



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler  
Lovelace Family Papers.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The small house in which Mary was waiting out the forty days of her purification stood where two shallow ravines met in a V. The path Joseph habitually followed, coming cross-country from the villa of Vedius Rusco, met the eastern arm and habitually he turned at that point and followed the eastern arm home. Tonight, however, his mind was so full of secret tunnels, ambushes and girls trained in arms, to say nothing of some disturbing implications, that his absent stride carried him beyond the turn. Before he realized what he was doing, he had got well along a third ravine which cut across the top of the V.

"Well!" he exclaimed in exasperation and started to retrace his way, but then he reflected that it would be shorter now to travel by the western arm although, even so, he would be late.

"I think too much!" he said. He was not used to so much thinking. His rule was to clear away every problem at each day's end. ~~(in order to start the next day free and easy.)~~ One day at a time, he always said. For months, however, so much had been happening that such clearing away seemed impossible. How could a man clear away a continuing mystery? Now and then he tried to tell himself that there was no mystery, only a dream, but too much

evidence seemed against him.

"Well!" he exclaimed again. "It certainly isn't a mystery that I am where I am. I ~~just~~ missed the turn-off. It's too bad, though. Elizabeth and Zacharias expected me long ago." He had promised to stop by their house on his way home to make plans for the trip to Jerusalem for Mary's purification.

The nearness of that ceremony filled him with satisfaction. Once it was behind them, they could get back to Nazareth and the good one-day-at-a-time life which they had lived before, and always would, the two of them. He corrected that. The three of us.

(D) He turned into the western arm of the V and ~~pretty soon~~ began to look ahead over the strange terrain for the home of the temple priest, Zacharias. He was approaching it from an unfamiliar angle and his confusion was the greater because the ~~last~~ of the ~~dull~~ sunset colors had <sup>long since</sup> faded, leaving only the deepening shadows of trees and undergrowth. What with looking for Zacharias's house, he did not watch where his feet were going and so, to his amazement, found himself stumbling over the legs of a half-score ~~of~~ ragged rowdies sprawled around a fire in a well-chosen covert made by clustering pines.

(D) He knew instantly who these rowdies were. He was only surprised to find so many. Even though he had never before glimpsed more than a few, he knew them. They were the beggars who, for days, had been <sup>Everywhere</sup> ~~traipsing~~ about his house, drifting past, slipping behind, loitering before, circling around, but showing next to nothing of themselves and never by the slightest sign

indicating any purpose.

The fire was the economical blaze which beggars regularly made. He had seen such fires all up and down Judea. It was so expertly laid that from any distance its faint smoke would be taken for the haze natural to the season. It was big enough to give the bit of warmth which was all a beggar asked, but so small that it was practically invisible until you walked ~~right~~ up to it.

When Joseph walked ~~right~~ up to it, one lean, dirty man, wearing only a ragged ~~burlesque~~ loincloth, drifted into deeper cover beyond the pines. Peleg for certain! So, Joseph told himself, he had been right in thinking that from their window he had half a dozen times spied the ~~flitting~~ shape of their scrawny companion of the first part of the journey down from Nazareth.

Throughout that brief companionship Peleg had seemed cringing, bragging, ~~feckless~~, as you would expect a beggar to be. But now he was the apparent leader of this crew. Beggars, everybody said, had some sort of guild. No one knew much about it. Beggars were an odd secretive lot. But perhaps Peleg was <sup>indeed</sup> the leader. Or perhaps he was leading now because he had been the one to suggest this ... mission ... or whatever it was?

Another mystery, Joseph thought! He wondered when ~~again~~ <sup>again,</sup> he would be a free-minded man without anything to ponder over except, perhaps, the tricky grain of a piece of wood.

The other beggars remained sprawled around the fire, except one who stood up quickly. This one was a hunchback. Since Joseph was mildly amused at the respectful act of rising, seeing <sup>since</sup> that only he, himself, had appeared and he certainly didn't <sup>next page →</sup> deserve

it, and he puzzled over Peleg and was wary of the sprawling rowdies who now began to nudge one another in an admission that this surprise was a joke as much on themselves as on the tall intruder.

"He certainly never expected to bump into us," one said.

"Well, we certainly never expected him. He came in as soft as a leopard on lambs."

"Lambs! Us?"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Baa-aa-aa!"

The comparison tickled the beggars out of all control. Only the hunchback continued quiet, watching Joseph. The others exploded into laughter. They were beggars, with less than enough to wear and usually less than enough to eat, but with one possession <sup>with which?</sup> they could afford to be as prodigal as the richest man in the world. With the richest they shared a wonderful inheritance which remained inexhaustible, no matter how much of it they threw to the winds. They were co-heirs of laughter and now they set about the delightfully impossible task of squandering their ~~it.~~ possession.

They tittered, snorted, giggled, chuckled, guffawed and finally burst into a hurricane. They were torn, they were all but dismembered by mirth. They beat backs, elbowed ribs, slapped thighs, swapped winks, swung arms, held sides, rolled, came up gasping and, at last exhausted, hung heads between knees and let hilarious tears rain.

"Lambs!"

"Us?"

"Baa-aa-aa!"

And then the whole lot of them began baa-ing. "Baa-aa-aa!" like a whole woolly flock. "Baa-aa-aa!" breaking into new hurricanes of laughter and then "Baa-aa-aa-ing!" again.

It got to be funny to puzzled, wary Joseph also. He did not laugh but he smiled. Here were no enemies. Here were not even neutrals. Here were ragged rowdies whose laughter, whose every utterance, every glance, declared their good will toward the man who had stumbled upon them.

"Peace be with you," Joseph said at last.

"Peace," one hilarious rowdy managed to say and then, as though remembering, stood up and touched hand to head and heart as Peleg on the journey had always done to the two he had seemed to believe were great.

The hurricane died down. The half-score fell silent. Joseph kept silent. He had nothing to explain. Thus he met the gaze of the hunchback who alone had not joined in the laughter. The man at last spoke in a cultured court voice, utterly out of place in this wild hideout.

"We watched the Magi for a little and now we watch hereabouts," he said. His tone had a finality which warned that nothing more, nothing, would be said.

Joseph ~~let it go at that. In an atmosphere so warm and friendly, although strange, perhaps he ought not to have forced any speech at all.~~ He smiled again and gave them all "Peace" again, and because the hunchback's words had been a sort

of dismissal he turned and went on his way.

But although the beggars were so reassuringly friendly, he worried as he tramped through the now pervading darkness. Such a watch as they were keeping indicated unfriendliness somewhere.

What was the unnamed shadow against which they were on guard? Was it fire? Thieves? Plundering mercenaries or legionnaires? That thing which, Vedius Rusco thought, the Primus Pilus Naepor and Panthera and, perhaps, the Tribune Muso, were planning?

He resolved to say nothing of all these fears to Mary. Not that they would frighten her! Mary did not know fear. Faith wrapped her safe from every storm. She had noticed the flittings around the house but she had been worried for the beggars, not by them.

Just thinking of Mary's serenity made Joseph feel better and shortly he saw the lights from the substantial home of Mary's cousin and her husband. The detour had made him very late. Joseph began to chuckle.

"Elizabeth will have plenty to say," he thought.

o-o-o

Elizabeth was, indeed, instantly scolding in that hoarse, warm voice of hers. "Here we are, ready to talk everything over and you an hour late!"

Joseph said he had been delayed, <sup>but</sup> though he said no more.

"Of course, there's plenty of time for you to eat something before we begin," she added, hospitably.

"The talk won't take long," Joseph said. "I'll eat with Mary."

"We saw Mary this afternoon," Zacharias said. He was a large, good-natured, brown-robed man whose beard seemed to have been liberally salted and peppered.

"And was everything all right?"

"She and the baby were both happy as birds. Of course she <sup>will</sup> be glad to get back to her home in Nazareth."

"So shall I," Joseph said. His mind's eye filled with a picture of their home. There never was such a comfortable house, Mary always said.

Well, at least, he had made it snug. He had rolled the roof, just before leaving, to pack the mixed clay and brush and grass tight against the rains, ~~until they returned~~. He remembered the cooing of the doves on the firm <sup>thatch</sup> roof. He remembered the view of Mount Tabor. Mary liked that view.

"We <sup>were</sup> ~~will~~ start back as soon as the purification rite is <sup>done</sup> ~~done~~," he said.

"Not until Mary has had a rest," Elizabeth said. "Did it ever occur to you, she'd need a rest?" She gave him a rebuking headshake, but her grey eyes twinkled.

"While we waited, Zacharias and I have been talking," she went on. "Mary has said all along that she wants to go to the Temple on the forty-first day because that's what the Law says."

Joseph nodded. "That's when she shall go," he said.

"Well, I know where she could get a helping hand if she should need one in the Temple that day." Judith will be there <sup>that day</sup>. Elizabeth said. "She Judith knows when Mary plans to go, and she told me she <sup>would</sup> like to be there when Mary <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~. Her baby is only a few months older. you

~~"You remember Judith,"~~ Elizabeth continued, "the strap-  
ping girl with coppery hair who helped us bring Mary from Bethlehem?"

"I do remember Judith," Joseph said gratefully.

~~He doubted that Mary would need any help but he didn't  
say so.~~

"Well, then," said Zacharias, "in only four days you and  
Mary will be going up to Jerusalem."

Joseph smiled faintly at Zacharias's easy use of the  
phrase so puzzling to Gentiles. "Up to Jerusalem!" When a Gentile  
spoke of going "up" anywhere he usually meant going north. But  
a Jew, whether he approached Jerusalem from the south, north,  
east or west, always said "up" because that was how he went. Up,  
up, up by paths and roads sometimes steep for goats, to the citadel,  
city and Temple, perched atop their two craggy mountains.

"That's right," Joseph said. In just four days, he and  
Mary would make the easy trip to Joppa Gate, the steep climb, and  
the long wait in the golden Temple. Only those hurdles were be-  
tween them and the happy return to Nazareth.

"We thought you could take care of the boy's redemption,  
too," Zacharias said. "I mean on the same Temple trip."

"I can see about it while Mary is waiting her turn in  
the Court of the Women."

"Zacharias has saved two absolutely unblemished turtle  
doves for Mary," Elizabeth boasted. "And a pair for Judith, too."

"If Zacharias says they are unblemished, they will be."

"What I don't like," Elizabeth said, "is that Mary will  
have to wait <sup>so long.</sup> ~~and wait.~~ Waiting tires you, when you've just had a

baby."

"I can't do anything about the waiting," Zacharias said regretfully. "I couldn't put Mary ahead. With <sup>such crowds</sup> ~~so many~~ trooping up to Jerusalem to pay this latest tax, <sup>many</sup> ~~lots of~~ people are taking occasion to settle old Temple debts, too. The Temple is packed from dawn to dark -- Court of the Gentiles, Court of the Women, Court of Israel. I swear that even the Holy Place would be packed, if a double line of Levites didn't stand guard telling people to keep down where they belong."

"Even if you could put Mary ahead, she wouldn't let you," Joseph said. "She <sup>would</sup> ~~could~~ say that taking someone else's place, wasn't any way to make a sacrifice."

"There are beautiful things to see in the Temple," Zacharias said. "And wonderful people .. there are Simeon and Anna."

Anna, ~~the one who fasted and prayed day and night~~, was a prophetess, famous over all Israel. Widowed as a girl, she had never departed from the Temple since, although she was old now. <sup>she</sup> ~~prayed and fasted day and night.~~

Simeon was even more famous, the holiest living man among his people. He was allowed a room in the bowels of the Temple and went there every day, declaring he had <sup>had</sup> a promise that he would not see death before he ~~had seen~~ <sup>saw</sup> the long prophesied Messiah.

"Well, that settles everything, ~~I guess,~~" said Joseph.

"There <sup>is</sup> ~~s~~ one thing more," Elizabeth said. "~~Mary's rest.~~"

"When you go up to the Temple, why don't you leave all your goods in the little house? And come back afterwards. Remember, Mary

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should have a good rest before you start north."

Rising, to continue homeward, Joseph smilingly said he certainly would see that Mary got a rest.

"Hurry along then," Elizabeth said. "You must be really hungry."

O-O-O

The silence of the night was enormous. It was an ink-black walk to the small house in which Mary was waiting, and even by day that house was always a little hard to find. Joseph rejoiced when he made out the flicker of light which would be a lamp in the window.

A chunky donkey came up and brushed against him. In the same moment a thin half-naked man drifted from behind a knoll. His outline was hazy but the donkey brayed loudly in recognition.

Peleg again! Of course Briar would recognize Peleg, a friend since the journey to Bethlehem.

The shadowy figure disappeared at once but in spite of himself, Joseph began to worry again. He untied Briar's rope, trying to shake off the fears that suddenly circled like dark birds.

He could almost hear Mary's soft rebuke ... as he had heard it a night or two earlier when she sensed worry in his manner. She had reminded him of the holy writings and their promise that the Lord was always with them.

"I know," Joseph had said. "'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in him will I trust.'"

He said the strong words aloud now and began to feel better.

He must remember, he thought, leading Briar toward the house, to say that to Vedius Rusco! Rusco, putting his trust in swords and secret tunnels!

↙ he went on with more of the psalm. "I will say it to him." Joseph spoke aloud again. And

~~"And I will say to him another part of that psalm Mary loves..."~~

"He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone."

May I read that part.

GILBERT  
SUPERASE BOND  
25% COTTON FIBRE

CHAPTER FOURTEEN <sup>(16)</sup>

"Gently!" the Chief Eunuch hissed ~~at the slaves.~~

"Gently! More gently!"

The bearers were even more nervous than usual. Herod's ~~rheumy~~ eyes were open and glaring. He had been glaring from the litter as he was carried up to the candle-ringed dais, and was glaring more than ever now during the perilous transfer from litter to throne-bed. He <sup>LOATHED</sup> ~~hated~~ this monstrosity which servants, made inventive by fear of punishment, had contrived for his corrupted carcass. He <sup>LOATHED</sup> ~~hated~~ it either as a throne or as a bed.

As a throne it ~~certainly~~ had little to offer except for great golden claws on the corners, and it displeased him as a bed also. He would have chosen a Roman-style bed, narrow and high ~~off the floor.~~ That made a man feel truly like a king, above lesser men and nobly straight in the posture of dignity a king should assume even when resting. But to ease his agony he had to permit a bed which was virtually a hammock. On a low ~~network~~ of interwoven cords, soft pads and softer pillows were stacked, and himself in the middle, sprawling whichever way hurt least.

He glared across the crowded audience hall and <sup>LOATHED</sup> ~~every-~~ thing <sup>that</sup> he saw ~~annoyed~~ <sup>despised</sup> him. He ~~hated~~ the fad currently raging among the women of his court. All of them, not only the courtesans who

always did whatever they dared to gain attention, but the wives and respectable concubines of his highest officers, and his own two-score concubines -- respectable, too, he hoped -- even Tirzah, had taken to carrying tear bottles.

