



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler
Lovelace Family Papers.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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

He had been, of course, a little on guard ever since the watchdog's muttering tumbled back to the study, and the puzzled suspicious watchman came to ask if he should admit two shabby, urgent visitors. Now, on recognizing Geber, he grew doubly wary, because of an instant suspicion of the story that the hunchback had deserted Herod.

More likely the crooked fellow was still in the service of the tyrant and his visit was to ferret out help for the search which Herod was pressing. This possibility was such a threat that Rusco would have been on guard for Joseph's sake even if his own trouble at the Palace were not still fresh.

"Sit down," he said to the pair come so soundlessly into the study. "And let's see -- what is your name?" He spoke to the thin one.

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

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

"I've seen you often enough," Rusco said to the hunchback. "You are Geber, Herod's man."

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

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

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

"I don't ask you to take just my word," Crookback said and gestured toward his companion. "You must know

strands which entangle young lovers. Behind them came Candace, carrying Deborah's unneeded cloak.

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

In silence he and Deborah and Lucianius waited with the strange pair who were silent, also. Peleg ~~and~~ settled against the wall and sighed and his skinny body seemed to melt in the warmth and comfort of the study. Geber, a sackcloth folded over his humped shoulders, sat as motionless as Peleg, but not as relaxed. His deep-socketed eyes probed the faces before him.

^{o-o}
"These people all know as much as I do," Rusco said to his ^{visitors} ~~visitors~~ when Bracae came in with Bria. His glance included privileged Candace, loitering in the ~~study~~ doorway.

~~He had told Deborah of Herod's plans and she kept little from Candace. Lucianius had been in the Palace through yesterday's critical moment, and Bracae, of course, had told Bria.~~

~~"They all know as much as I do," Rusco said.~~
"Now what exactly do you ~~want~~ ^{looked} ~~how~~ to tell us?" ⁽¹¹⁾

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

"The carpenter, Joseph," Crookback said, "has

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

"Why not?" Rusco asked.

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

"But why has Herod settled on this carpenter?"

"He hasn't, yet. But his sister has learned of a child presented to holy Simon^e. The child was ~~taken~~^{taken} to Simon^e by the ~~Temple~~ priest Zacharias, so the neighborhood of Zacharias' home is being watched."

"I have heard rumors ..." Rusco began cautiously. And so he had. ~~But~~^{As} it was still ~~unbelievable~~^{astounding} that they should apply to Joseph and Mary.

"Many have heard rumors," Peleg said importantly. "Some have even spoken with Magi from the East. ~~Will~~
~~hesitate~~ The rumors may be more than rumors. But it is best if you do not ask ~~any~~^u farther about them. It is enough that you help."

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

In Rusco elation was rising ~~like spring~~ ^{decision}
"Perilous business" ~~had~~ started ~~so~~ as though on a cue. But this, ^h
~~Rusco~~ realized, was not his ~~decision~~ to make alone. And because he had always tried to let any allies share the responsibilities of a decision as they had to share the dangers which the decision brought on, he looked toward his daughter and the others. None of them hesitated.

"Joseph is wonderful," Deborah said. "If we can help him, let's help him."

"Besides," Lucianus ^{Said,} ~~smiled,~~ "if Joseph and Mary are here for the wedding it will be the more the merrier."

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

"We know," ~~Crockback~~ and Peleg said, and ~~Peleg~~ ^{Wesley} smiled like a ~~living~~ skeleton.

"I've never seen the woman," Bria said, "but if she's good enough for Joseph she's good enough for me. And I like having a baby around."

"I never yet refused to help a fighting man in trouble," Bracae said. "And what a fighting man Joseph is, or anyway would have been if I'd got to him in time."

"He's made every hook in the villa as solid as a rock," Candace ~~smiled.~~ ^{Said.}

"It's unanimous," Rusco said, turning to Geber. "When will they be here?"

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

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

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

"The baby out in that dark and cold!" Deborah cried ... as though she alone knew all about babies. "Candace! Come along!" She snatched the cloak which Candace still held and ran.

"The winter sleeping room next to ours is one of the warmest in the whole villa," Bria said ~~to Bracae~~ "I'll put them in there."

In a moment Deborah triumphantly ushered in Joseph and Mary, with the baby warmly bundled up in Deborah's cloak. The baby was asleep and Deborah and Candace were rapturous as they hovered over him.

"What is his name?" Deborah ^{asked} ~~wanted to know.~~

"Jesus."

"It's a beautiful name."

So much walking and riding and hurrying had loosened the ends of Mary's braids and in the lamplight soft wisps of ~~brown~~ hair made an aureole around her head. The hem of her blue dress was dusty, and ^{her feet} in their wooden-soled sandals ~~feet~~ were dusty, too. In spite of her smiling pleasure at this meeting with the people about whom Joseph had so often told her she was tired and showed it.

"She's tired to death," Bria whispered to Bracae. ~~And what a sweet face!~~ And she isn't much older than Deborah. I'm going to go hot up some supper for them. Ask Candace to fix baths."

Joseph looked from Peleg and Crookback to Bracae and Vedius Rusco, his face clouded.

"I'm ^{too} ~~wanted~~ not to go home!" he said. "I'm ^{too} ~~unable~~ to come here! What ^{is} ~~is~~ this all about?"

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

"It'll be just for the night," Joseph said.
"I told Mary we'd be off for Nazareth tomorrow."

"If you stay through the day after," Deborah cried, looking up from the baby, "you'll be here for the wedding."

"A wedding!" Mary cried. "Joseph, there's going to be a wedding!"

Peleg looked at Crookback, plainly touched by Mary's pleasure ^{at the prospect of} ~~in~~ a wedding, with dancing and singing. Crookback looked at Vedius Rusco, a warning in his deepset eyes. Per-
suade them to stay. You can make sure that the wrong guests
do not see them.

"I think they'd be safe," Crookback said.

"Safe!" Joseph said restlessly. "Safe is what everybody has been saying for the last five hours." Are we really not safe?

He looked at Mary. "If Mary wants to stay for the wedding, we will," he said. "But not a day longer."

"Good!" Rusco said. "I don't think there's any need to rush away." He turned to Bracae. "Is everything ready for them?"

"Bria has already started things," Bracae said,
~~"And she told me which room."~~

Mary turned around until she found Peleg. He was looking at her humbly.

"Thank you for guiding us, Peleg," she said, and the beggar touched hand to head and heart as though he could not do it often enough.

Mary turned her smile to Crookback who was watching her closely with his deepset eyes.

"Thank you," she said.

He bowed like a courtier. He came near. "Now that we have so many lamps ... may we see the baby?" he said.

"Why, of course!" As pleased as though she had been the one to ask and receive a privilege Mary turned back the cloak.

Geber looked down, and Peleg, too, took a peek. Vedius watched them, his heart moved.

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

But Geber was calm and unafraid as he looked down at the sleeping ~~into~~ baby x

They are Miriam's people, too. And Deborah's.
~~Rusco thought.~~

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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

"What is it, Joseph?"

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

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

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

"I'm all dressed," Joseph said, "and Mary is dress-

ing and getting the baby ready."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rusco stood up and dropped on Joseph's shoulder a

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

"Flee from what?" he said. "Herod's hunters, if they are after you, don't know where you are. And if they do, there's always the dining room. You can use the tunnel any time you need it and fool the whole pack. They'll never post guards on the far side of the hill. ¹¹ ~~That's a mile away.~~"

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

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

Joseph's silence was ^{determined} ~~stubborn~~. He must obey ~~this~~ ^{The} warning which he had received.

Rusco pushed back the curtain from his bedroom doorway.

"We'll get Ercae; and Lucianus, too. He's just up from Egypt. The roads will be fresh in his mind."

He lifted a night lamp off its wall hook.

"I still wish you'd stay for the wedding," he said.

"Mary is going to be sorry to miss it. I could see that she likes weddings."

Joseph's silence answered.

"All right," Rusco said cheerfully. "After all, a dream is a dream. If I had one pushing me this hard I guess I'd pay attention, too."

It was impossible to wake Bracae without waking Bria. They slept in a fond tangle of legs and arms. Bracae tried quietly to work free but she opened an eye and shortly followed after him to Vedius Rusco's study. And so much stirring in the quiet of night aroused Deborah and she came with Candace, and Lucianius was filled with bliss at the unexpected vision, rosy, drowsy-eyed, exhaling promises of delight.

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

Mary came in, the baby in her arms. Not quite awake herself, although she had been up long enough to swaddle and nurse the boy, she was serene. A husband who woke her in the dead of night with a message from an angel was in no way upsetting.

There had already been considerable discussion and Lucianius, proud of his skill, had guaranteed any road map that Joseph might desire.

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

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

Candace brought food for everyone. Bria went out to pack provisions for the journey. Deborah had offered everything she owned and most of what her father owned, and kept taking anxious peeks at the baby.

"He won't mind the trip at all," Mary said.

"He'll never know whether it's me or Briar bouncing him."

"I'm sorry to have you miss the wedding," Deborah said.

"I'm sorry too," Mary said. "But Joseph says we mustn't stay. Much as I'd like to see you in a crown of myrtle blossoms and the two of you breaking the goblet."

Deborah glanced delightedly at Lucianus, bowed over the map.

"I know you're disappointed," she said to Mary, "not to be going back to Nazareth. Joseph told us you'd been talking of nothing but going ~~back~~ home."

The baby stirred and Mary stroked him and looked down with a thoughtful face.

She recalled Joseph's accounts of the rude Moabite country toward Egypt and pictured herself riding deeper and deeper into repelling hills and canyons and barren desert.

Around Nazareth the countryside would soon be blooming with flowers of more colors than she could name. The streams in springtime abundance would be giving drink to fig, pomegranite, olive, apricot, date and walnut trees. Grapevines would be clothing their black stumps in rich leafage. Life and beauty would burgeon on the folding hills. How the larks would sing, winging up to the sky, and how the bluebirds, lighter than feathers, would perch on the greening branches, and how the doves on ^{her} ~~their~~ own roof would coo, while she rode into the sterile south!

Mary shook her head in self-reproof.

"But I've never been to Egypt," she said, more to

herself than to Deborah. "I've never been farther from Nazareth than Bethlehem. I'll like a longer journey."

Joseph overheard.

"It'll be a lot longer," he said soberly.

"Briar can take his time."

"As if he ever did anything else!"

"That donkey!" Mary said.

Lucianius handed his ^{map}~~sketch~~ over to Rusco and the latter approved and handed it to Joseph.

"There's your road," he said. "Read the thing just the way you would a building plan. It takes you the long way but I think it's the right one."

"It'll be a rough way." Lucianius said. Like most young men he was doubtful that anyone older than himself had the strength for a rough road. "The country east of the Dead Sea is rugged."

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

"The nearest border town is Rinocolura, and Herod's power ends there," Rusco said.

"There'll be hills nearly as tough as mountains," Lucianius said.

"The Tribes climbed them," Joseph said and Mary nodded. "When they came out of Egypt they climbed them by thousands! And hundreds of thousands!"

"Hundreds of thousands?" Rusco said. "I know

"There was water for Hagar and Ishmael," Joseph said and smiled at Mary. "The trouble is, we'll go pretty much south of the Hill of Mercy where the angel told Hagar of water."

"These angels of yours are certainly a big help," Bracee said enviously.

"Along the dead sea it's even worse," ^{Lucianus} ~~Rusee~~ said. "Nothing gross. A few flies, if they can feed on carrion, but everything else is dead and the gashes in the earth are big enough to swallow a ^{cohort} ~~town~~ and mere of these bits of purple stone."

that country clear to the Wilderness of Zin and Paran. I know it clear to Goshen. Maybe thousands climbed, but hundreds of thousands? Never!"

"I have my own notions about those hundreds of thousands," Joseph chuckled. "I think that since it all happened a cipher or two got tacked on."

"Amateurs never make accurate reports," Tribune Marcus Seclator Lucianius said profoundly and Deborah ~~added~~^{bramed} admiring agreement.

"It's all desert now," Rusco said, "east of Zin, and south, and for that matter north." He nodded. "That's quite a well one of your people built, Joseph, at Beersheba."

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

"It certainly comes in handy these days," Rusco said. "The whole region is parched and tormented. It's flat sometimes, rolling sometimes, and sometimes just a wind-blown litter of bits of dull purple stone, but always desert. And hot! You'll need to be careful of water."

insert
If the threat of so much hardship bothered Mary she did ~~not~~^{not} show it.

"Where do you think you'll go in Egypt?" Rusco asked.

"Wherever I go I'll find some of our people," Joseph said. "Since the ~~Dispersion~~^{Scite}, they're spread all over. Alexandria, Memphis, Leontopolis, On! And every city has its synagogue, or a dozen! I'll probably try On first."

