



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler
Lovelace Family Papers.

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with the aging, jealous Herod. One was the urgent repair of his dining room which awaited the carpenter, Joseph.

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

But at least, he decided, he had been right in seizing the chance to bring on a rival against ^{Salvidinius} ~~Muso~~ ^{The Tribune,} ~~Salix~~ ~~duxus~~ with his boasts of family wealth and prestige was a liar choice as well as by habit. by ~~thxkxkx~~ Good old Marcus reported that the Muso gens only recently had been saved from actual poverty by Augustus who would always have pensions for the families of broke-down senators.

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

Vedius Rusco rejoiced again that Lucianus was coming. "When he was eight or nine he was quite a boy," he reminded himself hopefully. "Of course that was a long time ago!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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 demand. More men for Caesar Augustus's roads. He and Bracae had been waiting for two hours. A polite eunuch had come three times to explain that important matters were keeping the tyrant occupied, but Bracae was beginning to rumble indignantly. Rusco showed no resentment. He ~~had~~ 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 from the audience hall and, shortly, the courtiers who always stayed to the end, trying for every last profit from what transpired in the vast jet and crimson room, had suddenly all been shoved out and the great doors had been reclosed tight. Careful men did not ignore even a small change in Herod's usual procedure, and when they encountered such a large one they were justified in being suspicious to the point of apprehension.

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 a ~~resentful arrival, although he had tried to hide his~~ ~~resentment on sighting Bracae and then Bracae's master. The nod he~~ ~~had thrown their way had said, "think nothing of this."~~

Ambrose 1.

For The ^{Nov} Courier. RELEASE Nov. 21. 13

From St. Ambrose Episcopal Church. Ly 6 4788.

A special pre-Thanksgiving service of Even-Song will be held in St. Ambrose Episcopal church at 4:30 p.m. next Sunday. The usual 11 a.m. Morning Prayer will be omitted, and at that hour members of St. Ambrose parish will join in Claremont's community Thanksgiving service at Bridges Auditorium.

Holy Communion will be celebrated in the church at 8 a.m. Sunday School and a Family Worship hour will begin at 9:15 a.m.

Phillipus was waiting to face Herod with the
twenties strode into the Palace ante-chamber where Vedius Rusco
A young towheaded captain of mercenaries not far into his

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

had been plainly resentful until sighting Bracae and then Bracae's master. And even his nod which tried to say, "Think nothing of this" had been far from convincing. In fact he walked like a led bull ~~was~~ chafing at the ring in his nose which kept him from bolting in any safer direction. His present direction was anything but safe. If word of his appearance in Court got back to General Prfitus Proculinus he was in deep trouble. Its commanding general did not wish anyone of the Tenth, except himself, to have any dealings with Herod.

He walked like a led bull snaffled beyond any hope of escape, but he was not afraid. Even while it admitted the trap, his manner warned his trappers that he was still dangerous. He was still a remnant, at least 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," his manner warned. "Don't take too much for granted, or somebody will get hurt."

"He's cov ring up," Bracae whispered to Vedius Rusco, "but ~~he~~ he is worried. He knows that he'll sweat if Orfitus Proculinus hears of this."

"He will if he isn't able to come up with a better excuse than I ever heard him furnish when I was in the Tenth," Rusco agreed.

Watchful and wary, because Naepor's arrival was even more suspicious than the expulsion of the Court hangerson, Rusco wondered what might be up, as the Officer of the Day and Helius Naepor were

Prog
Nov. 20

Reals,

The sermon by the Rev. Frederick Q. Shafer, will be ~~xxxxxx~~ of ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the first four on the traditional advent season subjects of death, judgement, heaven and hell.

"Can Science Bring Us Back from the Dead" will be the sermon subject ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxx~~ at the ~~ix~~ 9:15 and 11 a.m. services tomorrow. Holy Communion will be celebrated at at 8 and 11 a.m.

St. Ambrose parish will be one of four host churches for the Day of Devotion for women of the ^{Bishop} San Bernardino conference on Dec. 3. The special service will begin at 9:30 a.m. and will conclude at noon. ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ The sermon for the occasion will be a meditation in two parts by the rector. All are welcome.

~~the United States~~
will follow. Father Haplanov is a Russian refugee who escaped to
by the Rev. P. Haplanov, of the Russian Orthodox Church in Glendora
auspices of the Canterbury Club of the Associated Colleges. A lecture
choral Advent Even-song will be held in the ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ under the
at 7:30 church
for the sale of Christmas gifts will follow. On Dec. 11, a special
at 3 p.m. in the Parish hall for the election of officers. A bazaar
On Dec. 9, the Women's Guild of St. Ambrose Parish will meet
Family Service will begin at 9:15 a.m.
hell. Holy Communion will be celebrated at 8 a.m. Sunday School and
on the traditional Advent subjects of death, judgement, heaven and
St. Ambrose Episcopal Church. The sermon will be the second of four
the Rev. Frederick Q. Shafer, at the 11 a.m. service next Sunday in
"Life's Two Flaws" will be the sermon subject of the rector,

The

DEC 11
The

hurried, almost pushed, into the audience hall to the open indignation of half a dozen more important clients who were not accustomed to being set aside for a Roman of Naepor's rank.

As the Primus Pilus and his escort, or guard, Rusco was not sure which, vanished the young towhead pretended to have seen the Road Commissioner for the first time. His clumsy ~~pretense~~^a of surprise was ~~an~~ boyishly transparent attempt to make any spy doubt that the towhead had come purposely seeking a man as unpopular with Herod as Vedius Rusco. But the acting would not have deceived anyone, especially after the towhead drew close with a look of badly concealed admiration.

"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 smiled. He could remember a dozen fights in Gaul, and none of them bad. All Gauls were

good fighters.

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

Rusco waited again. The towhead must have been told to do more, if the chance ever came, than merely offer long-distance thanks.

"Watch out!" The towhead swiveled his eyes toward the entrance of Herod's audience hall. "When you go in there you're going toward trouble."

"Much obliged," Rusco said. "The next time you ride toward Bethlehem stop off at my place. We ought to have a good long talk about that fight."

"Don't expect me!" The towhead was showing nervousness. Rusco knew why. Herod did not like having his officers too friendly with anyone in disfavor. The towhead's nod registered, once more for any spies, that the meeting had been only accidental and he was off.

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

"I know his name," Rusco said. "He is Brennus. He is a prince of the Aedui. ~~xxxxxxx~~ He is one of the young chiefs ~~of Gaul~~ 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 ^{got} ~~saw~~ bored and asked for an assignment with the mercenaries until he is allowed to go back home."

"You've been close to trouble with Herod for more than a year," Bracae said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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his twenties strode into the Palace ante-chamber where Vedius

Rusco Philippicus was waiting to face Herod with the same old

demands. More men, more material for Caesar Augustus's roads. He

and Bracae had been waiting for two hours. A polite eunuch had

come three times to explain that important matters were keeping

the tyrant occupied, but Bracae was beginning to rumble indignantly.

Rusco, although aware that he was being snubbed, showed no

resentment. He had, however, grown watchful.

He had begun to be watchful midway in his long wait. ^{He came} ~~He had~~

about them, the throng of courtiers, who usually ^{the court} ~~watched and tried~~

to listen to whatever transpired in the jet and crimson ~~audience~~

hall had suddenly been shoved out, and the great doors had been

reopened, tight. That had been suspiciously unusual.

Then, only a few minutes ago, old Helius Naeper, ~~Rxkxrx~~ ^{came into the}

~~Rxkxrx~~ had ~~xxxxxxx~~ ^{xxxxxxx} ante-chamber with

Herod's Officer of the Day. The bulging, soggy Primus Pilus of the

Tenth had been in a black rage, but he had masked his anger on

spotting Bracae first, and then Bracae's master, and had tried

to make the nod he threw their way casual and unconcerned.

"Unconcerned, my eye," Rusco said to Bracae. Protocol

insisted that only the general of the Tenth ^{xxxxxx the Commander's} ~~have~~ ^{xxxxxx} ~~dealing~~ ^{xxxxxx} ~~with~~

Herod. "If Orfitus Proculinus ~~ever~~ hears of this he'll have Helius ~~xxxxxx~~

Q
Vedius

"Maybe he's decided to come out into the open," Rusco ~~said~~.
~~He~~ thought swiftly. In such an event he could do with help and that meant that he must turn to Orfitus Proculus. The general of the Tenth was a poor prop to lean on. But he was the best at hand.

"If I'm going to have trouble my own witness will come in handy. Go to the Fortress and ^{keep} ask Orfitus Proculus ^{what was just} ~~to drop~~ ~~in on Herod.~~" and ask him to come. (U)

"If I do, and if Herod starts something, who will guard your back?"

"There won't be any fighting, at least not in the Palace," Rusco said. "Herod might order a dungeon, if he thought he could get away with it, but he'll think twice before ~~order~~ he hustles an Imperial Commissioner off to a dungeon 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 Proculus tipped off. Get along."

Bracae left, his face reluctant, his pace fast.

The polite eunuch came again after a while, but this time *only*

~~as~~ as an attendant for his chief.

"Come!" the Chief Eunuch said and stood aside. "Please come."

~~broken down to headquarters orderly, unless the old bull~~ ^{had} ~~can think up~~
a better excuse than I ever ~~could have thought of~~ ~~heard him~~
make when I was in the legion.

He ~~watched, silent and surprised,~~ ^{was still further surprised when} as ~~Naepor~~ the Officer
of the Day and Naepor were admitted, almost pushed, into the audience
hall. It was ~~not heard of for a~~ ^{known of Naepor's name} ~~Primus Pius~~ to
be admitted ^{the word important} to Herod's presence ahead of a half dozen of the ^{clients} clients,
to say nothing of an Imperial Roman commissioner. Something was
certainly up.

Rusco, cautiously alert, was wondering what it might be,
and was bracing himself in case it involved him, when the young
towhead, who had been wandering around, caught his eye and
registered broad surprise. The surprise was a boyishly clumsy
attempt to make any watching spy doubt that the towhead had come
purposely into the ante-chamber seeking a man so unpopular with
Herod as the Road Commissioner. But the acting would ^{not} have deceived ^{anyone}
~~no one~~, especially after the towhead drew close, with a look of ^{it}
~~badly~~ concealed admiration.

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

Vedius Rusco waited.

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"Herod gives you greeting," Soemus said, and Rusco bowed, keeping carefully aside from the ^{spouts of} breath breaking ~~in gasps~~ from the mouth which was being stuffed with black-streaked cheese.

Herod gulped and heaved among his cushions into an easier position.

"Herod supposes," Soemus smiled, "that you come with your usual request."

Herod also smiled, around the cheese. His smile made Rusco more wary.

"Caesar Augustus's roads must be built," he replied, good humored in turn.

"Herod might trade," Soemus said.

Rusco grew doubly wary. When had Herod ever offered a trade which wasn't a trap?

~~Herod, still amiable, ^{hated} beckoned Helius Naepor with the almost omnipotent finger, ^{commanding Soemus to speak.}~~

~~"Helius Naepor," Soemus said, warning still in his face but only deference in the voice he was loaning to Herod, "engaged to do a thing. But he hasn't done it. Herod thinks you might succeed where the Primus Pilus failed.~~

~~Helius Naepor had moved to a position on the opposite side of the bed, a little behind Tirzah, and his expression, as Soemus spoke, had changed. The self-conscious attempt at casual unconcern faded. Cunning replaced it, and defiance, but something else.~~

~~He looked tired, very tired. He looked like an old bull which has been baited to exhaustion and who now stands with head drooping for one last wild swing if his muscles are up to it, and legs spraddled to keep him erect for the swing, but not really carrying whether he makes the swing or not.~~

~~Rusco grew doubly wary. When had Herod ever offered a trade which was good for anyone but Herod?~~

Herod, still amiable, moved the almost omniscient finger, commanding Soemus to speak.

"Helius Naepor," the Ishmaelite said, warning still in his face but only deference in the voice he was loaning to Herod, "engaged to do a thing, but he hasn't done it. Herod thinks you might succeed where the Primus Pilus has failed."

Not until Soemus had named Naepor did Rusco become aware that his old crony was gone from the hall. Gone, Rusco was fairly sure, because he had not been willing to push his luck too far. He had taken risk enough by ~~xxxxxxxx~~ following Herod's Officer of the Day. He had cut the risk as soon as he dared, by leaving the audience hall by some back exit.

"Why did Helius Naepor fail," Rusco asked, "If old Naepor had failed the thing must be formidable."

Beth (Miss Beth Ellen Booth) was in my Sunday School class for ~~about two years~~ a little more than two years, when ^{I found} other responsibilities overlapped and ^{she} gave it up.

In the course of ~~various activities~~ ^{class} study periods and other ~~various~~ activities, I came to consider her a superior member of a group which was, itself, superior.

~~As of now, my best judgement is that~~
~~As of now, I would give her a very high rating~~
^{I rate her very high}
~~As of now, her rating, in all ten characteristics listed in your~~
~~letter, is very high in my estimation. I cannot, of course, speak~~
~~positively about her leadership, but certainly she is not~~
^{have I ever} had occasion to test
~~follower. Nor can I speak about her willingness to try new~~
~~experiences, and her initiative. But my opinion is that she has~~
~~plenty of the latter, and an admirable eagerness about the first.~~

In sum, ^{I am confident} ~~this~~ Beth would ~~in any way~~ ^{most} be a desirable
ambassadors of American youth wherever you sent her.

Faithfully,

Delos W. Lovelace.

Herod's audiences but usually he seemed as much a model of composure as of fashion. Now, however, ~~inside apparel aping Greek and Persian dandies, he looked like a coward who has staked all on a single throw and is dying a thousand deaths while the dice roll.~~

Rusco paused beside Soemus and felt, rather than saw, a warning in the ravaged face. He was surprised by this, although he and Soemus were on good terms. He had always felt sorry for Soemus whose treacheries and cruelties were, after all, another's treacheries and cruelties, never his own. They all 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 ~~comparative~~ cheese. Herod heaved among his cushions into an easier pose.

"Herod supposes," Soemus smiled, "that you ~~have~~ come with your ~~usual~~ usual petition?"

Herod, also, smiled, around the cheese. His smile made Rusco ^{more} wary.

"Caesar Augustus's roads must be built," he replied, good humored in turn.

"Herod might trade," Soemus said, while Herod's amiable ~~finger summoned~~

Rusco grew doubly wary. When had Herod ever offered a trade which wasn't a trap?