These silly Egyptian <sup>tricks</sup> ~~gadgets~~ were appurtenances of mourning, ~~so premature that~~ <sup>and</sup> he had to suspect them. True enough, he had publicly hoped that all Judea would weep at his death and he was loading his dungeons so that immediately after that ~~regrettable~~ event executioners could give cause for weeping. But ~~use of~~ <sup>the</sup> bottles <sup>now</sup> seemed <sup>premature</sup> almost like wishful thinking on the part of ~~their wearers~~. Also they were invariably of gold and he preferred seeing that precious metal put to more profitable uses.

In point of fact the women of the Court were using gold for ~~all sorts of~~ <sup>many</sup> profitless purposes. Their amulets, shaped according to religious preferences, like bearded bulls, woman-faced cats, winged lions, jackals that were half-man, fish that were half-crocodile, crocodiles that were half-fish, falcons with paws and hippopotami with claws, all were of gold. Their pet cats and leopards all wore gold collars, frequently inset with jewels. Their own hair was held in place by gold wire and pins and often was covered by caps of intricately joined gold leaves imitating the leaves of the oak, olive and a dozen other trees. Gold boxes held their kohl, gold bottles their perfume, gold shells their cosmetics, gold vials their aphrodisiacs.

Herod could not avoid the suspicion that some, at least, saw in so much gold a protection beyond even the accepted power of amulets. Gold was money. <sup>Should</sup> <sup>have</sup> ~~Happen~~ you had to flee the Palace,



secretly loved and whom Herod had adored and murdered. But Soemus was bound also by a loyalty so deeply rooted in his nature that it had survived even the shame and guilt of long obedience to Herod, although this had ravaged his face.

Farther from the dais another apprehensive group formed: the court astrologer-physician, the treasurer, the Officer of the Day, ~~a priest standing in for Joazar~~, a masseur with fingers as light as the whisks, and just in case Herod felt well enough to dress, a valet escorting three human clothes-horses hung with slippers, sandals, shoes, soft Persian socks, tunics, robes, cloaks and scarves. Still another group, ~~still~~ <sup>even</sup> farther away, included musicians with lute, lyre, psaltry and shawm; a pair of acrobats and a contortionist, dancers and the ten courtesans assigned to duty this day. These ten, with swaying, jewel-trimmed bodies, and breasts covered by wafer-thin, gold shields and bare, perfumed bellies, had arranged themselves in an arc which suggested an inviting rainbow except that their fixed smiles and calculating eyes were not inviting at all.

A fly threatened Herod's blotched cheeks and the slaves swung their whisks frantically.

"Gently! Gently!" the Chief Eunuch hissed.

The fly perished, beaten to death in mid-air by four assailants, and Herod's all-purpose finger moved. The tray slave put a hand to the wild boar but the finger said "No!" and said an even more impatient "No!" to Tirzah, wild to get her tale told. It kept beckoning to Soemus while rales clattered in Herod's chest, ~~as though to flee the corruption there.~~

"Yes!" the ravaged man said, "I have found another. She is waiting."

The tyrant's gray face worked in an agony of expectancy.

"She comes, Herod," Soemus said and beckoned and, through a rear entrance, unseen hands pushed a young girl. Her body was virginal and unlike the court women all around she wore no gold and carried no tear bottle. But her dress was court-style and so revealing that, as she advanced, she blushed under the gaze of the crowd.

Hearing her steps Herod commanded with the all-purpose finger that she come closer and Soemus put candles behind the bed.

"There will be no shadows, Herod," ~~Soemus~~ Soemus <sup>he</sup> promised. "You shall see her plain."

Half-sitting, half-lying, with eyes now closed, Herod moved his swollen lips. All knew the word he was repeating although he made no sound. "<sup>Miriamme!</sup> ~~Marienne!~~ <sup>Miriamme!</sup> Marienne!" Then, defying pain, he did make sounds. He prayed, the sounds stumbling from a throat in ruins.

"Oh, god! All gods! God of these Jews whose temple I rebuilt. Baal, to whom cheated Esau turned! Astarte whom my ancestors adored! Thou, Ormazd of the Magi! Ammon! Jupiter! Woden! Zeus! Mithras! Zalmoxis! En-lil! Let this, at last be <sup>Miriamme</sup> ~~Marienne!~~ Give back the life which was taken."

There was no other sound throughout the hall. The girl was a statue. Soemus held his breath, anxious for her, though not for himself. He believed <sup>himself to be</sup> ~~that he was~~ safe. No one else owned, as he did, exactly Herod's memory of the innocent

royal victim of plots and counterplots and tyrannical jealousy. No one else could even hope to succeed in the doomed and haunted search. The courtiers were stiffly silent; and safely out of her brother's sight Tirzah only shook her wattles in impatience to tell her story. The Chief Eunuch strangled a cough.

At the end of the groping prayer Herod opened his eyes and looked into the young face lifted out of shadow by the candles' light. He looked and looked, and then in wretched disappointment spoke again, in spite of pain.

"This <sup>Miriamme?</sup> ~~Marianne~~? This pot cleaner? Get her out of my sight!" He closed his eyes again.

Soemus instantly gave the girl a little urgent push. To him she was almost <sup>Miriamme.</sup> ~~Marianne~~. Almost, almost, as so often in the past, he was seeing again the girl whom he had worshipped when he was young. Guardedly protective, he pushed the rejected counterpart and did not relax until she was safely out of sight, he hoped beyond recall.

The courtiers <sup>scared</sup> ~~relaxed~~ cramped joints and the Chief Eunuch, Tirzah and Soemus shifted to intercept Herod's glance if he should open his rheumy eyes again.

He did open them. His wretched disappointment was gone as suddenly as it had been confessed. He might be, and was, old and sick, and a consuming fire raged in his bowels of such heat that it burned through into sores which not even the steaming springs of Callirhoe on the Dead Sea could heal. But now his will took hold again, as it could and did sometimes, and his finger commanded Soemus. When <sup>the latter</sup> ~~he~~ bent close, three fingers pointed up.

"The Magi!" Soemus whispered to the Chief Eunuch.

"He points to the sky, the stars. He asks news of the Magi."

The Chief Eunuch whimpered and his eyes implored Soemus to tell the bad news. Soemus said flatly:

"The Magi have gone, Herod."

Herod's eyes glittered. The finger wrote in the air.

"They neither brought nor sent a report," Soemus said.

"They fled. They have left Judea."

Grimacing ~~with pain~~, Herod strained to lift his head, ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> he looked to where Geber usually stood.

"Geber has fled, too," Tirzah cried in spiteful triumph. Now at last her story could be told. "Didn't I always say we couldn't <sup>not</sup> trust him?"

The finger commanded Soemus to deny the astounding charge.

"Geber has fled," Soemus replied. "There is no mistake."

"He's turned beggar!" Tirzah cried. "But he's been seen. A beggar's rags won't hide that hump."

"<sup>The spies</sup> ~~My men~~ report seeing a beggar who is, almost certainly, Geber," Soemus said quietly. Palace spies all reported directly to <sup>him.</sup> Soemus.

The finger curved. It became a leg-fetter.

"I said my men saw. They were not close enough to seize."

"And anyway," Tirzah cried, "just try to grab one beggar when other beggars are helping him! They stumble into your way like blind kittens. You can catch anybody but the one you want."

Propped among his cushions Herod <sup>'s</sup> ~~swelled with fury.~~

D ← gaze  
~~His gaze~~ dared all who watched to follow the traitor's example. Then, by degrees, the gaze grew crafty. He spoke again, in spite of pain.

"This rumored -- King, must be -- very great."

"Of course he is," Tirzah screamed. "Would the Magi and Geber otherwise flee rather than report?"

Herod sighed and his gaze upon those who watched was all kindness and amiability; and, as though the Magi and Geber were really not important, his finger elected an apple and while the slave peeled and scraped it for the tortured throat, he planned.

He would find this king. He would tear Judea apart. He would uncover a thousand who would tell. And then he remembered. He already had one from whom he had ordered exactly the information he desired. Casually, to maintain his pretence of indifference, his finger spoke to the Chief Eunuch.

The latter understood too well and was completely terrified.

"My men have been searching day and night," the Chief Eunuch said, standing close and whispering because this was a thing not to be overheard. "But up to now they have learned nothing."

Herod, still pretending indifference, lay in thought. Then the finger moved again. The Chief Eunuch this time did not understand and looked appealingly at Soemus.

"He says that the leader of your hunters must be brought here at once. Herod wishes to find out why he is so slow in doing what he has been paid to do."

"But I cannot have him brought!" the Chief Eunuch hissed

wildly. "The man I hired, his two helpers, none of them will come to the palace willingly. To come would be almost to confess ~~to~~ what they have been doing."

"Tell Herod that," Soemus said grimly. "Let me hear you tell him that you have paid out eight thousand denarii and pledged twenty-seven thousand more for empty service from a Primus Pilus, a Pilus Prior and a patrician Tribune."

"You know my men?" the Chief Eunuch mumbled.

"I usually know what you do, as soon as you start," Soemus said. "Do you like dungeons? Herod has demanded your hunters. Fetch at least ~~one~~ the leader."

The Chief Eunuch ~~wavered~~, then shrugged in desperation. The Primus Pilus Naepor had taken Herod's money, was linked with the hunt, and was in poor favor with General Proculus. He would resent being presented as the leader of the hunt. But could he refuse to be presented? ~~Not likely.~~

The Chief Eunuch again bent close to Herod's ear. "My man is not of the Court, Herod," he said. "I must send for him."

The finger commanded, "Send," and the Chief Eunuch whispered to the Officer of the Day and the latter hurried out.

Herod watched until the officer was gone. Then he beckoned to the tray-slave and, opening his mouth for the apple mush, turned the all-purpose finger on the contortionist.

In his long tyranny he had learned that there were occasions when he must bide his time and he knew how to bide his time. If he might not instantly question the Chief Eunuch's hunter he could, at least, seem to enjoy himself. Food, acrobats,

the contortionist, the dancers, the courtesans' breasts and bellies! There was, also, a sudden secret smile said, a tyrant's power.

His finger pointed first to a wine jar, then into the east, and Soemus understood even that.

"He says you must send to the Temple for wine," Soemus told the Chief Eunuch. "And of course he means the priests' best vintage from those green-white Hebron grapes."

The Chief Eunuch could not hide consternation. The Temple was full of wine, as it was full of gold. Five thousand great jars of the best wine in Judea. But who before Herod ever had dared seize any from the jealous priests?

"The Temple will refuse," he whispered.

"Not now," Soemus said.

"What do you mean?"

"A new order has been enforced," Soemus said. "The ceremonial vestments of the High Priest now are held in the Fortress of Antonia. After each wearing they must be returned there. As long as the order stands, the Temple will not deny, <sup>Even its best wine</sup> to the Palace, <sup>(u)</sup> ~~even its best wine.~~"

Herod and his finger ordered dancing. He let himself be stuffed while his mouth puckered over dancers and courtesans. The role of spectator provided one of the only three pleasures left to him. He could eat, sleep and watch. He watched and ~~gorged and~~ began to grow torpid. But the engine must serve until he had learned about the rumored king. Cursing the Chief Eunuch and his laggard hunter, he beckoned Soemus and the finger curved into an-

other leg-iron.

"He says," Soemus told the Chief Eunuch, "that if you want to stay outside a dungeon, get your hunter here at once."

(D) The Chief Eunuch's knees almost buckled. He had been repeatedly frightened this day. By dread of involvement in the Magis' flight, by Geber's defection, by the dangerous requisitioning of Temple wine! Now Helius Naepor's tardiness increased his fright. He appealed miserably to Soemus who alone dared to stand firm when Herod would not be appeased.

"The one who comes is the one for your dungeon, Herod," Soemus said. "Not even a Chief Eunuch's finger can snap loud enough to hurry a Roman of such rank."

Herod moved his own one finger. That, the movement said, could hurry any man in Judea. He beckoned his physician.

"Clear the audience hall," Soemus said to the Chief Eunuch, and the Chief Eunuch hastened to comply, for the fewer men and women there were to see the Primus Pilus arrive, the fewer there would be to link the Palace with Naepor's hunt.

As courtiers, concubines, courtesane, clients, officers filed out of the crimson and jet audience chamber, Soemus spoke to the physician.

"The King wishes to sleep for just a short time," he explained, "and he wishes to wake with a clear mind. Whatever you give him, make sure of that or take the consequences."

Mumbling zodiacal incantations, the astrologer-physician mixed a dose and Herod drank ...

Fifty years ago, the tyrant recalled, a Roman general

had killed thirty thousand Jews to keep Judea quiet. That number, he decided, would be a helpful precedent if any action of his own, in running down this rumored king, drew a criticism from the Emperor Augustus. More of a precedent than he would need. Growing sleepy he closed his eyes and calculated. He would not, probably, need to kill the half of thirty thousand. Perhaps not more than three or four thousand. He might manage with killing just a few hundred or even just a few score. He sighed and his finger asked Soemus to call up the musicians. Lute, psaltry, lyre and shawm began to play and Herod slept.

The great hall was empty now, save for the privileged few around the golden throne-bed. A sulky priest delivered the Temple wine. Herod slept on, and at last a messenger padded in to inform the Chief Eunuch that the Primus Pilus Naepor had arrived ~~at the Palace.~~

"He is in the ante-chamber," the servant reported and added in a whisper, "and the Road Commissioner is waiting there, too."

The Chief Eunuch shrugged off the whisper. It told him nothing that he did not know. He had already sent three messengers to conciliate the waiting Vedius Rusco Philippicus. But the news of Helius Naepor's arrival turned him to Herod, and he wakened the tyrant instantly, although fearfully and very gently.

The astrologer-physician had mixed ~~a fine~~ <sup>the night</sup> potion. Herod awoke with his mind clear.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN (15)

A young, towheaded captain of mercenaries, not far into his twenties, strode into the Palace ante-chamber where Vedius Rusco Philippicus was waiting to face Herod with the same old demands. More materials, more men for Caesar Augustus's roads.

The young captain wandered about, glancing now and then at the Road Commissioner with an elaborate carelessness, designed to make any watching spy doubt that he had come purposely seeking a man so unpopular with Herod as this one. But his boyishly clumsy attempt did not deceive either Rusco or Bracae.

"I wonder what he wants?" Bracae said, indignantly.

Bracae had been increasingly indignant for two hours. Vedius Rusco had waited that long for an audience with the tyrant. A polite eunuch had come three times to explain that important matters were keeping Herod occupied, but Bracae was not persuaded.

Vedius Rusco had shown no resentment, although aware that he was being snubbed. He had, however, grown watchful. He had begun to be watchful when, ~~in the course of his long wait,~~ Herod's Officer of the Day ~~had~~ raced through the ante-chamber and, shortly after, the throng in the vast jet and crimson audience hall ~~had~~ <sup>was</sup> suddenly ~~been~~ shoved out and the great doors reclosed ~~tight~~. Careful men did not ignore even a small change in Herod's usual

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procedures and that had been suspiciously unusual.