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

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

"On could be our city of refuge," Mary said, *pleased*
With the thought, "City of refuge?" Rusco repeated.

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

"On your journey you'll be days and days," Lucianus said.

"I'll make it," Joseph said.

"Now how about money?" Rusco said.

"Egypt needs carpenters. A carpenter can earn all he needs in Egypt."

"Especially a good carpenter," Mary said.

"Just the same," Rusco said, "a little backlog won't hurt," and he tried to push a purse into Joseph's hand.

"I'd take it if I needed it," Joseph said, pushing it back. "Thanks just the same."

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

"I have my staff," Joseph said. And at that Rusco shook his head in such long-suffering exasperation that Joseph had

to smile, ^{Even} ~~even~~ while his heart filled toward this big, ardent Roman. ~~Even~~ among his ^{very} own people there were not many who would have been as quick to offer aid so freely!

"All right," Rusco said. "Have it your own way. No weapons! After all, you'll soon pick up a travelling party so large that not even a big robber band will think of attacking it. You'll be all right, once you're through the tunnel."

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

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

"I think," he said, smiling at Vedius Rusco, "that we'll just start off through the gate. ~~I don't want to go hauling Mary and the baby through a black tunnel.~~"

"The gate!" Vedius Rusco threw up his hands. "You certainly are sure of yourself. And Mary is even surer. But why not do it my way? Just say you're humoring me. We'll light Mary all the way through, ^{The tunnel} as bright as day. And then you'll be, the

the three of you, going along just as you were coming down from Nazareth."

"The gate will be best," Joseph said. "And the quicker we're gone, the less likely we are to bring any trouble on you."

▼Trouble! Vadius Rusco bowed his neck and rubbed the back of it, as a man does sometimes in tired satisfaction after a day's work. When a man has finished all he has aimed to finish, what does he care about any trouble, even the biggest?

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

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

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

He looked at Mary, waiting beside Joseph in a gentle ease which could not have been greater if she had been holding Ceres' comforting hand. He thought of Herod.

If this woman's child is truly the expected Messiah then Herod is plotting an unspeakable crime. He is forcing a man-hunt which men will never forget nor forgive. He is hunting down a ... demigod.

All his life Rusco had used that word to describe

the sometimes almost holy son of a mortal (which the woman, Mary, certainly was) and one of the gods (and certainly a god had to be involved in the birth of a Messiah). But it did not fit this case. Just as there were many gods, there had been many demigods, some not holy at all. From Miriam and from Joseph, Rusco had learned that there might be, not many gods but only one. And if this child, Jesus, was the son of the one god he was more than demigod.

It would take time to think this through. ~~Was~~
 Rusco rubbed his neck and ^{looked} ~~smiled~~ at Joseph.

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

Joseph smiled ~~back~~. He certainly would get out while night held. Flee into Egypt was a command which did not encourage dawdling. But night or day did not really matter. ^{He that} keepeth Israel, shall neither slumber nor sleep. Joseph thought he was speaking to himself. But he heard his own voice saying the words.

They all went out of the villa, and night still held although the moon was low now and the stars were paling. There was a great emptiness beneath the arch of sky, and silence also. The dog did not bark and the watchman opened the gate without a word and the little donkey which Bracae had ready did not bray but sidled close to Joseph, twitching ^{its} ~~his~~ ears.

Rusco felt excited, even fearful, and he could see that Deborah and Lucianus, and the ^{others} ~~servants~~ shared his mood but

Just under level

don't write sent

Joseph and Mary moved with a quiet assurance. They might have been starting to call on a Nazareth neighbor. They did not seem at all like a pair on the brink of a journey at which seasoned soldiers might well balk.

Bria, who herself had made more than one hasty night departure from more than one legion camp, had rolled blankets on Briar to make a seat, and Joseph closed his hands on Mary's elbows and floated her up to it. Then he took ~~up~~ the food pack which Bria had prepared and ~~the~~ small brazier she had brought for making fires over which Mary might cook and from which she might draw a little heat, ~~when needful~~, at night.

The baby still slept soundly and Mary hugged him closer looking up and around at the vast empty darkness. Deborah and Bria and Candace came up and she kissed them.

"Woden ~~will~~ keep you in his care!" Bria said.

"Come to see us when you come back to Judea ... Lucianus and me, I mean," Deborah said.

"And come to the villa too," Candace said, ~~rest-~~^{leaving}
~~ing one hand~~ for a moment ^{Against} on Mary's ~~shoulder~~ as though for comfort.

They all ~~s~~poke in whispers. The men whispered, giving Joseph fresh advice, and warning him not to lose the map and saying goodbye at last. Rusco's hands gripped Joseph's arms.

"Peace on your house," Joseph said.

He bumped his staff ~~sturdy~~ against Briar's rump. The donkey looked around to make sure his master was ^{in earnest} ~~serious~~, and then looked back to Mary as though to make sure she was firmly seated and the baby snug. And then he stepped out, although at a

deliberate gait which told everyone concerned that he proposed to take his own sweet time.

Mary waved and Joseph lifted his staff in a gesture which said, "All is well!" His sandalled feet and Briar's delicate hooves made no sound. There was nothing to hear and indeed, you might have said, there was nothing to see because man and donkey and the donkey's riders melted almost at once into the night. Ruseo remembered what Joseph had quoted out of his holy writings. It did seem as though the departing three were watched by eyes which would not sleep or slumber.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Bria routed a dozen snoring slaves out of their blankets.

"I want," she told them, "better food than you ever fixed in all your born days. Not heavy! And not ^{too} much! But perfect from first hot rolls to last chilled fruit."

And every bowl, plate and goblet as clean as a whistle or she'd skin them alive!

She wanted, by eleven o'clock, a breakfast worthy of the bride ~~whom~~ she had watched, with love and pride and a few tears, disappear around midnight in the arms of Lucianius.

Flower-decked, veiled in flame, her waist girdled with wool, her ankles encircled by golden bells, Deborah had been borne through the draperies at the doorway of her own suite happily murmuring, "Where thou art Gaius I am Gaia," according to old, old ritual.

As she was lost to sight, high-held lamps were lowered by sighing, sentimental guests -- a hundred and more friends of Vedius Rusco and Deborah including, of course, the officers of the Tenth Legion from fat General Orfitus Proculus down, and all their women folks. Even Helius Naepor, although not

Salvidinius Muso or Panthera! Naepor had received from Rusco the warm welcome saved for an old comrade and for a little he had seemed glad to be there, but then he had turned sullen and quarrelsome and had vanished between two drinks.

"That means he got off in nothing flat," Bracae had said, when Bria made the comment.

Bracae would gladly have been still snoring but he had not been able to sleep after Bria untangled herself and bounced from bed. He was not, however, half as concerned, he insisted, as she was about the breakfast.

"You promised her mother, just as much as I, that you'd look after her!" Bria said.

"What is there to look after? Those two are so much in love they won't know whether they are eating raw barley or fresh ambrosia. And everything else has had to go all right. It isn't as it was with you, a bridal night in the middle of a whole legion."

"You never heard me say anything against that," Bria told him and went to put an ear to the draperies which had hidden Deborah and Lucianus now for almost ten hours.

No sound! Of course Deborah's study and boudoir intervened between ear and bridal chamber. Bria listened harder and this time was rewarded. Soft laughter came through the draperies. She went back to the kitchen.

"I think they've decided that they're getting hungry," she said, "I think they'll be ready for breakfast any time now."

"Not until they've had their baths!" Bracae said.

"Oh, baths!" Bria said. "Neither of them is more than half Roman, if that, but either is Roman enough to want to bathe before eating." She smiled. "For Deborah the bath will be as mixed up as that wedding yesterday."

"I never was sure what was going on," Bracae said. "First it was Jupiter's priest and spelt bread. Then it was the Temple priest and a goblet to be broken. First an ox-yoke, then a canopy."

"And yesterday," Bria said, "Deborah was ready to say, with every well-brought up girl in Judea, that bathing with a man wasn't modest. But now she'll act like any Roman girl and make nothing of it, just because those priests said a few words."

The slave who was minding the hourglass flipped it over and, as he had been ordered, signalled that the breakfast hour was only sixty fleeting minutes away. Bria looked toward the hearths. The light, risen dough for hot breads, sweet and plain, was being pushed into the ovens. The planning couldn't have been righter.

"Everything will be ready on the dot," she said.

"I'll carry their table into her study, myself," Bracae said.

✓ "I told her," Bria said, "that just the two of them in there would be better than ⁱⁿ the big dining room where everybody would be going and coming. Marriage is a right thing

and natural, but a girl can't face the world ~~the first thing~~ on the morning after and look and act as though nothing had happened."

"You didn't even want to leave the tent," Bracae remembered.

"When six thousand soldiers were waiting with their tongues hanging out? I should say not! And was I glad you were as big as you were!"

"I stopped their monkeyshines," Bracae said complacently.

"That pair can't stay abed forever," Bria said. "For one thing they've got the ride to Jericho ahead of them,"

In a welcome surprise gesture, Vedius Rusco had bought a winter villa there and had offered it for the honeymoon.

"I know the place," Bracae said, "and it'll be just the thing! I wish someone had offered you and me a country house in Cantabria."

"We couldn't have had more fun than we had in our tent," Bria said and gave him a slap, and hurried off to put an ear against the draperies.

o-o

Vedius Rusco came out of his bedroom, his shock of white hair still twisted from sleep.

"They've just gone for their baths, I think," Bria said. "My guess is that they'll be asking for breakfast in

about an hour."

Memory warmed Ruaco. He and Miriam had bathed for more than an hour before she sat up with water dripping from her shoulders and surprise rippling over her heart-shaped face to say that she was starving. Her speech always soared beyond all reasonable limits. She was always starving, never merely hungry; always parched, never merely thirsty; always scorched, never merely warm; always icy, never merely cold.

"Starving!" she had said in the remembered voice which had always held an echo for him alone even when many were within hearing. And he had stood her up, like a statue, and wound her in yards of something silk and carried her light, virginally thin body, not to such a table as was being readied now for her daughter, but back to bed where he had fed her while she laughed.

ho
quote

"I do like to remember the way she used to laugh," he thought. "Her laughter was like a feather floating down out of the sky."

"I'll bathe as soon as those two clear out," Rusco said. "Tell Bracae to join me."

"I'll get busy with breakfast," Bria said. "They'll be hungry. Especially Deborah! This is the morning, when even the thinnest, youngest ones want to eat enough for two. Maybe because their stomachs know what their heads won't find out for a month and more." Reminded of her own body which had never held such knowledge her voice grew lonely.

"Well, be sure to tell Bracae!" Rusco said. He

was lonely, too, ~~for Miriam.~~

His mood had turned in another direction and he was soberly thoughtful when, returning from pool, steam-room, cold room and a massage he passed Deborah's doorway. The now opened draperies were an invitation but he would have gone ~~past~~ on if she had not called.

"Father!" Her voice was so like Miriam's that for an instant he ... almost ... ^{believed ...} "Father! We've kept breakfast for you."

They were stretched out on dining sofas alongside the low, square table which Bracae had carried in. The broken halves of yesterday's ceremonial goblet lay between them and the sight pleased Rusco. So did Lucianius's smile, confident that the romantic shards would be understood.

"There!" Deborah shook back her foaming hair and pointed to a third sofa. "And Candace has just brought fresh honey rolls, piping hot."

"You're sure I won't be in the way?"

"Your company will be a pleasure ,,, sir," Lucianius said earnestly.

"He's teasing us," Deborah warned her husband. "He knows he won't be in the way."

"Change that 'sir' to 'Father' or, even better, 'Vedius,' Rusco said. "If," he added, "that wouldn't be rushing things."

His twinkle caught Deborah and she blushed. But she did not, he noticed, act as a young virgin traditionally was supposed to. She did not seem to have made an irreclaimable sur-

render. And no more had Miriam. Like Miriam she was acting as though she was the one who had come off victorious. She seemed, and this was exactly like Miriam, proud, loving and triumphant. Well, he never would understand women if he lived to be a thousand.

"Only a moment ago," Deborah said happily, "Lucianius was asking what you'd like him to call you."

"I'll tell you something, Lucianius," Rusco said. "When a man gets a bad son-in-law he doesn't care what he's called, and when he gets a good one, it doesn't matter."

"I hope I'm the second kind," Lucianius said.

"Shall we tell him?" Deborah asked Rusco. "Or shall we let him worry a little longer?"

"I dropped my guard the day I found him here in the villa," Rusco said. "He knows. He isn't worried."

"You seemed a little worried ^{yourself} when you came in," Deborah said.