^{HSL: Maspa}
"Tibni-ben-Ginath," Soemus said, warning still in his face although there was only deference in the voice he was loaning to Herod, ^{in August} "was ordered to do a thing. But he has failed. Herod

thinks you might succeed."

Helius Naepor

Old Helius did not often fail.

"Why did Tibni fail?" Rusco asked.

If Tibni-ben-Ginath

This thing, unnamed so far, had failed, the thing must be formidable.

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

"It isn't an easy thing," Soemus said. ^{Naepor} ~~Tibni~~ failed even with good helpers."

"Who helped?" Rusco asked. Before he has Soemus's answer, however, he knew.

"Helius Naepor, a Pilus Prior named Panthera and the Tribune Salvidinius Muso," Soemus said. ~~But the names are not~~ ~~xxxxxx xxxxxxxx~~ The name of everyone in this is to be kept secret. ~~xxx~~ They are not to go beyond you."

Rusco barely shut off a shout of triumph. The ambush was explained. ^{Herod} ~~Tibni~~ must have paid a lot to buy ~~the help of a~~ ^{A most important purchase, too,} Primus Pilus, a Pilus Prior and a Tribune; ~~illegal help, too,~~ because any help to Herod would be outside a Legion's line of duty. But only a thing that paid well would be big enough to justify trying to kill off Lucianus who might have interfered.

"Herod feels you can easily learn what the others couldn't," Soemus said. "The ~~others~~ have only stirred up trouble among the Jews."

Herod pointed to the ~~Sadducee~~ ^{Chief Sadducee}

"It was really ~~Tibni-ben-Ginath~~ ^{The Chief Sadducee} who dropped your name into the box," Soemus said. "In fact ~~he~~ ^{The Pilate's Pilate} had hardly begun to talk ~~today when he suggested you as the very man for it.~~ ^{admitted failure} ~~No success.~~"

~~Not Tibni! Rusco's mind raced. The Sadducee did not~~

Rusco wrestled with the mystery. Why had Naepor conceded that the man of whom he always had been jealous could succeed where he, himself, could not?

The indorsement of the Chief Eunuch was easily explained. That wretched little man was trying, by any step open to him, to shift a dangerous responsibility. And Nepor. Rusco continued to puzzle and finally decided how the mind of the Primus Pilus must have worked.

Helius Had to reckon on my discovering what he and Fanthera and Muso were up to, and he had to figure on me reporting my discovery to Proculus. So this proposal of his to Herod is a shrewd move 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. "You have thousands of friends around Judea. Any of them may know. After they tell you, it will be nothing."

"Wait a little!" 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?"

B

plied, good humored in turn.

"Herod might trade," Soemus said, ~~while Herod's amiable finger summoned Tibni-ben-Ginath.~~ *Helius Naepor*

Rusco grew doubly wary. When had Herod ever offered a trade which wasn't a trap? *Herod, still amiable, beckoned Helius Naepor with the ^{all out} ~~the~~ ^{multiplied} ~~finger~~*
Helius Naepor. "Tibni-ben-Ginath," Soemus said, warning still in his face but only deference in the voice he was loaning to Herod, *(voluntarily)* "was ordered to do a thing. But he hasn't done it. Herod thinks you might succeed where ~~Tibni~~ *the Prime of the* failed."

"Why did Tibni fail?" Rusco asked. If Tibni-ben-Ginath had failed, the thing must be formidable.

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

"It ~~wasn't~~ ^{isn't} an easy thing," Soemus said, "Tibni failed even with good helpers."

"Who helped?" Rusco asked. Before he had Soemus's answer, however, he knew.

"Helius Naepor, a Pilus Prior named Panthera and Salvidinius Muso," Soemus said. "But the names are not to go beyond you. The name of everyone in this is to be kept secret."

Rusco barely shut off a shout of triumph. The ambush was explained: ~~Tibni~~ ^{Herod} must have paid a lot to buy the help of a ~~Priamus~~ ^{Priamus} Pilus, a ~~Priamus~~ ^{Priamus} Prior and a Tribune; illegal help, too, because any help to Herod would be outside a Legion's line of duty. But only a thing that paid well would

Discovered

be big enough to justify trying to kill off Lucianus who might have interfered.

~~"No one will hear the news from me," Rusco said quietly.~~

"The thing is that Herod feels you can easily learn what the others couldn't," Soemus said. "The others have only stirred up trouble among the Jews."

Herod pointed to Tibni-ben-Ginath.

"That's right," Soemus said, "It was really Tibni who dropped your name into the hat. In fact, he'd hardly begun to talk today when he suggested you as the very man for it."

Rusco's mind raced. Not Tibni! Naepor! ~~Naepor!~~ ^{! Cute old}
Helius was the brains of this quartet, knew the ambush would make me begin to add up. And just in case I went to Proculinus he began figuring how to spoil me as a witness. If I help Herod in a ^{thing} that stirs up a hornet's nest in Judea I'll be marked in Rome as just another fool who couldn't resist making trouble among the Jews. And then who'll take any stock in anything I charge against anybody else?

"It will be easy for you," Tibni-ben-Ginath 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's told me yet what is wanted. What are my friends expected to tell me? What is this question that puts Jews so edgewise?"

Step
all

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's just as I said," ~~Tibni ben Sinath~~ ^{The Chief Scribe} interposed again, an anxious rasp in his voice. "It's nothing. It's just ~~finding a baby!~~"

A baby! Rusco's control still held but inwardly, illogically, he was flooded with shame. What foulness had he revealed ~~not to Soemus who only obeyed orders, but to Harper~~ ^{The Chief Scribe} who had proposed him, ~~and to the Sadducees~~ ^{Herod's wife} who had approved the proposal and to Herod who had snatched at it, that all three could believe he would betray a baby to a tyrant who had killed men and women 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. Outwardly he was as unmoved as his hand, when he held it out, was steady. Yet how could he be anything but breaking to pieces in the whirlwind of 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~~ ^{he} heard Soemus faintly through the thunder, "that the birth has taken place. ~~was not~~ ^{was}"

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 commanded Soemus to call up the musicians. Lute, psaltry, lyre and shawm began to play and Herod slept.

A sulky priest delivered the Temple wine.

Herod slept on.

Meanwhile the minor business of the court was not delayed. The Chief Eunuch summoned kitchen slaves who saw to it that the tray of the tyrant was replenished. Soemus attended to small matters which could not wait, or had waited long enough.

At last a messenger padded into the almost empty audience hall, empty now of concubines, courtesans, clients, courtiers, officers, of all save the privileged fourteen, to report that the Officer of the day was waiting outside with the man for whom he had been sent.

"And the Road Commissioner is still waiting," he added in a whisper.

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 instantly to Herod, and he awakened the tyrant fearfully and very gently.

The astrologer-physician had mixed a fine potion. Herod awoke with his mind clear.

Tuesday, Nov. 12 '57.

Dear Dr. Shafer;

Do not shake in horror. This is not a precedent.

Maggie Gibbs is a darned forgetful chairwoman. Or a plain fibber. She promised I should find a tag for identifying purposes, but all I found was a guy asking \$2.00 for the St. Ambrose membership and \$1.25 for the Lovelace food.

Incidentally, St. Ambrose could establish the town's most successful chapel cum shop by feeding the Co-ordinating Council and similar groups at \$1.25 a throw and giving no more than the singular ladies of the Odd Fellows provide. In the 25 years of the life of the Council somebody has grown rich. Now, however, the Council. It has about \$600 and that is dwindling. Well, serves 'em right. If members 25 years ago had given proper thought to Zoning a grateful City Council would, I am fairly sure, be feeding the whole kit and boodle free.

I do not usually tell on anyone, but Mrs. Staub, who has some sort of association with the group, played hookey today. And incidentally why she wasn't asked to double in brass and act for St. Ambrose, also, I'll never, I suppose, know. No clue to her whereabouts. Probably curled up somewhere with a good book by Maggie Creal. While in an in the way of snitching, John Staub ate the pudding served by the singular ladies of the Odd Fellows. If he is as reckless with his patients' digestion as he is with his own, he is no doctor for an Ambrosian.

Pudding was, as well as I could figure, horses' hooves soaked to softness and flavored with ginger. There is a good dessert much like it, called ginger bread. But this was a steamed concoction. I put cream on, and ~~some~~ a charming young maiden from the Associated Colleges named Suverkrup (or nearly) put jelly. In spite of both disguises the stuff still tasted and looked like soft horse-hoof.

Not a revelation of consequence, perhaps, but as a householder you may be pleased to note that by calling 2 141 or 2 2598 you should be able to buy a 32 gallon trash can for \$6.50. Lady from one of the Council's member societies said so. Her gang bought a pile to aid some charity and is overstocked. A 32 gal. can is even big enough to make another try at prohibition gin.

You may be less interested to hear--but you must have heard this already--that Earl Cranson will be the chief speaker at Big Bridges when this town's churches celebrate their joint thanksgiving. (Put a 'T' in the name). Well, certainly he should be better than last year's rampant fundamentalist.

Other matters, problems, issues, questions, and crises on which the Council is thinking hard.

SAFETY COMMITTEE--cross walks for small fry. Trimming orange trees, any old trees, at intersections to ~~give~~ motorists a clearer view when aiming at pedestrians.

COMMITTEE ON RECREATION--campaign to persuade all Claremont

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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 commanded Soemus to call up the musicians. Lute, psaltry, lyre and shawm began to play and Herod slept.

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Assent
The Chief Eunuch summoned kitchen slaves who saw to it that the tray of the tyrant was replenished. Soemus attended to small matters which could not wait, or had waited long enough.

At last a messenger padded into the almost empty audience hall, empty now of concubines, courtesant, clients, courtiers, officers, of all save the privileged ^{few, only} fourteen, ^{with golden gowns,} to report that the Officer of the day was waiting outside with the man for whom he had been sent.

"And the Road Commissioner is still waiting," he added in a whisper.

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 **appival** turned him instantly to Herod, and he awakened the tyrant fearfully and very gently.

The astrologer-physician had mixed a fine potion. Herod awoke with his mind clear.

Ambrose 1.

For the Courier. Release Nov. 21.

From St. Ambrose Episcopal Church. Ly 6 4788.

be "Our Daily Bread."

A special pre-Thanksgiving service of

An Even-Song ~~service~~ will be held in St. Ambrose and the sermon topic of the Rev. Frederick Q. Shafer, rector will be Episcopal church at 4:30 P.M. next Sunday, and The usual 11 a.m. Morning Prayer will be omitted, ~~at that hour~~ and at that hour members of St. Ambrose will join in the community thanksgiving service in Bridges Auditorium.

Holy Communion will be celebrated at 8 a.m., and Sunday School and a Family Worship hour will begin at 9:15 a.m.

Meanwhile all predictable crises

Meanwhile the minor business of the Court was not delayed. Tirzah, self-importantly, ~~Thaz@hisfz KunnunXTHZXPZVZNXZMIXRXXUNNUN~~ summoned kitchen slaves to refill the tyrant's tray. Soemus

Meanwhile ^{water} the minor ~~business~~ of the Court was not delayed. Tirzah, ~~pretending~~ ^{full of fussy disapproval} a wide-eyed ~~Smay~~ because it had not been done

sooner, got the ~~tray~~ ^{tyrant's tray} ~~replenished~~ ^{replenished}. Soemus, ~~showing~~ ^{his ravaged face showing} no ~~emotion~~ ^{emotion} at all, attended to whatever matters could not wait, or already

had waited long enough. The ~~Chief Eunuch~~ ^{Chief Eunuch}, nervous but ~~crafty~~ ^{slyly}, got ~~the~~ ^{the} permission from the Ishmaelite to ~~and~~ ^{clear out} packing everyone except the

privileged ones, now reduced to fourteen. The fewer ~~who~~ ^{who} were around to pick up any clue to Helius Naepor and his project the better.

Johnstone
came, the ~~four~~ ^{four} were ~~would~~ ^{would} be ~~to~~ ^{to} link the ~~Prime~~ ^{Prime} ~~Piles~~ ^{Piles} with the court official who had hired him.

Meanwhile minor ~~matters~~ ^{business} at the Court ~~were~~ ^{was} not delayed. Tirzah, full of fussy disapproval because the tyrant's tray had not been

replenished earlier, summoned a kitchen crew with ~~meats~~ ^{meats} fresh meats, fruits, breads, ~~and~~ ^{and} cheeses. Soemus, his ravaged face ~~showing~~ ^{showing} neither approval nor disapproval ~~about~~ ^{about} anything, attended to such ~~business~~ ^{business} as

could not wait, ~~or~~ ^{or} had waited long enough. The ~~frightened~~ ^{frightened} Chief Eunuch ~~got~~ ^{got} a concession which lessened his fear. Soemus let him send everyone

packing except the ~~privileged~~ ^{privileged} ~~ones~~ ^{ones}, now reduced to fourteen. The fewer there were to see Helius Naepor arrive, the fewer there ~~were~~ ^{would be} to

~~link~~ ^{suspect} him with the Chief Eunuch ~~and~~ ^{of being linked to} with the hunt. The ~~Prime~~ ^{Prime} ~~Piles~~ ^{Piles} ~~Shaulen~~ ^{Shaulen} hunt.

CHAPTER ONE.

At intervals, while an early sun continued its bold climb, the strapping, copper-haired girl glanced toward the curtain which cut off a corner of the room she was cleaning from top to bottom.

No sound came from that quarter. The baby behind the makeshift partition did not rouse to cry and his mother turned on an invisible pallet only once, so softly that it scarcely rustled.

quoted by permission

The Virgillian verse quoted in this novel are, from
The Singing Farmer, a ^{an} most evocative translation of the Georgics
by L.A.S. Jermny in memory of his son, Peter, killed in World War
II (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, England, publisher.)

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

Joseph, a carpenter of Nazareth.
Mary, his wife.
Jesus, their newly born son.
Elizabeth, Mary's cousin.
Zacharias, husband of Elizabeth, a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem.
~~John, their infant son.~~
Esrom, Beor, Zorobabal and Obed, shepherds.
Melchior, Belshazzar and Gaspar, Magi.
Simeon, a holy man.
Anna, a prophetess.
Peleg, a beggar.
Vedius Rusco Philippicus, a Roman Road Commissioner for the Emperor Augustus.
Deborah (pronounced DeBORah) his daughter.
Candace, a slave, attendant of Deborah.
Nepte, another slave.
Bracae, Vedius Rusco's bodyguard and comrade.
Bria, Bracae's wife, housekeeper in the Rusco villa.
Herod the Great, king of Judea.
Tirzah, his sister.
Soemus, director of Herod's corps of spies.
The Chief Eunuch, Herod's principal household officer.
Geber, an aide of Herod's.
Tibni-ben-Ginath, a Sadducee. Politically a Herodian, a supporter of Herod.
Orfitus Proculinus, commander of the Tenth Legion stationed in Jerusalem.
Helius Naepor, Primus Pilus of the Tenth.
Panthera, a Pilus Prior of the Tenth.
Marcus Seclator Lucianus, adopted son of Marcus Seclator, a ~~retired officer~~ and friend of Vedius Rusco.
Salvidinius Muso, a Tribune of the Tenth.
The Commandant, a principal officer in Herod's mercenary army.
Brennus, a captain of mercenaries.
Occo, his second in command.
Dumnorix, his standard bearer.
Messala, a centurion attached to the Tenth.
Dimas, a robber.