Then, only a few minutes ago, the Officer of the Day had hurried back into the ante-chamber with, of all people, Helius Naepor in tow! The bulging, ~~soggy~~ Primus Pilus of the Tenth Legion had been plainly unwilling to be towed so publicly into Herod's precincts although, on sighting Rusco and Bracae, he had thrown them a nod which said, "Think nothing of this!" In fact, <sup>however,</sup> Rusco thought, <sup>Naepor</sup> ~~he~~ had walked like a led bull, chafing at the ~~ring in~~ <sup>nose-ring</sup> his nose which kept him from bolting in <sup>any</sup> safer direction.

His present direction was anything but safe. If word of <sup>his</sup> Naepor's appearance in Court got to <sup>Orphidus</sup> General Proculinus, <sup>Naepor</sup> he was in deep trouble. The <sup>little general</sup> ~~commanding officer~~ did not wish anyone of the Tenth, except himself, to have any dealings with Herod. <sup>But</sup>

Although the Primus Pilus walked like a bull snaffled beyond hope of escape, he <sup>did look</sup> ~~was~~ not afraid, Rusco knew. His manner, even while it admitted entrapment, warned ~~his~~ trappers that he was still dangerous. <sup>It reminded Rusco</sup> ~~It was a manner~~ <sup>reminded</sup> of the younger Helius Naepor who had dared defy a whole ring of enemies when the tide of battle washed them around him.

"The old bull still has a few hooks left in his horns," the manner said <sup>plainly</sup>. ~~"Don't take too much for granted, or somebody will get hurt."~~

~~"He's covering up," Bracae whispered to Vedius Rusco, "but he's worried."~~

~~He should be,~~ Rusco thought!

Wary, because Naepor's arrival was even more suspicious than the ~~expulsion of the Court hangers-on,~~ Rusco watched the ~~Primus Pilus and~~

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the Officer of the Day ~~and Helius Naeper~~ as they were hurried, almost pushed, into the audience hall to the open indignation of half a dozen more important waiting clients.

~~When the Primus Pilus and his escort vanished,~~ <sup>when they</sup> the young towheaded captain pretended to see Vedius Rusco for the first time, ~~but~~ <sup>still</sup> his pretence was far from convincing. As he drew near to the Road Commissioner, a broad smile of admiration spread over his guileless face.

"I heard you were here," he said under his breath.

Vedius Rusco waited.

"My father fought against you in Gaul," ~~the towhead said next and grinned.~~

"I'm sure it was a good fight," Rusco said, smiling. He could remember a dozen fights in Gaul, but not a bad one. All Gauls were good fighters.

"My father said you let him up when you had him down." The towhead lowered his voice. "And he said that if the chance ever came, I was to say he remembered."

Rusco waited again. The young fellow probably had been told to do more, if the chance ever came, than merely offer long distance thanks.

"Watch out!" The towhead <sup>glanced</sup> ~~swiveled~~ his eyes toward the entrance of Herod's audience hall. "Whenever you go in there, you're <sup>are</sup> going into trouble."

"My thanks," ~~Much obliged,~~ Rusco said. "The next time you ride toward Bethlehem, stop at my villa. We ought to have a long talk about that fight."

W Don't expect me!" The young captain was showing nervousness <sup>now</sup>. "Herod doesn't like having his officers ~~too~~ friendly with you." His nod once more registered, for any spies, that the meeting had been only accidental and he was off.

"We should have got his name," Bracae said.

"I know who he is," Rusco said. "He is Brennus. ~~He~~ is a prince of the Aedui in Gaul. He is one of the young chiefs ~~being~~ brought to Rome to learn about government. He was sent on to Herod, a good teacher, though I hate to say so. But Brennus isn't a student, and he grew <sup>restless</sup> bored and asked for an assignment with the mercenaries until he is allowed to go back home."

"You <sup>have</sup> ~~ve~~ been close to trouble with Herod for more than a year," Bracae said. "Maybe he ~~'s~~ decided to come out in the open."

Vedius Rusco thought that over. In such an event he could do with help and that meant he must turn to Orfitus Proculus. The General of the Tenth Legion was a poor prop to lean on very hard, ~~but~~ he was the best at hand.

"If I'm going to have trouble, my own witness will come in handy," <sup>Rusco</sup> ~~he~~ said. "Go to the Fortress of Antonia and tell the General what we suspect and ask him to come."

"If the trouble starts while I'm gone, who <sup>will</sup> ~~'ll~~ protect your back?"

"There won't be any fighting, at least not in the Palace," ~~Rusco said.~~ "Herod might order a dungeon, if I am alone, but he'll think twice before he hustles an Imperial Commissioner off to one while a Legion general looks on."

"I don't like to leave you," Bracae said.

Rusco laughed.

"Well, I don't like to be left with Herod ~~for~~ very long today without having Proculinus called in. Get along."

Bracae left, his face reluctant, his pace fast.

<sup>at last</sup> The polite eunuch <sup>returned</sup> ~~came again after a while.~~

"Come!" he said to Rusco and stood aside. "Herod the

King will receive you now."

Rusco handed his sword and dagger to a mercenary reluctantly. He had to do it; only one in ten thousand was allowed to carry arms into Herod's presence. But when he walked ~~into~~ <sup>across</sup> the ~~great audience hall,~~ <sup>empty echoing</sup> ~~at the respectful gait which was due a king,~~ his red military cloak swung as though its owner were fully armed. The walk ~~across the empty echoing hall, ominously stripped of its usual throng, was a walk for none but a man armed at least with courage.~~ Rusco paced coolly along the gleaming marble floor.

Approaching the dais, he noted that only two of Herod's intimates were in place beside the ~~gaspng mound on the~~ soft, golden throne-bed. Tirzah was there. Herod's sister was one in ten thousand; she wore a dagger in her girdle. Soemus, the Ishmaelite, stood as usual where he needed only to bend to have his lips at Herod's ear. ~~But~~ the Chief Eunuch was keeping a much greater distance than was his custom, and a familiar, richly dressed, misshapen figure was missing. Where was the hunchback?

Vedius Rusco glanced again at the Chief Eunuch and noted something else suspicious. Usually the mincing overdressed man was all fussy concern for his master. Now, inside apparel aping Greek and Persian dandies, he seemed all concern for himself.

He looked like a coward who has staked his fortune on a single throw and is dying a thousand deaths while the dice roll.

Rusco looked for Helius Naepor. The Primus Pilus was nowhere in sight. That was more reassuring than otherwise. The matter which had called him to court must have been concluded, probably to Herod's satisfaction. The minute the bull no longer felt the ring in his nose he had lurched off, Rusco decided.

~~Naepor was no man to hang idly around Herod.~~

Rusco wondered again what had involved his old comrade with the tyrant, but grimly warned himself to attend to his own involvement. That, most certainly, had not been concluded.

Mounting the dais, Rusco paused beside Soemus and thought he saw another warning in the old man's ravaged face. He was surprised at this, although he and Soemus were on good terms. He had always been sorry for Soemus, whose treacheries and cruelties were, after all, ~~another's treacheries and cruelties,~~ never his own. They always sprang from Herod's ruthless finger.

"Herod gives you greeting," Soemus said and Rusco bowed toward the king whose quivering mouth was being stuffed with black-streaked cheese. Herod heaved among his cushions into an easier position.

"Herod assumes," Soemus <sup>said, smiling,</sup> ~~smiled,~~ "that you come with your usual request."

Herod, also, smiled around the cheese. Naturally the smile made Vedius Rusco more cautious.

"The Emperor's roads must be built," he replied, good humored in turn.

<sup>not</sup>  
"Herod would be ~~most~~ reluctant to stand in the way of the  
<sup>Desire</sup> Emperor's ~~needs~~," Soemus said.

<sup>was Herod's own writing a</sup>  
Rusco's caution grew. This sounded like a willingness to  
<sup>willingness to trade</sup>  
~~trade~~. But when had Herod ever offered a trade which was not also a  
trap.

203A

"Herod would be reluctant to stand in the way of the  
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Rusco's caution grew. This hinted at a willingness to trade,  
<sup>seldom</sup> <sup>trade</sup>  
But when had Herod ~~ever~~ offered a ~~trade~~ which was not also a trap?

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"Herod might trade," Soemus said.

~~Rusco's caution grew. When had Herod ever offered a trade which was not a trap?~~ 210

(D) "Helius Naepor," Soemus said, warning still in his face although there was only deference in the voice he was loaning to Herod, "was engaged <sup>performs a commission</sup> to do a thing. He has failed. Herod believes you might succeed."

"Why did the Primus Pilus fail?" Rusco asked. If ~~old~~ <sup>commission</sup> Helius had failed, this unnamed thing must be formidable.

Herod's amiability cracked and his throat made a formless indecency to show what he thought of Naepor for failing.

(D) "It ~~isn't~~ <sup>was not</sup> an easy thing," Soemus said. "Naepor failed even with good helpers."

"Who helped?" Rusco asked, but even before he had Soemus's answer, he knew.

"The Pilus Prior Panthera and the Tribune <sup>Julius</sup> ~~Salvidinius~~ Muso," ~~Soemus~~ <sup>he added</sup> said. "But the name of everyone in this is to be kept secret. ~~Nothing is to go beyond you.~~"

(D) Rusco barely shut off a shout of triumph. The ambush was explained. Herod must have paid <sup>high</sup> a lot to buy a Primus Pilus, a Tribune and a Pilus Prior, ~~(because help to Herod would be quite outside a legion's line of duty.)~~ Only an enormous reward would explain an attempt by the three to kill Lucianus who, somehow, must have threatened the success of their project.

"Herod feels you can easily learn what the others could not," Soemus said. "They have only stirred up the Jews, <sup>al</sup> though the Chief Eunuch warned them to act with caution."

Rusco glanced at the mincing, bony man and understood why he was frightened. He had hired the other three, and their failure was his.

"The Primus Pilus Helius Naepor himself," Soemus said, "suggested that you were the ~~very~~ man to succeed."

Rusco's mind raced. Why had Naepor conceded that the man of whom he always had been jealous could succeed where he, himself, had not? Old scheming Naepor! Then Rusco ~~had it~~. <sup>understood</sup>

Helius had to reckon on my discovering what he and Panthera and Muso were up to, and he had to figure on me reporting my discovery to Proculinus. So the shrewd course was to pull me into the plot. But what can the plot be?

"It will be easy for you," the Chief Eunuch broke in, desperate to shift his dangerous burden ~~to other shoulders~~. "You have thousands of friends around Judea. Any of them may know. After they tell you, it will be nothing."

"Wait a minute!" Rusco said. "Nobody has told me yet what is wanted. What are my friends expected to tell me? What is this question that grates so on Jews?"

Soemus began to explain and Rusco felt a rising angry unbelief. He had never more needed his hard-earned control.

"... a Messiah who is rumored to have come, or to be about to come into Judea ..." Soemus went on.

"It <sup>is</sup> just as I said," The Chief Eunuch interposed again, an anxious rasp in his voice. "It <sup>is</sup> nothing. It <sup>is</sup> just finding a baby!"

A baby! Rusco's control still held, but inwardly he

was flooded with shame. What foulness had he revealed, -- not to Soemus who ~~had only~~ obeyed orders -- but to Helius Naepor who had proposed him, and to Herod who had snatched at the proposal, that both could believe he would betray a baby to a tyrant who killed men and women without a thought and would just as readily kill infants?

Then lightning struck. Fire blazed through his mind and thunder rolled and he was battered by such a gale that he felt he was breaking into bits until, looking down, he saw that he was still all in one piece and, when he held his arm out, it was steady. Yet how could he be anything but breaking to pieces in the whirlwind of <sup>realization</sup> knowledge sweeping over him?

He did not need anyone to identify the baby. He knew. He could not grasp or trace the source of his knowledge but he was as sure of it as of a sword in his hand, a horse between his knees or meat in his mouth.

"We are almost certain ..." He heard Soemus faintly through the thunder, "... that the birth has taken place. Three Magi came seeking and Geber promised to bring back word of what they found but they left secretly and Geber has broken his promise."

Vedius Rusco did not need this reminder of Joseph's visit from three Wise Men. He knew. ~~(He not only knew that a Messiah had been born. He knew the Messiah's father and mother.)~~ He knew, he knew, and when he thought of the innocence of the woman and the integrity of the man he was being asked to betray, rage made him breathless.

"No!" he panted. "No! By Jupiter, Ceres, Mercury ..."

He tolled off all the Twelve. "... No!"

"What?" Herod heaved up, glaring.

"Watch yourself, Vedius!" Soemus warned recklessly.

"No!" Rusco panted.

"You refuse?" Herod cried, in spite of pain.

"Refuse!" Rusco repeated. A Roman of commissioner rank could refuse anything to an Idumean client king who could never rise to the privilege of Roman citizenship. But he would have refused anyway.

Herod's finger wagged furiously at Soemus.

"Herod says you must do this," Soemus interpreted, "because peace is at stake. The Jews may rise in revolt if Herod does not seek out and worship this new king."

Worship him. That was not worth answering, and Rusco was, in any case, too full of rage for speech. He knew his defiance might bring <sup>down</sup> the tyrant's heel ~~down~~ in spite of all the laws within which Caesar Augustus sheltered Roman citizens away from home. But he could not commit this act of betrayal, not even if Herod's ~~scrofulous~~ finger aimed at the dungeons. He flung back his head and stood erect.

Soemus bent impulsively to Herod's ~~pendulous~~ ear. He liked Vedius Rusco, and something in him responded to the Roman's flame of righteous anger.

"He <sup>will</sup> come around," Soemus whispered ~~to the tyrant.~~  
 "And he <sup>is</sup> the man <sup>we need</sup> for the job," he added in a crafty attempt to protect his friend. "His wife was a Jew. Jews work on his roads. A Jewish carpenter from Nazareth is working in his villa right now."

As the Chief Eunuch says, he has friends --- and by marriage, a relative or two --- among the Jews. He <sup>will</sup> ~~it~~ cool off and then he's just the one for you."

Herod's blood-shot eyes considered the argument, and rejected it. He had wished for a long time to ~~get~~ rid <sup>himself</sup> of this trouble-making road builder. He had been planning to do it soon. Only yesterday he had thought of using his mercenaries, but Rusco's defiance now spurred him to an immediate attempt. He looked to Soemus, to the Chief Eunuch, to Tirzah, choosing his instrument. It must be ~~the~~ one on whom he could most rely not to betray him to the Emperor Augustus. ~~(He made his choice.)~~ He beckoned and his sister advanced.

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At the entrance to the hall, mercenary guards made way hastily before another advance. Bracae's cough signalled, "Here we are!"

Another voice, reedy, but confident, said "Proculinus does not need to be announced," and the smallest, most arrogant feet in all of Caesar Augustus's twenty-eight legions began a hob-nailed strut along the marble floor. Heavier hobnails hammered behind and two scuffing, bare feet brought up the rear. The General of the Tenth Legion, attended by an aide and a very needful slave, and followed by Bracae, was come to pay a call of state on Herod the Great.