"I was. I was worrying ^{a little} about Joseph."

"And we've been worrying about Mary and the baby!" Lucianius cried.

"It was mainly that wonderful baby," Deborah said and blushed again.

Rusco grew tender. He wished Miriam might see her daughter, twelve hours married and blushing about babies.

"They're all right," Rusco said. "Joseph's an old hand at travelling. You can count on him. And Herod hasn't had time to get on his track." He was not going to spoil a honeymoon

by speaking of the robbers who squatted back of byways as
as well as highways all over Judea.

"We might pick up some word of them on our ride
to Jericho," Deborah said.

"You won't travel their road for very long."

"That's right," Lucianius agreed. "My map gave
them a short-cut off the main highway just a little distance be-
yond Jerusalem. ^{going to the villa} But we take the highway clear to Jericho ["]~~to our villa.~~"

He smiled at Deborah and she smiled back. Their
faces glowed at the thought of the golden days ahead. Vedius Rus-
co felt a bit in the way in spite of their warm welcome.

"It's time you started," he said. "Shall I have
your horses saddled?"

"Could you get ready that soon?" Lucianius asked
his bride.

"Almost that soon," Deborah boasted and clapped
her hands with wifely competence.

Marriage changed them overnight, Rusco remembered.
The clapping brought Bria and Candace.

"It's time to pack," Deborah said gaily.

"I think I have almost everything ready," Candace
said. "For you, that is." Her smile apologized to Lucianius
for leaving him in Micipsia's hands.

She looked ^{back} to Deborah with that mixture of submis-
sion, dignity and fondness which always made plain their relation-
ship. Now her smile said she was waiting to be told to accompany

her mistress.

"I'd rather you stayed here, Candace." Deborah said and gave her father such a look as she would not have given the day before. "The place at Jericho has lots of help. Anyone there can do the little I'll need. I'd rather you stayed here."

"There's plenty here to keep her busy," Bria said. "At least," she added, giving Rusco a look of her own, "There could be."

"You can take care of Father," Deborah said boldly and squeezed Candace's arm and looked toward her parent again.

Rusco was as unresponsive as a stone. Nothing in his manner conceded that he had caught any of the looks and Candace, after venturing one glance of her own, turned to finish the packing.

"I'll see to the horses," Rusco said briskly.

o-o

"Why didn't you bring Candace?" Lucianius asked as they rode away from the villa, Micipsia trailing a tactful distance behind. "Jericho would have been fun for her."

Deborah shook her head.

"You know that she adores Father," she said. "But Father only worships my mother's memory. That makes him happy in a quiet, sober way but Candace could make him happier. I left her behind hoping that without me around he would look at her, just look at her!"

"You mean you wouldn't mind ..."

"After all," Deborah said, "masters have freed slaves and married them before. And it isn't as though Father would have to explain her to offended patrician kinfolks. You know where our family started. A wife like Candace would do Father nothing but good. Bria says so, and so does Bracae."

"So do I, now that I think of it," Lucianius laughed.

"If only Father would make a move!" Deborah said. "Or if only Candace would help herself! But she just stands back and wishes."

"Look here!" Lucianius said. "You aren't trying to tell me that Vadius doesn't see what you're all up to?"

"Oh, he sees! He sees everything. But he won't be drawn." Deborah looked at Lucianius, making her blue eyes wide and fathomless. "If I were a man Candace could draw me."

"Not if you were this one," Lucianius said.

"Don't you ever let anyone^{else} draw you!" Deborah reached for his hand. "But I do want Candace to have Father. She would die for him. And she certainly is pretty enough!"

"Vadius remembers a different kind of beauty," Lucianius said. "He told me you are exactly like your mother."

"He never tells me anything except that I'm not as beautiful by half," Deborah laughed.

They reached the Jerusalem highway and turned north and Deborah had to drop Lucianius's hand because she needed both ^{her own} to manage her horse in the flow of travellers.

"Not even your father could make me believe she was more beautiful than you," Lucianius said, when they came close again.

"Oh, but she was!" Deborah cried proudly. "Although I love to hear you say that, it isn't so. How ..."

Her gaiety faded on the last word as they rounded the hill which had protected the ambush of Panthera and Muso and she caught sight of Panthera again.

The Pilus Prior had formed a century of the Eighth Cohort to block the highway ~~a furlong ahead~~ and was leaning down from his horse to question a young mother with a baby in arms. A second mother and baby were being kept in waiting by a soldier.

The road block had been set up where a secondary road, from the east, brought additional travellers down from brown hills to thicken the north-south flow of traffic along the highway.

"Lucianius!" Deborah whispered, "This must be part of Herod's hunt!"

"Well!" Lucianius said in grim satisfaction, ~~after a good look~~. "It doesn't seem to be getting anywhere." Panthera had waved the first and then the second young mother on their way.

He seemed surprised to see Lucianius and Deborah and his nod was sullen. Deborah ignored him and Lucianius only nodded shortly in return.

"I'm glad Joseph and Mary are so far away," Deborah said when Panthera was safely behind, ~~the~~

"I hope they are far enough," Lucianius said.

They rode in sober silence.

They were slowed by the crowds at the Joppa market but when they had rounded Jerusalem's ^{North} wall, they put their mounts into a mile-eating lope toward ~~east~~ Jericho.

"If I've learned to tell time from Father and Bracae," Deborah said, looking up at the sun and trying to turn her mood from Panthera, "we've got a good four hours until sunset."

"If I can reckon right from what Micipsia and I have learned about this country," Lucianus said, "we'll reach Jericho in ^{less} ~~no more~~ than three."

"It's a lovely city," Deborah said. "Even now, it is balmy and full of sweet scents from flowers and shrubs that couldn't even live this time of the year in Jerusalem."

"There's nothing balmy and sweet after Jericho," Lucianus said. "East and south there's nothing worth even a beggar's interest, except Joseph and Mary. Just the Salt Sea, a few starved villages, and a mountain of no consequence called Nebo."

Some day, my darling, I'll give you a lesson. A mountain of no consequence, indeed! Some day, Deborah resolved, and soon, she would teach Lucianus the consequence of Nebo where great Moses had died, longing for the promised land to which he had led the Tribes all the bitter way from Egypt.

They kept their horses to a lope, and golden Jerusalem sank low behind them and the barren Valley of Achor appeared far to their left and at last, ~~the~~ ahead, the walls

of Jericho danced amid heat waves. They forded the Jordan, broad now and not turbulent, and came within sight of Jericho's west gate.

"Your smallest coin! Any crust! Alms!" Head humbly bent, a thin man in rags began to trot beside their horses, so intent upon his calculated dramatics that he did not seem to recognize them.

"Peleg!" Deborah and Lucianius cried together, and halted their horses.

"Sh-h-h!" Peleg said. "Give me anything. Then it will look all right for you to talk with me." His thin mouth stretched into its skeleton smile.

"You're just the one we hoped to see," Deborah said as Lucianius fished for a coin.

"I hope the regulars on this highway don't catch me," Peleg said, looking guardedly over a shoulder. "But this seemed the best way to stop you. I'd heard you were coming in this direction."

"You hear everything," Lucianius said in admiration.

"I've heard and seen a thing you may want to know about," Peleg said. "We've been watching a little. Me and Crookback."

"Have you really seen ... ?" Deborah cried.

"They are off there," Peleg interrupted before she could name names although no other traveller was within hearing. Micipsia, behind them, had halted when Lucianius and

Deborah did.

"And everything is all right?" Lucianius asked quietly.

"All right!" Peleg said. "And others are watching now." He gave his skeleton smile again. "We saw them last as they rested in the heat of the noon today. They did not see us, of course. He ... " (Peleg was still careful to avoid names) "had found a slot where they could scarcely be seen from the trail. And she was sitting on a blanket he'd spread for her in the shade of a rock. And when Crookback and I looked, one of her hands was making a pillow under the head of the baby and ~~the baby was sleeping, and Joseph~~ beckoned her to come and look at a flower and she folded a corner of the blanket to take the place of her pillow hand and went to him. The donkey was tearing a meal off a briar bush just a little ^{bit} away."

"Did you know," Deborah said to Lucianius, "that the donkey is named Briar because he likes briars so much?"

Lucianius said it was great news but, No! He hadn't known it.

"Where is Crookback now?" he asked while Deborah sat smiling to herself.

"He's tired out," Peleg said. "He'll need some practice before he becomes the walker a beggar must be. I put him on a donkey and sent him, with a few others, to the hills south of Jerusalem. The place is safe. It's a cave you might pass ten times and hardly notice."

"I am glad you sent others with him," Lucianius

said. "It would be bad if ~~any~~ Herod's people caught him."

"It would be terrible!" Deborah cried. "And for more than Crookback. He knows where ~~they~~^{...} ~~are~~^{...}."

"I have told the others to keep him safe," Peleg said.

"Is there anything we can do?" Lucianius said.

"Sometimes," Peleg said, "I wonder if any of us can do anything for them." Travellers ~~appeared back on the highway~~^{approached} and he bowed and Lucianius dropped his coin and Peleg ambled away.

Lucianius and Deborah rode on toward Jericho.

~~Lucianius,~~ Deborah said, "Isn't it wonderful that they are safely on their way?" She was so much under the influence of Peleg's secrecy that even to Lucianius she named no names.

Lucianius nodded and as their horses cantered toward Jericho's gate Deborah gave herself over to the rich satisfaction of a picture of Joseph and Mary on a ~~safe~~^{far-off} safe trail, and ~~a picture~~ of Mary's hand, pillowing the head of her ~~sleep~~ son.

~~That baby! It may be just because they are of my mother's people, but I'll never forget him, nor any of them.~~

"I'm glad they're safe," Lucianius said. His thoughts had been running along with hers. "I don't know why it is, but it's hard to get them out of my mind."

They rode through the city's ~~west gate~~^{west gate} and Micipsia came close in order not to be separated on the crowded

streets.

Lucianius turned to Deborah. "We're ^{al}most there," he said and his voice told her all he was awaiting and expecting and desiring.

~~The street was crowded but at least it was not narrow.~~ Deborah leaned close, lifting her honey-colored throat. Her eyes were wide and fathomless again but this time she did not even know it.

o-o

Panthera had taken all he could stand in one day. It wasn't the questioning. He was willing to question any of them, especially the pretty young ones. Questions, to tell the truth, were fun and the more the proud-nosed Jews squirmed the more fun the questions became. And it wasn't the black looks. If looks could kill or even cut I'd be dead, or bleeding all over.

No! What he could ^{not} take ~~no~~ longer was the ^{crispy} tormenting ~~of the creepy~~ feeling that these Jews were going to explode. He'd got them on the very edge of a riot more than once and he'd seen plenty of times how rioting Jews smashed into an enemy not caring whether they, themselves, lived or died. And when they had finished their enemies were worse off.

Panthera had at least a couple of hours more, and he hadn't learned a thing, and he knew how Helius Naepor would blow up if he came back early with nothing new, but he had taken all he could stand.

He motioned to the leader of the century, and then

toward

the little track running east, into the stony hills below Jerusalem.

"Start the men along that," he ordered.

It was just the roundabout road ~~to~~^{back} needed to kill a couple of hours. He could turn the column off it and get into the city by either the Valley Gate, or the Dung Gate, or if still more time had to be used up, by the Fountain Gate. He could pretend he had put in a really big day and go on home to enjoy himself with Nepte, and Naepor would have to shut his drunken mouth because how could anybody prove it hadn't been a big day?

Protocol required him to keep at the head of the century, on the leader's right, but he rode wide. The men still did not know what he was up to and he did not mean to make it easy for their centurion to ask nosey questions.

The little track was not too steep for comfortable climbing and because the men, also, were anxious to get back to the barracks, even though they had no Neptes waiting, the column added extra speed to the usual route-step.

Looking left, Panthera judged they were just about opposite the Valley Gate. It was still too early, however, and he withheld the command to turn.

When he judged they were opposite the Dung Gate it was still too early. The Fountain Gate, he realized, would make him a trifle late. But better late than early! Early, would start Naepor to bellowing over his wine. Late would leave him speechless, even if, by this time, wine hadn't made him

^{So.}
speechless.

"Bear left!" Panthera called to the centurion, and the column angled down ~~into the valley of Hinnom~~ over limestone slopes revealing, now and then, the mouths of caves.

Inside one ^{first} cave mouth, ~~seventy five feet distant,~~ Panthera saw movement. Something in tatters scuttled deeper for better concealment.

A beggar! These hills were one of their ~~favorite~~ hangouts. Beggars? Maybe robbers! After all, he might not need to report nothing at all. Of course real robbers, like the long-sought Dimas and Gestas, never worked this close to Jerusalem. But he might pick up a few small fry. They wouldn't earn him any decoration, no honorary disk to pin on his breastplate, or proud bracelet or necklace to testify to his valor, and certainly not one of the crowns given the man first over a wall. But a capture of anybody at all just might help choke off Helius Naepor.

