarely startled. He nodded. He and his master understood each other so thoroughly that a nod or a single word usually was enough. He nodded in the easy assurance of a slave who has shared enough adventures with a young master to warrant acting more like a comrade when they are alone, and spoke a single word now.

"Eat!" he said in a surprisingly squeaky voice and rubbed his broad, hard belly.

o-o-o

The wall's main gate--double-doors of oak, reinforced with thick iron straps--slowly opened. Within lay an open space denying any enemy a hiding place and then the villa entrance, smaller double-doors.

As these swung open Deborah appeared just inside. She had unbent the gold bar and let the spun ebony of her hair foam wide over the shoulders of her green fluttering dress. Gaily she beckoned Lucianius past the doorkeeper who stood half-concealed by the panels he had pushed back, and half withdrawn into the cell where he not only served but slept. In an identical cell opposite, an enormous watch-dog eyed the young stranger with tentative suspicion.

Side by side Deborah and Lucianius walked down a broad corridor to a big open-roofed room, deeply recessed for ornamental vases and furnished with settees for clients who might demand the Road Commissioner's time and attention. Braziers filled with slow-burning charcoal were spaced among the seats. The floor, of polished vermilion tile, was covered by a great rug.

Far down the room, a large but pleasantly soft woman inspected Lucianius, seeking in this young stranger some link with one she had known well long ago. At sight of her, Lucianius ran forward in the excitement which rises so easily when a young man of twenty-one forgets the dignity of his advanced years.

"You must be Bria!" he cried. "My father told me all about you. And Bracae, too! Where is Bracae?"

"Bracae will be here soon," Bria beamed, nodding so vigorously that an iron necklace, shiny from constant wear, clinked. "He and the master are riding home from an inspection trip." She took the hands he held out. "So you are the son the Tribune Marcus Seclator has written about so often."

"Marcus must have talked about us even oftener," Deborah said, coming up. "Lucianius knows everything about us. The two of them must have spent days--weeks--discussing us. I'm afraid to hear what will come out of his mouth next."

"From the way you walked along with him, I wouldn't say you were very afraid," Bria said.

A girl a year or two older than Deborah, and so tall and strong that she might have been Bria in girlhood except

that she was the color of autumn oak leaves, came into the room. Deborah put an arm around her waist and Lucianus decided that this must be a slave even closer to her young mistress than Micipsia was to him.

"The bath is ready," the autumn-leaf girl said.

"Let the bath wait!" Lucianus cried. "Does anyone expect me to leave before protecting myself from slander? As though anything but praise could come out of my mouth! There never was such a household as this. You!" The look which he gave Deborah went far beyond the enthusiasm of the single word. "Your father! And where else could anyone find another Bria and Bracae? The pick of the girls in Cantabria! The best man of Gaul!" He began to laugh. "I'll never forget the story my father tells of how he and Vedius Ruseo captured Bria and of how she took a club to Bracae and of how Bracae spanked her."

"Sh-h-h!" Deborah whispered loudly. "We never tell that story in this house."

"I should hope not!" Bria snapped, holding back a smile.

"Not mention it?" Lucianus cried. "That grand story! Now let me see if I've got it straight."

"Well, you won't catch me waiting while you try," Bria said, but she did not go.

"Um-m-m!" Lucianus eyed Deborah as he made the sibylline sound. "It was long ago when Octavian was trying to bring peace in Spain among the wild Cantabri. And he and your father and my father and a cohort of the Twelfth were ambushed. But they beat off the attack and finally cornered

a handful. And then they found that the handful included an amazon."

"Bria! Fighting as well as any man!" Deborah cried.

"Give me shield and sword and I'll still make many a man back up," Bria said ~~calmly~~.

"I believe you!" Lucianus laughed. "Our fathers had a time taking you prisoner. You were too brave to kill, to say nothing of being too pretty."

"I wasn't the homeliest girl in Spain," Bria said complacently.

"But finally they did capture her," Lucianus said. "And then Vedius Rusco bought her."

"Because Bracae had begun to make eyes at her," Deborah ~~laughed~~.

"And that was when she took a club to Bracae and he gave her a spanking heard all through the camp of the Twelfth."

"And that was when my father decided that two who fought with each other so beautifully deserved each other," Deborah said.

"So I gave Bracae my club," Bria laughed, no longer even pretending to protest. "and Vedius Rusco Philippicus gave me my freedom to make the marriage binding."

"And after your father had retired from the army to return to Rome, and my father was transferred here to the Tenth Legion," Deborah added, "Bria and Bracae came along. And Bria became my mother's maid until..." she paused.

"Until I had to take Deborah over," Bria broke in cheerfully. "And what a handful I took! And now I must

take over breakfast. Your bath is ready," she reminded Lucianus, striding away.

In spite of that Roman fondness for baths, Lucianus did not follow. He looked at Deborah, and after a moment they sat down, side by side.

"Father will be here for breakfast," she said, just to be talking.

"Imagine meeting him after all my father's stories!" Lucianus exclaimed. "The only Roman alive with undisputed title to four oak leaf crowns for saving four lives on the field of battle."

"Four? Father almost never mentions any, but I never heard of more than two."

"My father," Lucianus explained, "says that two are not in the record because an emperor finds it embarrassing to admit that he ever needed so much help."

"Are you saying that my father ever saved the life of the Emperor Augustus?" Deborah cried.

"I might be banished if I said it in the wrong place," Lucianus told her. "But my father says that Vedius Rusco Philippicus saved Caesar Augustus once from a burning trireme when Marc Antony's fleet was destroyed at Actium and once in Spain. The Emperor has never forgotten."

He paused, losing himself in Deborah's eyes. Candace, from her corner, gave a small, remindful cough.

"Oh, yes! That bath!" Lucianus said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vedius Rusco never thought more clearly about private concerns than when riding through dangerous country. The die-if-you-don't watch which a wise Roman always kept in Judea, flanks, front and rear, was just the spur his mind required.

It spurred him now as the black gelding carried him along the new highway, far south of mighty Joppa Gate in Jerusalem's west wall, toward the hill on which his villa stood. He was a hard-fleshed, vigorous, prematurely white-haired man, in helmet, breastplate and a floating red military cloak. He rode so vigilantly that he could instantly answer, "No! Nothing there!" when half-naked Bracae, slouching like a bear on his roan, a pace behind, called warningly: "Those trees on the left!" Rusco had already satisfied himself earlier about that clump of trees. He saw in good time every rock and fold of ground which might erupt danger. But he was seeing also every facet of his immediate personal problems. These were three.

One was Deborah and her increasing, innocent absorption in love. One was the Gaza end of the new highway which he must start shortly and the new quarrels which it would start with the aging, jealous Herod. One was the urgent repair of his dining room which awaited the carpenter, Joseph.

As to his daughter, he rebuked himself now, as he had so often of late, for dreading pitfalls instead of enjoying her romantic flowering. The pitfalls did not, for the most part, even exist. They were only the ugly nightmares of a too-experienced adult mind. He wondered if all fathers had such nightmares. He wished for Naomi, not for the always desired lover but the understanding mother.

At least, he decided, he had been right in seizing the chance to bring on a rival against Julius Muso. Muso, with his boasts of family wealth and prestige, was a liar by choice as well as habit. All Rome knew that the Muso family only recently had been saved from actual poverty by Augustus who always had pensions for the families of broken-down senators.

The truth was that young Muso was out to rebuild his family's wealth, by any means that came to hand. If he had been willing to rebuild by honest fighting, no one would have thought less of him. Hard-up young aristocrats were fighting for fame and fortune all around the Empire. But Muso, in his year with the Tenth, had dodged a half dozen dangerous assignments. He might love Deborah--how could he not when she was so like her mother?--but he sought the marriage also because it would give him a hold on a fortune without any fighting whatever.

Vedius Rusco rejoiced again that Lucianius was coming.

"When he was eight or nine, he was quite a boy," he reminded himself hopefully. "Of course that was a long time ago!"

In rough ground to the east there was a flurry of movement. Rusco called, "Bracae!" and swung his shield from under the red cloak and plucked at his sword to make sure it would come easily from its scabbard and lifted his javelin, with its eighteen-inch point, from its stirrup socket.

"Ho-o-o-o!" Bracae kicked his roan alongside the black, keeping room to swing his own great two-handed sword.

Six horsemen, full-bearded and full-armed, came galloping hard out of the rough ground.

"Six to two," Bracae said cheerfully.

"Five to two," Rusco said, deciding to throw at thirty paces. The onrushing six would cover ten paces while his javelin flew twenty and downed one enemy, and he would still have time to draw his sword before the remaining five could close.

But the Road Commissioner and his huge bodyguard were too well known to go unrecognized. At forty paces the first of the charging horsemen shouted in dismay and wheeled and the whole band wheeled, their baffled complaints fading as they retreated the way they had come.

"Could that have been Dimas' or Gestas' gang?" Bracae wondered. Dima and Gestas were bandits whose successes, for months, had increasingly aggravated Herod and out-witted his mercenary troops.

Rusco shook his head. "Dimas and Gestas would have kept coming."

"You don't think Herod turned these six loose?"

"No!" Rusco said confidently. "When Herod goes after

me, he'll send more than six and they won't dare to fail."

He eased his javelin back into its socket.

o-o-o

He had seen Herod's diseased sexagenarian enmity growing. The tyrant rejected all men who did not put his interests above every other consideration, even above honor, integrity and trust; and Rusco was in deep disfavor because of an unavoidable conflict.

Herod was still seeking to insure his throne, as he had insured it for years, by holding Augustus' favor. He was still furiously building, in honor of the Emperor, temples, amphitheaters, palaces, gardens, even cities and harbors. And when these were delayed by Rusco's requisitions for highway materials and men, his rage soared.

Barring accidents, Rusco reflected now, he knew how to keep from joining the victims of sword, dagger, rope and wayside cross whose bleached bones outlined Herod's career.