Orfitus Proculinus was a rolypoly little man saved by only a handsbreadth from being a dwarf. He prided himself on being the best legion commander in the Empire. He ~~certainly~~ <sup>surely</sup>

sweated the most. Fat beyond all rivals, because fatness made him man-sized in at least one dimension, he sweated if he so much as stood up and sat down. After the walk from the Palace gate he was running sweat and as he drew near to Herod's dais he thrust a hand behind his back.

The slave whose scuffing bare feet trailed his master's strutting boots, filled the hand immediately. He would have been lost if he had not. He carried an armful of small thick towels, and his sole duty was instantly to provide a swabbing cloth whenever the hand of Proculinus reached.

Of course Proculinus swabbed himself. Face, ears, neck, armpits, arms, wrists, thighs and most of all the crotch between stubby, jelly-like legs. ~~Every steaming part!~~ Who else could swab, or for that matter do anything else, half so well?

In boyhood Orfitus Proculinus had dreamed of being ~~a~~ <sup>an illustrious</sup> first-rate fighting man. Too small for that, he had aimed in manhood at being the Empire's best general. In a day when most legion commanders treated their men like animals and got only an animal obedience, Proculinus gave the Tenth more consideration, food and furloughs and fewer punishments than any other soldiers, and in return he demanded and received an unequalled efficiency.

He was, undeniably, the Empire's vainest general, and one of its most ambitious. Standing, he believed, head and shoulders above all rivals, he was cocksure that one day soon he would rise to the govern<sup>or</sup>ship of a province, at least. Meanwhile he did all that he could to rise. He had hurried to Vedius Rusco to show himself prompt in protecting a loyal Roman against Herod.

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How better could he advance himself with the Emperor? Contrarily, he could be counted on to show himself <sup>equally</sup> ~~just as~~ prompt against ~~any~~ disloyal Roman. If disloyalty had even been hinted, Vedius Rusco might have <sup>lived out</sup> ~~rotted~~ his life away in Herod's deepest dungeon for all of Orfitus Proculinus. But of course Vedius Rusco was not disloyal. None stood so high in the favor of Augustus.

"Hail, Herod!" Proculinus cried and planted his stubby, freshly swabbed legs in front of the golden throne-bed. His vanity made him delight in every excess of formality and the salute which he gave now was a masterpiece of proper recognition of his own lofty position and of the reverence due a throne.

Herod grunted.

"I trust, oh King!" <sup>Proculinus</sup> ~~he~~ said, coming down from the salute, 210

"that my visit, in the name of great Caesar Augustus, is timely?"

Herod's grimace showed ~~plainly~~ how untimely it was.

By now the aide had ranged himself alongside Proculinus and so had the slave with his stack of towels.

"I ~~guess~~ <sup>am afraid we</sup> ~~were~~ <sup>are</sup> pretty late," Bracae whispered, sliding close to Rusco.

"You ~~re~~ <sup>are</sup> here when I need you," Rusco whispered back.

Soemus flicked an ironic congratulatory glance toward Rusco. ~~Herod grunted again.~~

"My monthly report, oh Herod, goes forward to Rome," Proculinus said, "today! But I could not omit the latest word of your unfortunate illness. May I tell Caesar Augustus that it lessens? He ~~awaits~~ such reassurance, I know, with imperial affection."

*The end  
of the  
story*

Vedius Rusco, perhaps as much in reaction from tension as from amusement, had to hold back laughter. In his youth he had believed that those in high places always spoke in high-flown language. But after listening to such men all over the Empire he had learned that few did, and they seldom. True, the written word tended to be flowery, but in ordinary give and take, princes no less than slaves used plain speech, the kind that slips naturally off the tongue. That was why the vivid Greek slang, which fitted into every occasion, was spreading everywhere. It was why a pat Egyptian word picked up in Alexandria was, within months, being overworked in Rome. It was why the Galilean hodge-podge of Syrian, Aramaic and Samaritan, plus a legacy from long-gone Canaanites, tempted sophisticated Jerusalemites even while they ridiculed Galilean crudities. 211

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 (D) But no ~~such~~ ordinary give and take satisfied the little General. He was aware of how an envoy should speak. At the end of his peroration, Herod grunted <sup>again</sup> ~~once more~~ and aimed a finger at Soemus.

"Pain," Soemus interpreted, "in his throat makes it difficult for Herod to speak. But he is, he says, improved. He will, therefore, be grateful if you will present his profound respects to great Caesar Augustus and say that he is better."

Herod could not be sure that any message from him would be relayed to the Emperor by a Roman general.

But the General's offer might be sincere and if so it

was a chance for Herod to impress the Emperor with his loyalty. He could not afford to miss it. His finger waggled urgently at Soemus.

"And Herod the King," Soemus continued, "directs you to include in your report word that he will shortly complete an unparalleled hippodrome in Jericho in honor of Caesar Augustus." The finger waggled spitefully toward Vedius Rusco. "He does this in spite of many obstacles." Soemus added.

Rusco kept a sober face. As much as Herod's finger, that "many obstacles" had been aimed at him. His highways had delayed the hippodrome, as they had delayed so many <sup>of the</sup> other projects by which Herod constantly sought to honor the Emperor and so keep in his favor.

"It will be my pleasure to take full advantage of the opportunity which Herod allows," Proculinus said, making each word ring. He was <sup>thoroughly enjoying himself,</sup> ~~having the time of his life.~~ 212

~~But~~ <sup>however,</sup> he was too much aware of the value of time to waste it, ever. He had accomplished the diversion for which he had <sup>come</sup> ~~been~~ brought.

"I go!" he said. "With the permission of Herod, I go. The Emperor's report must get off."

Herod grunted. Soemus was not needed to explain that the sound meant, "Go! And the sooner the better."

For the first time Proculinus seemed to notice Vedius Rusco. His artless recognition was as much a masterpiece as his salute.

"Vedius!" he cried. "My friend, Vedius! If your

business here is also finished, do come with me. Without the latest information concerning your highways, my report to the Emperor will be incomplete." He bent to Herod in a bow which was both a question and a Roman general's independant announcement of intention. "With Herod's permission, I shall take Vedius Rusco Philippicus with me."

Herod refused to reply by even so much as a nod. Instead, his finger aimed at the Chief Eunuch. He would allow no one but a slave to grant this dismissal.

*Rusco* "Herod, willingly and more than willingly, permits <sup>Vedius</sup> ~~the~~ Roman to leave," the Chief Eunuch said. His tone was impudent even though his cringing shoulders implored Rusco to remember that the impudence had been commanded.

Rusco bowed. Proculus held out a hand which instantly met the required towel. Framing flowery speech was sweaty work. He sopped, <sup>than</sup> and with the others backed away from the throne and down the dais. ~~Then~~ they all strode toward the door. 213

Behind their retreating backs Herod's finger beckoned Tirzah, no mean interpreter herself. She hurried to another exit, wattles swaying in her haste.

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D Out in the courtyard Vedius Rusco motioned to a palace attendant ~~for~~ his black gelding and Bracae's roan while Proculus squinted at the mercenaries on guard like a fat little rooster eyeing bears. His cluck said that Herod's bears fell a satisfying way short of his own in the Tenth. As horses were brought up for himself and his aide, two more attendants came from inside the

Palace but they failed to join the group already on duty. The two wore Tirzah's livery.

"You did a good piece of work back there, Orfitus." Rusco said. "You talked like an ambassador, ~~to the life.~~"

"I flatter myself I know how to handle a king," <sup>The general</sup> Proculinus said. His self-satisfaction was enormous.

"You got me out of a ~~really~~ tight place," Rusco said. "Many thanks!"

"Herod did look wild," Proculinus said. "I never saw him in such a state before. And just because you asked for help on your highways!"

"He had me in a state, too."

"State or no state, he had to calm down when I reminded him that I am ~~the~~ Emperor's <sup>eyes</sup> enjoy in Judea." Proculinus smiled in practiced graciousness. "Won't you come to my quarters for a drink?"

"I'm sorry. I have a really urgent errand," Rusco said. He had. He must get to Joseph with a warning of this projected search.

Proculinus made a little masterpiece of the formality of a legion general excusing a civilian officer. Rusco played his supporting role to the hilt. His smile and bow were solemnly appreciative and his courteous attention held until Proculinus's party had clattered away.

"It's too late to use the Joppa Gate," he said to Bracae then, squinting up at the sun. "We'd run into crowds. Let's take the street of the Candlemakers down to the Dung Gate.

Nobody will be using that now."

One of the attendants wearing Tirzah's livery turned back into the Palace, the other trailed in the wake of Vedius Rusco's black gelding, but not unobtrusively enough to be overlooked by the old campaigner, Bracae.

"Proculinus got you out of a tight place but <sup>perhaps</sup> maybe not for long," he said. "There goes one fellow to tell the Palace we've started and here comes another to spot our direction."

"And losing <sup>him</sup> ~~this one~~ won't do any good if they really mean trouble," Rusco said. "<sup>He</sup> ~~This one~~ will have a few helpers, even though they aren't in sight."

"Just the other day," Bracae <sup>said with a grin,</sup> ~~grinned,~~ "Bria told me to start looking the other way when a fight came along. She said I was over-due <sup>for over. (U)</sup> ~~to get my ears knocked down.~~"

"<sup>Perhaps</sup> Maybe we both are," Rusco said and the familiar elation gushed up. "We <sup>are</sup> ~~re~~ being trailed so I <sup>suppose</sup> ~~guess~~ we can ~~just about~~ count on some sort of a fight."

He smiled at a recollection of a <sup>saying</sup> ~~writing~~ Joseph had once quoted. How did it go? Whoso sheds blood, his own blood shall be shed? He could not remember exactly. Well, he certainly didn't intend to let his blood be shed ... not at least while Joseph lacked that warning.

"~~Maybe~~ you ought to go back for the General's drink," Bracae said, ~~pretending worry.~~ <sup>joked.</sup>

"Let's keep going," Rusco said. "Whatever comes will at least be a change from road-building."

"How many do you think will jump us?"

"No matter how many, the quality will be poor."

~~"Not too poor, I hope."~~

"They certainly won't be legionnaires," ~~Rusco said.~~

~~The Tenth doesn't work for the Palace except on Orfitus's~~ <sup>orders</sup> ~~eyes~~  
~~so.~~ And it isn't likely to be any of the mercenaries on guard  
 at the Palace today."

"So it should be just a pick-up lot from the Palace,"  
 Bracae said comfortably.

"And if they jump us, it will be inside the city,"  
 Rusco prophesied. "Outside the walls we'd have too much elbow  
 room to suit them."

With street fighting the likeliest prospect, they  
~~knew~~ <sup>felt</sup> they need not worry much. They knew the pattern of street  
 fighting. Two or three pedestrians would fall into an argument.  
 This would explode into a ~~slugging match~~  <sup>brawl</sup>. Ten or fifteen by-  
 standers would turn the ~~thing~~  <sup>brawl</sup> into a  <sup>general</sup> melee, blocking the street.  
 A half dozen passersby would dodge and scramble until the ~~inter-~~  
~~ested~~, chosen victims were caught off guard. Then weapons would  
 come out. Amid so much contrived confusion the victim<sup>s</sup> really had  
 the advantage if  <sup>they</sup> ~~he~~ refused to be caught off guard.

"Take off your cloak," Rusco said, and took off his  
 own. ~~"A cloak gets in the way."~~

They readied shields, daggers and javelins and Rusco  
 loosed his sword and Bracae laid his own long blade across his  
 saddle.

"Remember to keep your head up," Rusco said. "How many  
 times do I have to tell you that when you hunch those big shoulders

~~of your~~, the back of your helmet lifts clear from the nape of your neck and practically invites a dagger?"

"If we're giving advice," Bracae retorted, "then you remember there are two of us. Don't go racing off to have all the fun by yourself."

"Watch for somebody jumping off a balcony or out of a window," Rusco said.

"And watch out for slings, too."

"Slings?"

"A Palace gang would probably include some of Herod's own Idumaeen sandfleas," Bracae said, pleased at having had this thought ahead of Rusco. "They're not as good slingers as the Benjamins or those Balearic wonders, but they're good enough ~~when~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~range is short.~~"

The black and <sup>the</sup> roan had brought them to the busy street stretching southward through the Tyropoeon Valley. This had been taken over by the candlemakers, as every main street in Jerusalem had been taken over by some guild. Its clamorous, crooked length was <sup>lined</sup> ~~lined~~ with shops where tallow and wax products could be bought, and especially candles, from cheap <sup>over</sup> ~~things~~ smaller than <sup>a finger</sup> ~~good nails~~ and selling at five for a mite, to decorated glories costing five denarii apiece. It was wide as Jerusalem streets went, <sup>here</sup> but ~~now~~ and <sup>there</sup> ~~then~~ jutting balconies almost touched from opposite sides.

"It <sup>will</sup> ~~is~~ be from one of those that we'll be jumped," Bracae said.

"But only one man will jump," Rusco said. "The ~~pack~~ <sup>will</sup> in the street is what we ~~do~~ need to worry about."

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That

(set this) 224

"Well, don't forget, I'm along!" Bracae said again.

"Don't try to do it all yourself."

They rode into the Street of the Candlemakers, Rusco leading, his knees <sup>holding</sup> ~~guiding~~ his mount <sup>to</sup> at a waltzing walk, his shield poised, his right hand ready to reach for his sword.

"These horses haven't been in a fight for a long time," Bracae said. "I wonder if they remember their lessons?"

Up ahead two men clinched, struggled, wrestled and fell and a score more spilled around them in violent confusion.

This was it! Rusco got his sword out and was soothing his horse against the rising noise when he heard the familiar, dull chock of a slung stone. He looked back and saw Bracae sway, then slowly slide to the cobble stones. Bracae's roan did remember. It promptly halted so that enemies must come at his master from only one flank.

"Holy Jupiter!" Rusco breathed. Answering to a hard knee, his black halted at Bracae's other flank as the big man began to rise groggily.

"Sword!" Vedius Rusco shouted and leaped from his own saddle. "Sword and shield, Bracae!"

The command cut through Bracae's daze. His shield was still on his arm and his long sword lay within reach. Skull ringing, he got his weapon and stood up in the shadow of a wide balcony. He was still a little ~~dazed~~ <sup>confused</sup>.

"Vedius!" he bellowed. "Didn't I tell you not to go racing off ..."

"I'm right here, old bear!" Rusco laughed. "Right be-

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side you. And here they come."

Bracae shook his head as the first wave from the melee rushed them. Both he and Rusco had their shields squared, and stones from slingers in a second wave began to strike the curved surfaces and shatter into bits and ricochet. From beyond the horses a dozen assailants tried to charge but the animals, remembering their lessons well, reared with terrifying screams and struck with hooves like hammers and the dozen faltered.