Panthera
"Send ten to see who is hiding ~~in~~ that hole,"
he commanded.

The ten, grumbling because the duty would lengthen their day, moved out with their centurion.

One by one, six crawled into the cave mouth and disappeared. The centurion followed. Four remained outside on guard.

Cries and curses emerged and then a fat, ~~plump~~ beggar crawled out on all fours, looking cannily up along the legs of the guards to ask if they would kill a helpless man. Another

crawled out. Another was pushed out. Finally the six legionnaires emerged and then came the centurion, dragging ^{The Last} a prisoner.

Outside the cave ^{This Last one} ~~the prisoner~~ stood up, but not erect. He could not stand very erect. He was a hunchback.

"No!" Panthera said in sudden, loud excitement.

No! His luck couldn't be that good. There were ten thousand hunchbacks in this crazy country.

Just the same it would do no harm to look.

He rode over and when he had got close he saw that his luck could, really, be that good.

The fine clothes were gone, the rings were gone, the old furious look was gone, but it was the right fellow.

The hunchback's ~~and~~ pallid face drained white. His eyes, from ~~their~~ deep sockets, peered as though to read what kind of man this approaching leader of these captors might be. When he saw that the leader was Panthera, he looked away.

"Geber!" Panthera shouted and slapped a knee.

"Geber!" He jerked a generous thumb. "Turn the others loose," he said. "But we'll get this one to Jerusalem as fast as we can. Herod can't wait to see him again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The encirclement of the walls had been completed quietly and now the soldiers stood waiting in the darkness.

"You've formed your rings in plenty of time," the Chief Eunuch said. Because he was affected by the darkness and the secrecy he whispered. "The people of this town are pigeons. They always come home to roost. They're all still asleep inside."

There were three rings. In each, soldiers stood about five yards apart. Those with spears could slope the spears and instantly turn the rings into bar fences. The rings were about seventy-five yards apart. Only archers were in the outer ring. Back of the archers lay the Jerusalem road.

"But who'll ever get to it?" the Chief Eunuch whispered. "If anybody manages to break through, your archers will easily pick them off before they get away."

Behind the last ring more soldiers stood in close formations. Four units, on the north, on the south, on the east and on the west, ready to throw back any mass attempt at a breakout.

"That's good," the Chief Eunuch whispered. "It's

just a little place, only three hundred and two houses by a door-to-door count. There aren't enough people to make any real fight. But your four units are the clincher. They'll stop whatever fight does start and help keep the news of what we've done from spreading."

"You think you can keep this from spreading?" the Marshal in command of all the mercenaries present asked in his guttural speech.

"We can keep it from spreading too fast." the Chief Eunuch said. "That's all we need. If it only trickles, here and there, nobody will believe it at first. And when they have to, they'll have had time to grow afraid. If it happened here it could happen in bigger places. They'll see that and they'll say that a lot of lives, including their precious own, shouldn't be risked because of a few lost in such a little place as this."

"You've figured it all out!"

"Herod! He figured it all out long ago and proved it. When he killed half the Sanhedrin -- thirty-five out of the seventy -- what happened? Nothing! And nothing happened when he killed off the family that ruled these Jews before him, his wife Miriamne, her brothers, mother, uncles."

"The Marshal made a rumbling sound which expressed some doubt.

Except for the darkness, the Chief Eunuch's eyes would have challenged the sound. His voice did.

"Herod knows people," the Chief Eunuch said. "He knows your mercenaries. ^{He knows} They don't like what they have been told to do. But they like the extra pay."

"Twenty-five denarii for the men who stay outside isn't much," the Marshal said.

"For doing practically nothing?" the Chief Eunuch cried. "And I suppose five hundred apiece for those who actually go in isn't much either?"

"They'll earn it," the Marshal said.

o-o

The ones who would actually go in stood waiting in front of the great gate. They carried javelins and, for close work, daggers. They carried swords, too, of course, and shields. All wore complete armor. All helmets had neckpieces and cheekplates. The men were not in formation. They stood in small shadowy groups. In the darkness what they were busying themselves about could not be seen plainly but it could be smelled.

"You gave them plenty of wine?" the Chief Eunuch whispered.

"Too much if Brennus and his corporals don't keep watch. But Brennus will. He's big enough to handle any of them."

"The Captain Brennus commands?"

"Just as Herod ordered!"

"The big towhead!" the Chief Eunuch blurted, and not in any whisper now. "He talks too much. In a couple of hours he'll really have something to talk about. He'd better have! He'd better do the job! Herod won't take any more from
← him even if Rome does want him coddled because his father is

big in Gaul."

"What has Herod got against the boy?" The Marshal asked. He knew but he had been around the Palace long enough to know also that he must never let on that he knew very much.

"Brennus is a good officer. And since he raced all the men clean out of their shoes at the Hippodrome they think he is a wonder. I don't understand."

"You don't need to understand," the Chief Eunuch said and the Marshal recalled that he had used the very same words to Brennus after the Chief Eunuch had brought Herod's order and the regiment was about to quit Jerusalem on that starless night.

o-o

"You don't need to understand, Brennus," the Marshal said. "You're Herod's pick. You don't need anything else. And you'd better see that you do the thing right. I can tell from the way the Chief Eunuch acts that Herod is down on you already for something or other."

Brennus scowled and chewed his full, immature lips. He was so young that he had not yet trained himself to hide his feelings. He was confounded by what he had been ordered to do. He was puzzled as to why he had been picked to do it. He ran his hand through his hair. Then his eyes widened.

"Rusco!" he stammered. "Someone told them I spoke to Vedius Rusco^{Philippicus} and they've figured that I had to be the one who warned him! And so they're punishing me."

"What?"

Brennus explained and the Marshal shook his head.

"You're in trouble, boy! You'll have to watch your step while I try to have Rome recall you. I wouldn't know how to explain to your father if anything happened to you. And something is sure to if you make another wrong move."

"But to turn my men's swords on -- " Brennus could not get the word out. He stared at the Marshal. "And why do you stand for it?"

"What part of Herod's mercenaries do I command?" The Marshal spoke angrily to hide his helplessness.

"A fourth, at least."

"More like a sixth! And if I refused Herod's order do you think that for enough extra pay the rest wouldn't turn on me and any who stood by me?"

Brennus scowled again.

"I stand for it because I'll be killed if I don't," the Marshal said, "And so will you."

"But to kill these -- " Brennus could not get the word out this time either. "I've a notion to ride for it."

"Couriers ride faster," the Marshal said. "In two days they'd be ahead of you and have the whole country alerted. You wouldn't get two hundred miles."

"We could try the hills!"

"Don't include me! And don't you try alone! What hills can hide you from Herod's spies? Sick as he is, and

~~was~~ dying, Herod can still outsmart all of us. The Chief Eunuch has put away a fortune and would have ridden for it years ago if he thought he could get away. Even Soemus, I think, would have ridden."

"Herod doesn't catch everybody," Brennus said.

"That hunchback, Geber, got away."

"So you haven't heard!" the Marshal said softly.

"Heard?"

"Geber was captured yesterday." The Marshal looked around to make sure no lurking Palace spy overheard.

"Alive?"

"He didn't stay alive long. And he didn't seem to care. He would say nothing, nothing."

Brennus clutched his hair again in a frantic reach for comprehension. He knew what the hunchback had been told to find out; what, indeed, the poor crooked man must have found out. And because it had made him strong, even against torture, it must be a great discovery. This child sought by so many must have seemed to Geber, truly the -- Brennus stumbled over a strange word -- the Messiah.

A Messiah? A man knew what Woden was. But could it be that a Messiah was also one of the gods? Then what was Herod thinking of? Even a Herod couldn't hope to kill one of the gods.

"If only the hunchback had talked," the Marshal was continuing, "we wouldn't have this job to do. If they could just have squeezed out of him the names of the mother and father!

If he'd just named a name, it would be easy. We'd need to hunt down just one family. But after he'd let slip that those Wise Men he was sent to follow ... they're like our druids, I suppose ... had been ^{was} to Bethlehem, they couldn't squeeze out another word.

"Well!" The Marshal made a thoughtful amendment. "They did squeeze out one other thing. At the very last the hunchback said, 'Thank you, Ancient!' And everybody's been puzzling over that ever since. But after he had said it they couldn't squeeze out one word more. They certainly tried but they couldn't. So here we are!"

O-O

Around one of the wineskins now were grouped Brennus and Occo who, in the loose mercenary system, was second in command, and Dumnorix the standard bearer, and a recruit. The Recruit, most improperly, had attached himself to the superior trio and in their present mood none of these had bothered to tell him to get back where he belonged.

"Captain!" the Recruit said, "Why should we be the ones to go in? I mean in there?"

cutting off Brennus' reply.
"Drink your wine," Occo said. He was a scornful man whose brown beard hid every facial expression so that his harsh orders, leaping from ambush as it were, always startled soldiers into obedience.

"But I've already drunk more than ever before in my life. It doesn't do anything. They watered it too much."

"This! Watered? It kicks like a camel," Dum-

norix mumbled.

"You'd better drink some more, too," Occo said to Brennus.

"Somebody's got to stay half-sober to make sure the men don't get drunk too early," Brennus said. He mumbled, also, but from sick rage not ^{from} wine. Birds were beginning to talk sleepily ⁱⁿ ~~from~~ nearby trees. The time to start would come soon.

"Not me!" Dumnorix said. "This is a march I wouldn't bear the standard for, sober, for twice five hundred denarii."

"It's all in the day's work," Occo said. "I'm drinking but not because I couldn't do the job sober. And I've got a son coming in a month or so. But son or no son I can do the job and never turn a hair."

The Recruit stumbled off into the darkness and his shoulders heaved.

"What's wrong with him?" Dumnorix mumbled.

"He's being sick," Brennus said, "Let him alone."

"This early?" Occo laughed.

"I don't think you're as tough as you make out," Dumnorix said.

"I'm tough enough," Occo said, "But being tough isn't any part of this. The Primus Pilus Naepor said everything for me, and you, too, and for all of us the other day at a dice game. 'It isn't our funeral,' he said. 'We just do whatever someone orders and pays for,' he said. 'If anything goes wrong the blame is on the fellow who gives the orders and pays,' he said."

The Recruit came back to listen.

"We can't go against orders," Occo went on. "You've got to admit that." He lifted the wineskin and swallowed until he was breathless and then swallowed himself breathless again.

"That's right!" The Recruit swallowed in turn. "Herod ordered this and is footing the bill. Herod's the only one to blame."

The darkness was lifting. A cock crowed and the smell of smoke from some early hearth drifted over the wall.

"It's time," Brennus said. The town gates creaked, and he whirled to his scattered men.

o-o

"Attention!" He grabbed Dumnorix, handed him the company's lofty, gleaming standard and faced him to the gate.

"By Fours!" he roared. "On the Standard. FALL IN!"

"Look alive!" Occo shouldered among the straggling men. "Straighten those helmets!" "Lace those breastplates!" "You've lost your javelin! You, I mean! Find it!" "Bring that cockeyed shield to the ready!"

More quickly than seemed possible for men drunk and growing drunker, the column formed. The gates were almost open.

"Get to your squad!" Brennus shoved the Recruit. "And Occo! Take the rear file and keep the column closed up. No man is to fall out for anything."

"What if he falls out dead drunk?"

"You might as well cut his throat. After we've finished, the Jews will do worse if they find any of us alone."

He went to the head of the column. "Drop back two files, Dumnorix," he said.

"I always march first," Dumnorix mumbled.

"March third this time, so you'll live to march back."

"I always march first."

"If you fall," Brennus said, "And the men can't see the standard to rally on, they might panic. I want you among plenty who'll grab the standard if you drop."

"I never marched third before," Dumnorix said.

The gates were open.

Brennus drew his sword and swung it high. "Forward!" he roared. The column straightened. "MARCH!" By fours, as sluggish as lava and as hard to stop, the column flowed through the gate and when the last of it had cleared, men from the first ring raced up, shoved back the few early townspeople waiting to pass out and pushed at the gates.

One of the few was too spry. He got out. Dodging hands, ignoring one well-meant warning, he fled through the gap in the first ring. Spears sloped in the second to make a fence but he scrambled under, too fast for the heavily armored soldiers. He raced toward the archers but suddenly realizing who they were aiming at he let out a hoarse, protesting cry.

"They'd better stop him," the Chief Eunuch said to the Marshal, "or you'd better have horsemen to run him down."