FLIGHT FROM HEROD

by

Delos W. Lovelace

Author of

Journey to Bethlehem

and in collaboration with Maud Hart Lovelace

One Stayed at Welcome

Gentlemen From England

The Golden Wedge

FOR MY WIFE.

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

"Ho-o-o-o!" Bracae ~~roused from a half sleep and~~ kicked his roan alongside the black, keeping room to swing his own great two-handed sword.

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

"Six to two is fair enough," Bracae grinned.

"Five to two," Rusco said, deciding to throw at thirty paces. The onrushing six would cover ten paces while his javelin flew twenty and downed one enemy, and he would still have time to draw his sword before the remaining five could close. It fall never entered his head that the javelin might miss.

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

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

Rusco shook his head. "Dimas and Gestas are tough. They'd have kept coming."

^{These six} "You don't think Herod turned ~~the~~ loose?"

"No!" Rusco said confidently. "When Herod goes after me, he'll send more than six and they won't dare

fail to finish the job." He eased his javelin back into its socket.

O-O

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

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

Orfitus
"I think I can count on ^{Orfitus} Procullinus," he told himself. The general of the Tenth, although too ambitious to be entirely trustworthy, was an old comrade.

probably I
"And ~~I~~ ^{probably I} certainly can count on Quirinius, though Damascus is a long way off." Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, an even older comrade, ruled Syria for Rome and was Herod's superior. He has just imposed a head tax on the Jews and Herod was being required to help collect.

"I wouldn't put it past Herod to trump up some charge against me when I ask for men and supplies for the Gaza job," Rusco thought. "And then I wonder if I could get word to Quirinius before Herod ^{trapped me or} arranged one of his favorite little accidents ^{that} that he knows so well how to arrange when he wants someone put out of the way."

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

O-O

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

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

"You shall be my luck!" Octavian cried.

"I'll be your bodyguard!" Vedius said. A bodyguard was a post of dignity to a half-orphan already wise in

the duties of the legion. He thrust through an imaginary enemy blocking Octavian's path and rasped, "Hah-h!" like a recruit practicing at a sod target.

At the left knee, STRIKE! //Hah-h!// At the threat, STRIKE! //Hah-h!//

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

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

Vedius Rusco had enlisted at fourteen, although the minimum age for recruits was sixteen. Long before, he had observed that the majority of legionnaires, including his father, were usually in hot water and penniless. They were brave enough, charging headlong at the rousing note of shining trumpets. But they were forever being fined, whipped, demoted, banished, even executed. And except for ~~the~~ occasional loot they seldom had even pennies to eke out their ration of bread, porridge, vegetable stew and the watered vinegar with an egg beaten into it, ^{the pasta} which was frequently substituted for wine. And when they were discharged they half-starved on a small pension^s made smaller by dishonest paymasters.

Young Vedius had determined not to be of this ma-

who had succeeded him as first centurion of the Tenth

majority. He would be one of the few who became *primi pili* and tribunes and sometimes generals and governors of provinces and retired with honor and wealth.

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

In Gaul, Thrace, Britain, Syria, Judea, Egypt, Africa, Pannonia, in Spain where silver mines poured their wealth into Rome after the Cantabrians were quieted down, he piled up honors and at last became a legend. Far behind now lagged Helius Naepor, ~~lording~~ ^{lording} it over the Tenth in the Fortress of Antonia, usually full of wine and always full of envy, ~~and~~

Rusco

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

Jews were baffling, stubborn, unquenchable. Beset and often overrun, with a totality which would have crushed most peoples, they had never in their hearts submitted to

Joseph came early. ~~When he first~~ arrived to work on the new villa, Joseph had been a stranger to all. But his merit had at once won Rusco, and Deborah had quickly become his friend. She would give him the key to the cautiously locked room. He might be there, making repairs, already.

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

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

"Vedius! It's Vedius!" ^{Rusco Philippicus} Sleek, soft veterans found a better counter-irritant in hailing familiarly the living legend known wherever legions marched. They hailed and rehearsed the boasts they would make when, come evening, they drank their eggy posca or diced on the twelve-sided patterns cut into barracks pavements. How they'd humble recruits who would never be able to first-name Vedius Rusco Philippicus! They could not wait for evening. They boasted as they marched. And the recruits felt the prick of ambition along with contempt for oldsters whose every word was an admission that their glory was all

behind them.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE

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

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

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

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

"He's bathing," Deborah went on. "Candace had got

everything ready for you, so he didn't have to wait. He has the widest, blackest slave you ever saw who can eat more bread and bacon than anyone except Bracae. He's with Lucianus now, massaging him, I guess."

"And I'll be with them in no time," Rusco said.

"But has Joseph come?"

"Not ten minutes ago," Deborah said. "I took him straight to the dining room."

"You've kept that locked?"

"I ~~didn't~~^{never} even unlock it to go in myself, but the whole villa is curious. The slaves are all talking about what we are hiding behind that locked door."

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

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

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

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

"Is everything all right? The mother?"

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

Thought he

Hadn't

Boy or girl, Rusco knew exactly how Joseph felt. He ~~had~~ felt the same, sixteen years before? He nodded in understanding.

Joseph squinted once more at the guilty ~~man~~ ^{beam}

"I'll never again trust a Lebanese roofer to work on a chicken coop," he said.

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

o-o

In the home of Vedius Rusco the Roman routine of meals was followed. Of course anyone, ~~master, mistress, guest, freedman, or~~ ^{Even} slave, might nibble at something on rising. Remindful of many days on short rations, Vedius Rusco was generous. But the first formal meal was served at eleven in the morning.

By the garden sundial it was ten as Rusco left Joseph and headed for his bath. ~~Deborah had already settled with Bria on what should be served when her father, Lucianus, and she all had made ready.~~

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

limited hot water.

Deborah, although a Roman daughter, held back when her father walked toward ~~his~~ ^{his} bath ~~quarters~~. She was also her mother's daughter and no more than Susanna before the elders would she have uncovered her body before men, although she had heard that in Rome virtuous women did this as a matter of course. ~~She~~ She consulted with Bria about breakfast and ~~only~~ when her father and Lucianus emerged, oiled and massaged and casually clothed in belted tunics and soft sandals did she call for Candace, meanwhile noting with delight that Lucianus was talking a mile a minute ^{as though to his father} ~~while~~ while her father listened in a companionable silence which he never had offered to Salvidinius Muse.

Bria hastened in from the kitchen. She was disturbed.

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

"Oh, ~~my~~" Deborah cried. She loved Candace with no thought of the limits set for mistress and slave.

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

"~~The~~ ^{My} poor dear!" Deborah mourned.

"~~I think~~ ^{I think} Hepte is the best I have left," Bria said slowly.

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

Bria frowned.

"If this meal wasn't going to be practically a feast, instead of just a breakfast, I'd take over myself. Wouldn't that be like old times? But we'll have to use Nepte today. I don't like her, though. I wish we could get rid of her. Of course I know that in this household slaves never are sold."

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

"I remember the story," Bria said. An orphan, succored ~~in~~ in Egypt by a rich widow of Idumea, Nepte was reported to have been more daughter than servant in the household, but no provision had been made for her and after the widow's death, penniless in a strange land, she had sold herself to a good master.

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

Joseph came early. When he first arrived to work on the new villa, Joseph had been a stranger to all. But his merits had at once won Rusco, and Deborah had quickly become his friend. She would give him the key to the cautiously locked ^{room} ~~door~~. He might be there, making repairs, already.

Joseph

Bria was franker. "I don't like Nepte. I wish we could get rid of her. But I know that in this household slaves are ~~not~~ ^{never} sold." She frowned. "If this wasn't going to be practically a feast instead of just a breakfast I'd take over myself."

"Wouldn't that be like old times!" Deberah cried. "I tingle just to think of the goings-over you used to give me."

o-o

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

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

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

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

This is where I belong, not in that stinking

kitchen.

In the kitchen Bria stopped abruptly in the midst of preparations for breakfast. Could Nepte, she asked herself, have tipped the basin on purpose? On the heels of that suspicion other suspicions piled up and the whole lot were so disturbing that she could^{not} get to the baths fast enough.

"I shouldn't ever have let that Egyptian near Deborah," she ^{scolded} ~~thought~~ as she hurried.

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

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

"You dare?" she whispered. "You dare!" She drove the snarling Egyptian into the corridor. "You - you - " ~~Gadding~~ ^{Bria} half around the world after Bracae ~~she~~ had picked up words suiting the occasion. She had picked them up in Spain, Thrace, Rome, Palestine and where not. She had not realized how they had accumulated, but now they flowed out in a variety as vivid as it was sulphurous.

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

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

still snarled.

"Get back to the kitchen!" Bria swung again and when Nepte's hands lifted to her flaming face Bria laid a heavy palm across narrow buttocks. And when Nepte tried to protect her rear the palm swung high once more. She drove the snarling, defiant offender through long corridors and hurled her among dirty pots, then hurried back to Deborah.

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

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

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

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

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

Bria's rage came back. She gave a final tug to the lemon-colored folds, gave Deborah a last motherly spank and hurried to find Bracae. We don't sell slaves but if Nepte hasn't lived her last days in this house, ^{my heart is with Bria.} I want to know the reason why!

o-o

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

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

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

Well, he also had been amazed, and admiring, too. About swaddling he didn't know much. But he knew craftsmanship. And never had he seen such craftsmanship as the snug criss-crossing of the band which bound the immaculate cloth about the new baby from top to toe. He had not, however, been unbelieving. Long ago he had decided that with Mary nothing was impossible.

So many strange, unfathomable things had happened ... that light filling the stable ... the shepherds and the vision ^{said they} they had seen ... and months earlier, he himself ... Joseph laid down his tools.

He heard again, as though it were yesterday, the great voice out of nowhere.

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

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

Jesus--^ΣJ^Σshua! An earlier J^Σshua had tumbled Jericho, had made the sun to stand still on Gibeon and the moon

in Ajalon, and had conquered all of Canaan's milk and honey land.

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

But to the new ⁵J~~o~~shua, to this child, was now given a greater labor. He shall save his people from their sins.

It was frightening that in the hands of an ordinary man like himself must rest the bringing up of this boy. Joseph had not asked for such responsibility, and doubted that he was ^{Equal} to it.

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

But the sound could not drown out other worries which came crowding. Enemies would hover over this chosen one like panthers and vultures around a lost sheep. Rulers, fearful of their power. Others in high places jealous of their position,

Evil men with axes to grind, like those ~~xxxxxx~~ who had stared so long at Mary on the way down from Nazareth. ~~Evil men with axes to grind~~

He remembered the centurion Panthera, ^{at Sebaste} Only the timely arrival of ~~Rusco at Sebaste~~ Vedius/had kept that one from troubling Mary.

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

But he did not have Mary's ~~secret~~ faith.

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

o-o

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

"My daughter," he explained to Joseph, "and the son of an old friend. He's come up from Egypt to join the Tenth. I'll never be missed and I wondered how you were coming on, in here."

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

He made the demonstration gravely but his eyes had a small twinkle. This business of a hidden exit into a hillside tunnel with its implications of spies and plots and swift escapes was a side of Vedius Rusco that did not seem in character.

Rusco caught the twinkle, ^(all) and smiled sheepishly.
"You have to be a soldier, I guess, to understand. In camp I always wanted an extra way of retreat. And when I found that

just by breaking through a few caves, Bracae and I could run a tunnel clean through to the hill's far side I couldn't pass up the chance."

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

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He liked Joseph

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~~center~~. As almost everyone did, Joseph admired and liked Vedius Rusco, but it would have surprised him to know how warmly the famous man returned his regard. The Road Commissioner found the tall, darkly-tanned Joseph, so far removed in station from himself, a good companion. He enjoyed Joseph's humor, his thoughtfulness, his surprising knowledge. And especially he liked his proper pride. Joseph had shown this when he first went to work on the new villa and Rusco had approved an attitude which not many assumed when confronted by a Roman of authority. And he had been pleased when he found that the attitude did not affect Joseph's friendliness.

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

Vedius Rusco took it gladly. The enterprises

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

"Take a rest. Candace will be bringing your breakfast. And if you can ^{finish} ~~meet the deer~~ in two weeks I'll be more than satisfied. I'll sacrifice to Mercury tomorrow, or maybe Ceres, to help you along."

Some said Ceres was hardly a goddess for a soldier. But in Rusco's heart she had always stood ~~as~~ next to Jupiter. He smiled, remembering a thing he had lately read. Vergil, dead now almost twenty years and chiefly famous for his poem about Aeneas, had written it. It was one of the verses about farm life which Rusco liked even better than the ^{Epic} ~~Aeneas~~ thing. He waved his hand gaily.

*Single
Spec*

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

~~Joseph smiled. He knew he was being drawn.~~

*What was Rusco doing
intot*

"You think one God does everything, don't you?"

"Yes," Joseph said, "I do."

"All the rest of us are against you," Rusco said.

"It's a lot more sensible to believe in special gods for every
this and that. In Babylon they used even to have Beelzebub to

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

Joseph smiled. He could see what Vedius Rusco was leading up to.

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

"Just one, for everything?" Rusco ^{Shook} ~~said, shaking~~ his head.

"Don't you know the whole world is against you? It's a lot more sensible to believe in special gods for every this and that. In Babylon they used even to have ~~Belyzebub~~ Beelzebub to protect against flies. I hate flies."

He was smiling, and Joseph laughed.

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

~~achon."~~

protect against flies. I hate flies. ^{||}

"The Cyreneans also claim such a god," ~~Joseph~~
~~Joseph~~. ^{||} "They call him Acher."