Rusco glanced overhead. A man was just beginning a nimble leap from the balcony and as he came down his robe ballooned. Rusco got his sword up and the man spitted himself, his body jerking like a great muscle in torment. <sup>the jumper</sup> His weight turned Rusco's sword downward and ~~he~~ <sup>that</sup> slid from ~~it~~ to the cobbled street.

Bracae was mowing, mowing, ~~mowing~~ and on his quarter the attack was getting nowhere but the slingers were getting the range. A stone ricocheted off Rusco's helmet, a volley battered his shield and another struck on the laces of his breastplate. That really hurt and when one hit his shin he felt he was fighting on one leg. Another volley rattled against Bracae's shoulders, spraying in all directions.

"W-o-d-e-n!" Bracae bellowed, an exhortation poured out slowly like cold honey. It was not a prayer for help. Bracae 219 could manage without help if W-o-d-e-n would supply just a little more breath while he settled these sandfleas nipping at his great thighs. "W-o-d-e-n!" he bellowed and mowed away.

Rusco kept his shorter sword flicking in and out from beneath his shield, and between mowing scythe and flicking blade

one crowding attacker seemed to impale himself as soon as another drew back to tend his wounds.

The pack began to waver and the slingers grew less accurate. They could see that scythe and flicking point would be at their own bellies if the pack wavered more. The first wave snarled and broke, and the suddenly uncovered slingers, feeling naked, fled too. Off on a flank one crafty enemy made a last try for victory.

"The Romans kill Jews!" he shouted. "The Romans kill Jews!" ~~"Kill the Romans!"~~

It was a cry to bring Jews out of the very earth, but Bracae got a foot in the crotch of a dead assailant and turned the body over.

"Who said Jews?" he cried. "Look! Is this one circumcized? This lousy Idumaeen?"

Cry, "Romans kill Jews!", and you kindled a fire of hate in most Jews who heard. Cry, "Idumaeen!", and of any living thousand Jews within earshot nine-hundred-ninety-nine would instantly curse Herod. The gathering crowd cursed now. The evidence was plain. The overturned body was that of a man of the despised people who had given Judea its tyrant.

Rusco and Bracae rode on to the Dung Gate and out into open country. No one followed and they felt free to add up the damage.

The worst, Bracae swore by Woden, was a dagger wound bleeding at one shoulder, but a splitting headache made him groan.

"That very first stone got me," he said. "It came in

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under my helmet and caught me right on the nape of my neck."

He had said it before he realized what he was confessing. His jaw dropped.

"Didn't I tell you?" Rusco said, but he was too battered <sup>to feel</sup> ~~for~~ much triumph. A stone had caught him half way between ankle and knee and for hours he would not be able to hide a limp. He had half a dozen bruises and blood was seeping from three dagger thrusts which his hardened leather and metal cuirass had kept from going too deep.

"Bria will fix you up," Bracae said. "And she <sup>has</sup> ~~has~~ some of that salve left. Joseph's I mean. It's the best stuff I ever saw."

"Let's push along," Rusco said. But he was less anxious to get attention for his wounds than to reach home before Joseph left. Tomorrow was the day Joseph had said he and Mary would go to the Temple for the purification rite. Well, they had better not go! For that pair and their baby to go near Herod's Palace would be like walking into an arena full of hungry lions.

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 CHAPTER SIXTEEN

High across the city the sun's first rays, reaching over the Mount of Olives, struck golden fire from the Temple and in a watchtower four hundred and fifty feet above the still dark gorge of Kidron Valley the lookout priest raised a white-clad arm and blew on a golden trumpet.

His signal alerted the hosts below to their sacred labors which Moses had first decreed, which David had set forth anew, which Solomon had increased, which Zerubabal had reconstituted and which now were continued under the ~~half-mad~~ Idumaean <sup>tyrant</sup> ~~convert~~ who sat on David's throne.

The priests assigned for duty on this day, as they would not be assigned again for six months, were already at their posts, barefooted, white-robed and unblemished as the Law required. Their divisional chief already had completed the torchlight inspection of the sanctified precincts denied to Gentiles, and the captain of the Temple police had completed his own inspection of everything else within the four spiked walls that enclosed the entire Temple ground, twice as was his duty, putting his ~~penalizing~~ torch to the tunic of a sentry caught sleeping.

Now, in the Court of the Priests, the silver trumpets of three Levites echoed the earlier golden warning from the look-

out, and one priest crouched over the wood heaped on the Altar of Burnt Offerings and blew at shavings stuffed down among yesterday's embers and a thin blaze licked upward and then a thin wisp of grey smoke. At the peak of sacrifice the wisp would grow to a thick, black, oily cloud.

The Division Priest frowned. A red line divided the altar into halves, one for the burnt offering which must be consumed entirely for the glory of the Lord, one for the sin-offering, the best of which, when well-scorched, might be hooked clear, to satisfy mortal appetites. The line should have been freshly drawn but it barely could be made out. There would be grumbling! The people complained that all too often greedy priests ignored the line; especially at the end of the long, hard day. Tired then, and hungry, they aimed their meat hooks at the most succulent chunks, red line or no red line, lest they fail to provide a ration for their squad, and for themselves.

Strong attendants, who must keep clear the altar drain by which the hot blood spilled down to Kidron Valley, readied long pushers, already charred and darkly stained. More men of muscle inspected the big jars in which, as the day ran on, they would carry tote off ashes, entrails and other refuse. The priests who dressed the sacrifices honed their knives on marble butcher blocks. Other priests swung axes to loosen the muscles with which they would hang the washed meats on hooks and, later, transfer the meats to the fire.

Behind the Altar of Burnt Offerings stood a panel more than a hundred feet high. Under a bordering vine and grapes of

solid gold, it bore a picture of Solomon's long-gone Temple.

Between the panel and the Altar stood the Holy Place with its Golden Altar of Incense flanked by the seven-branched candlesticks and the tables of old and new shew bread, each laid with a cloth of gold. Reverent priests already had trimmed the candles and brushed the Golden Altar free of yesterday's incense ashes and spread hot coals on the newly cleaned surface. Now another priest set about the rite which had fallen to him by heaven-guided lot and from which he would be barred all the rest of his life. This was the envied, holy task of spreading over the coals fresh incense to carry prayers for all the people sweetly up to the Lord.

He approached the Golden Altar. Behind him lay silence. Priests and all others within sight ~~and sound~~ were now prone, mutely praying with gratitude for past boons, with thanks for present blessings, and with hope for future mercies.

The chosen priest took care that his incense fell for the most part on the side nearest the Holy of Holies, that perfect cube, behind the altars and the vine-adorned panel, which was empty of all save the Presence of the Lord; and as the cloud of fragrance drifted upward he withdrew, step by humble step, and the gold and silver trumpets blew again and the Temple organ played and the rich, united sound soared westward over Joppa Gate.

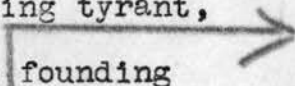
o-o-o

"It <sup>is</sup> opening!" ~~strapping~~ copper-haired Judith cried.

In the thirty-sixth year of the reign of the dying tyrant, Herod, and in the seven hundred forty-seventh year of the founding of Rome and a thousand years after David, another company of new

next page

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dedicated mothers was going up to Jerusalem's Temple to regain the precious privilege of approach to the Golden Altar.

It was late in the harsh month of Shebat, forty-one days at least after the birth of the sons who, the Law of Moses said, had made the mothers unclean. (Those who had borne daughters had been made unclean for eighty.)

Judith hugged her son in such rich excitement as she had not felt before in her lifetime. Just to be going up to the Temple, that whirlpool of ecstasy for all her people, would have been enough; but to be going up for the pending great rite was almost beyond imagination. She beamed toward ~~Aram~~, the burly young husband at her side.

Aram was marching solidly along, looking awed. He had his own Temple duty. Like every Jewish father of a first-born son, he must buy the release of the child from sanctuary service. The necessary five shekels were carefully folded into his girdle, patted often to make sure they had not fallen out unnoticed. He patted them now.

Judith looked around over bobbing heads. The morning was cold. The snow which had fallen in the night was being churned into a yellow mush by the crowd already gathered at the Joppa Gate.

She was looking for another young mother, the one whom she had helped out of the musty stable at Bethlehem, early one morning more than a month ago.

The pleasure of that morning was still fresh in Judith's mind. Her memory of ~~that morning~~ <sup>it</sup> was a peculiar pleasure. About helping that other young mother there had been a joy, --- Judith

had not tried to explain it, even to Aram. But she felt joyful now to think that she was making the purification rite on the same day the other young mother was making it. She was glad, too, to have her son making this trip with the other baby.

Judith looked around and ~~sure enough~~, farther back, she saw a donkey, and the flicker of a blue dress, and a tall man with a staff as formidable as a spear. *She*

Judith sighed with content and turned around to smile again at Aram. This time he caught the smile.

"Want me to carry him a while?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" Judith said and hugged the soft bundle tighter.

O-O-O

Joppa Market was beginning to bustle. Accustomed as she was to the scanty wares in Bethlehem shops, Judith had been marvelling at the booths here, all overflowing. ~~And not just~~ with <sup>just</sup> homemade stuffs! Here were rarities hurried in from every land by merchants eager to share in the prosperity which Herod, like the earlier <sup>Proud</sup> ~~despot~~, Solomon, had brought to Judea. Here was everything, and on every hand, and at every price. Here a mistress might, for a few pennies, clothe a slave for a whole year and then, perhaps from the same dealer, buy herself a dress costing enough to clothe a hundred slaves.

Already market inspectors were on their rounds, making sure that each merchant abided by the approved profit of one sixth of his cost, unless, of course, a bribe had been <sup>given</sup> ~~slipped~~ under the table.

~~But~~ <sup>however,</sup> not even the market could hold Judith's eyes after

the huge leaves of Joppa Gate ~~had~~ swung wide, ~~enough for entrance.~~  
 Scores trying to be first inside bumped her and would have bumped  
 harder if Aram had not boldly blocked them off.

Page

Judith did not blame them. Her own mood was to hurry. Strong, with fluent muscles, deep breast and firm legs and thighs, she smiled over a shoulder at Aram. Few, her smile said, would pass <sup>them</sup> her on this happy climb. Few would even keep pace. ~~Aram~~  
~~did.~~

Through the gate, <sup>she</sup> Judith turned this way and that to look for the golden and ivory city which was every Jew's pride. ~~Of~~  
~~course~~, not much of its splendor was evident at first. Herod had made a city almost as magnificent as Rome but around Joppa Gate there was little proof of this. <sup>HERE WERE</sup> ~~There was~~ only the gloomy citadel of David, some barracks, a huddle of laborers waiting to be hired, a dozen chained convicts shambling off, and a narrow, cobbled street climbing up and up.

The cobbled street climbed by shallow steps, which had saved camels many a slip and now saved foot travellers and donkeys. It was lined by the lop-sided huts of the poorest ~~of all the city~~  
<sup>leaning</sup> ~~which leaned~~ against one another for support.

Judith strode along beside Aram, hugging her baby and smiling. Hundreds walked before and behind them, some carrying pigeons and turtle doves and even sheep and lambs.

"Aren't we lucky," she said, "that the Priest Zacharias has already given us the ticket for our doves?"

Mentioning Zacharias reminded her again of Elizabeth's cousin and <sup>again</sup> she looked around ~~again~~, but there were too many donkeys

to find the one named Briar.

The road forked. The right ~~tine~~, less a street than a cramped slot, curved among the lop-sided huts to connect, after a quarter-mile, with the crowded strong-smelling Street of the Candlemakers in the Tyropoeon Valley. Aram and Judith and the hundreds bearing sacrifices, took the left ~~tine~~.

This climbed past Herod's palace. The mighty walls, slowly weathering to rose and ivory, drew all eyes but few travellers paused. The ~~hard-faced~~ mercenaries on guard before the gates were too suggestive of the tyrant's cruelties. The timid hurried past. Aram and Judith walked neither slower nor faster.

The cobbled road continued to climb and sometimes, ahead, it seemed to narrow until Judith doubted they could get through before it closed up like a sewn seam. But it was still narrowly open <sup>when they reached</sup> at the summit of Jerusalem's western hill. It levelled off then and they could look across the wide bridge which spanned deep, steep Tyropoeon Valley to connect with Zion, the eastern hill, and with the street which led to a great spiked wall. Behind this, the Temple rose defiantly in the shadow of the gloomy fortress where the High Priest's vestments were under Roman lock and key.

To the north and south, along the western hill, there was now proof aplenty of the grandeur of Herod's Jerusalem. The new mansion of the High Priest. The Sanhedrin's impressive council chamber. The ornate homes of merchants waxing richer and richer and of Sadducees, Pharisees and Herodians, all new and almost

dwarfing the old, unkempt, abandoned palace of the Hasmonean dynasty whose leaders Herod had slaughtered.

The crowd was thickening and Aram pulled at Judith's arm.

"Let's stop and look around," he said. "And not just at the Temple, either, but around at the whole city. You aren't likely to get up here often."

Judith smiled broadly, and Aram, remembering the plans they often made for ~~plenty~~<sup>many</sup> of babies, read her smile and he laughed, and so did she.

o-o-o

Almost impregnable, Jerusalem lay on its two hills, lay balanced on two fingers of rock at the end of the great plateau which stretched ~~far~~<sup>many miles into</sup> to the north. With so many new buildings shining now under the sun, it was truly Jerusalem the Golden. Judith and Aram stared reverently.

This was a place that had stood against conquerors almost since Abraham. First it had been Ur<sup>u</sup>-salem, the hill of safety, ~~an~~<sup>for the Pharaohs</sup> an outpost against ~~the Pharaohs~~<sup>Babylon</sup>. Then it was the chief town and holy place of the Jebusites. Then David ~~had~~ won it and Solomon ~~had~~ adorned it. Nebuchadnezzar ~~had torn~~<sup>took</sup> it down and Nehemiah ~~had~~ rebuilt it. It and Babylon ~~and~~ had been great together. Now Babylon was gone, but Jerusalem remained great with Rome, although Roman spears in Antonia glinted above the impregnable walls of the city. Almost impregnable, said the spears, enjoying their moment as Babylon had enjoyed hers.

~~(These things were the color and texture of the thoughts)~~

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~~Judith and Aram were thinking as they stared.~~

(D) Judith opened a pack of bread, ~~and~~ cheese and figs and <sup>she and Aram</sup> they munched companionably. She opened her dress and gave breast to the ~~fat~~ baby who sucked with little breathless gasps, <sup>lostin' of surrounding world</sup> When he had nursed, she laid him over her shoulder and patted his back and soon he fell asleep.

Aram laid a big gentle finger into a crease in the soft neck of his son. 229

"Time to start on," he said. "The sacrificing has begun."

Above the spiked wall a black cloud was rising. It looked as though the Temple were on fire.

o-o-o

They continued their walk through the pushing, shoving crowd and gained the bridge. ~~The~~ <sup>ripe</sup> odors were still heady even though thinned out after wafting seventy feet up from clamorous Tyropoeon Valley. Hoarse shouts also rumbled out of the valley and Aram and Judith looked at each other, their eyes ablaze with hatred against Herod.