"I think I can count on Orfitus Proculinus," he told himself. The General of the Tenth, although too ambitious to be entirely trustworthy, was an old comrade.

"And, probably, I can count on Quirinius, although Damascus is a long way off." Quirinius, an even older comrade, ruled Syria for Rome and was Herod's superior. He had recently imposed a head tax on Judea and Herod had been forced to help collect it.

It wouldn't surprise me if Herod invented some charge against me when I ask for men and supplies for the Gaza

GILBERT
SHERMAN
SONS

job, Rusco thought. And then I wonder if I could get word to Quirinius before Herod arranged one of his favorite little accidents.

The tyrant knew from long practice how to arrange an accident when he wanted to put someone out of the way.

But Herod would have a time explaining an accident involving Rusco to the Emperor. The knowledge of that might keep him from trying. Rusco had the favor of Caesar Augustus. He had won it at Philippi and had never lost it.

o-o-o

Throughout that fratricidal slaughter amid marshes, mountains and bitter October wind and rain, Vedius Rusco had been a six-year-old, tagging behind his father. His father had been a trumpeter in one of the nineteen legions which headstrong Marc Antony and the young, sick, worried Octavian, not yet become Caesar Augustus, had scraped together for the decisive battle with Brutus and Cassius. Vedius had stowed away for the stormy voyage from Brundisium, and across the Adriatic Sea had trudged all the long miles eastward into Macedonia. And, because he had not whimpered, his proud father had coaxed an armorer to make up for him a miniature shield and spear.

The young Vedius, strutting heroically with his new possessions, had caught Octavian's eye. To murdered Caesar's frail nephew, with a stomach always made queasy by crisis, such bold posturing had seemed an answer to his anxious sacrifice in Hercules' temple before quitting Rome.

"You shall be my luck!" Octavian cried.

"I'll be your bodyguard!" Vedius said. A bodyguard was a post of dignity to a half-orphan already wise in the duties of the legion. He thrust through an imaginary enemy blocking Octavian's path and rasped, "Hah-h!" like a recruit practicing at a sod target.

At the left knee, STRIKE! "Hah-h!" At the throat, STRIKE! "Hah-h!"

"Bodyguard, then," Octavian laughed. And when Cassius and Brutus, honorable men, were dead, the elated young emperor-to-be bestowed upon his small gamecock an accolade which in the end became a distinction few soldiers in the Empire could equal.

"You are no longer Vedius Rusco," he cried in rare jollity. "You are Vedius Rusco Philippicus for your heroic part in a great battle. And when you are older you shall enlist in the legions and maybe even rise to centurion rank."

Vedius Rusco had enlisted at fourteen, although the minimum age for recruits was sixteen. Long before, he had observed that the majority of legionnaires, including his father, were usually in trouble and penniless. They were brave enough, charging headlong at the rousing note of shining trumpets; but they were forever being fined, whipped, demoted, banished, even executed. Except for occasional loot they seldom had more than pennies to eke out their ration of bread, porridge, vegetable stew and the watered vinegar with an egg beaten into it, the posca, frequently substituted for wine. When they were discharged they

half-starved on small pensions made smaller by dishonest paymasters.

Young Vedius had determined not to be of this majority. He would be one of the few who became, not merely centurions, but *primi pili* and tribunes and, sometimes, generals and governors of provinces and retired with honor and wealth.

Modelling himself on stories he had been told of the two friendly rivals, Pullo and Vorenus, praised by great Julius Caesar, he had in every way out-distanced his own chief rival, Helius Naepor. When he retired it was said that even Scaeva, that third paragon whom Julius Caesar had jumped seven grades to make *Primus Pilus* of the Twelfth, had not equalled Vedius Rusco Philippicus.

In Gaul, Thrace, Britain, Syria, Judea, Egypt, Africa, Pannonia, in Spain where silver mines poured their wealth into Rome after the Cantabrians were quieted down, he heaped up honors. Far behind had lagged Helius Naepor--who was now *Primus Pilus* of the Tenth in the Fortress of Antonia, usually full of wine and always full of envy.

At twenty-two, Vedius Rusco had been transferred to Judea. There he had found his Naomi and enjoyed three such years as he had believed came only to the gods. Losing her, he had marched again, but in the end he came back and now his life had only two centers, Deborah and the roads he built for Augustus. He liked road-building; moreover, it kept him in Naomi's land which he loved, although he never hoped to understand its people.

Jews were baffling, stubborn, unquenchable. Beset and

often overrun, with a totality which would have crushed most peoples, they had never, in their hearts, submitted to any conqueror.

Now they would not submit to Rome, but plotted endlessly against Herod and so forced the Emperor Augustus to endorse the tyrant's plots against them.

Plotting was so widespread in Judea that any man might be a spy for Rome, for Herod, or for the Jews. And there were additional spies for other states. For hot Numidia, whose Juba lately had been allowed by Rome to take over Mauretania. For cold Dacia, whose peasants were not allowed to wear hats but who would not hear of Roman rule as a substitute for that of the nobles who froze their ears. For Trace whose tattooed tribes were instantly in revolt against any Roman restraint upon their often highly immoral conduct. For Armenia whose people challenged all invaders with bold eyes which gleamed above the hooked noses inherited from warlike Hittite ancestors. Spies from all these countries and more hung around Jerusalem, ready to warn their uneasy kings of any movement by Roman legions which might presage a Roman invasion and even more ready to help a Judean uprising on the chance that it might spoil an invasion plan. But in far greater numbers lurked the informers of Rome, herself, and the spies of the Temple priesthood, and of Herod.

o-o-o

Thinking of spies and ways of confounding spies, Rusco

found his mind turning to Joseph and the problem of the dining room. He was glad that Deborah was at home in case Joseph came early. The Galilean carpenter had first worked on the villa when it was building. He had been there at that time for some weeks because, after the villa was completed, he had stayed on, adding those last touches which called for a master carpenter's hand.

Deborah, Rusco told himself, would give him the key to the cautiously locked room. He might be at work there, already, on the needed repairs.

That die-if-you-don't watch detected movement and Rusco again called, "Bracae!" but this time only in the pleasure and excitement which marching Roman troops always aroused in him.

Over the brow of the hill ahead came the infantry detachment up out of Egypt. Its legionnaires were cursing. Good curses were a counter-irritant against hobnailed boots which, sometimes chafed in spite of straps laced tight to the knee, and the torture of seventy-five pound packs (basket, cloak, ax, saw, spade, chain, leather thong, grain ration, cooking pot, weapons, unsold loot and two stakes for the night camp's palisade!). Rusco and Bracae edged their horses off the highway and as the detachment drew near the cursing changed to a whisper, the whisper to a murmur, the murmur to a shout.

"Vedius! It's Vedius Rusco Philippicus." Veterans in the detachment found a better counter-irritant in hailing familiarly the champion known wherever legions marched.

They hailed and rehearsed the boasts they would make when, that evening, they drank their eggy posca or dined on the twelve-sided patterns cut into barrack pavements. How they would humble recruits who never had fought with and would not have recognized Vedius Rusco Philippicus! They could not wait for evening. They boasted as they marched. And the recruits felt the prick of ambition along with contempt for oldsters whose every word was an admission that their glory was all behind them.

Rusco saluted his shouting comrades of other years and when the detachment had passed, Bracae looked at him with bright eyes.

"It's still in your blood, isn't it?" Bracae said. "Well, it's in mine, too." He slapped his bare chest. He always rode naked to the waist in this mild Judea. "I followed the Eagles so long, I feel lost when they're not shining ahead."

Rusco nodded and turned for a last look. No matter what the Emperor might put him to doing, he was still, he knew, and always would be, a soldier. Then he realized that this must be the detachment with which Lucianus had journeyed and he beckoned Bracae and spurred his black.

They reached the by-road and turned into it at a gallop and came to the wall of the villa and Bracae gave a great roar. "We are come! Open up in there!" And the gates were hurried apart and then the villa's doors swung wide and the doorkeeper bowed and the dog slid out a long, panting tongue in welcome, and Deborah came running.

GILBERT
SUPERASE BOND
25% COTTON FIBRE
CHAPTER FIVE

"Lucianius has come!" Deborah made the announcement in a burst of excitement.

"Lucianius?" If she's calling him Lucianius already, the boy hasn't changed. He'll put Muso's little light clean out. "Lucianius?" Rusco repeated in pretended reproof, "Lucianius? Just like that? Not the Tribune Marcus Seclator Lucianius? I hope you aren't too familiar. I hope he won't have to put you in your place."

"He's nice," Deborah said, and lifted her amber cheek to be kissed.

Vedius Rusco had never felt completely natural except with one woman, and the reticence which his early life had fostered restrained him now even when kissing his daughter's soft cheek. Deborah did not seem to notice any more than her mother would have. Swinging his hand delightedly, she drew him down the wide corridor to the open-roofed atrium in which Bria had welcomed Lucianius. There, as always, Rusco paused before the murals of Naomi playing a lute, of Naomi weaving, of Naomi asleep on a couch.

"He is bathing," Deborah went on. "Candace had everything ready for you, so he didn't have to wait. He has the widest, blackest slave you ever saw, who can eat more bread and bacon than anyone except Bracae. He's with Lucianius

now, massaging him, I suppose."

"And I'll be with them in no time," Rusco said. "But has Joseph come?"

"Just a little while ago," Deborah said. "I took him straight to the dining room."

"You've kept that locked?"

"I never even unlock it to go in myself, but the whole villa is curious. The slaves are all talking about what we are hiding behind that locked door."

Rusco hurried on into a colonnaded garden. The dining room was to the right of the garden with the kitchen behind.

The slaves, Rusco reflected, were too near for comfort and he wondered, as he unlocked the dining room door, which ones had started the talk. He locked the door carefully behind him and saw Joseph squinting at splintered panelling and a slipped ceiling beam, the cause of the trouble.