"Bracae," Rusco said, "and Bria both are sworn servants of Woden and wear Woden's iron necklace, even abed. But they sacrifice to dozens of pesky, malicious lesser gods. And how about our legions? Besides all the old gods, they sacrifice now to a new one, Mithras, out of Persia. A while back nobody ever heard of Mithras. Now thousands of priests sing of him and his 'thousand eyes, thousand ears, all knowing, all powerful, ^{||} ~~neither slumbering nor sleeping.~~"

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

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

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

"But your priests are just as full of hecuspocus as the priests of gods you say are nothing," Rusco observed slyly.

"Hecus-pocus?"

"All this stuff in your temple!"

"This waste of rivers of oil, and thousands of rams," Joseph quoted. "I know. One of our prophets spoke against it long ago. He said that all the Lord asked of

us was to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our god."

"I used to watch your priests when I was quartered in Antonia," Rusco said. "If I went from my orderly room just a little way along the collonade walk, I could see ~~a good deal~~ ^{plenty of what} that went on."

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

Joseph had never thought of that walk from the fortress being used to look down into the Temple out of curiosity. It was meant to be a quick avenue into the great Court of the Gentiles in time of trouble. When a hundred thousand were packed in the Court on Feasts ^{days}, trouble could flare up in seconds. A single complaint against a cheating money-changer could start it.

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

Priests did sometimes make shameless substitutions, Joseph conceded.

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

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

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

"Why?"

"It's this way. When we Jews have climbed from

The Court of

the Court of the Gentiles through the Women's Court to ~~where~~
~~Israel where only men may stand and look across~~
~~only men may stand, and look across the court of Israel past~~
the Altar of Sacrifice to the Holy Place, we are truly afire
with reverence. We feel ourselves almost in the very dwelling
place of the Lord, and nothing else matters."

Joseph paused.

"The dwelling place, of course," he went on,
"is the Holy of Holies, and when we feel the power and the near-
ness of that, the tricks and lies of ~~some of the~~ priests seem
unimportant."

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

Joseph nodded.

"Is there always nothing in it?"

"Nothing but the Lord," Joseph said.

"What?"

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

"How I know why Pompey was so set down," Rusco
said.

"Pompey?"

"He was the one who broke in. He was a general
almost as great as Julius Caesar ~~or the Emperor~~ *who was his rival and finally*

Killed him Joseph waited.

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

Joseph did not smile. And Rusco realized penitently that the ^{Joke} ~~tale~~ might have been better left untold.

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

"No," Joseph answered. "The Law tells Mary to make her purification rite in the Temple on the forty-first day after the boy's birth. If we leave earlier she will have to put it off. Same," Joseph smiled, "put it off until they happen to be in Jerusalem for a feast day. But the Law says after forty days and that is how Mary wants it. And," he added, "so do I."

"And so would I," Vedius Rusco agreed. "I'd want everything done in order for my son, too. And prayers help, maybe."

"Mary sets a store by prayers," Joseph said.

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

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

shall his blood be shed,' we were told."

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

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

Rusco ~~inspected~~ ^{waved toward} it with satisfaction. "It was a gala breakfast today because of young Lucianus. Baked eggs in cream sauce, sausages, these yellow things called carrots, and fresh rolls and honey and wine."

Joseph accepted the invitation of Rusco's hand.

"How do you like carrots?"

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

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

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

Candace stood waiting and her eyes, on her master, ~~Joseph realized,~~ were tender and luminous.

~~"She loves him!" The unspoken words rang through his mind and he was amazed at his own perception. Mary could always perceive such things, however shyly, however carefully.~~

Vedius Rusco did not even look her way.

they were veiled. Mary was forever happily prophesying a wedding because her sympathy and understanding were boundless. But he had never thought of himself as sympathetic and understanding, not very. This love of Candace's must be plain for him to see it.

Of one thing he was sure; Vedius Rusco did not see it. Vedius Rusco's love was all still given to the memory of his wife. Joseph doubted that he turned at all to other women, and certainly he was wholly indifferent to this one although the Numidian girl was ~~very~~ lovely.

"Thank you, Candace," ~~Vedius Rusco~~ ^{he} said and ~~did not~~ ^{turned back} ~~so much as look her way when she slowly~~ ^{to Joseph before the Numidian had} left the room.

"I'm glad," he said ~~turning~~ ^{this} to Joseph, "that you won't be starting back to Nazareth after ~~the door is repaired.~~ ^{is done} There's lots for a carpenter to do around the villa. Easily enough work for forty days."

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

"We'll have more chances to talk," the Road Commissioner said, rising. ^{But now} "I've promised Deborah and Lucianus some sword practice." ~~He~~ He went out to the garden.

CHAPTER SIX

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

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

~~Bria's crew, for plaus reasons born of various~~
ancestries, had urged live snakes unlimited in and around the new villa's kitchens. The Greeks had pointed out that in Athene's temples resident snakes got a honey cake once a month. The Jews had recalled Moses' fiery serpent upon which any Wilderness wanderer needed only to look to be cured of any live snake's bite. The Romans had reminded that domestic snakes were favored by tutelary gods without whose guardianship great evil might befall any household. The Egyptians linked the slimy things with fertility and, by an extension of characteristic lickerish reasoning, with the even more desirable gift of potency. All had warned that

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

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~~trouble was sure for any kitchen failing to welcome snakes, and feed them, too.~~

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

"In this Palestine there are at least thirty kinds of snakes," she had protested, "if you count from Dan clear down. Which will you pick? Or do I pass out honey cakes, come one, come all?"

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

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

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

"And any color," she had added generously. After all, Vedius Rusco had ordered frescoes slapped on all four walls of the new kitchen in the latest fashion ^{Painting or} and a few extra snakes would be hardly any trouble. Although, if you asked her, frescoes were coddling even the world's best kitchen crew too far.

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

All the bread, oil, olives, pickled fish and salt

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You ... fool!" Bria muttered and ran over the wonderful epithets she had thought of earlier. "You've lived your last day in this villa, if I know anything!"

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

"You ... fool!" she muttered ^{toward Nepte} again and hurried out to the courtyard where her man and the broad, sooty black, whenever their mouths were emptied, were swapping boasts mixed with explosive oaths that by god ... by this god and that ... every last word was true.

Bracae swore by Woden. Like Bria he wasted no

*As bold as ever under her shining
black helmet of hair*

time conciliating strange gods, but along with constant sacrifices to his chief deity he made many fearful appeasements of Woden's small fry. A man was a fool who didn't. Rash doubters born elsewhere might deny it, but every man born in Gaul knew that every forest, tree, hill, valley, stream, pool and rock was the home of at least one spirit, usually spiteful or at any rate so touchy that it could be stirred to retaliation merely by the wrong flicker of a passing man's eye. So whoever neglected any of them was sure to find himself in a mess. And what a mess if the tree, hill, valley, stream, pool or rock on which the careless flicker fell happened to house, as plenty of them did, a whole clan of spirits.

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

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

Encircling

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

Bracae

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

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

0-0

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

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

Bria tried to interrupt, anxious about the business of Nepte, but Bracae had to tell Micipsia how, once, he had fought out of a tight ~~a terrible tight~~^{place} by mowing down -- he couldn't remember how many -- with his two-handed sword. "Like grain, by Woden!" he said and dropped a belittling glance at Micipsia's bow.

But then his pleased expression turned to alarm because the bow came from a tree and the tree would certainly have its spiteful and probably eavesdropping spirit.

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

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

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

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

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

"Leave me!" Bria murmured complacently. "Go feather a few arrows, black man! I have a private thing to say to this one."

When Bracae failed to slap the woman down for her

impertinence Micipsia registered amazement. But he was himself docile as he walked to a seat on a pile of firewood. And he confessed to himself that he might not have been able to leave easily, and maybe not at all, if any of his girls had been such a ripe armful as Bria.

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

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

"I'll give her this!" Bracae said. "She isn't going to take it lying down."

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

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

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

~~She would not string.~~ Her eyes cursed him and her fingers clawed.

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

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

the garden.

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

While cooks, scullions, gardeners and maids stared and mumbled two men of the household staff marched Nepte through the courtyard gate for the ^{Long} ~~three-mile~~ walk to the vast market where slaves, along with all other disposable merchandise, were sold twice daily. As the gate closed Nepte ^{is gaze} slid back, over a yellow shoulder, a promise that they had not heard the last of her.

"I should have had her lashed!" Bracae said.

"That's all her kind ever worries about. She'll come off better ^{at the} than most honest women." *Auction*

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

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

~~"Hurry, hurry!" the cook cried, "I can't see Nepte give the commander a look!"~~

~~"Probably~~ a troop of the Tenth," Bracae said,
 ///

"Out for its monthly field drill." Under the strict discipline of General Orfitus Proculinus, each cohort marched ten miles every ten days and at least once a month spent a half day afield in tough combat practice.

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

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

Everyone ran to look.

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

But make no mistake, Bria thought, half in admiration, half in disapproval of so public an exhibition, she is making him see that she is all woman.

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

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

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

"If he knows she is for sale, he might buy her, at that," Bracae said. "On a Pilus Prior's pay, he can afford to."

"What are they doing here, this cohort?" Micipsia asked.

"Training..." Bracae started to explain, then broke off. "By Woden!" he bellowed suddenly as the men and their leader came closer. "Look who that Pilus Prior is!"

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

in armor

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

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

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

The prolonged nearness to Vedius Rusco had done

for Candace as much as exercise and Lucianus had done for Deborah. The autumn-leaf girl too was glowing. Tall, strong, rounded, her silvered breastplate rising and falling with her quickened breath, she seemed to be absorbing with quiet joy every moment of this desired proximity. ~~Deborah noted it with pity but Lucianus could see no one but Deborah.~~ Vadius Rusco's attention was given fully to his duties as drill master.

The commotion outside broke in on all this.

"What can it be?" Deborah cried. "Come on, Candace! Let's go see!"

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

"They'll be disappointed," Rusco predicted.

"You know that sound and so do I. It's only troops doing field manoeuvres. Little Orfitus Proculinus runs a fit legion even if he does look too fat and easy going. ~~He gets every cohort out three times a month for a ten-mile hike and once a month each ranking centurion must put his cohort through a tough combat practice.~~"

"If these are men of the Tenth," Lucianus said, "how is it that their ^{leader} ~~commander~~ lets them raise such a hullabaloo so near your villa?"

"It isn't good manners," Rusco agreed. "But it will probably turn out to be just an accident." He could think of only three in the legion who might ^{wish} ~~care~~ deliberately to annoy him. ^{his old rival} And Helius Naepor was too ^{shrewd} ~~old~~ a hand and ^{Salvidianus was on} ~~Muso~~ ^{hand}

- besides he was too enormous of Deborah -

Leave in ^{the} Panthera ^{Rusco}
~~returned from Caesarea~~ and ~~that~~ centurion whom ~~he~~ had reprimanded in Sebaste ~~for bothering Joseph's wife~~ ~~name of Pen~~
~~there or something~~ did not command a cohort and never would.

The girls had raced through the villa. ~~Vedius~~
Rusco and Lucianus overtook them at the wall gate, waiting impatiently while the keeper unbarred it under the gaze of the ever-watchful dog. Outside the walls the four joined Bracae and Bria and Micipsia.

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

~~Rusco was surprised but thought he knew the answer. Money had changed hands . . . or else Naepor had wanted one cohort leader whom he could send down any path.~~

~~What path, Vedius Rusco wondered, looking absently toward the hillside where the cohort was sprawled for a few moments of rest. Seeing the party from the valla, Panthera saluted Rusco and swaggered forward.~~

o-o-o
@xx@xx@xx

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

catch-as-catch-can crossbreeding.

A mongrel, Rusco had decided early and had seen the record bear him out. From the beginning Panthera had played favorites when he was on top and had begged favors when he was underbeath. When rations were short, when prizes were divided, he always came off with something extra. He always had an excuse, even a downright lie, for a duty undone. His mind was always on women, any woman. And where other men might have been embarrassed, he grew only boastful when his bottomless craving caused his real name to be forgotten and replaced by the name of the animal considered the most concupiscent in nature.

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

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

Not even a centurion had any right from Rome to stop an innocent traveller and his wife, but Panthera had seen Mary. His winks, hints and innuendos had drawn a crowd of guffawing soldiers around her ~~and~~ when Vedius Rusco and Bracae had ridden up.

Rusco had been staying over night in Sebaste and the riot had roused him. And even though he was out of the Imperial army, his rank gave him authority over a centurion. He had ridden between Panthera and his victim.

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

"No, but --" Panthera had fumbled.

"Suppose then that we let them go along,"

If the Commissioner will let me explain --"

"Go ahead." Rusco was softly reasonable. "Do explain."

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

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

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

OT "Know what?"

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

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

"Well!" Panthera exploded, "It could be this woman's, just as well as now. [†] It could be any woman's."

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

Panthera was, Rusco decided looking toward the hill on which the cohort ~~was~~ sprawled, not only a mongrel and a piece of filth, but a fool to boot. He was good enough in combat -- a ~~crafty~~ brutal fighter -- although never too good unless the fight was going his way. But he got little respect from his men. As a leader of a century, a hundred soldiers, he might do, but he was not half good enough to lead a cohort. Then why the promotion?

But because Rusco knew Heliuss Naepor, he thought he knew the answer to this question. The Primus Pilus was up to one of the grafting deals he was forever plotting. He needed at least one cohort leader whom he could send down any path.

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

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

challengingly + triumphant

Panthera's swagger and the ~~do-you-want-to-make-~~ something-of-it smile on his ~~dark~~, usually sullen face, was his way of ^{Goasting} ~~calling attention to the fact~~ that now he was as good as, practically, anybody. In Sebaste he had been only a centurion of least rank. The Emperor Augustus's road commissioner could make him jump through any hoop. Now he was one of the elite officers of the Legion. Now he was very different from the humble fellow who had not dared defy an order to stop baiting Joseph's party. His bold inspection of Deborah and Candace, and especially their uncovered arms and legs, marked a very different Panthera indeed.

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

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

"The Tribune Marcus Seclator Lucianus," Rusco

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

Panthera nodded indifferently, too full of his own glory to be interested in any new young stranger. But his persistent smile now asked for some acknowledgement of his promotion. And it would have been quite in order to, at least, invite him into the villa for wine, for a congratulatory goblet, to mark his newly won place among the chief combat officers of ~~the~~ ~~Tenth~~. Rusco's old legion.

Rusco, however, had despised the centurion who annoyed Joseph and Mary at Sebaste and he despised no less the swaggering Pilus ~~and~~ Prior.

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

"Glad to," Panthera drawled and his sleepy gaze went ^{Again} to Deborah and Candace, running over them like an insistent hand.