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O-O

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More quickly than seemed possible for men drunk and growing drunker, the column formed. The gates were almost open.

139, continued--

If he gets away the news might spread too fast."

The archers held their arrows, doubtful that one, undersized, terror-stricken target was worth their skill. The man danced from side to side, then saw that he was doomed and stooping grabbed a rock and still crying hoarsely, but in defiance now, charged the menacing bows. An officer shouted an indignant command. One archer loosed an indignant, accurate arrow.

o-o

For a little the Chief Eunuch listened but heard no sound behind the thirty-foot gates except the muddled resentful voices of those townspeople who had been kept from leaving. He wondered why Brennus was so slow in going into action but then decided that he was expecting results too early and turned his irritation against the dew on the grass. His feet were clammy, and worse, his boots might dry hard. His softest Persian boots! But the sun was coming up red and bright. It would soon make dry underfooting.

The Marshal, also, listened but no more than the Chief Eunuch could he hear any sound at first, unless you counted soldier noises around him -- gabble, hallos, the rattle of arms and armor. But then a woman screamed, her voice only partly muffled by the thirty-foot walls. Her piercing cry, shrill and monotonous, ran on and on, and then came the sound the Marshal had been dreading, a thin, high wail which ended abruptly, almost as soon as it had begun. The Marshal retreated, step by

step, to escape the wail but it followed him and then there was more muffled sound. Many women screamed, men shouted, ~~weights~~ weights crashed and, at intervals which could not have been as evenly spaced as they seemed, those thin, high, abruptly ended wails.

"Brennus ought to finish soon," the Chief Eunuch said. "Herod mentioned only the ones two years old and younger."

"You talk as though they were sheep," the Marshal said. "Doesn't this get under your skin?"

"Nothing has got under my skin since I was fourteen," the Chief Eunuch said. There was plenty of light now and the challenge in his eyes was plain. "If you had been made as I am, would much get under your skin?"

"I guess Herod is as good at picking his men as he is at trapping the ones who run away," the Marshal said, and then looking back to the wall he groaned, "Oh, god! Oh, Woden!"

A flaxen-haired young woman, hugging something in one arm was scrambling along the top of the wall. Although young she was deep-breasted and her thighs, outlined under ^{her} ~~a clinging~~ dress, were big and firm. When a soldier came climbing in pursuit her free hand was strong enough to turn his first javelin thrust aside. The hand spurted blood and the second thrust got through and the javelin drew her back. Then the javelin came free and she fell across the wall, feet hanging down ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ side, arms ~~in~~ ^{out} side, and all her flaxen hair came loose, ~~and~~ ^{what} she carried in one arm dropped out of sight.

A man came climbing after the young woman and grap-

pled with the soldier. A second soldier came climbing and the man hooked his fingers into the ^{nick-hole} ~~neck~~ of the breastplate of this one and, furiously clutching both adversaries, summersaulted off the wall. After the long drop and loud crash a mercenary left his ring and pulled all three apart and then spread his hands to signal that all were dead.

"It takes a good man, unarmed, to handle two soldiers," the Marshal said. ~~He wanted to cheer.~~

"A Jew always tries to hurt someone, anyone, when he, himself, is hurt," the Chief Eunuch said. "I don't like Jews. I never have. They never win, but they never stay licked. As long as they had two kingdoms, the north was always fighting the south whenever both weren't fighting some outsider. Not that they've often been free of some outsider. Not for most of the last eight hundred years."

A growing commotion among the rings of soldiers caused him to break off. Their attention fixed on the body of the flaxen-haired girl, and on the three dead men at the foot of the wall, they seemed on the point of breaking ranks. When they kept their places, although restlessly, the Chief Eunuch resumed his spiteful complaint.

"Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Syria, Rome all have come in to fight them. Assyria carted most of them off into captivity. For a while Babylon enslaved most of the balance. And any who were left have been subject to somebody most of the time. Rome captured them sixty or seventy years ago and by then you'd think they had learned. But now they are fighting Rome and Herod

harder than they fought even Assyria. That fool on the wall never had a chance, any more than the one who picked up ^{the} a stone. But would either quit? I think it would be a good idea to kill them all."

"That would mean a lot of killing," the Marshal said. He did not look at the Chief Eunuch. His head was turned to catch the cries rising inside the wall.

"But how much easier it would make your job!" the Chief Eunuch said. "When Rome takes over other countries the natives settle down. Gaul sends her princes to Rome and Herod for training. Nobody in Egypt plots to bring back the Pharoahs. The Cantabrians work their silver mines like good little boys. But these Jews!"

The cries seemed to be dying away, at least a little. The Marshal was bending forward in his effort to hear. The Chief Eunuch, impatient of such inattention, stopped talking until the Marshal, ~~after a moment~~ straightened up guiltily and looked at him. Mollified, the Chief Eunuch went on.

"These Jews will never settle down until somebody tears that whole Temple city of their^s to pieces, stone by stone, and maybe not then. They act as though they had something worth fighting for. A heap of rock! Their whole country isn't two hundred miles long and it isn't half that wide. You could just about lose all of it in the folds of a fat man's girdle. But they think it is everything and they swear it will be here a thousand years from now, and greater than ever, when Rome is nothing. Herod ought to kill them all off."

"Killing is a harder business than you think," the Marshal said. "You couldn't go all over Judea doing what Brennus is doing in there." Now it was his turn to stop speaking. He pointed.

~~"Look at that old man!"~~

A small old man who had lived a long long time was creaking through the ring nearest to the wall. The two outer rings had let him keep coming all the way from the Jerusalem ^{Road} ~~highway~~. Their orders were against anyone leaving the town, not anyone approaching it. As he passed the Marshal the old man was talking to himself, "... let thy servant depart ...". He spoke and breathed in the way the very old do, measuring each syllable and breath as though any waste would make the next impossible.

"I know that old wreck!" the Chief Eunuch said. "He hangs around the Temple. What is he doing here?" He would have turned a soldier loose, but the Marshal caught his signaling hand.

"He isn't hurting anybody!"

The old man got close to the gate and cocked his head to listen. The muffled sounds inside had lessened. The screams came less often and so did the shouts and so did the thin walls but now there was a new sound, a low undercurrent of sobbing.

"Brennus ought to be coming out any minute," the Chief Eunuch said.

"I'll get some more troops up near the gate," the Marshal said. "The people just might try a rush when it opens."

He thumbed to an aide and one of the units ~~in~~

in close formation moved up and deployed into two lines, slanting back funnelwise from the gate.

o-o

The gate opened.

Marching in the same fours, but fewer by two or three files, Brennus's column flowed out, more drunken than when it had gone in. Every man seemed drunk but not with wine. With the stuff, rather, which gummed their javelins and still unsheathed swords. About half walked in sodden silence. Half of the rest seemed dazed. The balance were sniggering in a way that the Marshal had never heard before and never wanted to hear again. It was as though they had done a thing which had to be proved a laughing matter. ~~It was a laughing matter.~~

The Recruit carried the standard at the head of the column, but not proudly. It might have been a punishment chained to him. Why, the Marshal wondered, did not a veteran wrest the honor from one not even able to march properly? The Recruit skulked along, not meeting any eyes and when he emerged from the funnel, into full sight of the regiment, he flung the standard away and crouched and his shoulders heaved.

"He needs a stronger stomach than that if he is going to be a mercenary," the Chief Eunuch said.

The boy's convulsions were terrible. They were more than vomiting. They tore him inwardly. He retched and fell and bubbles came out of his open mouth.

"He's done with being a mercenary," the Marshal

said. "Maybe Dumnorix is, too. He never turned over the standard before."

None of the soldiers of the column rushed to lift the standard. They weaved past it, the sodden, the dazed, the sniggering, and began to scatter.

"Occo!" the shocked Marshall called, "Stop that!"

Occo had stepped aside from the head of the column, his proper place in a withdrawal. Sword swinging loosely in his hand he soberly checked, watched, measured, or seemed to, but he did not obey the order to hold the men in formation. He did not seem to see that they were falling out. He did not seem to see anything. He took another step and stumbled over the body of the Recruit. He knelt, looked carefully, changed his gummed sword to his left hand, laid his right hand on the boy's breastplate and with his left brought the sword down in a clumsy but hard enough blow. The right hand popped into the air and the arm stump spurted. None of the detachment paid any more attention than they had to the fallen standard. Unregarded, Occo shouted and raced through the rings and when he was a long way off, almost to the Jerusalem ~~road~~ ^{road} he turned to look back. The stump now was only dripping. He turned and turned and turned and turned and fell.

"Get wine for this crowd!" The Marshal told an aide. "Get anything to wake them up! Where, by god, is Brennus?"

Brennus was just coming out of the gate and with the rear guard was holding back a mob of men and sobbing women. The Marshal signalled. Soldiers left the funnel to swing the gates shut as the rearguard cleared them. The mob was shut inside

and the old man, creaking from his place close to the wall, somehow managed to get himself shut in with the others.

Brennus had lost his helmet and his ~~hair~~ towhead looked like wheat stubble. He was smiling and he kept on smiling as he came up and saluted.

"Are all your men crazy?" the Marshal said. "Can't you keep discipline?"

"They're just glad to be out," Brennus smiled. "They're just glad it's over."

"Where is Dumnorix? What do you mean, giving the standard to a recruit who falls apart?"

"Dumnorix fell apart, too," Brennus smiled. "It was funny. We'd hardly got to work in there when Dumnorix began bellowing for everybody to follow the standard."

"What was wrong with that?"

"He wanted everybody to follow him back out here." Brennus smiled. "I had to kill him. If the men had followed we'd never have finished."

"Did you finish?" the Chief Eunuch said.

"We didn't miss a one," Brennus smiled.

"You're sure!"

"You told me there'd be forty or fifty," Brennus smiled. "We did better than that. The men tried so hard that they got careless and added a few who were a little older. Just to make sure, I guess."

"How many men did you lose?" the Marshal said.

"Nine! The mothers and fathers were hard to handle,

until we took care of the leaders. After that we didn't have any real trouble, except now and then. I broke the detachment up into so-and-so many sections and gave each section so-and-so many houses and we worked them all, slow and sure. Like that Persian game -- chess." Brennus's smile broadened with pride at remembering the word. "We didn't miss a thing."

"This good officer of yours is going like Occo and the Recruit," the Chief Eunuch said.

"I almost missed one," Brennus smiled. "She seemed almost a baby herself."

"Form your men!" the Marshal ordered.

"I'd almost let her go when the chimney began to wail," Brennus smiled.

"Form your men, Captain!" the Marshal shouted.

"But I jabbed up into the chimney and that made it a clean sweep," Brennus smiled.

"Form your men, Captain! Get them to their barracks!"

Smiling, Brennus saluted, turned and roared, "Attention!" Then, as the weaving, scattering men began to fall in he began to run toward the wall.

"Catch him!" the Marshal shouted.

But no one was fast enough to catch Brennus. In full armor he ran, every one said later, faster even than in the Hippodrome and when he came to the gate he bent forward and plunged head-first. This sound was short and a little dull, like a coconut splitting. Brennus dropped, and his straw-colored hair

no longer looked like wheat stubble.

"Now that is really a thing!" the Chief Eunuch said. "Herod claims that no man is brave enough to drive his legs that hard at the finish. Years ago his brother tried it against a cell wall when the Syrians had him. He failed and Herod said that if his brother failed no man would be brave enough."

"I'm getting the regiment out of here before they all crack up," the Marshal said.

"Some must stay!" the Chief Eunuch said. "Nobody may leave the town yet. The news would travel too fast. You've got to keep the town bottled up ~~for a week~~. The trickle that Brennus's detachment will start will be enough. By the end of the week the whole country will be afraid. If it could happen here it could happen anywhere. When people tell themselves that, nothing that anyone can say will be enough to stir up real trouble. A lot of people will say it probably never happened at all. And in a few years a lot will swear that it never did."

o-o

High on the wall, over the body of Brennus, the old man appeared and grew tall and spoke. This sound was ~~measured~~ measured out, as his earlier words and breathing had been, ^{but} It was high, clear and strong and carried far.

↳ Thus saith the Lord! ↓ ↘

He seemed to grow taller.

~~"Thus the Lord said to Jeremiah: Let all listen!"~~

"Stop that old crackpot!" the Chief Eunuch cried.

The captain of the funnel beckoned four spearsmen.

lamentation and bitter weeping
Thus saith the Lord; a voice was heard in Ramah,
Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted *for her children*

"Stop him!" the Chief Eunuch shrieked.

The spearsmen balanced their weapons, aimed ...

Because they ~~children~~ were not! the old man cried.
... and threw.