"You've got here, Joseph!" Rusco cried. "I'm glad and ten times glad and you know why. But oughtn't you to be somewhere else?"

"Mary's cousin has taken charge. She has even found us a house."

"Is everything all right? The mother?"

"Both are wonderful," Joseph said. "And it's a boy."

Boy or girl, Rusco thought he knew exactly how Joseph felt. Hadn't he felt the same, fifteen years before? He nodded in understanding.

Joseph squinted once more at the guilty beam.

"I'll never again trust a Lebanese roofer," he said.

"Bracae will help reset the beam, and after that's done the mending of the panels won't be too hard," Rusco said.

o-o-o

In the home of Vedius Rusco the Roman routine of meals was followed. Of course anyone, even the slaves, might nibble at something on rising. Remindful of many days on short rations, Vedius Rusco was generous. But the first formal meal was served at eleven in the morning.

By the garden sundial it was ten as Rusco left Joseph and headed for his bath.

The Roman routine of baths also was followed. The family bathed, sometimes several times a day, across the garden from the dining room in a tiled and frescoed room containing the pool. Adjoining were a steam room, a cold room, and a room with marble massage tables. Bracae and Bria used all these, too, and Candace when Deborah bathed alone. For the rest of the household there was a great bath behind the kitchen with unlimited hot water.

Deborah, although a Roman daughter, held back when her father walked toward his bath. She was also her mother's daughter and no more than Susanna before the elders would she have uncovered her body before men, although she had heard that in Rome virtuous women did this as a matter of course.

She consulted with Bria about breakfast and only when her father and Lucianius emerged, oiled and massaged and casually clothed in belted tunics and soft sandals, did she call for Candace, meanwhile noting with delight that Lucianius

was talking as though to his own father while her father listened in a companionable silence which he never had offered to Julius Muso.

Bria hastened in from the kitchen. She was disturbed.

"Candace's arm has just been scalded," she said. "A basin of hot water tipped over."

"Oh!" Deborah cried in loving concern.

"Not badly," Bria said. "And we've covered it with sweet oil. But she'll do no massaging today."

"My poor Candace!"

"Nepte is the best I have left," Bria said slowly.

"Nepte will do," Deborah said just as slowly. She would not reveal her dislike of Nepte. She knew how her disapproval would affect the Egyptian's position in the household.

Bria frowned.

"If this meal wasn't going to be practically a feast instead of just a breakfast, I'd take over myself. Wouldn't that be like old times? But we'll have to use Nepte today. I don't like her, though. I wish we could get rid of her. Of course, I know that in this household slaves are not sold."

"She served the same mistress from childhood," Deborah reminded, but in a doubtful tone. "It was only when her mistress died that she was put up for sale."

"I remember the story," Bria said. A Reputed orphan, succoured in Egypt by a rich widow of Idumea, Nepte was reported to have been more daughter than servant in the household but no provision had been made for her and after

the widow's death, penniless in a strange land, she had sold herself to a good master.

If Bria could have talked with a certain troop of Roman auxiliaries which had come, from Cyrenaica through Egypt to Palestine, she might have heard a different story. But the troop had stayed in Jerusalem only briefly.

o-o-o

Nepte flexed her too wise fingers as she hurried toward the pool, a sinuous girl, the color of yellow cream and with black hair sculptured to her defiantly held head. The hands which shepherded her young mistress through the pool and to the steam room were light as thistledown and when they began to massage her on the warm marble table they set up such a lulling rhythm that Deborah felt on the drowsy edge of sleep, only it was not the sleep she had always known.

Nepte had waited confidently to serve the rounded young body and now that ^{the} opportunity had come, thanks to a sly arm on a basin of hot water, she was exultant.

If this daughter of the house accepts any service but mine hereafter it will be because she is too cold for pleasure.

She looked around the inviting room with its warm tiled floor so easy on her feet and its landscaped walls so pleasant to the eye. She drew in the sweet air.

This is where I belong, not in that stinking kitchen.

In the kitchen Bria stopped abruptly in the midst of preparations for breakfast. Could Nepte, she asked herself, have tipped the basin on purpose? On the heels of that

suspicion, other suspicions piled up and the whole lot were so disturbing that she could not get to the baths fast enough.

"I shouldn't ever have let that Egyptian near Deborah," she thought as she hurried.

Nepte's hands lifted when Bria came in. Languid, more than half-tranced, Deborah was frowning, as in protest against a frightening dream. And while Bria looked down, the frown became a shadow of distress upon the soft flushed cheeks.

With a speed which no woman of her weight could have been expected to reach, Bria snatched Nepte and whirled her away.

"You dare?" she whispered. "You dare!" She drove the snarling Egyptian into the corridor. "You--you--"

Gadding half around the world after Bracae, Bria had picked up words suiting the occasion. She had picked them up in Spain, Thrace, Rome, Palestine and where not. She had not realized how they had accumulated, but now they flowed out in a variety as vivid as it was sulphurous.

"You jomer!" she cried. "You pot! You bed-bait! You draggletail! You horny! You ploom! You fizzfab! You ponk! You Cyprian! You..."

She swung against Nepte's delicate, cat's ears. Right hand, left hand, right, left! Nepte's face flamed but she still snarled.

"Get back to the kitchen!" Bria swung again and when Nepte's hands lifted to her flaming face Bria laid a heavy palm across ⁱⁿnarrow buttocks, and when Nepte tried to protect

her rear, the palm swung high once more. Bria drove the snarling, defiant offender through long corridors and hurled her among dirty pots, then hurried back to Deborah.

"That one will never handle you like a bag of barley again," she cried. Under her motherly hands the repellant dream was broken, the flushed cheeks cooled.

"I must have gone to sleep," Deborah stammered in bewilderment. She moved with a clouded distaste. "I want to go back into the pool, Bria. I want to wash all over again. Was I asleep Bria? What happened?"

"There, there!" Bria murmured and carried her to the pool and then back to the rubbing marble and smoothed oil over the amber shoulders. "There, there!" she cooed and touched Deborah deftly with perfume-sticks.

When this was done she dropped a white linen tunic over the head of the only daughter she had ever had and put silvered sandals on her feet, and a lemon-colored dress on her body and snugged a gold belt around her waist and hung gold rings in her ears and set a woven, silver cap on her foaming hair, brushed and hanging loose, all as she had done when each of them was ten years younger. And Deborah, remembering nothing now of the dream, stood up, fresh and gay.

"Bria!" she said. "I love having you, even more than having Candace." She looked away. "Bria! Don't ever send Nepte again!"

Bria's rage came back. She gave a final tug to the lemon-colored folds, gave Deborah a last motherly spank and hurried to find Bracae. We don't sell slaves but if Nepte

hasn't lived her last day in this house, my name isn't Bria.

o-o-o

Bracae, that mighty man, had reseated the beam with scarcely a ripple of leg and shoulder muscles and now the solitary repairing of the panels was a ^{task} job much to Joseph's liking. Any work of skill was to Joseph's liking and this precise replacing of cracked woods, this exact regrooving of runners, this sweet fitting of invisible edges so that none could tell which marked the concealed door, all called for his best skill. He would, he reflected, have a fine story of craftsmanship for Mary when he got home.

And then, as had been happening often of late, he grew warm and proud thinking of home-comings when he and the son Mary was nursing would together be telling Mary fine stories of craftsmanship accomplished together. He looked ahead to such home-comings and next, in wonderment, back to the night of the birth, accomplished amid such portents. He thought of how Mary's calm had calmed his own dismay when they found there was no room for them at the Inn. He thought of how naturally she had accepted a stall, among cattle, and then he had to laugh.

"Never," he laughed softly, "did I see a more amazed, resentful, unbelieving woman than that midwife who came late and found nothing to do and the baby up in that limestone manger all bathed, oiled, salted, dusted with myrtle powder and swaddled and even with an amulet, a little ivory fish, under his chin." She had looked down at Mary asleep in the

golden straw and had just thrown up her hands.

Well, he also had been amazed, and admiring, too. He had not, however, been unbelieving. Long ago he had decided that with Mary nothing was unbelievable.

So many strange, unfathomable things had happened... that light filling the stable... the shepherds and the vision they had seen... and months earlier, he himself...

Joseph laid down his tools.

He heard again, as though it were yesterday, the great voice out of nowhere, which had brought him out of sleep.

---And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.

The prophecy always frightened Joseph. He shall save his people from their sins. What a mission for the little mite tugging at Mary's breast!

Jesus--Joshua! An earlier Joshua had tumbled Jericho, had made the sun to stand still on Gibeon and the moon in Aijalon, and had conquered all of Canaan's milk and honey land.

"...the hills and all the south country and all the land of Goshen and the valley and the plain and the mountain of Israel and the valley of the same. Even from Mount Halak that goeth up to Seir...even unto Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon...the whole land, according to all that the Lord said unto Moses...for an inheritance unto Israel according to the divisions of their tribes..."

But to the new Joshua, to this child, was now given a greater labor. He shall save his people from their sins.

It was frightening that in the hands of an ordinary man like himself must rest the bringing up of this boy.

Joseph had not asked for such responsibility and doubted that he was equal to it.

"I'm certainly not!" he said, picking up his hammer. That gave him reassurance. At least, he thought, he was equal to the tools of his trade. He was a good carpenter although maybe not quite so good as Mary always claimed.

He resumed his careful tapping; but the sound could not drown out other worries which came crowding. Enemies would hover over this chosen one like panthers and vultures around a lost sheep. Rulers, fearful of their power. Others in high places jealous of their positions. Evil men, like those who had stared so long at Mary on the way down from Nazareth. He remembered the centurion Panthera. Only the arrival of Vedius Rusco at Sebaste had kept that one from troubling Mary.

Joseph could not keep such worries entirely from his mind. "Everything is in the Lord's hands," Mary always said. But he did not have Mary's faith.