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

The girls turned willingly away, shepherded by Bria. ^{Rusco} Vedius, as the men strolled toward the legionnaires, spoke disarmingly of the value of combat practice. Panthera,

aware of the double snub, looked sullen, but arriving at the cohort, he strove for his old swagger. He turned to smile meaningly back at the balcony where the girls had now appeared.

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

Rusco said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

He told himself this and was pleased that he had

sense enough to keep his mouth shut, but the old elation went right on rising. He held his silence so long that Panthera swaggered wider, tipping a wink to the men nearest him.

"Yes," he said, "I'd like a lot to learn what the legion^(s) old champion could teach me."

Bracae burst into laughter, Micipsia squeaked derisively and Lucianus stared in cold contempt, but to Rusco's chagrin the murmur which ran along the cohort was not, in the main, derisive or contemptuous of Panthera ~~at all~~. There was even a hint, mixed with the pleasure which legionnaires always felt at the ^{prospect} ~~possibility~~ of any sort of scrap, that perhaps their big new commander was the one to prove that after many years the great ex-Primus Pilus was finished. Evidently Panthera thought so.

The old elation rose higher. Rusco called himself the biggest fool unhung, but it went on rising in spite of muscles which not only had to be slower but felt slower.

"I probably couldn't teach you a thing," he said with a modesty in reverse of his mood. "I've been out of things for a couple of years and even then I was pretty old for such stuff."

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

"But of course Vedius Rusco Philippicus isn't just any old-timer turned out to pasture with his bonus and good service diploma. You must have quite a lot of skill left."

"Quite a lot?" Bracae's bellow brought a couple of recruits erect in alarm, but Rusco only smiled amiably.

Young fellows

"Plenty of ~~old timers~~ probably could give me a good lesson."

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

Rusco laughed. ^{By Mars! By Hercules!} ~~What the hell!~~ Muscles were always muscles and his felt fine.

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

You don't want just to cross swords, ^{Pilus Inion} centurion.

You want to show me up. Maybe you even want to stick me, by accident of course, but the deeper the better, because then your cohort would really admit that you were boss.

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

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

"Let's just get bows and arrows and shoot at a mark. Maybe I can teach you a thing or two about a bow, and some day you might thank me."

"Roman weapons are good enough for me."

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

"I've watched those auxiliaries who are called the world's best slingers," Panthera said scornfully. "Those Balearic ^{Sharp, shorter} ~~Island parties~~ I'll stick to sword, dagger and javelin."

Lucianus spoke up ~~in anger~~. "If Panthera wants a lesson so much, let me try to give him one." It wasn't, of

course, as though his own father were stepping out of fat middle-age to play champion. Veditus Rusco was so lacking in any look of middle-age that it was hard to believe he was almost as old as Marcus Seclator, but Rusco also carried a burden of years which might impose an unexpected tragic penalty.

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

Panthera laughed.

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

"He'll have to put up with me," Rusco said lightly. He decided that he didn't feel a day over twenty-five. He glanced around the cohort and off to one side found a small, separate detachment and raised a hand in delighted greeting.

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

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

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

"And under your own vexillum!" Rusco looked to the banner as he held out an affectionate hand. "When were we to-

gether last? Wait! I remember. It was when we fought under Tiberius all the way from the Rhone to the Danube."

"Clean into Pannonia!"

"And what no-holds-barred fighters those Pannonians were!"

Messala glanced down at his gleaming ^{breast plate} cuirass of hardened leather faced with iron straps. "Remember it?" he asked.

"Should I?" Rusco smiled.

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

"I did, at that!" Rusco laughed. "And you certainly needed it because the Pannonians had slashed yours all over."

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

"And good enough for the likes of me," Rusco said. "Will you loan it to me for a little while, and your helmet and shield and weapons?"

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

Rusco laughed. Elation ran higher and higher. He felt ^{more strongly than ever} ~~the~~ the grand familiar confusion of emotion^D which he well knew he ought to deplore.

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

Messala

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

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

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

"I'm ~~all set~~^{ready}," Rusco said, the high mood ringing ~~loud~~ in his voice.

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

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

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

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

"I won't take all your money, babies!" Messala

~~laughed and~~ refused the small change. "On Vedius Rusco Philip-
picus, twelve denarii!"

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

"I don't even feel right laying you twelve to eight," Messala said in mock-mournfulness. He ignored Panthera. When did an independent evocatus^{us} under his own vexillum need to knuckle down to a big show-off like this one?

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

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

"You will," Bracae said.

"We'll quit any time you've had enough," Rusco said happily, "And we'll start any time you're ready."

He looked back at the balcony. The girls were too far away to hear what was being said, of course, but they could see what was going on. Both were leaning forward intently. Rusco waved.

"Hold on!" Lucianus cried. "Do you mean to keep those on?" He pointed protestingly from Rusco's soft shoes to Panthera's hobnails. The latter were a brutal weapon in close fighting. They had crushed many a foot so badly that the owner was lamed for life. And they might accidentally do harm even in a friendly set-to. But Rusco smiled. "I don't mind."

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

"Of course it is," Rusco agreed. "And I've fought in ~~my old~~ ^{soft} shoes before. There were times, when I was young and broke, that I couldn't afford ~~good ones~~ Any other?" (4)

~~"Your only pair was full of holes when you took on that Pannonian," Messala laughed.~~

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

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

"I'll obey. You can count on me," Panthera promised loudly. He tried for an artful frankness. He knew ~~the question with artful honesty. He felt that the shoes had lost~~ that his ready agreement would ~~him some popular favor and hoped his reputation would create the new~~ persuade at least a few that he was, in spite of the shoes, as ~~well that in facing so famous a champion any condition was at a dis-~~ ~~advantage.~~ fair a fighter as any man could be.

"I'll stop on command,"

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

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

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

"READY!" Bracae commanded.

Panthera nodded. Rusco smiled up at Deborah.

Sweat broke out on Lucianus's palms. Micipsia

tensed as though he, also, faced a sword. Bracae hardened his lips to give snap to his next command. The cohort sighed loudly.

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

"GUARD!" Bracae cried.

Panthera feinted, then drove a swift long-point. Rusco evaded it without shifting his feet, a proof of balance which brought a "Ha!" from Messala's veterans. Panthera's blade stabbed at and under and around, but the opposing shield always met it. Panthera pressed but he was skillful and wary and never over-reached. He never took a stride so long that a counterstroke could catch him off guard.

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

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

"Strong as a bull!" Bracae grunted to Lucianus. "But I'll bet that wrist hurts."

Panthera backtracked, waiting for the hurt to lessen.

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

The cohort's veterans nodded in a growing conviction that their ~~Pilus~~ Prior had bit off more than he could chew and the six converted recruits were happily surer that their eight denarii had gone up the spout.

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

Rusco fell back. He retreated half a dozen light, deliberate steps, began to circle right. Panthera was forced to change front and to reach across his own shield. He never could quite reach his target but after a circle or two his confidence grew. Two circles, three! His man was tiring. Four circles, five! Old Rusco couldn't even make a stand, much less counter-attack.

Panthera decided that his moment had come. In this scramble any blow could be alibied. Half around the sixth circle he stabbed upward and when the shield rose and covered Rusco's eyes, or seemed to, he stomped at Rusco's lightly shod instep. He missed, heard a scandalized voice cry, "That could

cripple for life!" stomped again and was all set for the contrite, virtuous apology when he knew he had missed the second time. Then, incredibly, he was in retreat.

Rusco was not, after all, too tired to stand or even to counter-attack. And this was a different Rusco. This was not the smiling make-believe opponent of the first five minutes. This was as unmistakable an avenger as the attempted foul had been unmistakable. And now Panthera discovered what oldsters meant when they said that Vedius Rusco Philippicus was the best.

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

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

His fear changed to terror as he realized that

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

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

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

Blood seeped from Panthera's breastplate.

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

"~~GROUND~~ POINTS!" Bracae roared ⊗

Panthera started a forward stride, his face

congested.

"GROUND POINTS!"

Vedius Rusco touched earth with the tip of his sword, a half smile on his lips.

Panthera hesitated, in uncontrollable rage and shame.

"GROUND POINTS!" Bracae shouted and seizing the nearest soldier's shield and javelin, stepped in front of Panthera. "Ground Point! You fool! Do you want a lesson from me, too?"

Panthera lowered his sword and, as his mind came back under control, prayed that his instant recovery from terror had deceived the cohort. He put out a hand and swaggered up to Rusco.

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

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

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

"Fall in!" he roared.

And even the men who had tittered leaped to obey. ~~Even~~ Messala was not now willing to challenge the cohort's commander. ~~But~~ he had a little trouble covering up a smile as he helped Vedius Rusco out of the borrowed gear and indicated his intention to delay his detachment until he had finished. ^{But} This was the right of any leader who flew his own vexillum.

"Forwa-ard, MARCH!" Panthera shouted.

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

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

All Rusco's fine elation was gone.

"Now why did I go out of my way to make a tougher enemy?" he wondered. Abruptly he told himself again that he was

~~Deborah came flying through the gate and rushed into her father's arms so impetuously that he said "Whoo-sh" as her breastplate banged him breathless. Bria beamed behind and Candace brought up the rear, her eyes soft with relief ~~and~~ ~~praise~~ and shy adoration. Rusco thought of Joseph, working in the dining room through all this hullabaloo. ~~Joseph~~, he remembered, was ~~Panthera's~~ ^{Joseph's} enemy, too. He decided he would go and talk with Joseph.~~

too old for such horseplay as he had just engaged in. He greatly regretted the whole affair.

Even without the duel he had had enough tough enemies. Panthera had been a tough enemy because of Sebaste and now, of

course, he would be a tougher. Naepor was tough, merely because of his ancient envy and now, perhaps, he would be tougher with special cause. This scheme of his -- if there was a scheme -- would be hurt in the degree that today's defeat made Panthera a less valuable tool

And tougher than ten thousand Naepors was Herod.

Vedius Rusco was, day in and out, a man who ^{tried} never ~~let~~ ^{To} himself regret yesterday or dread tomorrow. But now pessimism swept him. He had had no warrant, he thought, for deciding that morning that he was in no real danger of joining the long row of Herod's bleached victims. Herod would not, probably, strike openly against a Roman of consequence. But just let the tyrant find half an excuse! Just let him even think he had found one!

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

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

But three names clanked like a menacing chain somewhere back in his mind. Herod -- Naepor -- Panthera.

Rusco remembered Joseph, working in the dining room through all the hullabaloo. Panthera, he recalled, was Joseph's enemy, too. He would go and talk with Joseph.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Salvidinius Muso, tall, pink-cheeked, with a long, foxy face, walked toward Panthera's orderly room in the barracks near the Joppa Gate. The Tribune, still confident that he was Deborah's preferred suitor, had returned from leave in Caesaria, on the coast, to find an urgent call to a meeting.

In the sunshine outside the barracks soldiers were cursing or rejoicing over their luck at dice played on the pavement patterns. The orderly room was dim at first, but Muso made out Panthera, and Panthera's new woman and ~~the~~ ^{then} big, gross Helius Naepor.

The Primus Pilus was seated at a table, his heavy shoulders bowed over a goblet of wine, and Muso glanced with distaste at the dribbled tunic. He seated himself so that the broad purple band of his own immaculate tunic was conspicuous. Patricians, alone, were permitted the broad band. Equestrians were permitted only a narrow one, and plebians like these two none at all.

Muso's usual air of condescension was, if possible, more marked than ever to keep the others from making capital out of the fact that they had summoned and he had come. He had not dared tell them to come to him, he needed money too much, and now he waited impatiently for one of them to state the figure.

Helius Naepor kept silent, offended as usual by Muso's

Ambrose 1.

SAVE

From St. Ambrose Episcopal Church. Ly 6 4788.

For The Progress Bulletin. Release Oct. 19. Valley Ch Page News.

St. Ambrose Episcopal
Claremont.

The annual Every-Member canvas ~~fixxxx~~ will be made Sunday, Nov. 10, Earnest A. Strathmann, senior warden, announced today. Donald L. Pile has been appointed canvas chairman, and Robert M. Kemp assistant chairman. Team captains will include John W. Schafer, William H. Martin, John H. Kemble, Earl Stanfield, Charles S. Holmes, Joseph W. Clokey and Jesse Shaner.

A pre-pledge ^{canvases} dinner will be served at cost in St. Ambrose parish hall Nov. 5, at 6:30. Mrs. Harold G. Cooper is dinner chairman.

Tomorrow, at the 11 a.m. Morning Prayer service, the rector of St. Ambrose, the Rev. Frederick Q. Shafer, will have as his sermon subject, "What we give up at Baptism." Holy Communion will be celebrated at 8 and 9:15 a.m.

The rector is now conducting confirmation classes which meet every Thursday at 8 p.m. in the parish hall.

---X---

expression, because it said that even a Primus Pilus was favored beyond his deserts to be on familiar terms with a scion of one of the oldest patrician families of Rome.

Patrician beggars! Naepor knew of the Emperor's handouts to the Muso clan, along with handouts to scores of other impoverished aristocratic families.

Let him wait, the Primus Pilus thought! He was resolved to leave all the talking to Panthera. Over and over he had wished that he had kept entirely out of this plot ~~to~~ ^{to hunt a baby for Herod} this mixing in with a conscienceless Jew, a lecherous centurion and a despicable Tribune. He could not imagine Vedius Rusco sitting in on such a meeting as this. ^{Naepor} ~~He~~ had taken ~~Panthera's~~ offer thinking to pile up a little wealth against a day when he no longer had his pay as Primus Pilus. He knew that day was close. His superb strength was fading. But he had already frittered away the ~~xxxx~~ Chief Eunuch's ~~xxxxxxx~~ advance and he knew that he would not end up with much of the balance. Meanwhile, he must continue ^{to submit to the humiliation of} this alliance. ~~xxxxx~~

~~xxxxxxx~~ He must, for example, ~~xxxxxxx~~ look the other way when this Pilus Prior whom he had made, brought his new woman where she had no right to be.

In the corner nearest Panthera the woman was stretched out on a couch, as relaxed as a yellow cat. Newly oiled and rubbed, her body gleamed under the ~~waxxxxxxxx~~ silks which had replaced the cotton semi-livery she had worn from the slave market. She ignored Muso and Naepor and only now and then spared a narrow, secret look for her new master. Her attention was being given to the scented pumice stone, the lemon water and the heavy unguents with which she was bringing back to her toe-wise hands the softness which had pleased men in Memphis ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~

~~Muso continued to wait and when Naepor continued to slouch alongside a jug of wine Panthera gingerly began the necessary explanation. Briefly he tried to make it plain~~

that most of the job would fall upon himself, some on Naepor, little on ~~Salvianus~~ the Tribune.