Hatred for Herod grew in every Jew whose climb to the Temple was profaned by the shouts. The High Priest and the Sanhedrin had protested <sup>strongly</sup> when Herod ~~had~~ <sup>here</sup> built an amphitheater ~~down~~ there. And always when the noisy betting, cursing and shouting over gladiators and runners and charioteers billowed up, Jews felt the tyrant's open insult to the nation's place of holy sacrifice.

Aram and Judith crossed the bridge, and at the Temple's main western gate, the noisy, grumbling but good-natured press of ~~of~~ worshippers -- young and old, the poor in tatters, the rich in

warm shawls and immaculate robes -- went into the bedlam of the huge outer court where Gentiles, also, might stand.

"They say this place holds a hundred thousand," Aram said. "But I <sup>suppose</sup> guess that is only on the great feast days, - Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of the Tabernacle."

(D)

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↓

On the eastern side of the great Court of the Gentiles 230 stood Solomon's Porch. At least some said it was the proud monarch's very justice seat, although doubters insisted that in all Jerusalem nothing had survived the savage destruction of Nebuchadnezzar. The lofty Sanctuary blocked off the north side of the Court but, on the other three, colonnades provided shaded walks for all who came, whether to meet friends or gossip or perform religious rites or ~~admire~~ or only to satisfy idle curiosity. The colonnade pillars, which three men with joined hands could scarcely encircle, gave shelter to money-changers, now crying for the business of all with earshot. (Will retype if you wish this to stand.)

Each money-changer sat against a pillar on a padded stool with a big money-box on either hand. One box held only shekels and half-shekels of Temple coinage. The other had many compartments to hold alien money, Greek, Roman, Tyrian, Persian, Egyptian, Syrian. The Temple would not accept these because they were stamped with the likenesses of bulls, owls, hawks, horses, and kings and emperors and so violated the commandment against graven images. Temple coins bore only the seven-branched candlestick or a palm branch or a lily or Solomon's temple.

A curly-haired Syrian sidled up to Aram. "I know the only honest money-changer in the Temple," he whispered.

(D) "I got my Temple shekels a long ~~while~~ ago when a money-changer came to Bethlehem," Aram explained.

The Syrian kicked in rage. Small dealers had cut into the Temple trade for years by setting up shop in big cities before important feast days, but lately they had been going even to small towns, and all the year around.

page  
h.  
Another man, with a crafty face, tugged at Aram. "I'll help you get your ticket," he said confidentially, as though ~~giving away a great favor.~~ *offering a favor.*

"No thanks, it isn't necessary .." Aram began.

(D) "Not necessary?" The tout ~~broke~~ in so violently that Aram was silenced. ~~We~~ waved toward Solomon's porch where priests stood beside cages and pens confining birds, sheep and cattle, all feeding in calm unawareness of their imminent fate.

See  
pg. 230

"Of course, my poor friend, it is necessary. Everybody who sacrifices does it by ticket." He waved again toward the priests. "You get it from one of them when you pay for your sacrifice. But you need me. I can take you to the priest who will give you the best price."

"Thanks, again, but .." Aram was trying to go on when a second flood of words stopped him.

"Now don't tell me, my poor, poor friend, that you have brought your own sacrifice! Nobody with any sense brings his own sacrifice. If everyone brought his own beast or bird, the crowds would never let you get yours even as far as the Court of the Women, let alone higher. No! You ~~must~~ *just* pick a sample from those in the pens and cages, and you pay and are given a ticket which says

you have paid and tells what you bought, and you hand the ticket to the proper priest in the Court of the Priests, and he sees that a proper sacrifice is taken from unblemished animals all ready and waiting."

"But one of the priests has already arranged all this for me," Aram said. "We already have our ticket." 232

The tout wailed over wasted time which might have been spent making an honest penny elsewhere, <sup>and</sup> ~~But~~ Judith and Aram went on, this time toward the terraces from which the golden sanctuary looked down on the Court of the Gentiles. P. 230

"Look over there," Aram cried and Judith turned as everyone was turning toward a shrunken female figure in brilliant silks and jewels which was flouncing through the crowd, shielded by four anxious slaves.

"What an awful old woman!" Judith said.

"I think she is Herod's sister," Aram said.

"Is she the princess Tirzah?"

~~"She looks like a slut from the gutter,"~~ <sup>J</sup> someone whispered. ~~And another~~ muttered, "What does she want today? She never comes here unless she is doing something for Herod."

o-o-o

After Tirzah was lost in the crowds, Aram and Judith turned to the wide stairs leading up to the Court of the Women. Aram had not gone around to the Gate of the First Born. He was taking Judith and their son through the Beautiful Gate. That led directly into the Women's court and, Judith had been told, the trumpet chest for her purification pennies was just inside,

*and*  
 and not far off was the gallery where all the mothers would wait until summoned to take part in their special ceremony.

① ~~But~~ before they came to the wide stairs they faced the massive balustrade guarding the sanctuary elevations. Plaques at thirteen entrances warned in Greek, Hebrew, Roman, Egyptian and Syrian:

LET NO ALIEN ENTER WITHIN THE 29  
 BALUSTRADA AND EMBANKMENT ABOUT 31  
 THE SANCTUARY--WHOEVER IS CAUGHT 32  
 MAKES HIMSELF RESPONSIBLE FOR 29  
 HIS DEATH WHICH WILL FOLLOW. 28

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 Within the balustrade they faced the Temple buildings, so elevated that, from the Court of the Gentiles, necks had to be craned if eyes were to see. Aram led on to the Beautiful Gate, two massive doors of shining brass, three or four times as high as ~~Judith's~~ *their* home in Bethlehem and twice as wide.

"It takes twenty men to swing those doors open in the morning and close them at night," Aram said. He was proud to know so much about such marvels.

The Gate stood at the top of broad, alternately white and blue marble steps. ~~They~~ *Aram and Judith* took off their sandals and climbed, and inside Judith paused uncertainly. There were thirteen trumpet-chests, each guarded by a severe, white-robed priest.

"Which one do I use?" she whispered nervously.

"The third one," Aram said. "That is marked for purification pennies."

"Do I just drop my money in?"

"Show it first to the priest. And show the ticket Zacharias gave us. Of course you know you'll never see the doves

Zacharias has picked out. But keep the ticket and wait in the gallery. Let me have the boy now. I'll go and redeem him."

Aram, in his turn began to <sup>show</sup> ~~act~~ nervousness

"The redemption ceremony isn't long," he said. "~~Just~~ Only 234

two prayers and the payment. I just give the baby to the priest and the priest gives him back when I pay." He felt his girdle to make sure he still had the five shekels.

"He <sup>will</sup> ~~is~~ be as good as gold," Judith said. "He nursed just a little while ago." She gave a pat or two to the precious bundle and handed it over and Aram settled it in two arms, fearful that one would not be enough.

He walked toward the Court of the Priests and Judith walked to the trumpet. She dropped her pennies and the priest nodded over her ticket and she walked smiling to the gallery and seated herself behind the lattice.

She could see Aram, their son in his arms, and a dozen other men, their arms also full, mounting the steps which led to the Court of the Priests. The tall sun-blackened carpenter, Joseph, <sup>Also</sup> carrying ~~the~~ baby, was in the group.

Judith turned her pleased gaze around the crowded gallery. Far off to the right she was almost sure she saw a blue dress embroidered in ~~me~~ soft yellow.

o-o-o

"It <sup>is</sup> ~~s~~ your turn now," Aram said ~~later~~ as the organ began the hymn which called mothers to purification.

He had returned some time ago, still carrying in two careful arms the son he had redeemed with those long-guarded

shekels. The baby had been crying furiously and Aram had given him into Judith's care with a puff of relief.

"He didn't cry during the ceremony. At least, not much," he had said and Judith had nursed and rocked the infant and now he was safely asleep again.

Page She stood up, for the organ was not only playing, trumpets were calling through the late afternoon. It was almost time for the incense to be lighted.

"Tell me again just what I do," she said, although Aram had already rehearsed it three times.

"Well, you cross the Court of the Women and climb the steps up to the Men's court and the gate opens and you go in."

"Not into the Men's court!"

"Oh, no! Just beyond the gate is a wicket. It stops you. But you'll be close enough to see everything that happens at the Golden Altar."

"I think I have it right," she said. "I stand there with the baby and with all the other mothers and their babies. And the trumpets blow and the organ plays and the chorus of Levites sings and the priests chant and the incense is scattered on the Golden Altar."

~~"That's right!"~~ Aram said. "And when the incense cloud is risen you are through," Aram said.

"But my ticket!" Judith said. "I'll still have my ticket."

"No you won't," he laughed. "A station man will take it from you as soon as you reach the wicket."

Judith touched the baby's bright fuzz of hair and smoothed her own coppery braids and stood straight. The organ summoned loudly.

"You'd better hurry," Aram said. And she drew her veil over her face and walked across the blue, rust-red and white marble floor of the Court of the Women. She felt <sup>a little</sup> afraid. She could not see a blue and yellow dress, the crowd was too great. It helped, though to know that the other mother was there. ~~There~~ ~~was~~ ~~nothing~~, Judith remembered that her son had been given to the Lord and received back from the Lord, and that she herself was about to perform her own act of equal piety. She stood straight and sent a reassuring smile back to Aram.

The mothers climbed to the men's court, their naked feet whispering up the marble steps which were cold now in the sunset chill. A priest stood behind the opened gate and a station man, one of the lay representatives of the people, gestured each woman to a place. He took Judith's ticket, just as Aram had said he would, and dropped it into a pouch.

Up against the wicket, Judith could see everything, could rejoice that she was sharing everything. The baby did not cry, and rejoice she did - In the trumpets, the organ, the singing, the priestly benedictions and finally the incense floating above the Golden Altar! It was for her and the other mothers that prayers now were floating in a fragrant cloud upward to the Lord.

"This is worth the trip up from Bethlehem and ten times more," she thought and looking around, suddenly tearful, she did at last catch a glimpse of <sup>the</sup> ~~that~~ other young mother and her baby.

(They seemed to stand out from the others. "Because I know them," Judith thought.) <sup>Judith</sup> She felt again the joy she had felt when she helped them make the trip from <sup>the</sup> that stable in Bethlehem to the small lonely house Zacharias's wife had found.

"I'm very glad I came today," she thought.

0-0-0

As the cloud of incense faded, the priest at the wicket gestured again ~~with both hands~~ and the mothers retreated down to the Court of the Women.

Judith looked ~~around~~ for Aram but she saw first the carpenter Joseph. He was standing with the big priest Zacharias who was talking in such excitement that his salt and pepper beard jerked up and down, ~~although Joseph seemed calm.~~

Aram, when Judith found him, was excited, too.

"See that Joseph?" he said, "The husband of the one you helped from Bethlehem? A great thing has happened to him."

"What?" Judith asked.

"Well, while I was waiting for you, we got to talking. We had talked before at the Redemption ceremony. He's very friendly. And while we were talking, the priest Zacharias came up."

"But what happened? I don't understand."

"Joseph and his wife have been sent for by Simeon."

"Simeon? the holy man? Why?"

"Why? I don't know."

Aram and Judith gazed at each other in wonder.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN (17)

It was a great thing for Joseph and Mary to be called by Simeon, Zacharias thought, cautiously descending narrow rock-hewn stairs to the murky underground. Simeon, all knew, worshipped and prayed constantly, waiting for the Messiah, in his cell in the bowels of the temple. Very few had been allowed to see it, let alone called there.

Many cells, vaults, and rooms had been chiseled out of rock deep under the Temple. Safe ones for the vast treasure of gold and silver. Huge ones for the stores of wine, olive oil and grain. Dry ones for the making and repairing of furniture. Airy, warm ones for the Temple's library, five million scrolls, it was said, containing the wisdom of Israel from the beginning. There were scores of interlocking tunnels, one of which led ~~even~~ to the Fortress of Antonia.

Zacharias went on ahead, working his way like a salt-and-pepper mole through narrow, rocky tunnels lit only at rare intervals by flickering wall lamps. This was indeed a marvel, he thought. And he knew marvels; he had seen marvels himself, he and Elizabeth together. This one fitted <sup>in with</sup> ~~into~~ all the others.

He came at length to a small doorway and knocked and went in.

Simeon's was a very small cell, lighted by one lamp and an overhead grating, furnished only with a mattress and a blanket. And Simeon was a very small old man.

All men and women, if they live long enough, come finally to those years which erase sex, temperament, even humors. They are not old people. They are merely old. On first sight they have no more identity than a crumpled parchment left so long out in the weather that all original markings have been scoured off. They are only tracks left in the dust by Time's trailing finger. Simeon was such a crumpled parchment, such a track. Above his thin brittle body, his face was a tangled skein of wrinkles around tiny bright eye-buttons, a bare nub of nose, ears worn almost to vanishing, and a mouth almost sunken out of sight.

And yet, even on such crumpled parchment, even in the least of Time's trailing tracks, something may be read. There is something which, on second looking, reveals the true self, a character which shines out. Looking the second time we do not say, as we had said at first, "The poor, poor old!" With the triumph of discovery we say, "Why, here is virtue!" "Here is goodness!" or, sometimes, "Here is beauty."

As Simeon took three short stiff steps -- he needed no more to cross his cell -- <sup>and</sup> Zacharias thought, Moses must have looked like this when he gazed from Mount Nebo across Jordan into the Promised Land.

"They will be coming shortly," Zacharias said. "A Levite is guiding them. I came ahead to make sure the way was clear. The woman, Tirzah, is in the Temple and spies are everywhere."

Simeon seemed hardly to hear.

"Anna is coming," he said in a dry reedy voice. "Anna must see them, too. She is on her way."

"I <sup>will</sup> keep watch outside while they are with you," Zacharias said.

Simeon did not reply. His gaze was on the door.

o-o-o

On watch in the dark tunnel, after the Levite guide <sup>delivered his charges and</sup> had hurried back to his Temple duty, Zacharias could hear Simeon's voice inside the cell <sup>(x)</sup> ~~addressing the two who had come at his summons.~~ Zacharias would have listened except that just then he heard distant footsteps. He looked in their direction, at once anxious and eager. The steps could belong to either Tirzah or to Anna, but they proved to be only those of a fellow priest burdened with the ~~treasured~~ vestments of the High Priest.

Zacharias turned his back. This was a sight you did not admit seeing, a shame which priest kept even from priest, this yielding of precious ceremonial garments to Romans in the Fortress of Antonia.

When the footsteps had passed by, Zacharias heard, from within the cell, Joseph's voice.

"He wants to hold the boy."

Joseph would be speaking to Mary, Zacharias thought and smiled in the gloom. Now Simeon's old, slow arms would be reaching for the swaddled bundle, not taking, but receiving. Zacharias imagined the holy man first looking down and then turning his eyes upward as though the grating were a window facing/

Jerusalem, or even Heaven.