He was glad when the door of the dining room opened and Vedius Rusco came in again.

o-o-o

"They are still eating," Rusco said, smiling at the picture he brought with him of Deborah, radiant in her lemon-colored dress, and Lucianus, trying to pull his gaze away from her. The boy was handsome; he had Greek grace and strength.

"My daughter," he explained to Joseph, "and the son of an old friend. He is come up from Egypt to join the Tenth.

I'll never be missed and I wondered how you were coming on in here."

"I'll be at this a couple of weeks." Joseph pressed a carved ornament in the center panel and a concealed slide opened part way revealing a murky limestone cave. "When a thing like this sticks, it needs careful work. The whole wall needs it."

He made the demonstration gravely but his eyes had a small twinkle. This business of a hidden exit into a hillside tunnel with its implications of spies and plots and swift escapes was a side of Vedius Rusco that surprised him.

Rusco smiled sheepishly. "You have to be a soldier, I guess, to understand. In camp I always wanted an extra way of retreat. And when I found that just by breaking through a few caves, Bracae and I could run a tunnel all the way to the hill's far side, I couldn't resist."

He did not mind explaining to a man he liked as much as he liked Joseph. Joseph would have been surprised if he had been told how much he was liked by the famous Road Commissioner. From the first, Vedius Rusco had found the tall, darkly tanned carpenter, so far removed in station from himself, a good companion. He enjoyed Joseph's quiet humor, his astonishing knowledge and his proper pride. Rusco at first had been startled, then amused and finally whole-heartedly approving, of a self-respect which not many people asserted when facing a Roman of authority. He had been doubly approving when he found that the attitude did not affect Joseph's friendliness.

It was fine to be a conquering Roman. In every age one nation stands above all others. In the age of Vedius Rusco the nation was Rome. If you were a Roman you belonged to the most powerful people in the world. The temptation was almost irresistible to act as though they were also the most generous, virtuous, intelligent and brave. The trouble was that this assumption aroused Rome's conquered subjects to a natural resentment. Romans everywhere bumped up against that barrier. They did, that is, except when they came across one like Joseph who, surprisingly, raised only his own friendly counter-assumption of equality.

The enterprises of these two men were far apart, but more and more they enjoyed companionable talks and even arguments--about gods, for example. Rusco put his trust in Roman gods, of course; chiefly in Jupiter and the rest of the major twelve. The carpenter believed, as all Naomi's people did, that there was only one God. Rusco liked to draw Joseph out on this subject, and he saw a chance now. He sat down and motioned for the carpenter to join him.

"Take a rest. Candace will be bringing your breakfast. And if you can reset the door in two weeks I'll be more than satisfied. I'll sacrifice to Mercury tomorrow, or maybe to Ceres, to help you along."

Some said Ceres was hardly a goddess for a soldier. But in Vedius Rusco's heart she had always stood next to Jupiter. He smiled, remembering a thing he had lately read. Virgil, dead now almost twenty years and chiefly famous for his poem about Aeneas, had written it. It was one of the verses about

SUPERASE BOND

farm life which Rusco liked even better than the Aeneas work. He waved his hand gaily.

"Bow down to Ceres in whose honor see
You mix a bowl of cream and honeyed wine..."

"I suppose," he broke off, "you think I am foolish to sacrifice to more than one god. You believe that one god does everything; don't you?"

Joseph smiled. He could see what Vedius Rusco was leading into.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"Just one, for everything!" Rusco said, shaking his head. "Don't you know the whole world is against you? It's far more sensible to believe in special gods for every special need. In Babylon they used even to have Beelzebub to protect against flies. I hate flies."

He was smiling and Joseph laughed.

"The Cyreneans also claim a fly god. They call him Achor."

"Bracae," Rusco said, "and Bria both are sworn servants of Woden and wear Woden's iron necklace, even abed. But they sacrifice to dozens of malicious lesser gods. And how about our legions? Besides all the old gods, they sacrifice now to a new one, Mithras, out of Persia. A god of light they say, always at war with Ahriman, god of darkness. A while back nobody ever heard of Mithras. Now thousands of priests sing of him and his 'thousand eyes, thousand ears, all knowing, all powerful.'"

"That is not the Lord, no matter how many sacrifice to him," Joseph said. His tone now was serious.

"I know, I know!" Rusco said. "'There is none holy as God, there is no rock like Him.' That's out of your own book and your people have said it for thousands of years."

"The Lord was the Lord ten times ten thousand years ago."

"But your priests are just as full of trickery as the priests of gods you say are nothing," Rusco observed slyly. "All this stuff in your Temple!"

"This 'waste of rivers of oil, and thousands of rams'?" Joseph quoted. "I know. One of our prophets, Micah, spoke against it long ago. He said that all the Lord asked of us was to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God."

"I used to watch your priests when I was quartered in the Fortress of Antonia," Rusco said. "If I walked from my orderly room, just a little way along the colonnade roof, I could see a good deal that went on."

Fortress and Temple stood close together on top of Jerusalem's Mount Zion. The thick, towering Fortress overhung the precipice which fell away to the north. The shining, lofty Temple with its spacious courts and broad terraces stood adjacent on a site leveled out of the rock itself. So little distance separated the two structures that smoke from sacrificial fires often stung the eyes of Roman sentries. The colonnade roof on which Vedius Rusco had walked, joined fort and Temple.

Joseph had never thought of that walk from the Fortress being used to look down into the Temple out of curiosity. It was meant to be a quick avenue into the great Court of the

Gentiles in time of trouble. When a hundred thousand were packed in the Court on feast days, trouble could flare up in seconds. A single complaint against a cheating money-changer could start it.

"Down below," Rusco said, "people can't tell whether the sacrifice being readied for the altar is unblemished or just any bony old brute slipped in while greedy priests sell the perfect beast over and over. But I could see."

Priests did sometimes make shameless substitutions, Joseph conceded.

"And there's this cheating over the priests' share of sacrifices," Rusco went on. "Priests fill their bellies every night with meat supposed to be too sacred for mortal touch."

Priests did a great deal that they shouldn't do, Joseph agreed. To Elizabeth's husband, a Temple priest, he had said so bluntly.

"I know that much is not right," he told Rusco. "But I think I know why we don't protest enough to bring on a reformation."

"Why?"

"It's this way. When we Jews have climbed from the Court of the Gentiles through the Woman's Court to where only men may stand, and look across the Court of Israel past the Altar of Sacrifice to the Holy Place, we are truly afire with reverence. We feel ourselves almost in the very dwelling place of the Lord and nothing else matters."

Joseph paused.

"The dwelling place, of course," he went on, "is the Holy of Holies, and when we feel the power and the nearness of that, the tricks and lies of a few priests seem unimportant."

"Your Holy of Holies had one of our generals puzzled," Rusco said. "He had heard of it, and when he conquered Jerusalem before you and I were born he broke through the curtain, hoping for gold and jewels. There was nothing at all, just an empty room as high as it was wide and as deep as it was high. No gold, jewels, or anything."

Joseph nodded.

"Is there always nothing in it?"

"Nothing but the Lord," Joseph said.

"What?"

"The Holy of Holies is the Lord's dwelling place."

"Now I know why Pompey was so puzzled." Rusco said.

"Pompey?"

"He was the one who broke in."

Joseph waited.

"The story has come to be a joke among the legions," Rusco said. "When a soldier looks for loot but finds nothing, we say he's done a Pompey."

Joseph did not smile. And Rusco realized penitently that the tale might have been better left untold.

"I suppose," he said quickly, "now that your baby is come and your tax paid, you'll be starting back to Nazareth as soon as you finish here."

"No," Joseph answered. "The Law tells Mary to make her purification rite in the Temple on the forty-first day after

the boy's birth. If we leave earlier she will have to put it off. Some," Joseph smiled, "put it off until they happen to be in Jerusalem for a feast day. But the Law says after forty days and that is how Mary wants it. And," he added, "so do I."

"And so would I," Vedius Rusco agreed. "I would want everything done in order for my son, too. And all the proper prayers." He grew thoughtful. "But in battle," he said, "my safety hangs less on prayers than on me. I have to know how to get a shield in front of the other fellow's sword and how to get past somebody else's shield with my own sword or dagger or javelin. It helps, too, to know how to use a sling, or a bow and arrow. The most powerful praying man won't last long in a fight if he hasn't practiced using weapons."

"A long long time ago," Joseph said soberly, "my people were warned not to raise hand against one another who are all made in the Lord's image. 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed,' we were told."

"'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.'" Rusco repeated it. "If you make your living by the sword, the sword will cost your life in the end, is that it?" he asked. "Then I know what I must expect."

Joseph did not like to hear him say that. He was about to answer when a knock sounded and Rusco admitted tall, brown Candace, her shoulders and knees gleaming above and below a knee-length tunic. She placed a loaded tray in front of Joseph.

Rusco waved toward it with satisfaction.

"It was a gala breakfast today because of young Lucianus. Baked eggs in cream sauce, sausages, these yellow things called carrots, and fresh rolls and honey and wine."

Joseph accepted the invitation of Rusco's hand.

"How do you like carrots?"

Joseph tasted. The taste was strange. But the more he savored it, the better he liked it. He nodded.

"Bracae grew them from seed sent along with the sausages," Rusco said. "All Gaul eats the things. Do you think many other people might?"

"Why not?" Joseph said. "They're good."

Candace stood waiting and her eyes, on her master, were luminous and tender. Vedius Rusco did not even look her way.

"Thank you, Candace," he said, and turned back to Joseph before the Numidian had left the room.

"I am glad," he said, "that you won't be starting back to Nazareth after the door is repaired. There is much for a carpenter to do around the villa. Easily enough work for forty days."

He was too reticent to say more but his friendly look told Joseph that Rusco would be glad to have him around. Well, he enjoyed Vedius Rusco, too!