"You'll hardly need to be around," he said.

"You can go back to Caesarea or anywhere you like, just so long as you come in with us and keep the general off my neck."

"How much?" Muse asked, a quick tongue circling his mouth. It was the sign of a money-hungry man testing the wonderful flavor of gold.

"The Primus Pilus took care of that end," Panthera said with a large laugh. "And you know a better man doesn't live for squeezing out the last copper."

"How much?"

"Believe it or not, you'll get ten thousand denarii."

"How much for you?"

"Uh-uh-h! Five thousand."

"And you?" Muse looked sidewise at Naepor.

"Twenty thousand," Naepor said, contemptuous of what the Tribune might think of so large a difference.

"And ten for me? No!" Muse's legs shifted to get him out of his seat, out of the room. They did not, however, complete the threat. "I'm not interested at all." Was a patrician worth so little when this plebian Naepor was being paid five thousand denarii more than he earned as Primus ^{Pilus} in a whole year?

"Even a patrician can do a lot with ten thousand,"

~~But ten thousand is a small sum for a Tribune.~~
Panthera cried.

"Not to me!"

Panthera wanted to say that they might throw in the Chief Eunuch something. They probably could squeeze ~~them~~ for a little extra.

But the offer was not his alone to make. He looked at Naepor. The Primus Pilus helped himself to another drink in silence.

Now Salvidinius Muso did get up, his pink face hot. He got almost to the door.

~~"I thought you weren't interested at all."~~
~~"I might be for as much as you are getting."~~
~~The big, gross Primus Pilus helped himself to another drink, in silence.~~
~~Now Salvidinius Muso did get up, his pink face hot. He got almost to the door.~~

Naepor threw in a question.

"Do you know you're being transferred?"

Muso whirled, "Transferred?"

General

"Almost any time now. Proculinus has tapped a young Tribune just up from Egypt for your post in the cohort."

Naepor grinned. "As a matter of fact, the shift has been all set for a couple of months, and it came to a head while you were in Caesarea. Vedius Rusco fixed it up."

the General transfer me at Vedius Rusco's

"Why would ~~Vedius Rusco~~ request?"

Muso said.

Do you want me to say why, right out? Do you want me to say you're the lousiest Tribune the Tenth ever had? Naepor eyed his victim in silent, contemptuous triumph. A word now would bring him into the plot.

Naepor withheld the word for a moment. He knew -- he had known ~~in his heart~~ all along -- that if he did not bring Muso in, his own release would be easy. He would need only to say

He knew which always was

the job
that he and Panthera could not swing ~~it~~ alone. Then he would be
free of this pair and ~~Talox~~ the Chief Eunuch could whistle for the money advanced. But this
feeble clash of good and evil impulses was familiar to Naepor. ~~But~~ he knew that he would speak, and he did. After all, fifteen
thousand denarii were still to come.

"The Road Commissioner," he said, answering Muso's
"Why?", "has a young friend who has been in Egypt. He didn't like
Egypt. So Rusco asked if there was an opening in the Tenth. Or-
fitus Proculinus said there was. So the young fellow has come on
to fill it."

"And I'm being kicked out!" Muso cried.

"You're just being promoted," Naepor said. "You're
going to legion headquarters. Young Marcus Seclator Lucianius is
assigned there now but as soon as he learns the ropes he'll re-
place you here."

"Lucianius!" Muso exclaimed. "I remember him.
He's the Greek brat Marcus Seclator adopted. I'm being kicked out
for him?"

thick lips spread in a
"You're being promoted," Naepor ~~grinned~~.

"A little, homeless scabby Greek brat!"

"Not scabby now," Panthera blurted. "He's ...
the girls will go wild over him."

"And not homeless!" Helius Naepor grinned more
broadly. For the first time in the course of this interview he
found something to please him. "He's living at Rusco's villa."

"Rusco's villa?"

"Haven't you called there since you got back?
Yes, young Lucianius is living there. You thought of marrying

the Rusco daughter, didn't you? Pretty, and a fortune, too!"
his choice few of
Musco cursed through the major gods of Rome,

~~.....~~

"Ask a little help of Bacchus, too," Naepor
said, pouring and still grinning. "He'll dry their throats
maybe, if you ask. What could be worse?"

Unsmilingly, Musco called on Bacchus to curse
Marcus Seclator, his son Lucianus and Rusco. Especially Rusco.

"The gods helping," Naepor said, "this deal will
~~.....~~ give you ^{your} chance," ~~.....~~

"Chance for what?" Musco demanded blankly. "To get even."

"With ..." "With Vedius Rusco." Musco frowned, "How? Tell me how?"

"Tell me, too," Panthera said, the sleepy look
olive
fading from his ~~dark~~ face.

"Do you mean you don't see how?"

~~They waited but Naepor withheld the revelation,
as a little before he had withheld the word sure to bring Musco
into the plot. Why should he turn this pair loose on Vedius
Rusco? Did he hate Vedius as much as that? Hate? He backed
away from the word. He had admired Vedius all his life.
All his life he had wanted to be like Vedius
Rusco, not merely best with weapons but best also, as Vedius
was best, in a way that made men model themselves after him.
The Road Commissioner lived by a code of his own making and
seeing this men said, that is how I want to live! although
they seldom did more than make a start.
Helius Naepor never had had a code. He moral
signpost of his own erection ever warned against temptation.~~

They waited, their eagerness as plain ~~as~~ writing. Muso licked his mouth testing a flavor almost as irresistible as money. Even greed was hardly greater than his wish to even up with the man who had cost him his ^{See} ~~post~~ ⁱⁿ the Eighth Cohort. Panthere's eyes hardened. He was seeing himself revenged for every defeat suffered at Vedius Rusco's hands.

Naepor let them wait. He withheld the revelation as he had earlier withheld the bit of news sure to bring Muso into the plot. Impulses clashed again. Why, he found himself wondering, did he want to turn this rascally pair loose on Vedius Rusco. Did he hate Vedius as much as that? Hate? He backed away from the word. He had admired Vedius all his life.

All his life he had wanted to be like Vedius Rusco, not merely best with weapons, but best also as Vedius was best, in a way that made men model themselves after him. The Road Commissioner lived by a code of his own making, and seeing this men said, that is how I want to live! although they seldom did more than make a start.

Helius Naepor never had had a code. No moral signpost of his own erection ever warned against temptation.

He always succumbed even though, afterward, always, he was ashamed and despairing until enough wine spread a ~~thick~~ fog over shame and despair.

Muso's insistent voice broke in.

"How does this hunting down of some baby tie in with Vedius Rusco Philippicus?"

It was the "Philippicus" which decided Naepor. He had never conceded to Vedius Rusco that almost ennobling identification bestowed by great Augustus. It always drowned all his admiration in bitterest envy.

"Ask Panthera. He knows."

"Me!" Panthera was startled. "Me! I wish I did."

"Didn't Rusco stop you a while back in Sebaste, just as you were starting to have some fun with a pair of Galilean hayseeds?"

"Yes, but .. "

"The woman of the pair," Naepor said to Muso, "was having a baby. She'll have had it by now. You throw in with us and when Panthera makes the hunt Herod is asking for, *Panthera* he'll go out of his way to come across the couple and push them around. And then, you know Vedius Rusco! He'll come quick to help any friend."

"He will! He always does," Muso said. "But how will Panthera ever find a couple of Galileans?"

"He heard Vedius Rusco call the man by name. Joseph! And Panthera learned at Sebaste that this Joseph is a

carpenter from Nazareth."

"Joseph, the carpenter!" Panthera's woman spoke over the two palms which were rubbing unguents into each other. She paused long enough to sniff in satisfaction. "Joseph! ~~Was~~ he was working at the Villa the day I was sent away."

"Sent away!" Muso said. "What is she talking about?"

Panthera pulled the woman into his arms. She melted against him.

"Nepte was sold by Vedius Rusco's order yesterday," he told Muso.

"I thought Rusco never sold slaves."

"He certainly sold Nepte."

"They didn't want me around," Nepte said with an edge in her voice. "But Joseph has the run of the place. They told me he ~~was~~ there for weeks, while the villa was being finished. And the day I was sent off he'd been called back for something special. The master treated him more like a friend than a workman. They got off together and talked and talked."

Muso looked at Panthera challengingly.

"Is this woman safe?" ~~he asked.~~

"Safe?" Panthera was angry. "Hasn't she already been a help?"

Nepte spoke again, the hardness gone from her voice.

"I'd help you burn the whole villa," she purred.

"I'd like to set a torch to it with its Road Commissioner and that Bracae inside. And as for Bria and Candace and that precious Deborah!" She drew away from Panthera to make the gesture with which the women of ^{Memphis's} ~~Thebes's~~ ~~lowest~~ brothels welcomed customers.

Muso laughed. They all laughed. They all knew the gesture.

"I'll do it!" Muso squared his ^{patrician} /shoulders.

"Let me have my advance now. I'm a little short."

"I've got two thousand for you," ^{Naepor} ~~Panthera~~ said.

"And you'll have eight more coming."

"This calls for a drink all around," Panthera cried and signalled to Nepte.

She held a palm pleurably under her nose for an instant, then brought goblets.

Helius Naepor looked through slitted eyelids while Panthera poured.

Luck!
"Bump ~~xxxx~~!" Panthera said and handed him the first drink.

Helius
"No!" /Naepor said. Even being accorded precedence over a patrician could not make it go down. "I've got a thing to do that can't wait. Have your drinks. I'll have mine later." He hurried out.

I'll have mine later, but I'll have to work up to it. I'll have to work hard and think hard about those fifteen thousand denarii before I'll be able to drink, ~~even with~~ to luck with ~~xxxxxxx~~ those two.

CHAPTER NINE

The three Magi were courteously careful to reach the great palace on Jerusalem's western hill promptly at the hour Herod had set. Their gentle code would have called on them to offer every civility even to the falsest daeva from the deepest pit of their Zoroastrian hell. So, naturally, they were courteously careful to reach the great palace on Jerusalem's west hill promptly. But they had been careful also to come prepared for any bolt the tyrant might loose. They were prepared for anything he might do, because they knew everything about him.

All the long road from Persia they had forehandedly sifted a great store of information, and after Herod's summons came to them at Jericho they had uncovered more. They knew that he was an Idumean, a scoffing convert to Judaism, practising it only from expediency. They knew how widely he was hated and where he was hated most. They knew of his ambitions, evidenced by his endless public works rising east, west, north and south in honor of Caesar Augustus. They knew of his ruthless assignments to ^{Gallus} German and ^{Salatin} Salatin mercenaries. They knew of his fearful disease. They knew of his youthfully ardent marriage to ^MMarianne, and how he had murdered her, and the reasons for the ^{Eight} ~~same~~ calculated marriages which had followed. They knew all the murders, treacheries, lusts and terrors of his ^{forty} ~~forty~~-four years of misrule and that he endured his foul sister ^{Tirzah} ~~Salome~~ because he

believed she alone was completely loyal, although ~~Soemus~~ a certain ~~Soemus~~ had been an indispensable companion for almost half a century. They knew the curious, hopeless task at which Soemus struggled.

The ^{ir} line of camels halted at the huge main gate and Gaspar looked around. He had heard much of this palace, second in magnificence only, Herod claimed, to the Imperial palaces of Rome. If bigness meant magnificence, this was magnificent, Gaspar agreed. It was a walled palace and the walls ran seven hundred feet in one direction, ^{and} almost six hundred in the other, enclosing a whole ten acres.

"Walls of rose and ivory stone!" Gaspar cried. "~~I never saw more~~ beautiful!"

"Wind, rain and sun turn native limestone from its natural white to these colors," Belshazzar explained.

"The effect is lovely indeed," Melchior said.

None of them mentioned fairer palaces left behind in Persia.

The big gates opened and the Chief Eunuch, a bony, mincing man, came out and knelt, ^{in respectful welcome} and the camels knelt, and the Magi and their dozen retainers dismounted and trumpets blew. A full hundred trumpets belled harsh sound up through the golden dancing notes filed off the whirling wheel of the noonday sun. An honor guard of two hundred clanking mercenaries ranged up to act as escort. A guard, besides honoring the party, was always useful in watching for an assassin who might use innocent arrivals for cover.

Tall in their jeweled turbans, the Magi went

through the gates and Gaspar flashed a delighted look at his companions. ~~Within~~, enclosed by cloistered courts, lay gardens and parklike groves and rippling brooks and winding walks bordered by rare flowers, rarer shrubs and rarest trees. Quiet pools reflected statues of Augustus, and his empress, Livia, and Tiberius, his undoubted successor now that Drusus was dead, and the slain Miriamne, as well as half a hundred lesser ones whom Herod found it expedient to honor. These last went up and down, Gaspar had heard. ^{When} ~~As~~ one favorite fell, his bronze was melted so that a new one might ~~be honored~~. go up x

Flanked by the honor guard, the three and their retainers walked ~~through the garden and into~~ the crimson and jet audience hall while the trumpets went on blowing.

Eunuchs were kneeling to indicate the silver seats set in readiness on a deep white carpet close to the golden dais, ringed by candles, which was in readiness for Herod. The Magi settled themselves ~~so as~~ to be comfortable through what was sure to be a long wait. They did, indeed, know everything about Herod.

Bowing in apology for the absence of his master, the Chief Eunuch could not hide a look of worry as he inspected the celebrated guests.

"He's afraid our robes and jewels may make Herod's seem poor," Gaspar said. He was the youngest Magus. He was a ~~beardless~~ beardless shining youth, a student of the other two until study had made him almost their equal and worthy of sharing the star-led journey into Judea. He came from Kashan.

Big Book
I am from

"I should have thought of that," Melchior murmured regretfully. Their clothing was, for a fact, priceless as well as enviably bright. He was the oldest Magus. He was small and frail with face and hands of that ivory translucence which sometimes marks an ascetic of great age. He came from Sava~~n~~.

"But it is a compliment to a king to wear our best," Belshazzar said. He was the middle-aged Magus. He was deep-chested and deep-voiced with a big black beard which looked as though it had just met a whirlwind. Two tame nightingales sat upon his shoulders. He came from Pethor, not far from Ur where Abraham was born. His grandfather, sixteen times removed, had been Balsam.