"They shut that one up just in time," the Chief Eunuch said to the Marshal and turned back to where his litter was waiting. He couldn't get to Herod fast enough. Herod was awaiting an assurance that there would be no uprising incited by a revival of all the legendary hopes of these crazy Jews. Well, there wouldn't be! Even the Jews wouldn't rise behind a dead leader. Everything was going to be all right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the end it was old Anna's innocent rejoicing which turned Herod to the quarry. After Anna gave thanks to the Lord she was not able to tell the people often enough the good news of the long-awaited wonder seen in Simeon's cell. The soft rain of her happy gossip showered everyone. She spoke of him, it was said, to all them that looked for redemption in Israel. If ^{all} ^{was} meant only the prayerful city folks who came to the Temple, they alone would have been enough to broadcast the news. If it meant the tithing, sacrificing, hoping hosts from the world over, the marvel is that the broadcast went so slowly.

It did, finally, reach Herod. While the Chief Eunuch was reporting his false triumph, ^{Tirzah} ~~Salome~~, the sheathed dagger jerking against her hip, rushed into his private suite and pushed aside the slave with the heaped tray.

"I've got the names," she panted. "That prophetess is telling them all over the Temple. The mother is Mary and her man is Joseph, a carpenter of Nazareth."

The Chief Eunuch shrank back from the ~~wave of~~ rage which swept Herod's face. ^{Tirzah} ~~Salome~~'s revelation meant that the work at Bethlehem this morning had been for nothing. The slaugh-

^{The} teroof_n innocents had failed. Anna, famed for prophetic vision, knew that as of now the child was still safe.

Was still, Herod's rage said, a threat! But almost at once ~~the rage subsided~~. The mind which, when not rusting forgot little, remembered back. One is working in his villa now, Soemus had said a few days earlier, A carpenter named Joseph.

Herod's finger questioned Soemus. The question could not have been plainer if Herod had said outright, "Is it the same man?" He would only have put his throat to the extra agony of helping tongue, jaw and lips shape five words which Soemus did not need.

"Yes," Soemus said reluctantly. "This is Vedius Rusco's Joseph."

Again the finger questioned, ~~turning angrily to the hinges~~.

^{ho!} "Yes," Soemus said, ^{✓ your spies report that} ~~your spies watch Rusco's~~ ^{Rusco's villa} ~~villa~~. The carpenter left _n about four days ago."

^{Tirzah} "And the wife!" ~~Salome~~ screamed. "Didn't the spies say that the wife had been there, too? The wife and child! And now all are gone!"

"Yes!" Soemus's tongue stumbled. "Yes, there was a wife."

Herod's eyes blazed but only for a moment. Soemus's failure to report on the carpenter's wife and child would not have been accidental. Lately, especially where Vedius Rusco was concerned, Soemus's loyalty had been question-

able. But there could be no question about the helpfulness of his services. And they were needed now. They had never been needed more.

A double prize was in sight. One which could more than make up for the morning wasted at Bethlehem. Annoyingly, that must stand as a profitless, although excellently planned effort. But with the double prize before him Herod felt better, his inward fires cooled, his aches grew less, as after a soothing soak at Calirrhoe.

His finger pointed ~~strongly~~ toward a bust of the Emperor Augustus.

"Yes," Soemus agreed, "if Vadius Rusco helped Joseph escape he could be accused of treason." Slowly he worked out the pattern of accusation. "Since you say the child menaces you, it can be charged that Rusco aided an enemy of Herod and therefore an enemy of the Emperor, since you act for the Emperor." The ravaged man nodded. "Yes, I ^x ^x guess it can be claimed that Rusco has committed treason against Rome herself."

Herod's finger curled into a leg-iron.

"Yes, you could order his arrest on that basis." Soemus said.

"But first General Proculus must be convinced," the Chief Eunuch interrupted. He had been thoroughly frightened but he felt better now, although drained of all the satisfaction which had buoyed him while the slaughter seemed a success. "Only he and the Tenth may act against a Roman Commissioner, ~~in ¹¹ ~~the~~~~"

Herod's finger commanded.

"He ~~directs that we summon~~ ^{wishes to see} the General," Soemus ^{to} told the Chief Eunuch. The finger still commanded. "And ~~also~~ ^{Summon} ~~Tibni ben-Ginath~~, the Primus Pilus Naepor, the Tribune Muso and the Pilus Prior Panthera."

The Chief Eunuch hurried messengers away and Herod sank back and closed his eyes, and lay still with his swollen throat pulsing.

o-o

~~the summoned group~~ ~~waited in.~~ Panthera came first with head high, and when Herod waggled a finger of recognition ~~his way~~ he rose almost on tiptoe in triumph. A finger of recognition today, a fat purse tomorrow, maybe two. Nepte had said, turning in sensuous pleasure like a cat expecting to be stroked, that a huge purse was sure for the captor of Geber.

Herod pointed to Soemus.

"It comes down to this," Soemus said. "Vedius Rusco is reported a traitor and must be seized. The question is, how best can it be done?"

Herod noted that reported.

Helius Naepor laughed. He was a little drunk, as was the case almost always now, and when drunk he dared laugh at anyone. The laugh challenged the accusation and invited Panthera and Muso to join in.

"What talk is this?" Proculinus cried, "Vedius Rusco is never a traitor!"

Soemus explained with his usual skill, but Herod's mind turned back to that betraying, "Yes, there was

a wife", and then he began to tick off a whole series of supporting phrases, each one an unconscious confession. "You say the child menaces," "It can be charged," "I guess you can justify," ~~and~~ "reported a traitor."

He might not, Herod told himself, be able to use this servant much longer. True, Soemus had always seemed irreplaceable, because he had always seemed the one man to press the search for a Miriamne. But wait! Through half a lifetime the fool had completely failed. Others might have done better. The Chief Eunuch, for instance.

When Soemus had ended his explanation, self-interest swept protest and friendship for Vedius Rusco from the General's fat face.

"I can see, now that I have duly considered," he said, "that there are convincing reasons, a quite persuasive logic, in your charge." The direction of the wind of the hour was unmistakable and he would not resist being blown along with it. "Yes!" he continued and reached for a cloth and swabbed. "Vedius Rusco Philippicus has, quite apparently, aided an enemy of mighty Caesar Augustus and, of course," he made a suave gesture, "of great Herod also." He went tck-tck-tck-tck-tck until Soemus thought he was never going to stop. "A Roman should keep away from Jews. Certainly he should not protect a possible upstart king of the Jews."

Herod's finger pointed to the ~~fat little~~ General.

"It must be your legionnaires who direct the arrest," Soemus said.

only a fool resisted a prevailing wind.
without ~~glad~~ an unmistakable reason.

and unless a man had a better reason
than was afforded here, he was a fool
to resist ~~the~~ prevailing wind

And without a ~~over~~whelming reason, a man was a
fool to resist a prevailing wind.

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 ~~xxxxxxx~~ ^{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. and at that hour

Morning Prayer will be omitted, ~~xxxxxxx~~ members of St.

Ambrose will join in ^{celebration} the community thanksgiving service on

Bridges Auditorium.

Holy Communion will be celebrated at 8 a.m., ^{in the church} and *

Sunday School and a Family Worship hour will begin at 9:15 a.m.

A

"No!" Proculinus said. "No! That is too much."
He held out a hand and ^{the} a slave filled it with a ^{fresh} ~~dry~~ cloth.
The fat little man was running sweat. The cloth was wringing
wet when it had sopped face, neck and armpits. A second was wetter
when it had wiped crotch and thighs.

"No!" Proculinus said again. "Mark me! I do not
defend Rusco. A general of the legions does not defend any
traitor. But I will not have any part in the arrest." He knew
that following the arrest he would be asked to turn Rusco over
to Herod and he knew what Herod would do with the prisoner. And
then he would have laid himself open to a charge that he had had
a hand in murder.

Herod's finger pointed to the bust of Augustus.

"The Emperor will not find fault, if that is
on your mind," Soemus said to the General. "Couriers sail from
Tyre tomorrow with Herod's report of the treason. In an eighty-
oared Liburnian bireme, with two men to an oar and two more in
relief, and a sail, and a bonus for speed! They should reach the
Tiber and Rome in fewer days than are usually needed for half the
distance."

"Always get your side of the story in first,"
Naepor ~~mumbled~~.

"I should have been consulted about such a re-
port," Proculinus complained. He was running a river of sweat
now.

A standard
~~One~~ of the mercenaries ~~standards~~ stood over
against a wall and Herod's finger turned to it.

"Herod wants you to know," Soemus said soothingly, "why he needs the help of legionnaires in arresting ^{Vidius} Rusco. The fact is that this morning ~~the~~ ^{the} mercenaries were used in a manner which makes any fresh activity on their part inadvisable just now."

"Yes, yes! I have information touching on what you describe as 'used in a manner.'" Proculus said accusingly.

Muso and Panthera exchanged glances and nodded. Helius Naepor did not seem to hear.

"Then you will see to ^{Vidius} Rusco's arrest?"

Rolling his fat shoulders as though to rid them of and unwelcome burden, Proculus reached for a wiping cloth and looked at his Primus Pilus. The latter swayed on wine-limber legs and ~~stood staring~~ ^{stared} so hard at the bright floor tiles that he might have been the one accused of treason.

"The Tribune Muso and Panthera can take a few men from the Eighth Cohort," Proculus said but Naepor still did not look up.

"This isn't going to be an easy thing," ~~Calpurnius~~ Muso said sourly.

"We may not get into Rusco's villa easily," Panthera said, "but I think we know how to keep Rusco from slipping through our fingers."

Herod looked at Soemus.

"How?" Soemus said to Panthera.

"Well, I have a woman ... " Panthera began.

"Whenever didn't you?" Naepor interrupted, and ignored a warning ~~look~~ ^{glance} from Herod. Proculus x

"She was Vedius Rusco's slave," Panthera said. "And when she came to me she told me a thing." He looked at Naepor. "And I told the Primus Pilus and he thinks he's figured the thing out."

Naepor gave Panthera a sudden stabbing look.

"I'm not sure it means much," he shrugged.

"That's not how you talked yesterday," Panthera said.

"If you know something to make the arrest of Rusco easier, tell it," Proculus said. "That is an order, Primus Pilus."

Naepor looked at Panthera again. I'd never have told except for you. I don't tell on a comrade, not even one I hate. You're doing this, not me. His look was both vengeful and relieved.

o-o

Naepor
"Panthera's slut," ~~he~~ said, "claims that Vedius Rusco needed some strange carpentering done in ~~the~~ ^{his} dining room. Nobody but his daughter, her companion, Marcus Seclator Lucianus, the housekeeper and Rusco's bodyguard were allowed in the room while the carpenter was working."

He was silent until Herod's finger grew annoyed and Soemus said, "Well, Primus Pilus!"

"Well," Naepor went on, "I know Vedius. In camp he never felt easy unless he had more than the usual way of get-

ting out. Just in case!" General Proculinus was eyeing him with distaste but Naepor did not notice and spoke as though reciting lines long rehearsed.

"You all know," he said, "that Rusco's villa backs And you all know how water in this region honeycombs limestone. up to a limestone hill./ I think Rusco found some caves and was able to tunnel from his dining room all the way to the hill's far side and I think his dining room has a secret opening to the tunnel."

Herod's finger snapped like a trap.

The General looked at Naepor now ⁱⁿ ~~with~~ open contempt. With every word Naepor spoke, his own shoulders rolled off more of their weight of blame. Not his, the betrayal, but Naepor's! And his contempt said so for the record.

"But don't send any men into that tunnel," Panthera said importantly. "The Primus Pilus says Rusco will have built deadfalls."

"They'd be easy to ^{built} ~~make~~," Muso said. "Just slabs of limestone balanced to topple on anybody who came by in the dark."

"Maybe a few men ought to be sent in," Panthera said. "Knowing of the deadfalls they could spill them without getting hurt and maybe choke the tunnel with a rock slide. Then Rusco would be stopped by the rocks as well as by a guard we could post at the far end." He turned a look of admiration on Helius Naepor. "At least that's the way the Primus Pilus figured it yesterday."

With his last promotion Panthera had expected that intimacy with Helius Naepor ^{which was} usual among elite pili. But Naepor had been keeping him at arms' length, and more and more stubborn

stubbornly demanding every courtesy due a Primus Pilus.

Panthera had not dared show resentment. But now he was seeking something better than intimacy. Revenge! He knew every counterfeit word of admiration shook Naepor's pedestal. The scornful look on the General's face proved it.

The trouble was ^{that} Naepor still didn't seem to notice this or anything else. He had spoken like a man in a ~~dream~~ ^{still} and like a man in a dream ~~swayed~~ ^{swayed} on his wine-limber legs.