"We'll have more chances to talk," the Road Commissioner said, rising. "But now I've promised Deborah and Lucianus some sword practice."

CHAPTER SIX

Deep cooking hearths filled the kitchen's whole north wall. Eight all told, with cranes to swing big pots and little pots over the flames, and roasting spits to hold, at need, a whole plump pig or sheep. Each hearth had a short flue to draw off smoke, for there was always smoke, and behind each flue a painted snake writhed on the sooty plaster. Even now, with anger against Nepte still at flood, those snakes recalled to Bria her satisfying victory over two-score silly superstitious servants.

"Thank Woden," she had said to Bracae when the battle was won, "that you and I aren't such dupes of any god."

In the Villa Rusco, servants and slaves were conceded privileges and seldom hesitated about claiming them. Vedius Rusco was too conscious of his own humble beginning to force all his preferences upon those whose position in the household was humble, and Bria and Bracae were too good-natured. Barring Nepte, all the slaves had been at the villa so long that they felt they had an interest in it which it was their right to defend. And for pious reasons born of various ancestries, Bria's crew had wished to defend it with snakes.

They had urged live snakes unlimited in and around the new villa's kitchens. The Greeks had pointed out that, in Athene's temples, resident snakes got a honey cake once a month. The Jews had recalled Moses' fiery serpent upon which

any Wilderness wanderer needed only to look to be cured of any live snake's bite. The Romans had reminded that domestic snakes were favored by tutelary gods without whose guardianship great evil might befall any household. The Egyptians linked the slimy things with fertility and, by an extension of characteristic lickerish reasoning, with the even more desirable gift of potency. All had warned that trouble was sure for any kitchen failing to welcome snakes, and feed them, too.

Bria, however, as to religion was stoutly exclusive. Naturally she missed no chance to conciliate Woden and allied gods but conciliation of any alien god was a waste, and honey cakes for a tame snake, were, she declared, downright silly.

"In this Palestine there are at least thirty kinds of snakes," she had protested, "if you count from Dan all the way down. Which will you pick? Or do I pass out honey cakes to one and all?" Bria loved an argument.

One Greek had suggested that for all except Athene's snakes any left-overs would do, and besides they often caught mice.

"Maybe you want all snakes set up in housekeeping, two by two," Bria snapped, "the way it was with that Noah?"

Despite such crushing rejoinders the crew still wanted snakes and a stalemate was near when the key to victory flashed into Bria's mind. Painted snakes! As many painted snakes as Romans, Greeks, Jews and Egyptians wanted.

"And any color," she had added generously. After all, Vedius Rusco had ordered frescoes painted on all four walls

of the new kitchen in the latest fashion and painting in snakes would not be pampering the world's best kitchen crew too far.

There was no question that it was the world's best kitchen crew and except in silly matters like live snakes Bria showed her appreciation by never skimping them on even the generous allowances of Vedius Rusco.

All the bread, oil, olives, pickled fish and salt they could eat. Plenty of wine, even fresh meat now and then. And every two years the best pair of wooden shoes and in alternate years a tunic, and not a cheap tunic, either. And a warm, shaggy hooded cloak. And living quarters far beyond the coffin-sized cells of other villas she knew about. And for couples a cell with a thick double mat. Because of course each couple used only one mat. If they hadn't desired that pleasure they wouldn't have coupled up.

Her crew earned, Bria never denied except to their faces, all the good things they were given, even painted snakes. They kept the kitchen spotless, barring the smoke, and any time, any time at all, that the master or young mistress called for food, food was ready. A wonderful crew! But it would be even more wonderful when that Nepte was gone!

Bria turned a punitive glare on Nepte, crouching like a wild yellow cat over dirty pans. The whole crew had been looking at Nepte since her humiliating return from Deborah's bath and their whispers had been of nothing else. There was little pity in their looks and whispers. In her few weeks among them the Egyptian had offended them all by her arrogance

and her overtures to Vedius Rusco, as plain as she dared make them and openly rivalling Candace's.

Candace did, indeed, adore her master, and small good it did her, Bria thought regretfully. Candace deserved, herself, to be adored. But her shy, barely unveiled affection only aroused Rusco to approval of her as a companion for Deborah, if he noticed it at all.

Nepte was different. Trained in a school where even free men and women sought to submit themselves to a superior, Nepte had hoped that her yellow charms might become so necessary to her master that she would be freed of drudgery. That hope had now been ruined and she was open in her fury.

Bria, even while planning punishment, granted grudgingly that the Egyptian was not afraid. This concession did not, however, beget mercy. Nepte deserved no mercy. She had thrown away her luck. A mistress who never stuck needles into her! Who never had her beaten just for fun! Yet she had done...what she had done!

"You..fool!" Bria muttered and silently repeated the wonderful epithets she had thought of earlier.

Ever since she had ordered the Egyptian back to the pans and pots Bria had been looking for a chance to talk to Bracae about getting rid of the girl. First, however, there had been breakfast to serve. Now Bracae and his new friend, Micipsia, were eating bread and bacon again as though they had not stowed away mountains of it earlier. Bria refused to let such stuffing hold her back longer.

"You...fool!" she muttered toward Nepte again and hurried

out to the courtyard where her man and the broad, sooty black, whenever their mouths were emptied, were swapping boasts mixed with explosive oaths that by god...by this god and that... every last word was true.

Bracae swore by Woden. Like Bria he wasted no time conciliating strange gods, but along with constant sacrifices to his chief deity he made many fearful appeasements of Woden's godlings. A man was a fool who didn't. Rash doubters born elsewhere might deny it, but every man born in Gaul knew that every tree, hill, valley, stream, pool and rock was the home of at least one spirit, usually spiteful or at any rate so touchy that it could be stirred to retaliation merely by the wrong flicker of a passing man's eye. So whoever neglected any of them was sure to find himself in trouble. And what trouble if the tree, hill, valley, stream, pool or rock on which the careless flicker fell happened to house, as many of them did, a whole clan of spirits!

Bracae scorned Roman gods as he scorned Roman apparel, and in spite of his devotion to Vedius Rusco, he stood fast by the long pants of his own country. These had earned him, first in derision and then in admiration, the nickname, "Bracae," that is to say, "Pants." Thick-soled sandals on his enormous feet had straps criss-crossed to hold the famous pants tight around his ankles. From the waist up he was bare. Even his head was bald-bare, although he rubbed it nightly with powdered donkey's teeth and honey, a hair-restorer guaranteed by Woden's usually reliable druids.

Bracae lived under a double embarrassment. He was

childless as well as hairless. Even though he and Bria wore Woden's necklace, they were childless. Technically, the necklace was meant to be worn only within those magic circles ruled by Woden's grim druids, but Bracae and Bria, always hoping, kept on the evidence of their fealty even in bed.

Well, why should not Woden help make Bria pregnant? Making men and women was no trick for him. Hadn't he made the first man and woman from trees? And was Bria worse material out of which to make fine boys and girls than ash and elm?

"And it isn't," Bracae told Bria often, "as though we weren't doing our share. We ought to have ten sons, at least." And whenever he said that Bria's gaze grew dreamy. Ten sons!

Looking at Bracae now, as he and Micipsia lied to each other, Bria wished from the bottom of her warm heart that she had been able to give this satisfying man ten sons. Well, five sons and five daughters. By Woden!

o-o-o

"By Anuku!" Micipsia ended a great lie with a loud appeal to his own pet deity, a goddess of small power even in her own country and not known at all in Palestine but favored by Micipsia because her statue presented her in a magnificent feathered crown.

"What better goddess," Micipsia contended, "for a man who fights with bow and feathered arrow?"

Bria tried to interrupt, anxious about the business of Nepte, but Bracae had to tell Micipsia how, once, he had

fought out of a tight place by mowing down--he couldn't remember how many--with his two-handed sword. "Like grain, by Woden!" he said and dropped a belittling glance at Micipsia's bow. But then his pleased expression turned to apprehension because the bow came from a tree and the tree would certainly have its spiteful and probably eavesdropping spirit.

"By Anuku, the bow is the one weapon!" Micipsia said, giving Bracae's sword a look. "It can finish before a sword can even start." And while Bracae continued to worry lest he had offended the bow's tenant spirit, Micipsia told how, once, he and his bow had won, lone-handed, a fight against --"It is hard to say how many, Bracae. A man who has to deal death slowly with a sword, maybe wouldn't believe. It was at least fifty."

"Once I finished off over fifty without even a sword," Bracae said, boldly refusing to worry longer over only one spiteful spirit. "I just pulled a beam loose one time and brought down a whole house and a whole mob under the house."

"You two, and your swords and bows and beams!" Bria broke in impatiently. "When I was a girl no one took me for a beam or sword or bow, but you two together would have had a time felling me like grain, or with an arrow either."

Bracae offered Micipsia more bread and bacon. "She's always cutting a man short, and that's the truth, by Woden!"

"So were all my girls, by Anuku!" Micipsia said. "I got tired of them and left. Why don't you leave her?"

"Leave me?" Bria murmured complacently. "Go feather a

few arrows, black man! I have a private thing to say to this one."

When Bracae failed to slap the woman down for her impertinence Micipsia registered amazement, but he was himself docile as he walked to a seat on a pile of firewood. He confessed to himself that he might not have been able to leave easily, and maybe not at all, if any of his girls had been such a ripe armful as Bria.

When Bria had told about Nepte, down to the last of the vivid string of epithets, Bracae turned toward the kitchen.

"Egyptian!" His bellow must have been heard in every corner, but he had to repeat it twice before Nepte stalked through the doorway, a half dozen frightened, curious faces filling it after her.

"I'll give her this!" Bracae said. "She isn't afraid."

"She's everything I said," Bria declared. "But foul as she is, she has courage."

Bracae took Nepte by the throat and shook her until the helmet of her hair whipped around like a mop.

"I ought to break you in two," he said.