"Lord," Simeon's old reedy voice came from within and Zacharias's ears strained toward the sound, "now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

There was a pause. Not complete silence for Zacharias caught the sound of an old man inhaling in slow stages, as though each breath was the last his strength could manage.

"According to thy word," the voice said and paused again.

"For mine eyes have seen thy salvation," it went on, "which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel."

Zacharias wished Elizabeth were there to hear.

There was silence now. He is blessing them, Zacharias thought. He could picture the ancient man looking at the little family closely with his button-bright eyes.

"Behold," Simeon's voice continued, "this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against -- Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also."

Was he speaking such fearful words to Mary? Zacharias wondered and was glad Joseph was within and close beside her. Zacharias could not of course, -- and neither could Joseph -- know exactly what Simeon meant, but if Mary's soul was to be pierced, Joseph would want her to know that he would help her, with all he had. The Lord, also, would help.

Simeon said something more, which Zacharias caught only in part, about the thoughts out of many hearts being revealed, and

(D)

then steps, well down the tunnel, became louder and Zacharias made out Anna, the ancient prophetess, hurrying toward him. At first he saw only something like a crumpled parchment, long out in the weather, but then he thought: Here is beauty!

Anna had had great beauty and its aura remained. She was of the tribe of Asher, whose women always had been the most beautiful in Israel, the only ones entirely worthy to be the brides of kings, and among her generation she had been the most beautiful.

She vanished into Simeon's cell and shortly another step grew plain along the corridor --- a strong hurrying step <sup>and a</sup> ~~"Tirzah!"~~ <sup>came up</sup> ~~and a~~ <sup>"Tirzah!" he said</sup> fellow priest <sup>^</sup> said to Zacharias, in a low voice. "Up above, Tirzah is demanding permission to come down here."

Zacharias instantly rapped and called.

"What is it?" Joseph stepped out.

"You must come at once," Zacharias said. "Fetch Mary and warn her not to let the baby cry."

"What is this all about, Zacharias?"

"I'm not sure, not really. Except that Herod is behind it."

"Herod?"

"Well, his sister. His shrew of a sister, Tirzah, has been stopping mothers in the Temple today and now she is demanding to come down here."

"I'll <sup>will</sup> get Mary. But where do we go?"

<sup>next says</sup> "A little way ahead, this tunnel branches off and the branch leads down to a house in the Street of the Candlemakers." →



You and Mary can leave that after dark and be just a family going home as hundreds do go, every evening, out of Jerusalem."

"I'll <sup>will</sup> get Mary," Joseph repeated.

"Don't say anything to make her afraid."

Joseph made a spreading gesture with both hands to ~~say~~ <sup>show</sup> that neither Zacharias nor anyone need fear that Mary would be afraid. Even when she had heard Vedius Rusco's warning, given on his return from the stormy interview with Herod, she had not been afraid. Joseph had, of course, agreed with her that ~~they~~ could do nothing about that warning. Although he had seen at once how it tied in with the watch kept by Peleg and the other beggars.

Joseph smiled now at Zacharias.

"She won't be afraid, but she has had a long day. Can you get her a donkey?"

"I'll get your own beast," Zacharias said. "It will be waiting in the house on the Street of the Candlemakers and you <sup>will</sup> be out of Jerusalem in no time."

o-o-o

Above, in the Court of the Priests, the long day of sacrifice was ending. At the washing place, behind the Altar of Burnt Offerings, priests were beginning to scrub tired hands and aching feet and Levite helpers were sloshing water over stained marble tables and the floor. The <sup>Last</sup> ~~final~~ contingent of worshippers began to drift back to the Court of the Gentiles, tired fathers, mothers, babies. Touts tried for no more profits but instead stood in nooks counting the day's gains. The money-changers, each by his own column, closed their coffers and awaited the arrival

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of porters and guards. Beggars sifted slowly through the crowd.

High on the four hundred and fifty foot watch-tower a white-clad priest raised a golden trumpet and blew a lonely twilight note.

52 N. COTTON WALK  
200 E. V. 2 E. ROAD  
CITIZEN

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN (16)

Vedius Rusco could not be sure, but he thought he had seen the thin one somewhere within the month. The hunchback he knew well in spite of unfamiliar ragged clothing, and, although he gave no sign, his guard went up.

(D) He had been, ~~of course,~~ a little on guard ever since the watchdog ~~had~~ barked and the villa's suspicious watchman came to ask if he should admit two shabby, urgent visitors. Now, on recognizing Geber, Rusco grew doubly wary because of an instant suspicion of the story he had heard at court that the hunchback had deserted Herod. More likely the crooked fellow was still in the service of the tyrant and the object of this visit was to ferret out help for Herod's search. ~~This possibility was such a threat that~~ Rusco would have been on guard for Joseph's sake even if his own trouble at the Palace had not been still fresh in his mind. (start all)

(D) "Sit down," he said to the pair come so soundlessly into the study. "And let's <sup>me</sup> see -- what is your name?" He spoke to the thin one.

"I am Peleg!" Both men settled down on the study floor, against the wall. "I work along your new highway. With a number of others, of course."

(D) This was ~~pretty~~ evasive ~~talk~~ but Rusco had been long enough in Judea to understand. His highway, he knew, had been taken over by a well-organized band of mendicants prepared to hold its begging franchise against all rivals.

(D) "I <sup>have</sup> seen you often enough," Rusco said to the hunchback. "You are Geber, Herod's man."

"I was Geber, when I was Herod's man." The hunchback's wide forehead colored. "But I am Herod's man no longer and now I am called Crookback. I am trying to help, so far as I am able, the same people you would help."

Or maybe trying to pry out of me their whereabouts for Herod! Along with suspicion Rusco felt an increase in the anxiety which he had felt all day. In spite of warnings, Joseph had taken his wife and the child into Jerusalem. Even though Herod had not identified his quarry, any mother and her new baby were not safe that near the tyrant's palace. Where are they now?

(D) "I find I get along best when I speak straight out," Rusco said. "How can I know you aren't <sup>not</sup> still Herod's man? How can I know you aren't <sup>not</sup> playing a trick on Peleg and me to help along a plot of Herod's?"

(D) "I <sup>do not</sup> ~~don't~~ ask you to take <sup>alone</sup> ~~just~~ my word," Crookback said and gestured toward his companion. "You must know that even Herod, and even with my help, couldn't fool the beggars."

(D) "~~I~~ suppose the odds are against it," Rusco agreed.

"Somebody, somehow, usually tells us just about everything," Peleg said meekly. "We know, Vedius Rusco, what happened between you and Herod yesterday. We know that Tirzah's people

tried to kill you later. We know that still later you carried a warning. We know that the man and woman went into Jerusalem today."

"And it is because of the man and woman that we come to you now," Crookback said. "We come because you have made the man your friend and ~~have made~~ yourself his patron."

"Who else knows you have come?" Rusco said. Admiration for Geber replaced suspicion. The hunchback was in ~~as~~ greater danger <sup>than</sup> as any one. ~~Greater?~~ His motives were obscure, but the consequences of his present act were plain. He was risking his life.

"Quite a few know," Peleg said. "But we'd rather not say any more unless you tell us we must." Hunkering against the wall he looked up at Rusco with an expression as helpless as that of a dog turning onto its unprotected back ~~in trust~~ before a good master. "Couldn't we just say that we sent ourselves and that we have a few more like us back of us?"

And a few more like them back of them, Rusco thought, and with a smile accepted Peleg's answer.

Deborah and Lucianus came into the room, walking decorously apart but bound together by the invisible strands which entangle young lovers. Behind them came Candace, carrying Deborah's unneeded cloak.

"I was just going to send for you," Rusco said. "Fetch Bracae and Bria, will you, Candace?"

In silence he and Deborah and Lucianus waited with the strange pair who were silent, also. Peleg settled against

①  
②

the wall and sighed and his skinny body seemed to melt in the warmth and comfort of the study. Geber, a sackcloth ~~folded~~ over his humped shoulders, sat as motionless as Peleg, but not as relaxed. His deep-socketed eyes probed the faces before him.

o-o-o

"These people all know as much as I do," Rusco said to his visitors when Bracae came in with Bria. His glance included privileged Candace, ~~loitering~~ in the doorway. "Now what exactly do you have to tell us?"

③  
④

He looked to Peleg but Geber <sup>answered</sup> ~~spoke quickly~~. The hunchback's speech was not the speech of the highways, but of the court. He will be captured, Rusco thought! Why did he choose this side?

"The carpenter, Joseph," Crookback said, "has come back over the hills from the Temple. He and his family. He wants to go to their home near Bethlehem but that would not be desirable."

"Why not?" Rusco asked.

"You know that Herod is seeking out babies and the fathers and mothers of babies?"

"But why has Herod settled on this carpenter?"

⑤

"He hasn't, yet. But his sister has learned of a child presented to holy Simeon today. The child was taken to Simeon by the priest Zacharias, so the neighborhood of Zacharias's home is being watched. ~~And Joseph lives near Zacharias.~~

"I have heard ..." Rusco began cautiously. And so he had. And it was still astounding that what he had heard should apply to Joseph and Mary.

"Many have heard," Peleg said importantly. "Some have

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^

even spoken with Magi from the East. But it is best if you do not ask further about such things. It is enough that you help."

"And helping may be perilous ~~business~~, Vedius Rusco Philippicus," Geber said.

In Rusco the words "perilous <sup>(u)</sup> ~~business~~" started, relation rising as though on a cue. But this decision to help, he warned himself, was not his to make alone. <sup>His daughter and the others here</sup> ~~And because he had always~~ tried to let any allies share the responsibilities of a decision, ~~as they had~~ <sup>would have</sup> to share the dangers which <sup>a</sup> the decision brought on, he looked toward his daughter and the others. <sup>them questioningly.</sup>

Deborah spoke instantly with enthusiasm.

"Joseph is wonderful," she said. "Of course, we ~~will~~ <sup>will</sup> help him."

"Naturally," Lucianus agreed. "He and his wife could stay on for the wedding."

"Why so they could!" Deborah cried and she and Lucianus nodded at each other as though that settled everything.

"These two," Rusco explained, "are being married day after tomorrow."

"We know," Peleg said, and smiled like a merry skeleton.

Bria, too, liked Joseph, and her first inclination ~~had~~ <sup>was</sup> been to take the family in, but as talk of the wedding ran on and she had time to think, she realized that these guests might bring the whole villa into the torrent of Herod's anger.

"Why should we take this risk for a woman and baby we have never seen and for a carpenter we can replace with no trouble at all?" she asked.

Bracae snorted. "Risk!" he said. "Since when is the Villa Rusco afraid of a little risk?"

Everyone looked toward Candace.

*Page* "I agree with Bria," the oak-leaf girl said. Why, she thought, should Vedius Rusco increase the dangers which already surrounded him? Her great dark eyes, full of love and concern, rested on her master.

Vedius Rusco was chagrined. He had taken it for granted that all would feel as he did.

"A majority at least are in favor," he said cheerfully to Geber. "How soon can you get them here, the carpenter's family?"

The hunchback smiled. "Some of Peleg's friends have them out in your courtyard ~~right~~ now."

*Demanding.*  
"You've kept them waiting outside!" Bracae ~~cried~~. His pride in the villa's hospitality was stung.

"~~Let's~~ get them in!" Rusco said. "At once."

"A baby out in that dark and cold!" Deborah cried, as though she alone knew all about babies. "Candace! Come along!" She snatched her cloak from Candace and ran, and the other two women followed.

o-o-o

There was a considerable wait before they came back, and with Joseph only.

"Where are the others?" Vedius Rusco asked. ~~He felt dis-~~  
~~appointed at not seeing Mary.~~

"Mary was

"They were cold," Candace said.

*her and the baby*

"I put ~~them~~ into the winter sleeping room next to ours. It's the warmest in the villa," Bria said. And as Vedius Rusco almost smiled, she added defensively, "She isn't much older than Deborah and she was all tired out."

Bria could have said more. ~~She could not get the young mother out of her thoughts.~~ So much walking and riding and hurrying had loosened the ends of Mary's braids and in the lamp-light, soft wisps of hair had made a bright glow around her head. The hem of her blue dress was dusty and her feet in their wooden-soled sandals had been dusty, too.

"I brought water from the kitchen and we washed her feet," Bria said.

"She fell asleep before we finished," Candace said. "She was ~~in the midst~~ of telling us, Joseph, how pleased she was to meet us all -- ~~because we are your friends.~~"

"Of course, the baby slept through everything," Deborah said in a knowing tone.

Bria turned ~~around~~ *briskly*. "Well, Candace and I will see to some food for Joseph."

They hurried away and, as the eddying talk died down, Joseph looked patiently around ~~the room.~~

"I <sup>am</sup> told not to go home," he said. "I <sup>am</sup> told to come here. I <sup>am</sup> told one thing and then another. What is this all about?"

"It won't be for more than a couple of days," Peleg said.

"It will be just for tonight," Joseph said solidly. "I

told Mary we would be off to Nazareth tomorrow."

"If you stay through the day after," Deborah cried, "you will be here for the wedding."

"Wedding?" Joseph said.

"Mine," Deborah said proudly.

"Ours," said Lucianus. "We do hope you <sup>will</sup> wait for that."

At this development, Peleg looked at Crookback, plainly asking guidance. Crookback looked at Vadius Rusco. Persuade them to stay, his deep gaze said, but make sure that the wrong guests do not see them.

"You will be perfectly safe," Vadius Rusco said to Joseph.

"Safe!" Joseph said. "Safe is what everyone has been saying for hours. Why are we not safe? Well, if Mary wants to stay, we will."

(D) "Good," Rusco said. "There <sup>is</sup> no need to rush off. But now, Joseph, you ought to get some rest yourself, and a good bath ~~before you start it.~~ first."

"I'll see about the bath," Bracae said. "Come with me."

Before he left the room, Joseph turned to Peleg and Crookback.

(A) "Thank you for what you have done," he said, and the beggars touched hand to head and heart.

"What is the child's name?" Crookback asked in a low voice.

"Jesus."

"Jesus!"

Crookback bowed like a courtier. ¶ "I have a favor to ask," he said. "When they awake, may we see him?"  
 "We'll be outside. Not far away," Peltz added.  
 "Why, of course," Joseph said with pleasure. And there was silence.

Vedius Rusco marvelled. These Jews! What do they think they will be seeing? Geber for years has been betraying his own people by serving Herod. Is he making requital now while he has time? No one knows better than he that he will be captured. That crooked back cannot escape. And Herod's vengeance will be terrible.

*(However,*  
 Geber ~~seemed~~ <sup>seemed</sup> calm and unafraid.