The Chief Eunuch, out of a corner of his darting eyes, caught movement on either side and gestured angrily. Twenty, thirty, forty mercenaries clanked to space themselves and their javelins along the marble floor and bully back the fascinated crowd pressing in on the majestic three. Back, back, back from horizontal javelins stumbled clients, courtiers, officers, servants, slaves, friends -- But no! Herod had no friends. Back, back, back stumbled the greedy, the glib, the protesting, the worried, the hopeful, the humble, the fearful, the expectant pack who did not dare stay away from Herod's audience hall if they could bribe their way in.

Behind the javelins the pack continued to watch the Magi while minutes dragged on, ten, fifteen, a half hour, three-quarters.

"The King of Chaldea," Belshazzar said, at no pains to keep his voice down, "met us outside his palace. How long do

creature
we wait for this ~~arxand xrox~~ of Rome?"

Belshazzar had inherited a contempt for princes from his sixteen-times-removed grandfather. Balaam had been brought by a prince at least as great as Herod all the way from the Euphrates to curse the Israelites but had blessed them instead, being advised by ^{the wise} ~~his~~ gifted ass on which he rode.

"I don't mind," Gaspar said, "I am learning something every minute."

"Herod is almost here," Melchior murmured although nothing around them gave any evidence of this. His right hand rose in the air palm up, as though receiving something. "I now speak as your Ancient!" His voice was still soft but his glance commanded. "Think of home. Think of Ormadz and of the Holy Spirit which is his other self. Think of nothing that concerns our coming into Judea. A man is with Herod. His mind touched mine. Block it from yours by thinking as I have told you."

Gaspar's shining face grew remote.

"And you, oh Ancient?" Belshazzar ventured out of his beard before he, too, did as he had been told.

"Such men have tried to enter my mind before," Melchior murmured, unworried.

0-0

Trumpets blew, a forest of them. The harsh peals echoed off the lofty roof and were lost in the clanging

of a hundred cymbals rising and falling like yellow shields and in the rolling thunder of a hundred drums. From the rear of the hall eight black slaves in orange livery entered as though walking on eggs. They bore a purple litter on which reclined a gasping, blotched, bloated monstrosity over whose handsome enough apparel the Chief Eunuch sighed in relief before he fell on his face along with all those crowded behind the javelins while from all sides choked voices cried, "Hail, Herod!"

Only the mercenaries on the watch for assassins, and the Magi, did not fall. The Magi merely rose politely.

The litter halted beside the dais and Herod glared over a marble floor lumpy with heads, half-bald, wholly bald, and with hair of every color including courtesan green, and an occasional pair of ^{quivering} humped-up buttocks; then he looked toward the silver seats.

Belshazzar bent in what passed for a bow, Melchior inclined his head in a measured benediction, Gaspar, his bright face intent, smiled with such friendliness that, to the amazement of the slowly rising courtiers, the gasping, ~~bloated~~ ^{bloated} old man gave a half-smile back.

"Gently! Gently!" the Chief Eunuch hissed to the bearers. He had risen and raced over to direct the lowering of the litter. It came to rest ^{beside} ~~on~~ the dais and the Chief Eunuch clicked his teeth in relief.

"And now again! Gently!"

One hearer worked his hands lightly under Herod's bulging shoulders. A second worked his under the small of Herod's

back. Numbers Three and Four got under the huge rump, Five and Six under the doughy legs. At another "Gently!" all lifted, and Seven pulled the litter clear while Eight made sure nothing snagged. The Six poised their burden over the throne. It was less a throne than a second, golden litter full of cushions and deep soft pads. At another tense "Gently!" the bearers lowered carefully and slid their hands away as Herod's weight crushed into the cushions.

Then all eight drew back and eyed the Chief Eunuch, mutely asking for only a nod of approval, their faces bleak lest approval be withheld. their noses turned as far as they dared from the stench which poured through Herod's swollen lips.

From the waiting audience, as the Chief Eunuch finally nodded, a deep sigh arose, perhaps of relief, perhaps of hope deferred.

A slave, holding an enormous tray heaped with meats, roasted chicken, breads, cakes, sweetmeats, cheeses and fresh and dried fruits hurried into position at the foot of the throne, prepared to satisfy the ravenous hunger which was a symptom of Herod's disease.

Propped among his cushions, the tyrant gasped until his swollen throat pulsed like a frog's. For one brief moment his finger moved and a ravaged man, as old as Herod, bent over the throne and met the question in the rheumy eyes. This was Soemus., once a roving Ishmaelite, who had joined his fortune with Herods when both were very young.

"No, Herod," he said in a low, flat voice. "I have

not found a new one. I have looked at many but none resembles her."

^{the} The Magi exchanged glances at this proof of the ~~legend~~ which they had heard. That day after week after month after year, by the King's orders, Soemus searched ~~everywhere~~ for one who looked like the murdered Miriamne. He was dedicated to the search for he had loved her too, and now, long after her death, his consolation was to find ^{now and then} a girl who resembled her, but so far Herod was always ~~unsatisfied and~~ unsatisfied, rejecting each one.

Herod's wrinkled lids drooped in disappointment, and he sighed. But then, as though ^{An inward fire had been} ~~refused by an in-~~ ^{refused} ~~refused~~, he stiffened and willed himself to the interrogation of the Magi. His temporarily clear mind had been planning this since, having learned that wise men from Persia were seeking a child born King of the Jews, he had counselled with the High Priest Joazer and half a dozen former High Priests, for he displaced High Priests as readily ~~as a child~~ ^{on any whim.}

In the periods when his mind cleared, Herod's will was as strong as ever. The trouble was that the mind seldom cleared. After years of driving, ^{it} was rusting away. As a ^{tetrarch} boyish ~~tetrarch~~ of Galilee, his mind and will had overcome the whole Sanhedrin. Later mind and will had raised him to the kingship of all Judea and had held him there, poised on no more than the feathery breath of a Roman overlord. But now he was old, he was sick, and they failed him often.

He was not very old, he was only sixty-nine, but

he was very sick and his foul disease left him capable of ~~any~~ ^{purposeful} ~~unaided~~ effort only by fits and starts. Between times the rust thickened.

His terrorized, watchful court knew when the mind rusted. The grey flesh, the vacant eye, the moaning misery of the unmentionable disease, the dis-interest in pomp, fleshpots and women, the commands forgotten almost before they had been completed, all told them. Sometimes desperate watchers wondered if their moment had not come but just when they might have raised a dagger or thrown a strangler's cord the will, refueled, leaped again for a while.

It was leaping now. The pendulous flesh was less grey, the eye was sharp, the misery of illness was defied, sixty-nine years were defied, death was defied.

A hunchback approached the golden throne. He was richly dressed and his hands were heavy with jeweled rings. Beneath a crest of silky brown hair and a wide bloodless forehead, his deep-socketed eyes were probing as he frowned toward the Magi.

Geber, the hunchback, was one of only fifteen persons to whom Herod granted the privilege of close approach. The eight litter-bearers and the tray-slave had it; for each of them hostages, more precious than their own lives, had been found. Tirzah, Herod's sister, had it. The others were Loazor, the High Priest, the Chief Eunuch, the general of all the mercenaries and, always, of course, Soemus.

^{Tirzah} As the hunchback availed himself of his privilege, ~~Salome~~ jealously claimed it also. Once plumply pleasing to three

Tirzah in these days
husbands, Salome ~~was~~ was so shrunken that wattles swung from
her cheeks and her flat breasts hung like empty waterskins.
Close beside her, Soemus motioned the Chief Eunuch.

"Another cushion," he whispered.

"He can't sit up, and it's almost as bad when
he lies flat," Gaspar said, ^{in pity.} "Halfway is how they try to keep
him, ~~poor man!~~"

One of Herod's bloated fingers moved. Any
larger movement brought pain, even speech brought pain, so that
the finger had become an instrument of command, denial, approval,
anger, instruction, interrogation. Even to lift his eyelids was
painful. They remained closed, but the finger moved ~~and~~ and
Soemus and the hunchback watched it. Better than anyone else
Soemus could read the digital abracadabra but this day the hunch-
back knew he would be involved in the command.

"The Magi!" Soemus said in his flat voice.

The hunchback scowled on the Chief Eunuch and the
latter trotted like an anxious dog to the three who still stood
and still wore their several airs of indifferent obeisance, mild
benediction and friendliness.

The all-purpose finger moved again and Soemus
beckoned the tray. The slave moved a hand toward the bread but
the finger said "No!" The slave poised a carving knife over the
baked chicken. The finger said, "Yes!" and the slave carved a
thick slice and fed it into the ravenous mouth.

"Please!" the Chief Eunuch whispered to the Magi.
"Please! Hurry!"

"We come, we come," Belshazzar said indulgently and stepped aside to let Melchior go first and then followed and was followed by Gaspar.

Across the great room the High Priest Joazar pushed past the javelin barrier with an air of importance quite justified by his apparel. The splendor of this had not lessened in almost fifteen hundred years since Moses had first decreed it for Aaron -- the tall, white turban; the immaculate linen coat with hem full of alternating golden bells and woven scarlet, purple and blue pomegranates, a bell, a pomegranate and then a bell all around; the Breastplate of Judgment inset with four rows of precious stones, ruby, yellow topaz and red carbuncle, then emerald, sapphire and diamond, then orange jacinth, agate and amethyst, then pink beryl, many-colored onyx and opalescent jasper, each stone engraved with the name of one of the Twelve Tribes. The costume justified Joazar's air of importance. It marked him as one who stood second to none in all Judea. It should have proclaimed him great. But to tell the truth he was not great at all.

In Herod's day the High Priest's apparel was still great but the man inside was Herod's slave. Herod had made Joazar and a flick of Herod's finger could unmake him. No High Priest held office except at Herod's pleasure. One had held it only a day. And having reached Herod's dais in the same moment as the Magi, white-bearded Joazar stood slavishly awaiting permis-

sion to speak. He seemed almost awaiting permission to breathe.

Herod turned upon an elbow, his eyes wide open. The white meat was devoured and when his finger waggled, the slave of the tray fed a piece of cheese into the mouth.

The finger commanded the High Priest. Better than anyone else Soemus could interpret the finger's gestures but Joazor did pretty well from terror. Now, in obedient understanding, he bowed lower than any High Priest ever had bowed before Herod's day and beckoned to the Magi.

They did not move or bow. They were already close enough to hear and be heard.

"You may approach," the High Priest said huskily but not Belshazzar nor Melchior nor Gaspar moved and Joazor began to speak.

He spoke of the wonders of the night when the great light had shone over Bethlehem and of all the wondrous rumors which had gained strength since then, especially the one concerning the birth of a Messiah as foretold by prophets through many generations.

"And Herod asks," he ended, "whether it is true that you have come seeking this Messiah and if so whether you have found him and where."

Geber, the hunchback, scrambled past the nine slaves and spoke directly into Herod's ear.

"Of course it is true," he said furiously. "And of course they have found him. I cannot reach the mind of any of the three but of course they know where he is." He spun back to

Melchior. "Where?"

"We, also, wish to know where," Melchior murmured.

"But you have had a sign!" the hunchback protested, as the High Priest stepped submissively aside. "You have come all the way from Persia because you have had a sign."

"Yes, we have had a sign," Melchior murmured.

"But - but!"

Rales filled Herod's chest with a muffled clatter and the slave filled Herod's mouth with more cheese as the all-purpose finger commanded haste.

"I have told Herod," the hunchback cried desperately, that there is nothing in heaven or under it that you do not know."

"Geber, the son of Heth, is partly right," Melchior murmured and the hunchback shivered at such familiarity with his name and his father's name but then he reminded himself that the Magi had been in Jericho easily long enough to gather that information.

"Partly right?" he challenged.

"There is nothing in heaven or under it that I may not know if Ormadz permits," Melchior murmured. "But only if Ormadz permits."

"Well," Geber said craftily, "tell Herod what Ormadz does permit."

"Two years ago, ~~the~~ Magi and many others saw a great light filling the sky," Melchior said.

"Come to the point!" Geber said. "Speak of the second

light, the one seen lately."

"Exactly eleven nights ago!" Melchior murmured.

"And like the first it was a sign."

"Of what?"

"Among us," Melchior murmured, ~~an eclipse, that~~
~~is to say~~ ^{is} darkness, is an omen of evil. Contrarily a great
light is an omen of good. By the great light of two years ago
we had forewarning that a mighty king would be born in the
Westland."

"And being in Persia, the Westland had to be
Judea!" Geber nodded to Herod. "Just as I said!"

"Or in Syria, Egypt, Cappadocia, Mauretania ..."
Melchior murmured. "The sign told us the Westland but not where
in the Westland."

"Nevertheless," Geber said sharply, "just a lit-
tle while ago you did set out for Judea."

"We have been five months on the road."

"But always aiming for Judea," Geber insisted.

"Why?"

"Later we were shown other signs."

"And the later signs brought you here," Geber
pressed.

"I and my companions still await a last sign."
Melchior said quietly.

"You mean one which will say exactly where this
King, if he really has been born, is hidden."

"~~The~~ ^{At} Messiah does not hide," Melchior murmured,
"although it may be that he withholds himself."

The hunchback ~~seemed to be~~ ^{was} bursting with fury.

"But you cannot tell Herod where he may be?"

"Ormazd has not made the place known to us,"

"Joazar⁶ says all prophecies put the place in Bethlehem."

"Ormazd has not made the place known to us," Melchior repeated.

"But have you opened your mind to Ormazd?"

"I! Open my mind to Ormazd!" The Ancient was gently rebuking. "Ormazd will do the opening in his own time, whether my mind wills to open or not." He smiled at Geber. "It is only to men that a Magus is able to open his mind ... or close it."

The hunchback colored, ~~angrily~~ "Well, then," he said quickly, "I am sure you will gladly share with Herod the knowledge you gain when Ormazd does open your mind?"

"Gladly, if Ormazd wills."

"In Judea," Geber said coldly, "It is Herod who wills, Magus! And you are in Judea."

"All men know the power of Herod the Great," Melchior said calmly. "However, in Persia we are accustomed to think always of Ormazd."

Belshazzar had ~~flushed~~ ^{flushed} and Gaspar had ~~stiffened~~ ^{flushed} in ~~anger~~ and Melchior turned to them repeating in veiled warning, "We think always of Ormazd."

Gaspar's shining face again became remote. Belshazzar's beard became a mask. Even the nightingales on his

shoulder, which had been hopping about with interest, grew still.

Herod's finger waggled and Soemus bent close. Then he addressed the wise men. Although no more a Jew than his master, Soemus put reverence into his low, flat voice.

"Herod asks," he said, "that you go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring Herod ~~his~~ word again, that he may come and worship him also."

Soemus looked at the Chief Eunuch who made a sign that the interview was over.