Her eyes cursed him and her fingers clawed.

"We never have sold our people," Bracae said, flinging her away. "But we'll sell you. I'll speak to your master and in ten minutes you'll be on your way to the Joppa Market."

Nepte brushed herself off and her eyes continued to curse him but they cursed only his back as he hurried toward the garden.

He returned in less than the time he had promised and nodded in grim triumph to Bria. Nepte looked defiantly away. By now a stream of servants had poured through the kitchen doorway; the whole staff was crowding out to watch the unheard of punishment. Scoldings? They could not count their scoldings. Whippings? Some had even been whipped. But when had any slave been sold out of the household of Vedius Rusco Philippicus?

While cooks, scullions, gardeners and maids stared and mumbled, two men of the household staff marched Nepte through the courtyard gate for the long walk to Jerusalem's west wall. There stood the vast Joppa market where slaves, along with all other disposable merchandise, were sold twice daily. As the gate closed, Nepte's gaze slid back, over a yellow shoulder, a promise that they had not heard the last of her.

"I should have had her lashed!" Bracae said. "That's all her kind ever worries about. She'll come off better at the auction than any honest woman."

Shouts and the sound of tramping feet rose in the field outside the villa walls. Micipsia hopped off his firewood seat and ran to a peephole. One bold cook, hoping for a last report on Nepte, ran to another.

"Legionnaires!" Micipsia called to Bracae in his high, squeaky voice. "A whole cohort!"

"A troop of the Tenth," Bracae said, "out for its monthly field drill." Under the strict discipline of General Proculus, each cohort marched ten miles every ten days, and, at least once a month, spent a half day afield in

combat practice.

"They're letting your two men and Nepte go past," Micipsia called. "No! The Pilus Prior is speaking to them."

"And Nepte is certainly making sure he remembers her," the cook cried.

Everyone ran to look.

Distantly down the slope which fell away from the villa wall, the Egyptian stood close to an officer of pilus prior rank. Nothing about her pliant pose suggested a disgraced slave.

She is making him see that she's all woman, Bria thought, half in admiration.

"Trust the slut to get herself remembered!" she said to Bracae. "She'll manage even to tell him where he can find her."

The watchers saw Nepte's two escorts draw her away.

"But she's still looking back at the Pilus Prior," Bria said.

"If he knows she is for sale, he might buy her, at that," Bracae said. "On a Pilus Prior's pay, he can afford to." He broke off. "By Woden!" he bellowed as the men and their leader came closer. "Look who that Pilus Prior is!"

"Bracae!" Micipsia said. "How about opening the gate? I want to go out and watch."

Bracae had already started to open the gate. He hurried out in advance of everyone. He wanted a better look at the Pilus Prior.

"I don't believe it," he was muttering.

In the garden, when the shouts and tramping feet were heard, sword practice was in full swing. Deborah and Lucianius were opposing each other with sword, dagger and shield, while Candace watched Vedius Rusco who patiently corrected mistakes of which Lucianius, with a Venus in armor before him, had made more than his share.

Both girls were in armor. Candace, unable to practice because of the scalded arm, had been so disappointed that Deborah had insisted on her at least putting on the proper dress. They were full of young pride over their military accoutrements.

Vedius Rusco had lately given Deborah all of the rich gear usually worn by tribunes, from hob-nailed marching boots to crested helmet, with added engraved gold for beauty. Candace had similar equipment but hers was dressed up with silver. The arms of both girls were bare, except for low-hanging shoulder flaps, and so were their legs beneath tunic skirts which were reinforced with leather straps, and as they stopped short to listen to the sounds from the field both did justice to their handsome attire.

Exercise had made Deborah's knees rosy and had spread over her arms a soft sheen of moisture. It had given her upper lip a faint, dewy moustache, had flushed her amber cheeks and had made sunny pools of her eyes. She was a girl to take a man's mind off his work and Vedius Rusco had not blamed Lucianius for not putting his heart into his. The heart was so obviously, elsewhere.

The prolonged nearness to Vedius Rusco had done for

Candace as much as exercise and Lucianus had done for Deborah. She, too, was glowing. Tall, strong, rounded, her silvered breastplate rising and falling with her quickened breath, she seemed to be absorbing with quiet joy every moment of this desired proximity. Rusco's attention was given fully to his duties as drill master.

The commotion outside broke in on all this.

"What can it be?" Deborah cried. "Candace! Let's go and look!"

Forgetting even to drop their shields, the two girls ran and the men looked at each other, both aware of how colorless the garden had suddenly become.

"They'll be disappointed," Rusco predicted. "You know that sound and so do I. It's only troops doing field maneuvers. Little Orfitus Proculinus runs a fit legion even if he does look too fat and easy-going."

"If these are men of the Tenth," Lucianus said, "how is it that their leader lets them make so much disturbance near your villa?"

"It isn't good manners," Rusco agreed. "But it will probably turn out to be just an accident." He could think of only three in the Legion who might wish to annoy him. And his old rival, Helius Naepor, was too shrewd a hand and Julius Muso was on leave in Caesarea--besides, he was too enamoured of Deborah--and the centurion Panthera whom Rusco had reprimanded in Sebaste did not command a cohort and never would.

The girls had raced through the villa. Rusco and

Lucianus overtook them at the wall gate, waiting impatiently while the keeper unbarred it under the gaze of the ever-watchful dog. Outside the walls the four joined Bracae, Bria and Micipsia.

"It's the Eighth Cohort," Bracae said. He turned to Rusco in amazed disgust. "And imagine who ^{do you think} is commanding? Believe it or not, it's Panthera. How could Helius Naepor pick him for a ~~Pilus~~ Prior?"

o-o-o

Rusco was shocked. He had been Primus Pilus when Panthera joined the Tenth, a recruit from Sicily. A Sicilian had long been just as much a Roman citizen as any man from the original mainland provinces, and Rusco had known many Sicilians who were Romans as good as any. But for centuries the island had been a crossroads where all the traffic up and down the Mediterranean mingled. The best, but also the worst, adventurers from Phoenicia, Babylon, Greece, Egypt and Carthage, indeed from the whole world, had dropped their seed. Panthera showed all the faults of such carnal ^{casual} crossbreeding.

A mongrel, Rusco had decided early, and had seen the record bear him out. From the beginning Panthera had played favorites when he was on top and begged favors when he was underneath. When rations were short, when prizes were divided, he always came off with something extra. He always had an excuse for a duty undone. His mind was always on women, any woman. And where other men might have been

embarrassed, he grew only boastful when his bottomless craving caused his real name to be forgotten and replaced by the name of the animal considered the most concupiscent in nature.

Vedius Rusco's memory turned back to the recent night in Sebaste, half way between Nazareth and Jerusalem, when Panthera had affronted the young wife of Joseph. Vedius could still recall her face. Indeed, he wondered whether he would ever forget it.

Panthera had come to halt a riot. Riots grew up like weeds between Sebaste's Samaritans and Judean or Galilean Jews. This one had started in a quarrel between a Samaritan shopkeeper and a Sadducee. And having parted the two chief quarrelers, exacting his bit of graft, Panthera had put his legionnaires to dispersing the crowd that had gathered and so had come on Joseph's party, who were on their way to Bethlehem.

Not even a centurion had any right from Rome to stop an innocent traveller and his wife, but Panthera had seen Mary. His winks, hints and innuendos had drawn a crowd of guffawing soldiers around her and Joseph, when Vedius Rusco and Bracae had ridden up. Rusco had been staying overnight in Sebaste and the riot had aroused him; and even though he was out of the Imperial army, his rank gave him authority over a centurion. He had ridden between Panthera and his victims.

"These people can't be mixed up in the riot, Centurion," he had said, and another thing he still remembered was the relief that came into Joseph's face, and how his strong hand had relaxed its grip on the staff he was holding.

"No, but---" Panthera had fumbled.

"Suppose then that we let them go along."

"If the Commissioner will let me explain---."

"Go on!" Rusco was softly reasonable. "Do explain."

"Well, the Commissioner knows of the funny story going around. About a ---." He glanced at Mary, so plainly near her time.

"Oh, that?" Vadius Rusco was still softly reasonable, because his anger was growing.

"Well, it's like I told you. Herod---." Panthera rubbed suddenly sweating hands against his cloak. "If there's anything to---he'd like to know. I guess---."

"To know what?"

"Now, look, Commissioner! The kind of thing people say is going to happen might mean trouble for Herod a few years from now. So, if Herod knew soon enough where to look---."

"Look to people like this?" Rusco did not think it necessary to explain that he knew Joseph from the latter's work in his villa. It was enough that here were only harmless travellers.

"Well!" Panthera exploded. "It could be this woman's, just as well as not. It could be any woman's."

It was then, at the absurdity of pinning such a story on Joseph's wife and at the greater absurdity of trying to take down the names of all women due to bear children in the next few days, or weeks, and so compile a list which Herod might check, that Vadius Rusco had sent Panthera back to his quarters.

Panthera was, Rusco decided looking toward the hill on which the cohort sprawled, not only a mongrel and a piece of filth, but a fool to boot. He was good enough in combat--a brutal fighter too--but he got little respect from his men. As the leader of a century, a hundred soldiers, he might do, but he was not half good enough to lead a cohort. Then why the promotion?

But because Rusco knew Helius Naepor, he thought he knew the answer to this question. The Primus Pilus was up to some questionable transaction and needed a cohort leader whom he could send down any path.

What path, Rusco wondered, eyeing the Eighth in its brief moment of rest? What path did Naepor plan for Panthera?

Seeing that he had attracted the attention of the master of the villa, Panthera saluted Rusco and swaggered forward.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Panthera blustered up with an insolent smile on his usually sullen face. In Sebaste he had been only a centurion of least rank. The Emperor Augustus' Road Commissioner could command and he could hardly disobey. Now he was one of the elite officers of the Legion. Now he was very different from the humble fellow who had not dared defy an order to stop baiting Joseph's party. His bold inspection of Deborah and Candace marked a very different Panthera indeed.