"Even so it may be hard to arrest Rusco," Muso said. "His slaves fight like freedmen and he has Bracae besides."

"And Bria!" Panthera said. "She's as good as most men. Don't forget Bria."

Both of them remembered Deborah, the hunting Diana, and Candace, the centaur's bride, but Muso made no mention of these two and Panthera's was oblique.

"Rusco's daughter isn't there," Panthera said. "She and young Lucianus are honeymooning in Jericho."

"I still think we're being asked to do a lot," Muso said, "and with the General's permission, is it a thing the Legion ought to be ordered to do?"

"Would my bodyguard be any help?" ^{The Chief Eunuch} ~~Tiberius~~ ~~asked~~ asked recklessly. Any public move linking him, in any way, to a plot against the Messiah was full of risk. But this would be only an indirect link. And risk or not, he had to assist now that Herod's frightening assignment seemed, at last, to

be turning in the right direction. "I have forty men and most are ex-mercenaries and ex-legionnaires."

"They'd help a lot," Proculinus said. "With your forty, I'll need to assign only a few men of the Tenth." His river of sweat began to run lower as he took full measure of this chance to shake off more responsibility. "Twenty-five will be enough for you," he told Muso and Panthera.

"And ^{Who is to be sent after} ~~how about~~ the Nazarene?" Soemus was not reluctant now. Vedius Rusco and an ^{obscure} ~~unknown~~ Jewish carpenter were ~~two~~ different kettles of fish. "We have to learn where the Nazarene has gone and send after him and his wife and the baby."

Herod's throat sounded one of its formless indecencies. Not only Soemus understood this one. They all did. It said: (This is the ^{heart} ~~crux~~ of the whole matter. This mustn't be bungled.)

General Orfitus Proculinus looked at Naepor coldly.

"I shall send the Primus Pilus," he said.

At that Naepor ^{dropped swimmingly} lifted his heavy head and winced.

This was no proper assignment for ^a Primus Pilus, ~~just as it was no proper assignment for the Legion.~~

"It isn't ... " he began but stopped.

He saw in the General's face that the mission was his punishment for revealing Vedius Rusco's secret.

"Four men," Proculinus said ~~harshly~~. "You'll need no more to catch them. And you ought to be able to catch them soon. They'll be on foot and can't have got far."

"Where will the Primus Pilus look?" Soemus asked.

"He'll know where!" The little General's tone made a new denial of his own responsibility and called upon Naepor contemptuously for further betrayal. "If the Nazarene was helped by Rusco, Rusco planned his route. Naepor just needs to figure out what his old comrade would be likely to advise."

Naepor stood in silence, ~~swaying~~

"Work it out," Proculus said. "Let's hear you work it out." ~~And~~ ^{of Panthena} having no further way to give a shake of his own against Naepor's pedestal, ~~Panthena~~ was grateful for one so hard from the General.

"Well!" Naepor began, swaying again on those wine-limber legs. "Vedius might or mightn't send the carpenter through the tunnel. But that's not important. It's where he goes when he gets clear that counts."

"So!" Proculus said.

"Well," Naepor said, "in the first place, Vedius'd never send him north. Not toward home. Up that way everybody knows Joseph of Nazareth. A hundred would say, 'Yes' if anyone asked whether they'd seen him."

"Well, then?" Proculus jeered.

"Well! Vedius never would send him straight south. I'm told this Joseph stands up like a ~~tall~~ cypress and that once you've seen the woman you remember her. And straight south would take them on a main highway and the crowds on a main highway would be just about sure to notice such a man, and such a woman, and a baby."

"Where does that leave you?" Proculinus said.

"Well! I still think south is the direction. And Egypt ought to be the place. Egypt is full of Jews and an extra one couldn't miss finding friends. And besides ..."
Naepor looked toward Herod, "... in Egypt a man wanted by the king of some place else would sleep without any worry at all on his mind."

"What we want, then, is the right road to Egypt," Soemus said.

"The Primus Pilus will figure it out," Proculinus said, "He'll know exactly how his old friend would think."

"Well!" Naepor laughed and swayed, "I never knew a man who liked a fight better than Vedius. But he'll go miles to save his men from one. I think he'd send ^{this Joseph} ~~the Nazarene~~ roundabout. And there's a really good roundabout trail east of the Dead Sea."

"Didn't I tell you!" Proculinus jeered. "Spell it out, Primus Pilus."

"Well! On that trail the man and woman and baby might go unseen for days. Unseen by anyone hunting them, that is. Only people of Moab use the trail and only to visit a neighbor or relative once in a while. The carpenter would have plenty of natural cover, too, gullies, shrubs, ravines, rocks."

"There you are!" Proculinus jeered. "It's east of the Jordan and the Dead Sea that you'll find the baby." His shoulders shook the blame for the revelation off onto the Primus Pilus and he took another wiping cloth.

"Both sets of hunters," he said to Herod, "will start tomorrow. Muso and Panthera ought to clean up their job

by noon, even if Rusco makes a fight of it. The Primus Pilus won't need much more time."

Herod's finger danced.

"Herod would have you start now," Soemus said.

"Tomorrow!" Proculinus said. He'd show Herod who was giving orders to the Tenth! Already he was afraid he had done wrong in joining with the tyrant. But he remembered the report going to Rome on tomorrow's wind. There was no way he could smother it with an earlier one of his own. He did not keep one of the fastest ships in the world for every emergency. And he knew that in the back of Caesar Augustus's mind was always the fear of a friend turned traitor. The Emperor never forgot how Julius Caesar had died.

A man must look out for himself. Rusco should have remembered that a Roman keeps to Romans. But he certainly would show Herod who ran the Tenth.

"Tomorrow!" he repeated curtly to Muso and Panthera. "And twenty-five men are all you'll need beside the ^{Chief} ~~Saducee's~~ ^{Eunuch} bodyguard of forty. You are supplying that!" he reminded to ~~Tiberius~~ ^{The nervous lady.} ~~Tiberius~~ ^{The Chief Eunuch} had no thought of boggling when everything, at last, was going the right way. He nodded.

Herod's finger continued to object.

"Herod doubts the bodyguard is a proper force," Soemus said. "Will they fight if Rusco resists?"

"I shall not change my order," Proculinus said petulantly. ^{The Chief Eunuch's} ~~Tiberius's~~ bodyguard is my protection. I cannot re-

fuse to help arrest Rusco, because he has committed treason. But just suppose Caesar Augustus were to forgive his old friend, even of treason? I need protection against that." He looked around shrewdly. "I can claim that the bodyguard slew Rusco in a private grudge fight before the Legion could interfere."

Herod's finger was offended. Soemus said nothing.

"Who said anything about slaying Vedius Rusco?"

Tirzah
Salome asked tardily.

The ~~man~~ sweating little General wrinkled his nose in derision at the question. "When a prisoner is taken, accidents are bound to happen." He bowed his intention to go. He did not wait for permission. He turned on his heel. It was an act of independence which he could not resist. Moreover he had been turning over an ~~additional~~ act of self-protection and he wanted to carry it out as soon as he could find a messenger sufficiently trustworthy.

The others stood, not sure whether they also had permission to go or were to await developments. Herod's finger increased their uncertainty.

"Wait!" Soemus told them and bent to Herod's full lips for the slow, painfully formed ^{almost inaudible} words which began to issue from his throat.

"Herod says," Soemus said, standing erect, "that if all of you carry out your orders, he will double for each .."

"Double is fine," Naepor grunted.

"Herod says also that the arrest and pursuit

should not hang fire," Soemus said. "Your General said tomorrow and Herod notes that one minute after midnight is tomorrow."

Muso, ^{and} Panthera ~~and the Sadducee~~ smiled. Naepor still swayed on his wine-limber legs.

"Herod permits you to go," Soemus said, and when they had gone he bowed for permission to take his own departure.

o-o

Herod delayed consent. He looked at the ravaged man, and made his decision. He had watched too many turn against him not to know when another was turning.

That mind which for so long had proved farther-sighted than any rival mind saw now, certainly, that Soemus proposed to warn Vadius Rusco. As soon as Soemus left the bed-chamber he would try to send word. And the Chief Eunuch, Herod told himself, could certainly do as well as a man who had ~~found~~ ^{found} ~~nothing in~~ ^{for} almost a half century of ~~searching~~ ^{in a} for another Miriamne. faded

Soemus bowed once more for permission to go and while his gaze was bent to the ~~bright tiles of~~ the floor Herod's finger signalled his sister. When Soemus came erect he received his permission and began to back away and ^{Tirzah} Salome, sidling into position behind him, hardly needed to push on the dagger which she had whipped out. You might say, really, that she merely allowed Soemus to sheathe the blade beneath his own left shoulder.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

over two
more spaces

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

Vedius Rusco laid Virgil down and pushed the study lamp back until his couch was in shadow and tried to sleep. Not that he really expected to sleep! His nerves were as tight as bow strings. They were tight because of the mercenaries who had ringed Bethlehem all day and still ringed it now, two hours before midnight. All day he had forbidden his people to try to find out what the mercenaries were up to, but he had had a half-troubled, half-satisfied certainty that they were poking into every last Bethlehem corner for the Messiah who, so many in Israel believed, had been presaged by the bright star of a month and more ago.

Let them poke! The child was gone! And it was just because the child was gone that he had forbidden his people to ask any questions. Questions would mean talk exchanged, and the troops might stumble on the fact that a man and his wife and baby recently in Bethlehem had been at the villa just before dropping out of sight. If Herod ~~had~~ decided that the missing child might be the one he sought, he might manage to trace and overtake the family.

With so much in the air, Rusco thought, a man had reason to be wakeful. Being wakeful, a man read. Reading took up the slack of wakefulness; and the soothing counsel of Virgil took it up best of all.

A chair scraped in the atrium and in spite of tension Rusco chuckled. Bria was awake, too. She had Deborah on her mind. Deborah was in Jericho now and was certainly all right, but Bria had conjured up a hundred sleep-destroying fancies. Every now and then Rusco had caught her restlessly listing them for Bracae who kept her company. Would strange servants daub Deborah with too much perfume? Had all the proper dresses been sent? It was a pity, Rusco reflected, that Bracae and Bria had never learned to read.

He began to think over what he had read, and to recall the Roman scenes -- sky, trees, earth and streams, bees, birds, beasts and crops -- which Virgil described with such love and grace. Everyone called Virgil's last, long, long piece about Aeneas his greatest poem, and the fight with Turnus certainly was a wonder. But the Georgics were grand reading, especially to a man who always had had a weak spot for a farm.

Three more
spaces to
the left



.....".What a joy
To cover Ismara with close-ranked vines,
And with the green raiment of the olive clothe
The sides of huge Taburnus

He shut his eyes, for vines and olives, familiar in Judea, too, brought up the memory of Deborah's mother; but with Deborah safely married and, more than safely, happily, he found it easier, he realized, to recall Roman trees scarce-

ly seen since his boyhood.

"The gentle sallow and the pliant broom,
Poplar and willow, shimmering silver-grey,
.the chestnut tall,
The common oak
The cherry and the elm, and ev'n the bay,
Small, sacred to Apollo"

Why not, Rusco asked himself suddenly, go back among Roman trees? A man should be required to take only so much of Herod! There were others who could build the Emperor's roads. Let them! Why not buy a farm in the Sabine hills or a ranch down in Bruttium? Why not, for the rest of the life left him, do as Virgil said men should do?

"Foreknowledge of the winds and varying moods
Of Heav'n should be our care, the natural culture
And livery of each field - what each will bear
And each reject"

And a little bee culture, too! A man could watch bees all day. And how their honey sweetened hot rolls!

"Honey that's borne upon the winds of heaven,
A gift of the high gods"

He would go back! He would! He'd ride to Jericho tomorrow and tell Deborah. She and Lucianius would, he was sure, follow soon. Meanwhile . . .

"Bracae! he shouted. "And Bria!"

o-o

They had not heard such a cry since the good years when Miriam was alive and every call seemed, they would

have sworn, either laughter falling softly down from the sky or a mirthful shout rising up to it. They came running.

"Bria! Bracae! We are all going home."

"Home? Why, we're home now!"

"No! I mean home to Rome -- or somewhere near it."

"Woden!" Bracae shouted. "If we go a little to the north we'll be practically in Gaul."

"You mean a little two or three hundred miles north? Well, we might do even that!"

"And isn't Cantabria just a little sea away?"

Bria cried.

"Oh, a very little sea!"

"But how will we keep busy?" Bracae asked.

"Back there we won't have any roads or any fighting, either."

"We'll farm!" Rusco cried. "We'll farm like good and pious men. We'll,

'Bow down to Ceres, in whose honor see
You mix a bowl of cream and honeyed wine.
Nor let a man lay sickle to ripe corn
Ere he has bound, a Ceres worshipper,
His temples with the twisted sprays of oak,
And trod a rustic measure, sung his chant.'