They are <sup>Naomi's</sup> ~~Miniam's~~ people, too, And Deborah's, Rusco thought, trying to comprehend. He looked at his daughter who was standing very still, her eyes blue pools of wonder.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN (16)

(D)

The night was clear. The silver moon had passed its zenith and begun its long curving run, against a background of golden stars and deep heaven, toward the somber horizon. Its thin rays reached through the bars of the narrow window and re-<sup>to Vedius Rusco's bed</sup>vealed to Vedius <sup>turn</sup>Rusco the hand, calloused by plane and hammer, on his shoulder. He did not move, and he spoke in a whisper. After a few thousand nights in armed camps you do not move or raise your voice when a friendly, silent hand comes out of the darkness.

"What is it, Joseph?"

"Something has happened," Joseph said. "I want to talk with you."

Outside the window no metal clinked, no feet brushed stealthily along the ground, no low voices sounded. Everything was as quiet as Joseph's hand, so the thing that had happened could not be a threat from outside. Rusco sat up and threw off his blanket.

"This is as good a place as any for a talk," he said and pulled a robe over his tunic and felt with bare feet for his sandals. "Will you be able to keep warm?"

"I <sup>am</sup> all dressed," Joseph said, "and Mary is dressing

ing and getting the baby ready."

"Ready! Ready for what?" Rusco said. "You're not leaving. We settled last night that you <sup>would</sup> stay over for the wedding."

"Word has come to me," Joseph said. "We are supposed to leave sooner."

"Supposed?" Rusco said. "What do you mean, 'supposed'? And what do you mean, 'word'?"

"A - a - a - " Joseph hesitated. "An angel, at least it seemed to be an angel, appeared to me."

"You mean you've had a dream?" Rusco thought back and was sure he had the explanation. What a day Joseph had put in! The journey to Jerusalem, in spite of the warning against Herod. The exciting hours in the crowded Temple. The awesome <sup>ceremonies</sup> ~~ceremonials~~. Meeting <sup>with</sup> ~~the~~ holy Simeon, ~~and the prophetess Anna~~. And at the end the sudden new warning from Peleg and Geber. No wonder Joseph had dreamed! The only wonder was that he hadn't had nightmares.

"Go back to bed, Joseph," Rusco <sup>said,</sup> ~~laughed.~~ <sup>ing</sup> "The things that have happened to you are enough to bring on a hundred dreams. Why, I've had a dozen in a single night myself after only the pull and haul of a hot fight. And what is an angel, anyway? If it had been Mercury, now! <sup>(1)</sup> ~~But an angel...~~"

"It was an angel of the Lord," Joseph said.

"Now let's sit down and talk this out," Rusco said.

"The angel," Joseph insisted, "said, 'Arise, and take the young child and his mother and flee!'"

Rusco stood up and dropped on Joseph's shoulder a hand

Page

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3

calloused by sword hilt, spear shaft and the stinging rasp of slings.

"Flee from what?" he said. "Herod's hunters, if they are after you, don't know where you are. And if they do, there's always the dining room. You can use the tunnel any time you need it and fool <sup>them all</sup> ~~the whole pack~~. They <sup>will</sup> ~~ill~~ never post guards on the far side of the hill."

"The angel told me to take the young child and his mother," Joseph said, "and flee into Egypt." He was entirely sure.

"Egypt!" Rusco weighed that haven. "It might be a place, at that. But there's no hurry."

Joseph's silence was determined. ~~(He must obey the warning which he had received.)~~

Rusco pushed the curtain back from his bedroom doorway.

"We <sup>will</sup> ~~ill~~ get Bracae; and Lucianus, too. He's just up from Egypt, <sup>and</sup> The roads will be fresh in his mind. "I still wish you'd stay for the wedding," ~~he added.~~

Joseph's silence answered.

"All right," Rusco said cheerfully. "After all, a dream is a dream. If I had one pushing me this hard, I <sup>suppose I would</sup> ~~guess I'd~~ pay attention, too."

o-o-o

It was impossible to wake Bracae without waking Bria. They slept in a fond tangle of legs and arms. Bracae tried quietly to work free but she opened an eye and shortly followed after him to Vedius Rusco's study. And so much stirring in the quiet of

night aroused Deborah and she came with Candace, and Lucianus was filled with bliss at the unexpected vision, rosy, drowsy-eyed, <sup>(A)</sup> ~~exhaling promises of delight.~~

Rusco told them what had happened and Deborah, Candace and Bria gazed at Joseph with awed interest. Bracae muttered enviously, "Those angels of yours <sup>must be</sup> ~~are~~ certainly a help!"

Everyone wanted to help. Bria went to see what Mary needed. Deborah offered everything she owned and most of what her father owned, and Lucianus guaranteed any road map that Joseph might desire.

"On the way up from Egypt," he said, "I learned the country like the palm of my hand. <sup>And now I <sup>have</sup> learned the lay</sup> of the land all around here. Any map you need, I can draw." <sup>stet</sup>

Rusco proposed a route and Lucianus began to draw it while Bracae nodded approval. He usually nodded approval when Vedius Rusco planned.

Candace brought food for everyone.

"I've taken some to Mary," Bria said, returning. "She <sup>is</sup> busy with the baby but not at all upset." <sup>she</sup> <sup>ad</sup> ~~Mary~~ had been serene as starlight, <sup>stet</sup> Bria thought. A husband who woke her in the dead of the night with a message from an angel did not trouble her at all.

"I wish we were going home to Nazareth," Joseph said. "Mary has been talking of ~~almost~~ nothing else <sup>lately</sup>."

Around Nazareth, he thought, the countryside would soon be blooming with more flowers than he could name. But Mary would be able to name every one. The streams in springtime abundance would be giving drink to fig, pomegranite, <sup>a</sup> olive, apricot, ~~date~~ and

walnut trees. Grapevines would be clothing their black stumps in rich leafage. Life and beauty would burgeon on the folding hills. How the larks would sing, winging up to the sky, and how the bluebirds, lighter than feathers, would perch on the greening branches, and how the doves on Mary's own roof would coo, while she rode into the sterile south!

Vedius Rusco read his distress. "It will be all right," <sup>Joseph</sup> Rusco <sup>he</sup> said. "Didn't you tell me Mary enjoyed the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem?"

"This one will be ~~a lot~~ longer," Joseph <sup>answered</sup> ~~said~~ soberly.

Bria beckoned to Candace. "We'll pack provisions for the trip. Plenty of them!" she said. ~~They went out and Deborah went with them, saying she would help Mary, and "Perhaps I can help Mary," Deborah said. She ran off.~~

<sup>after a time</sup> Lucianus handed his map over to Rusco, ~~and~~ the latter approved and handed it to Joseph.

"There's your road," he said. "Read the thing just the way you would a building plan. It takes you the long way <sup>(East of the Dead Sea)</sup> but this time the long way is the right one."

"It <sup>will</sup> be ~~a rough way~~ rough," Lucianus said. Like most young men, he was doubtful that anyone older than himself had the strength for a rough road. "The country east of the Dead Sea is rugged."

"Below the Dead Sea," Bracae said, "he can just angle west, keeping clear of the main highway until he reaches the border of Egypt."

"The nearest border town is Rioncolura and Herod's power ends there," Rusco said. <sup>Lucianus</sup> Lucianus nodded. "There

<sup>will</sup> ~~There'll~~ be hills nearly as tough as mountains, <sup>though.</sup>

~~Lucianus said.~~

"The Tribes climbed them," Joseph said. "So can we."

(D) "It's all desert now," Rusco warned, "east of Zin, and south, and for that matter north." He ~~nodded~~. "That's a fine well one of your people built, Joseph, at Beersheba."

"Abraham built it," Joseph said. "Right down through rock."

(D) "It ~~certainly~~ helps these days," Rusco said. "The whole region is parched and tormented. It's flat sometimes, rolling sometimes, and sometimes just a windblown litter of black stone chips, but always desert. And hot! You'll need to be careful of water." (D)

"Along the Dead Sea it's even worse," Lucianus said. "Nothing grows. A few flies, if they can feed on carrion, but everything else is dead and the gashes in the earth are big enough to swallow a cohort."

Joseph looked sober and Vedius Rusco thought that enough had been said about the hardships into which Joseph must take Mary and the child.

"Where do you think you <sup>will</sup> go in Egypt, Joseph?" he asked.

"Wherever I go I'll find some of our people," Joseph said, his face clearing. "Since the Exile, they <sup>are</sup> spread all over. Alexandria, Memphis, Leontopolis, On! And every city has its synagogue, or a dozen! I'll probably try On first."

"On?" Rusco puzzled. "Oh, that's your name for Heliopolis, isn't it?"

"Yes!"

"And"

"That's right!" Joseph said. "Of all the places in Egypt that I know I can do well in, it's the nearest. And of course I don't want to take Mary any farther than I have to. On could be our city of refuge."

"City of refuge?" Lucianius repeated.

"In the old days," Joseph said, "some of our cities were set apart as places of asylum. If an enemy sought vengeance and you escaped into one, you were safe until you'd had a fair trial. The cities were so close together that one of them was always within a day's journey."

"On <sup>this</sup> ~~your~~ journey you <sup>will</sup> be days and days," Lucianius said.

"We'll get there safely."

"Now how about money?" <sup>Vedius</sup> Rusco said, and tried to push a purse into Joseph's hand, but Joseph pushed it back.

"Egypt wants carpenters. A carpenter can earn all he cares to in Egypt. I don't need more money than I have."

~~"A little more won't hurt." Rusco tried to push a purse into Joseph's hand.~~

~~"Thanks just the same." Joseph said, pushing it back.~~

"And you won't let me give you a sword and shield, or a spear, or even a dagger?"

"I have my staff," Joseph said. And at that Rusco shook his head in such long-suffering exasperation that Joseph had to smile, even while his heart filled toward this big, ardent Roman.

"All right," Rusco said. "No weapons. They wouldn't help much anyway, one lone man, if you ran into a robber band. But take cover whenever you can, once you're through the tunnel."

Joseph was caught up short by the word "tunnel." He retreated from it. Tracing back over the warning which had broken his sleep, he felt that he did not need, really, to skulk through a tunnel, any more than he needed weapons or money. His safety, and the safety of Mary and the baby, did not hang on such things.

I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in him will I trust. Joseph, as he had resolved to do, had once repeated the well-remembered words to Vedius Rusco, but now he said them ~~only~~ to himself. He shall cover thee with his feathers and under his wings shalt thou trust. His truth shall be thy shield and buckler. And then came the words which Mary loved. He shall give his angels charge over thee . . . They shall bear thee up in their hands lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

"I think," he said, smiling at Vedius Rusco, "that we'll just start off through the gate."

"The gate!" Rusco threw up his hands. "You certainly are sure of yourself. But, why not do it my way? Just say you <sup>are</sup> ~~are~~ humoring me. We <sup>will</sup> ~~will~~ light Mary ~~all the way~~ through the tunnel as bright as day. And then you <sup>will</sup> ~~will~~ be, the three of you, going along just as you were coming down from Nazareth."

"The gate will be best," Joseph said. "And the quicker we <sup>are</sup> ~~are~~ gone, the less likely we are to bring any trouble on you."

Trouble! Vedius Rusco bowed his neck and rubbed the back of it, as a man does sometimes in tired satisfaction after a day's work. When a man has finished all he has aimed to finish,

# why should he be afraid of  
what does he care about any trouble?

For years Deborah had been his only concern and now that was taken from him. Lucianius was in charge.

From here on, what is left for me except repeating?

And how long does a man want to go on, repeating over and over what he has already done the best he knows how? What if trouble should come? What if ...

He took the plunge and found, in strange, cold depths, a different elation. What if Joseph is right and those who live by, do die by the sword? So long as a man died for a good thing, it did not matter when or how he died.

He thought of Mary, <sup>and of the serenity with which</sup> waiting for Joseph with a gentle ease which could not have been greater if she had been holding <sup>Bria had said, she waited for Joseph</sup> ~~heres' comforting hand.~~ He thought of Herod.

If this woman's child is truly the expected Messiah, then Herod is forcing a manhunt which men will never forget nor forgive. He is hunting down a .. demigod.

All his life Vedius Rusco had used that word to describe the sometimes exalted son of a mortal (which the woman, Mary, certainly was) and one of the gods (and certainly a god had to be involved in the birth of a <sup>messiah</sup>). But it did not <sup>fit</sup> fit this case. Just as there were many gods, there had been many demigods, some not exalted at all. From <sup>Naomi</sup> ~~Miriam~~ and from Joseph, Rusco had learned that there might be, not many gods but only one. And if this child, Jesus, was the son of the one god he was more than demigod.

It would take time to think this through. Rusco rubbed

Handwritten notes in a circle: "D", "never", "her", "had a?"

Handwritten circled number "1"

his neck and looked at Joseph.

"All right! You've beaten me down," he said. "Right through the main gate. But at least do one thing for me. Get out of here while it is still night."

D Joseph nodded emphatically. He certainly would get out while it was still night. Flee into Egypt, was a command which did not encourage dawdling.

"Mary and the baby are ready," Bria said, looking in.

"You can be off then," Rusco said, and Joseph nodded.

"But wait!" Joseph said. "Peleg and Crookback! ~~(They said they'd be spending the night just outside.)~~ They asked to see the baby. You remember. Mary and I will take him out ..."

He left the study and Vedius Rusco looked after him and pondered.

o-o-o

Night still held although the moon was low now and the stars were paling. There was a great emptiness beneath the arch of sky, and silence also. The dog did not bark and the donkey did not bray and the watchman opened the wall gate without a word.

The small group which had gathered to watch the departure was silent, even after the three were gone, as though any sound would shatter remembrance of the last essential moments which they all wished to keep.

Joseph had slung on his shoulders Bria's food pack and a small brazier she had brought for making a fire over which Mary might cook on the journey and from which she might draw a little heat at night.

Bracae had rolled blankets on Briar to make a seat for Mary.

① "Woden keep you in his care," Bria had said to the young mother. She had been near to tears thinking, for some reason, of the daughter she had never had.

② "The Lord bless thee and keep thee," Deborah had said, and Rusco had heard with surprise the blessing he had often heard spoken by <sup>Naomi</sup> Miriam, and Deborah had been surprised to find herself thinking of her Jewish mother who was dead.

③ Candace had ~~said nothing~~ <sup>thought</sup>. "Whether she comes back or not, she will be with me always," ~~Candace had thought~~.

④ The men had whispered, giving Joseph fresh advice, and warning him not to lose the map and saying goodby at last. Rusco's hands had gripped Joseph's arms.

"Peace on your house," Joseph had said, and he had slapped Briar's rump and ~~had~~ lifted his staff in farewell, the storax wood staff that smelled like cinnamon.

Peleg and Crookback ~~had watched~~ <sup>were watching</sup> from the shadow.

Joseph's sandalled feet and Briar's delicate hooves had made no sound. There was nothing to hear and indeed, you might have said, there was nothing to see because man and donkey and the donkey's riders melted almost at once into the night.

In the silence which continued to enclose those who were left, Vedius Rusco found himself thinking of something which Joseph had once quoted to him out of the holy writings.

He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

It did seem as though the departing three were watched by eyes which would not sleep or slumber.