"I hope," he said, "that we haven't made too much noise. I put the cohort into a practice charge along the hill and they got a little out of hand." The words seemed natural enough, but the tone was defiant.

"You didn't bother us at all," Vadius Rusco said pleasantly. He moved forward a dozen paces to put Deborah and Candace too far behind to call for introductions. Lucianus and Bracae followed, and Micipsia followed them.

"The Tribune Marcus Seclator Lucianus," Rusco said, "is just up from Egypt and I believe your general plans to give him some duty in the Tenth." He knew Orfitus would wish, himself, to reveal the particular duty. Proculus always wished to reveal, himself, the particulars of every assignment in the Tenth.

Panthera nodded indifferently, too full of his own glory to be interested in any new young stranger, but his persistent

smile now asked for some acknowledgement of his promotion. It would have been quite in order to invite him into the villa for a congratulatory goblet, to mark his newly won place among the chief combat officers of Rusco's old legion. Rusco, however, had despised the centurion who annoyed Joseph and Mary at Sebaste and he despised no less the swaggering Pilus Prior.

"When I was with the Tenth," he said smoothly, "the Eighth Cohort was one of the best, at fighting or drill. Will you show us how good it is now?"

"Glad to," Panthera drawled and his sleepy bold gaze went again to Deborah and Candace, running over them like an insistent hand.

Rusco turned. "Maybe you ought to go back to the villa," he said to his daughter. "And take Candace with you. You both may watch, if you like, from the balcony."

The girls turned willingly away, shepherded by Bria. Rusco, as the men strolled toward the legionnaires, spoke disarmingly of the value of combat practice. Panthera, aware of the snub, strove to retain his swagger when they arrived at the cohort. He turned to smile meaningfully back at the balcony where the girls now appeared.

"You train Amazons in your villa," he said, loud enough for the nearest soldiers to hear.

Bracae who had kept close to his master stirred at Panthera's impertinence but Rusco's look warned him to remain quiet. Micipsia's eyes stuck farther out and his brows arched more roundly in utter disbelief when no rebuke was given.

"And every man of every legion envies them the training," Panthera went on, speaking louder. Plainly he had an idea which pleased him more than his promise of a show by the cohort. "I, myself, am eager to learn what Vedius Rusco Philippicus can teach. I don't suppose you would care to give me a lesson?"

Rusco colored slightly. He recognized the intent of the new Pilus Prior to impress his men but was he really in earnest? Even a practice fight was risky. Did he really believe that his youth and bulk were sure to win against older skill and experience?

Rusco was almost alarmed to feel a familiar elation rising. He smiled, and Bracae understood that his chief, as always, was taking fire at the approach of an enemy.

Rusco was taking fire, indeed, but he was also telling himself that he was too old to respond to the mixture of fun, fear, calculation, rashness and rage which conflict had aroused in him from his first days as a recruit.

You have seen thousands at your age go down before younger champions. They had slowed up. You have slowed up yourself.

He was pleased that he had sense enough to keep his mouth shut, but the old elation went on rising. He held his silence so long that Panthera swaggered wider, winking at the legionnaires nearest him.

"Yes," he said, "I'd like very much to learn what the Legions' old champion could teach me."

Bracae burst into laughter, Micipsia squeaked derisively

and Lucianius stared in cold contempt, but to Rusco's chagrin the murmur which ran along the cohort was not, in the main, contemptuous of Panthera's brashness. There was even a hint, mixed with the pleasure which legionnaires always felt at the prospect of any sort of fight, that perhaps their big new commander was the one to prove that after many years the great ex-Primus Pilus was finished.

The elation rose higher. Rusco called himself a self-esteeming fool, but it went on rising in spite of muscles which not only had to be slower but felt slower.

"I probably couldn't teach you a thing," he said with a modesty in reverse of his mood. "I've been retired for over two years and even then I was old for such play."

Panthera could be modest, too, and mean it just as little.

"But of course Vedius Rusco Philippicus is not just any veteran turned off with his bonus and good service diploma. You must have a good deal of your old skill left."

Bracae's bellow brought two recruits erect in alarm, but Rusco only smiled amiably.

"A number of young men probably could give me a lesson."

"I am asking for a privilege as well as a lesson."

Rusco laughed. By Mars! By Hercules! Muscles were always muscles and his felt fine.

"I would be proud, all my life, just to be able to say I'd crossed swords with the great Philippicus."

You don't want just to cross swords, Pilus Prior. You want to best me. Maybe you even want to wound me, by accident of course, but the deeper the better, because then your cohort

would really be impressed.

"Swords!" Rusco pretended amazement. "One of us might get hurt."

"I'll have to take my chances!" Panthera winked again.

"Let's just get bows and arrows and shoot at a mark. I might teach you a thing or two about a bow."

"Roman weapons are good enough for me."

"Now wait! How about the sling? I'll try to give you a lesson with the sling. You might thank me for that, some day."

"I've watched those auxiliaries who are called the world's best slingers," Panthera said scornfully. "Those Balearic Island sharpshooters! I'll keep to sword, dagger and javelin."

Lucianus spoke. "If Panthera wants a lesson so much, let me try to give him one." He felt concerned. It wasn't, of course, as though his own father were stepping out of fat middle-age to play champion. Vedius Rusco was so lacking in any look of middle-age that it was hard to believe he was almost as old as Marcus Seclator. Nevertheless Rusco also carried a burden of years.

"Why not Micipsia!" Micipsia squeaked. "I'll sword the man, bow the man, wrestle the man."

Panthera laughed.

"I'll give you a lesson," Bracae said solidly and no one could mistake his offer for a joke.

"He will have to put up with me," Rusco said lightly. He decided that he did not feel a day over twenty-five. He glanced around the cohort and off to one side found a small,

separate detachment and raised a hand in delighted greeting.

"Arrius! Arrius Messala! I thought you had retired. When did they call you back?"

A centurion, full of wrinkles and gray hair, who stood at the head of twenty-five veterans, squared age-thickened shoulders at such warmth from so famous a comrade.

"In September, Primus Pilus!" His use of the old title told how far back the comradeship ran. "They called me back to lead this independent unit." He waved up to a small, square banner, carried by an orderly. "And last week they brought us on from Africa for duty with the Tenth."

"And under your own vexillum!" Rusco looked to the banner as he held out an affectionate hand. "When were we together last? Wait! I remember. It was when we fought under Tiberius all the way from the Rhone to the Danube."

"All the way into Pannonia!"

"And what fighters those Pannonians were!"

Messala glanced down at his breastplate of hardened leather, faced with iron straps. "Remember this?" he asked.

"Should I?" Rusco smiled.

"You gave it to me!" Messala cried. "After you cut down that Pannonian chief who charged our eagles. You took it off him!"

"So I did! And you certainly needed it because the Pannonians had slashed yours all over."

"I never fixed this little slit where your sword went through," Messala said, "but it's as good as ever."

"And good enough for me," Rusco said. "Will you loan

it to me for a little while, and your helmet and shield and weapons?"

"They're all yours!" Messala cried and could not check a proud glance around. "And if I do say so, you couldn't have better. The sword is the one I carried under Tiberius."

Rusco felt more strongly than ever the grand familiar confusion of emotions which he well knew he ought to deplore.

"Aren't you going to send for your own gear?" Lucianus protested.

"Messala and I are of a size," Rusco said easily.

A little of Panthera's swagger ran out at such light treatment of the imminent meeting. Cuirass, shield, sword and dagger were important. If a cuirass chafed, if a shield was unbalanced or awkward on the arm, if weapons were not right--if any one of these details was present--the difference could hurt and if all of them were, it might mean the difference between winning and losing.

"Go in and get your own metal," he said to Rusco. "Take all the time you want."

"This will do," Rusco said, the high mood ringing in his voice.

He finished arming with the help of three experts. Messala inspected the fit of armholes and tightened straps to snug the breastplate. Micipsia adjusted the broad, sporran-like leather which hung between his legs. Bracae would not approve sword, dagger and shield until Rusco had tried the balance of the weapons and banged the shield hard to test it for an invisible flaw.

The recruits of the cohort were eyeing Panthera with admiration but the older men, Rusco was pleased to note, were eyeing one another with cautious grins.

"Five silver denarii on the Primus Pilus," Messala sang out. "No, twelve!" He had emptied his pouch.

Six recruits huddled and turned up enough brass, copper and silver to make eight and a half denarii.

"I won't take all your money, babies!" Messala said. "On Vedius Rusco Philippicus, twelve denarii!"

"On Panthera, eight denarii!" cried the recruits' spokesman.

"I don't feel right even offering you twelve to eight," Messala said in mock-mournfulness. He ignored Panthera. When did an independent evocatus under his own vexillum need to truckle to a big boaster like this one?

"How far is this to go?" Bracae demanded. "As far as first blood?"

"No further," Panthera said virtuously. "My whole idea is just to get a lesson."

"You will," Bracae said.

"We'll stop it any time you've had enough," Rusco said happily. "And we'll start any time you are ready."

He looked back at the balcony. Deborah and Candace were too far away to hear what was being said but they could see what was going on. Both were leaning forward intently. Rusco waved.

"Hold on!" Lucianus cried. "Do you mean to keep those on?" He pointed protestingly at Panthera's hobnails. Such

boots were a brutal weapon in close fighting. They had crushed many a foot, and might accidentally do harm even in a friendly set-to. But Rusco smiled. "I don't mind."

"Isn't this just for fun?" Panthera asked, trying to make a molehill out of Lucianus' mountain.

"Of course it is," Rusco agreed. "And I've fought in soft shoes before. There were times, when I was young, that I couldn't afford any others!"