Belshazzar made no more of a bow than he had made at Herod's entrance. Caspar gave a farewell look of pity. Melchior repeated his benediction. Herod saw nothing of what any of them did. He had closed his eyes.

But as the three moved toward the silver chairs to pick up their attendants, Herod roused. He waggled a finger for a cake and then for Soemus who went quickly after the wise men.

"Herod says he will send a messenger with you. When the awaited sign tells you where this Messiah is to be found, tell the messenger. Then he ~~can~~^{will} hurry to Herod and Herod ~~can~~^{will} hurry with his homage."

"And the messenger," Melchior murmured, "is Geber."

Soemus looked surprised, and Geber, who had joined them, shivered again.

As the Magi walked calmly past the fence of javelins the hunchback kept close to Melchior. The fury which had marked him had faded. His face was drawn and cold.

Outside the gates where the camels waited a beggar stood, a thin, dirty man wearing only a ragged burlap loincloth.

"Do you know that man?" Melchior asked the hunchback.

Geber looked and closed one of his heavily ringed hands upon his warm, rich robe, drawing it aside. "No!" he said. "Certainly not."

"You will," Melchior said. "I think you may know him well."

o-o

Back among his cushions, Herod's eyes grew vacant, his flesh grey, his lips slack, and the misery of his sickness and of age and, perhaps, of the torment of the ghosts of his slain overwhelmed him. The slave was offering fruit. The finger a second ago had demanded fruit. But Herod no longer had the strength even to respond to his ravenous hunger. Inert, the gluttoned beast lay torpid once more. His mind had stopped again and was rusting.

CHAPTER TEN

Without the blemish of his crooked back, Geber might have been a High Priest bolder than the slavish Joazor and Herod's implacable enemy. His blood line was right for so great a role. On his mother's side he was a prince of Israel, tracing back to that King Zedekiah destroyed by Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar who razed Jerusalem and carried the Jews into exile. On his father's side he was descended from Zadok, High Priest under Solomon, and his great-grandfather and grandfather themselves had been High Priests. His father was even now the chief of one of the Temple Divisions, and his four brothers were senior priests. But all these had been men without blemish as the Code of Priests required.

Father and brothers had known from the first that blemished Geber could not follow the family tradition. Geber himself had known it early, but he had not been unhappy in the groves and gardens of his father's home, busy with his scrolls and studies. Mystically devout, he had searched out holy truths and had talked much with his brothers. Then his world had been turned topsy-turvy. Through the conniving of an uncle he had been ordered to court. A crooked back would not do for a priest, but it was fine for a jester.

Thrown into the glittering arena of the court, the gentleness of the delicate boy had changed to fury. ^{In} ~~The~~ bitter revenge he had turned his strange gift, of which he was increasingly aware,

to Herod's purposes. In time he was elevated to a place among the tyrant's intimates. He found himself ranking below only Tirzah and Soemus.

Herod, indeed, trusted Geber, the hunchback, to have sent him with the Wise Men to Jericho.

O-O-O-

There was no other city like Jericho near which the Magi, in their stately camp, awaited the last sign. It had been a spot of Canaanite beauty when Joshua's trumpets cracked its walls. Babylonian warriors had envied what they saw as their scythed chariots mowed through Zedekiah's fleeing army. The pupils of Elisha had found it perfect, barring bitter water, and his miracle sweetened that. Pompey had rested amid its luxury before his profane treasure hunt in the Holy of Holies.

Close to the tumbling Jordan it escaped the winters which sometimes briefly blanketed with snow the golden Temple high in Jerusalem. And other heights, Nebo and Pisgah, indeed the whole mountain range of Abarim, turned aside the eastern summer winds which scorched the rest of Judea. Its abundant fruits always ripened earliest, grapes, apricots, figs, dates, citrons, black and white mulberries. And now Herod had rebuilt the city and came often for its baths which, although not healing to his sores like Callirhoe's sulphur pools, were a comfort to his brittle, aching bones. For his amusement he had built a theatre.

"And of course," Geber, the hunchback, ~~son of Herod~~ said to Melchior, "the big Fortress of Herodium. Half a cohort of the Tenth is stationed here and four hundred Balearic slingers."

Wherever Herod built a palace to live in, he had to build a fortress in order to feel safe.

After forty-eight hours with the Magi, the hunchback felt safe. He shivered no more. The feverish tainted years with Herod fell away, his fury fell away, in these kind presences .

He enjoyed their calm discussions, and Gaspar's ceaseless interest in the whole wide world of thought and action stirred a wistful nostalgia. How wonderful to be as free from guile and hypocrisy as this young saint! Gaspar was always bringing in fresh subjects for talk, and Geber, in his own gentle youth and the talks with his brothers in their father's garden, had liked good talk. It had been his chief relief from the shame of his deformity until Herod, discovering the hunchback's mystic gift, had offered wealth and fine apparel and dainty foods, and women. But none had been as comforting as this old resource, recovered now, of discussion and debate.

"I have learned two great things!" Gaspar cried coming into the council tent on the second evening, and Geber smiled in anticipation. He and Belshazzar sat alone. Melchior, a little earlier, had withdrawn himself.

~~Belshazzar~~ pretended ^{ing} awe at such swift accumulation of knowledge.

"And what are the great things?" ^{Belshazzar} he asked,

"Well!" Gaspar said, "We all know, of course, that Sargos who was king of Babylon twenty-five hundred years ago was born while his mother hid from enemies and was set afloat on the Euphrates in a bulrush boat to save his life and was rescued and

protected until he was old enough to lead his people ..."

"And now," Belshazzar smiled, stroking first one and then the other of his nightingales, "you have learned that Moses who led these Children of Israel fifteen hundred or so years ago also was a bulrush baby, but in Egypt?"

"I might have known it would be old to you," Gaspar said .

"Old but more than great!" Belshazzar said. "Such parallels prove that Ormadz uses the same wonders to teach people everywhere."

"But your Ormadz, whatever Ormadz is, had nothing to do with our Moses!" Geber protested. "It was our Lord who saved Moses and gave him the leadership of our people."

"Come, come!" Belshazzar said, much as the day before he had said, "We come, we come!" "Isn't it true that you Children of Israel say there is but one God?"

"What else? In all time and every world."
~~naturally:~~

"Well, isn't there still but one even though you call him Lord and we call him Ormadz?"

Here was an invitation to admit that all Hebrews only shared, and with Gentiles, a possession which they jealously claimed for their own. Geber swallowed ~~hard~~. He had never before considered such a possibility and it was hard, indeed, to ~~swallow~~. ~~accept~~ x

"And what is the second great thing you learned?" Belshazzar said.

But Gaspar whispered, "Later!" Ivory Melchior,

the council tent's inner room.

frail but erect, had come from ~~behind a curtain~~. He walked to the tent door and looked out. Judea's sun was suspended only a little above the horizon, a soft, rosy ball wrapped with narrow grey clouds like swaddling bands.

A mile or so to the north Jericho's walls rose and inside, the towers of Herod's palace lifted and to the south stood the thick battlements of Herod's fortress filled with Roman swords and Balearic slings. In front of Jericho the ribbon of the Jerusalem road unwound, but the Ancient kept his gaze on another road, hardly more than a donkey track, that wriggled through brown fields, crooked gulches and deep canyons toward distant, invisible Bethlehem.

Melchior beckoned and the master of the caravan trotted from among yellow tents that crouched amid rocks silvered by the twilight, and Belshazzar and Gaspar leaped up, ~~in exprostation.~~

"Now?" Gaspar cried.

"Now?" Belshazzar cried.

"Now!" Melchior said. ~~The last sign had come.~~ They need wait no longer. The Ancient, at last, knew where, exactly where, they might see the great one whose coming they had awaited so long.

"We shall see the King this night," he said, his ivory face showing a little color.

"And worship him!" Gaspar cried.

"Tonight!" Belshazzar cried, his black beard ablow.

~~The caravan master came in, and Melchior pointed to three carefully corded prods against the tent wall.~~

"On the twelfth night after the birth," Melchior murmured.

The camel master came in.

"Make our three best mounts ready," Melchior said and smiled on Geber. "And an extra mount."

The camel master waited.

Melchior pointed to three carefully corded packs against the tent wall.

"Put these on three baggage camels," he said, "and our best driver in charge of them."

"Your best driver is here and already is in charge, Ancient," the camel master said. His leathery face was glowing.

o-o-o

Strapping the three packs to the three baggage camels, the camel master was almost choked with pride. He was a plain man of the desert, but he had served Melchior over many years and he shared a secret known in full to only three other men in the world. Now the secret would soon be revealed to the one for whom it was intended.

Oh, the whole caravan knew part of it. All the men had used their ears. All had picked up a bit here, a bit there. A baby, a prince not long in the world, was to receive the gifts.

But who else, beside the Magi themselves, knew the whole secret of the gifts: the curved perfection of every last jar, the delicate whorl on every last ornament, the gleam and flash of every last jewel? Who but the one man who alone had put every last gift into the three packs and now was loading them.

Gold and frankincense and myrrh. The words made a song, Gaspar had said one time as he watched the camel master at the packing.

Of course the gifts were not just gold and frankincense and myrrh. The gold was not merely chunks of gold, or dust or bars or coins. The gold was in ornaments which, if only because of the time and skill required for their making, were priceless. Gold thread bewilderingly woven through garments which, even without the thread, would have been a Magi's ransom. And amulets whose

history would have made them, too, a ransom, even if they had been made out of roadside stone. And bracelets, necklaces and many other ornaments.

"Gold to crown a mighty king," Gaspar had said.

And the frankincense was not merely a fragrant solid, crushed from the winged seeds, and the three-celled fruit of this or that shrub, and enriched with its own lightly rising oil. Its perfume not only filled precious jars. It poured from linens and silks so fine that you touched them again to make sure they, and not shadows, were there.

"Frankincense," Gaspar had said, "for the worship of the true Messiah whose name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace."

And the myrrh was not simply so and so much amber stuff darkly glowing with so and so much rockrose resin. Like the frankincense it was stored in jars and vases on which master workmen had labored a lifetime.

Gaspar had lifted a jar to his nostrils.

"Myrrh for a great healer," he had said gravely. He had not added a think which, back in Persia, the camel driver often had heard of myrrh, that the bitter perfume prefigured tragic death.

The camel driver puzzled over the saying a little as he finished strapping the last carefully corded pack on the last camel.

He almost forgot to order the beast intended for Geber.

~~"Put these on three baggage camels and put our best driver in charge," he said. "And have our three best mounts ready and, he smiled on Geber, an extra mount."~~

Geber realized what had come to pass. He realized also that he ought at once to demand this information, newly come to the Ancient, and hurry it to Herod. Herod's command had been imperative. Moreover, Geber knew the penalty for disobedience. Or rather, and more dreadful, he did not know the penalty except that it would be ~~terrible~~. *Dreadful*

Only two days earlier he would have tried to reach Melchior's mind and obtain the information. Now he knew better than to try. But he opened his mouth to ask and then he closed his mouth. Who was he to ask what this Ancient did not freely offer? He stood and waited in silence.

Melchior went to his own tent and Gaspar went to his and Belshazzar went to his. But first Belshazzar took the nightingales off his shoulders onto his big hairy wrist and carried them to a swinging perch and spoke softly until they sat quietly there.

A Geber waited and all three men came back dressed in white. Even their shoes were of white leather and all wore immaculate turbans and Melchior's was taller, even, than the turban of the High Priest Joazor.

Melchior nodded and Geber in his rich cloak of Herodian purple followed the others to four white camels, ~~and a dun-colored fifth~~ which knelt and the four men mounted. The camel master rode a dun-colored fifth and behind ~~him,~~ *him,* with ~~three more camels~~ *three* more camels carrying the three carefully corded packs. ~~The white camels knelt,~~ *was* and the Magi and Geber mounted and Melchior put his beast into an

easy amble along the donkey track and soon all the animals were footing ^{it} through a canyon so deep that even their bobbing hammer-heads did not show over the rims.

The sun set and darkness fell, or would have fallen except that ~~a young moon was~~ ^{uncounted stars were} on hand to spread over bushes, rocks, riders and animals and, indeed, over all the ~~earth~~ ^{desert landscape}, a soft, catholic luminosity which blended landscape and riders into one vast shadowy whole.

"Watch for a big rock like a thumb," Melchior said. "We turn at the Stone of Bohan." ^PIn silence, so skillfully did the camels set down their broad feet, they slipped through more canyons and finally they did come to the mark which reminded new generations of the long-forgotten thing done by Reuben's son when the Tribes came out of the Wilderness.

Now the track angled southerly and the camels ghosted through the moonlight and scrambled out of one canyon and into another and across a narrow stream made turbulent by winter rains and across another, and then they came to the Valley of Trouble where Joshua stoned the thief, Achan, and then, hardly visible under a ^{spreading} terebinth tree, a man appeared.

He was the ^{thin warty} beggar who had stood outside Herod's audience hall. He still wore only a loincloth, ~~and still was~~ ~~barefooted and gaunt.~~

"The Lord our God is one Lord," the beggar said and touched head and heart, ~~to three so much greater than himself.~~

"Ormazd is god of all," Melchior murmured.

Melchior turned to Geber.

"Now you must make your choice," he said. "Will

you take the word back to Herod?"

beyond
Out ~~from~~ Jericho, down the deep canyons, toward the sunset, into the darkness, under the uncounted stars, past the Stone of Bohan, over the turbulent streams, through the Valley of Trouble and, finally, to the terebinth tree, Geber had been exulting. For the first time in ever so long he had not a care in the world.

The generous Magi had taken upon their noble shoulders all his burdens. He was calm and free in a security which had grown ever since he had entered the Magis' tents. His only reminder of the nightmarish fury and fever which had whipped him in the Palace was a small uneasiness lest this new peace might not last. Now he looked at his questioner in consternation and the uneasiness grew.

"You mean no one will stop me if I try to go back?" His words rattled like stones down a cliff.

"No one."

"But you cannot trust Herod that much! He said he wished to worship, but you know that is not the truth. If I go back and only direct him to this terebinth tree his mercenaries will swarm about ^{the} ~~that~~ place ^{you seek} ~~the star overhead is pointing out~~, almost before you leave it."

"I was to tell you when we were sure where the star led," Melchior said. "That was the understanding. Now you know, and you must choose whether to take the word to Herod."

"Oh, so that's it?" Geber screamed. "You put the blame on me. If I go back and tell, the evil is mine."

"If you feel it would be evil to tell, you must feel that it would be good not to tell. You have an opportunity to choose