Reminded that Augustus' Road Commissioner had been forced, in the days of his youth, to economize as hard as their own, the six gambling recruits were washed with one of those emotional waves which turn logic topsy-turvy. It inspired the glorious dream that they might rise to his high level and their young hearts, in spite of their eight denarii, began to hate Panthera who was about to attack their dream.

"I'll referee," Bracae announced. "And I want you both to obey on the dot when I command 'Ground POINTS!' That way you'll be more likely not to get hurt." He addressed his last sentence to Panthera.

"You can count on me," Panthera promised loudly, attempting an artful frankness. He knew that the shoes had lost him some popular favor and he hoped that his ready agreement would persuade at least a few that he was, in spite of the shoes, a scrupulously fair fighter.

"I'll stop on command," Rusco laughed. "I'm almost wishing I didn't have to start." The wonderful mood which he ought to deplore was higher than ever.

Panthera did everything by the book but he did everything well. He settled into position. His sword arm was ready to thrust forward or up or down because, of course, the old Greek technique of always using the edge had long since been discredited and now the point was paramount. In his shield hand he held his heavy dagger by the blade. This was something new, but also by the book. The blade was wrapped in his neckscarf, leaving the hilt bare for a quick snatch if he lost his sword or got into quarters too close for the longer weapon. Bent, springy knees made movement in any direction easy. This was by the book also. Feet were a little apart, the left a little advanced. The top of his shield was in line with his chin, ready to protect face, neck or vulnerable arm-pit but well positioned to guard soft belly or tender groin, the latter only poorly protected by the sporran-like strap.

Vedius Rusco's stance was not very different, but it was too relaxed to conform to the book. Every muscle was as loose as sand, making him ready to fall away, slide ahead, sway, step aside or leap clear. He did not hold his dagger by the book either. His shield hand gripped it between two fingers, by the hilt. Panthera had heard men claim that Vedius Rusco could seize a dagger by the point and throw it straight and true. He had even heard some say they had seen Rusco do this, but he doubted the story.

"READY!" Bracae commanded.

Panthera nodded. Rusco smiled up at Deborah.

Sweat broke out on Lucianus' palms. Micipsia tensed as

though he, also, faced a sword. The cohort sighed loudly.

The men were well matched. Panthera was younger, a little heavier and taller and his reach was longer. Rusco was deeper chested and more strongly muscled. Panthera was scowling and breathing audibly. Rusco was expressionless and his gaze seemed to fall nowhere and everywhere.

"GUARD!" Bracae cried.

Panthera feinted, then drove a swift long-point. Rusco evaded it without shifting his feet, a proof of balance which brought a "Ha!" from Messala's veterans. Panthera's blade stabbed at and under and around, but the opposing shield always met it. Panthera pressed but he was skillful and wary and never over-reached. He never took a stride so long that a counterstroke could catch him off guard. His powerful, orthodox swordplay was always dangerous even though it had no originality to throw out an unexpected menace.

Both men were shifting their feet now, scraping the stony ground roughly and quickly. They reversed positions three times and then Panthera thought he had the sun in Rusco's eyes and drove straight for the belly and for once it seemed that Rusco would not intercept the thrust and Micipsia whinnied. But the edge of Rusco's shield came out of nowhere to ring against Panthera's blade a few inches in front of the hilt and Bracae nodded approval.

The blow would have knocked the sword out of the hand of almost any other soldier, but Panthera hung on although his mouth twitched.

"Strong as a bull!" Bracae grunted to Lucianus. "But

that wrist must hurt by now."

Panthera backtracked, waiting for the hurt to lessen.

"That's a good one to learn," Rusco said, faintly apologetic.

The cohort's veterans nodded in a growing conviction that their Pilus Prior was in trouble and the six converted recruits were happily surer that their eight denarii had gone up in smoke.

Furious at having been so nearly disarmed, Panthera set out to regain face. He did not let himself become reckless and did not open himself to another numbing shield blow, but he thrust, thrust, thrust and his heavy hobnails stomped.

Rusco fell back. He retreated half a dozen light, deliberate steps, began to circle right. Panthera was forced to change front and to reach across his own shield. He never could quite close with his target but after a circle or two his confidence grew. Two circles, three! His man was tiring. Four, five! Old Rusco seemed unable to make a stand, much less counter-attack.

Panthera decided that his moment had come. In this scramble any blow could be explained. He stabbed upward and when the shield rose and covered Rusco's eyes, or seemed to, he stomped at Rusco's lightly shod instep. He missed, heard a scandalized cry, stomped again and was all set for the contrite, virtuous apology when he knew he had missed the second time. Then, incredibly, he was in retreat.

Rusco was not, after all, too tired to stand or even to counter-attack. And this was a different Rusco. This was not

the smiling make-believe opponent of the first five moments. This was as unmistakable an avenger as the attempted foul had been unmistakable. And now Panthera discovered what oldsters meant when they said that Vedius Rusco Philippicus was the best.

What mortal man could be as good as this? This was a terror, long-fanged and flashing like a wolf. This was implacable, living death.

As fearful now as he had been confident, Panthera tried, like Rusco, a calculated retreat but when he attempted to fall back two paces he was driven back six. He tried to circle but found his arc cut by a blade slashing from a dozen points at once. He tried to stand his ground and, knowing himself already branded for an unmistakable foul, he swung a sword at Rusco's unprotected shins but found it stopped by another seemingly dozen slashing blades. He leaped mightily to buy a little relief, and now discovered that he had underestimated the dagger. The damned thing came at him end-over-end. He got his shield up but the heavy blade hit and came like a spike through a plank, menacing his face and by its weight spoiling the balance of his shield.

His fear changed to terror as he realized that he was helpless. He had been tricked into his backward leap as surely as a balky horse was ever backed into a stall. Rusco had moved him at will and his leap had provided the necessary instant in which Rusco had been able to stab sword into the ground, grasp dagger and hurl, and catch up sword again.

And now the sword was at him again. It smashed his own

sword down and Rusco's shield smashed his own shield back until the projecting blade of Rusco's damned dagger was at his eyes and the point of Rusco's sword was entering his cuirass, was through, was into his very flesh.

Panthera told himself that he was a dead man. In wild terror he leaped back once more until the tip of Rusco's sword was pulled free of his belly. Turning, he blundered into his own tittering troops and instantly realized what such a flight confessed. He turned to blunder back, hoping he might make it appear that nothing more than proper caution had caused him to back away. He was sick with shame, and full of hate and he swung his sword to command a way and the titters around him changed to dismayed cries. As he swung right and left he swore that he would stand up against Rusco if he died, but he found himself facing an adversary who was once again easy-going, and smiling and even again faintly apologetic.

Blood seeped from Panthera's breastplate.

Rusco eyed it, glanced at Bracae, and stepped back.

"Ground POINTS!" Bracae roared.

Panthera started a forward stride, his face congested.

"Ground POINTS!"

Vedius Rusco touched earth with the tip of his sword.

Panthera hesitated, in uncontrollable rage and shame.

"Ground POINTS!" Bracae shouted and seizing the nearest soldier's shield and javelin, stepped in front of Panthera.

"Ground POINTS! Do you want a lesson from me, too?"

Panthera lowered his sword and, as his mind came back under control, prayed that his instant recovery from terror

had deceived the cohort. He put out a hand and swaggered up to Rusco.

"You got the better of it this time," he said and hoped that at least some of his audience believed that he would be willing to try it again.

"We'll do it again, any day you say," Rusco said pleasantly, but although only a little while before his gaze had seemed to fall everywhere, he did not now seem to see Panthera's hand and the Pilus Prior knew he had his dismissal. Even his new rank did not give him daring enough to stay any longer.

"We certainly will, soon," he said and turned away, hating Vedius Rusco even more than in Sebaste, hating him for life. He motioned a corporal to stand as guide.

"Fall in!" he roared. And even the men who had tittered leaped to obey. Messala had a little trouble covering up a smile as he helped Vedius Rusco out of the borrowed gear and indicated his intention to delay his detachment until he had finished. This was the right of any leader who flew his own vexillum.

"For-ward, MARCH!" Panthera shouted.

"He's marching them at attention!" Lucianus exclaimed. A conscientious young officer, he disapproved of any needless ill treatment of the ranks.

"He doesn't know whether he's standing on his feet or on his head," Bracae said.

All of Rusco's fine elation drained off. Now why did I go out of my way to make a tougher enemy? he wondered.

Abruptly he told himself again that he was too old for such horseplay as he had just engaged in. He greatly regretted the whole affair.

Even without the duel he had had enough tough enemies. Panthera had been a tough enemy because of Sebaste and now, of course, he would be tougher. Naepor was tough, merely because of his ancient envy and now, perhaps, he would be tougher with special cause. This scheme of his--if there was a scheme--would be hurt in the degree that today's defeat made Panthera a less valuable tool.

And tougher than ten thousand Naepors was Herod. ⁹Vedius Rusco was, day in and out, a man who never let himself regret yesterday or dread tomorrow, but now pessimism swept him. He had had no warrant, he thought, for deciding that morning that he was in no real danger of joining the long row of Herod's bleached victims. Herod would not, probably, strike openly against a Roman of consequence. But just let the tyrant find half an excuse!

Rusco shrugged and shook off his forebodings as Deborah came flying through the villa gate. His trouble, he decided, was that he was tired. But when had he ever before even realized that he was tired, let alone admit it?

She rushed into his arms so impetuously that Rusco said "Whoosh!" chiefly because her breastplate banged him breathless, but a little to blow away his depression. Bria came beaming behind and Candace brought up the rear, her face bright with relief and adoration. In the eyes of his women, Vedius Rusco thought, he was still invincible.

But three names clanked ominously back in his mind.
Herod--Naepor--Panthera.

Rusco thought of Joseph, working in the dining room through all the commotion. Panthera, he remembered, was Joseph's enemy, too. He decided he would go and talk to Joseph.

ALBERT
SUPERASE BOND
25% COTTON FIBRE