"Sixteen years!" Bria said to Bracae. "I never expected to see again the day he'd go on like this." She smiled at Rusco. "In the state you're in you need a wife. A loving young one."

He smiled back. To his amazement he could smile at her suggestion. "Not with these white hairs!" he said.

"Bria's got one waiting right around the corner," Bracae warned.

"The one I had was enough," Rusco said gratefully. In Miriam he had had more than any other man he knew had had in a lifetime.

"Candace is yours for the taking," Bria said.

"Be serious!" Rusco smiled. "I know how you all have been talking. But Candace needs lots of babies by someone of her own age."

"She wants babies by you," Bria said. "And in a hurry."

"She doesn't want a man who'll need four slaves to tote him to breakfast before she has her first wrinkle."

"She'd still want you if you needed eight."

Rusco took up the sword which always stood near to his hand and pretended to look it over as though Bria's proposal had not interested him at all. But it had. Even though he did not love Candace. Even though the fair thing would be to leave her free to find, as soon or late^c she must, someone her own age. Bria watched him closely but to her exasperation he changed the subject.

"If I do go home," he said, putting the sword down, "the laugh will be on Joseph."

"I don't see why," Bracae said.

"Joseph says I'm likely to die violently. He told me a few weeks ago that among his people it is said: 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.'

But I'll buy a farm and die in my bed."

"Don't speak that way!" Bracae cried.

"What way? Why not?"

"My people, and Bria's too," Bracae said, "say that the gods often rule by opposites. If a man says a thing will happen, the gods change it around."

"But such changing can be good," Bria said quickly. "A man says he will not marry Candace. So the gods see that he does marry Candace."

"Candace ... " Rusco began, but then stopped because of a soft clink of metal in the dark outside the study window.

o-o

He snuffed out the bed lamp and all three flattened themselves against a wall and listened to more soft clinking and stealthy steps, and a careful voice.

"Master of the House!"

"It sounds like just one," Bracae said. "I'll slip out by the garden and look him over."

"We'll take him on two sides," Rusco said. He strode to the main entrance and hushed the dog and shook the doorkeeper. He considered smothering the wall lamp, thought better of it and was let out, and out through the wall gate, also. Around the corner of the wall he saw dim forms. More than two! Three! By Jupiter, four!

"Wait there!" Bracae called in a half-whisper.

"No, go back inside."

Almost at once Bracae came inside also, alone and frowning.

"There are three," he said. "And here's a thing! Each came by himself and swears that now some of the mercenaries who ringed Bethlehem are starting to ring this villa. All three are in a hurry for fear they may have a time getting back through. And each brings a message."

"How do you read such signs, Bracae?" Rusco asked. He felt the start of the mood which always rose in the face of danger.

"They spell trouble," Bracae said cheerfully.

"Bring one of the three in," Rusco said. "And Bria!" He raised his voice and she came running, ~~from the kitchen corridor~~. "Call up the household, and arm them, any who are willing to bear arms."

"That will mean everyone, Candace first of all," Bria said.

"And no lights," Rusco added. He did now put out the wall lamp and motioned the warden to smother a couple more along the hall. When Bracae came back with the first messenger the atrium was lighted only by the moon and stars shining through the open roof.

o-o

The first messenger was a Palace slave. He offered the telltale bow as he slid into the darkest corner

and even there he seemed afraid.

"Five days ago, master of the house," he said "I was given a message to bring if a certain one died." He offered a signet ring. "Now I bring his ring and message. It is this: 'If this ring is brought secretly, Vedius Rusco Philippicus, you will have one less friend in the Palace where you cannot have too many.'"

"Soemus's ring," Rusco murmured. "Herod at last has killed that worn old man." He looked at Bracae. "And how do you read this sign?"

"It spells trouble," Bracae said, soberly this time.

"Not too much trouble so long as we have the tunnel," Rusco said. "That will get us clear."

"Go ask for the woman, Bria," he told the slave. "Say to her that you are to have as many sesterces as you can hold in both hands, twice over."

"Twice over?" Bria asked out of the half light.

"Twice! And both times heaping."

o-o

The second messenger was a young spit-and-polish legionnaire who had General's Orderly written all over him. His grin was a promise to be, some day, an ex-Primus Pilus himself.

"Do you think you can get safely away from here?" Rusco asked.

"You mean the mercenaries, Sir?" Young, hard fingers curved over imaginary dice, and made an imaginary cast.

"Against mercenaries, Sir, when I have to, I can always throw a Venus."

"Your message?"

The legionnaire came smartly to attention.

"I have a message, Sir. 'Not even a general of the legions can help you now against Herod.'"

Rusco stood silent while the message soaked in.

"When you're done with soldiering," He said at last, "come back to the Sabine hills. If I'm still alive, maybe I can help you find a good farm. And on your way out ask for the woman, Bria. Tell her I said that this time it is to be denarii."

"I don't want pay," the legionnaire grinned. "It's pay enough just knowing I can brag to my grandchildren that I brought a message to Vedius Rusco Philippicus through five hundred mercenaries."

"You're counting on grandchildren?" Rusco cried. "Then you'll need a big farm and a big one costs plenty."

"We're all armed here, to the last man and Candace," Bria told him as he took the General's orderly in tow.

O-O

The third messenger was a soldier with familiar wrinkles and grey hair and age-thickened shoulders. Recognizing him, Rusco turned to Bracae in amazement.

"Did you know?" he asked.

"All the time!" Bracae said. "But he wanted to surprise you."

"The Centurion Messala, reporting to the Primus Pilus," the third messenger said in a voice bubbling with the excitement of having wriggled, at his age, across a hillside thick with mercenaries.

"Arrius!" Rusco said. "Arrius! Great Jupiter, what message can be important enough to make it worth your hands?"

"If I brought a hundred messages I could ~~not~~ ^{never} even-up with the Primus Pilus," Messala said.

"My guess is that this will even-up a thousand times over. But who sends it?"

"As if we both didn't know!" Messala winked.

"Can you get back?" Rusco asked, as he had asked the spit-and-polish orderly. "I don't want the likes of you trapped on your way back," ~~he explained.~~ ^{he explained.}

"Primus Pilus!" Messala said. "The mercenaries can fight. I give 'em that. But I can slip through a million of them on any night. They don't even see the man marching ahead until they're too close to kick his backsides."

"Let's have that message," Rusco laughed.

"My message is this, Primus Pilus: 'One who has no love for you still would not see you speared like a pig in a sty. You have only until the second hour after midnight. And do not trust your tunnel.'"

It was the last part of this final message that

Rusco let soak in for a long moment while Bracae blew out a long breath of dismay. The tunnel is no secret. ~~There was~~ ~~real trouble.~~

"Thanks, Old-Timer!" Rusco gave Messala a hard hand-grip. "I'm not going to offer you what I offered the other messengers, just now." He clasped the centurion's hand ~~again~~ and through a long silence they stood looking at each other. Then Rusco signalled Bria to let this messenger, also through the courtyard gate.

"I've put guards there, and at the garden gate, too," Bria said.

When they were gone, Rusco turned to Bracae. "Soemus, Orfitus Proculinus and old Naepor warn me. And Naepor tells us that our tunnel is known. How do you read those signs?"

"Really big trouble."

"It must be."

"Otherwise the General would have told Herod to keep his hands off a Roman citizen," Bracae said.

"But instead, it looks as though Proculinus had consented to use legionnaires to arrest me. Muso and Panthera will probably lead them, and Naepor, I suppose, will be along to see that they do the job right."

"And Herod has posted mercenaries just in case we try to get away before Muso and Panthera get here." Bracae plucked at his under lip. "I wonder how the tunnel secret leaked."

"Nepte!" Rusco said thoughtfully. "We weren't as careful as we thought. She noticed something and told

Panthera."

"And Panthera told that ^{old boss} smart / Naepor," Bracae said. "And he figured it out but then was ashamed of setting dogs on an old comrade so he sent Messala."

"What time is it?" Rusco asked. "Naepor gave me only until the second hour after midnight."

"When you called Bria and me to your study, she had just turned an hour glass. It ought to be about due for turning again. That would make it an hour before midnight." He went to look. He was right.

"Then we have three hours."

"Let's look into the tunnel," Bracae said.

o-o

As soon as they opened the dining room panel they breathed freshly stirred dust.

"The slabs that we piled up tippy-toe!" Bracae said. "Somebody found them and tumbled them down. I hope he's under."

"Mercenaries!" Rusco decided. "Old Helius would play fair. He wouldn't let Muso and Panthera get here ahead of time."

"But Herod sent his own pack and some of them found the far entrance."

Rusco was not listening. Peering into the black musty hole he was thinking of Joseph again. Maybe Joseph had something after all in a Lord who was a refuge

and a fortress. Tunnels did not seem to hold up!

"We don't need the tunnel," Bracae said. "My guess is that there won't be a hard fight. What legionnaires will fight hard against you on orders from the likes of Muso and Panthera? And they all know your household is tough."

"I don't want to drag the household and you into this," Rusco said. "There must be some way to handle it alone."

"More than once you've said we did everything a little better when we did it together," Bracae said.

"Not this time," Rusco said. "If I don't come through, I want you around to help young Lucianius look after Deborah. And right now I want you to get word to her."

"This time I won't leave your back uncovered," Bracae said. "I won't leave you."

"Well, at least slip out and see how tight the mercenaries have closed the ring, ~~by now~~."

"If that scared slave and flip young orderly got through it can't be very tight."

"It's had time to tighten since those two left. Don't test it too hard. I don't suppose you're down for arrest also, but in the dark anything could happen."

"It'll happen to one of them, not to me," Bracae said. In a quarter of an hour he was back.

"They are tightening up," he admitted. "I could get through, though." He hunched his shoulders stubbornly. "But don't ask me! Don't try to play it alone!"

"I must get word to Deborah," Rusco said. "I doubt Herod will harm her. She is my daughter but her husband is a Roman and his father is a patrician. But Herod is risking a lot in arresting me, and he might risk trying to arrest Deborah, too. I'd like her to go under cover until he cools off."

"Bria could get through those mercenaries!"

"Don't think of it! That crowd would give a rough time to any woman they found wandering around tonight."

"Not to Bria. She's lived more than half her life in army camps. She could handle them."

"No!"

Bracae insisted. "Bria can do it!" he said. "I'll call her." He did not need to call. She came stumbling in, blind with crying and able to speak only between wrenching sobs.

"Oh, Bracae!" She fell into his arms. "Oh, Bracae! The babies!"

Bewildered, Bracae hugged her and looked at Rusco in confusion.

"Oh, Bracae! Bethlehem! The babies!" It was as though Woden had promised Bria fulfillment of her dearest hope and then, with ~~the~~ all those sons and daughters almost in her arms, had made a decision by the cruel law of opposites.

"Bria, it's all right. It's all right," Bracae said. "What is it? What babies?"

Rusco choked on hatred of Herod. "Bethlehem" and "the babies" in big, hearty Bria's forlorn cry were the almost certain, terrible answer which he had forbidden his household to seek.

"Who told you, Bria?" he asked softly. "Was it the Palace messenger?" It had to be. Whatever had happened in Bethlehem had happened by Herod's order and news of it would have gone back first to Herod's Palace. "Was it the Palace messenger?" he repeated.

Bria bobbed her head, her tear-stained, grief-reddened face twisted out of all its wholesome lines. Addressing not Rusco who had asked but Bracae who shared this deprivation which Woden had put upon her she told how Soemus's messenger had hung around, as though one more thing must be said, and finally had poured out the report, shocking even to a Palace slave.

"Hundreds and hundreds!" Bria sobbed.

Not hundreds! Little Bethlehem, Rusco knew, could not have held even a hundred. But saying so would not comfort Bria. Numbers did not matter. The slaughter of one innocent was more than enough to break her heart.

Bracae thought so, too. "Oh, great Woden!" he said and turned to Rusco. "Now I know what you are charged with! It is Joseph's escape with the mother and one of the babies."

"Herod could twist that into a charge of treason," Rusco said thoughtfully, "And Proculinus is so ~~sharp~~ ^{Acquisious} not to hurt his record ~~as a general~~ that he'd fall in with it. ☺

"But a charge of treason would mean they're coming to arrest you for execution, if they don't kill you on the spot!" Bracae cried. He could not understand how Vedius Rusco was able to remain so calm.

"If it's here, it's here!" Rusco said,

Bria began to quiet her sobs within the solace of Bracae's big embrace. He gave her a little shake.

"Stop this!" he whispered gruffly, "Hush! Pull your mind together. There's a thing you've got to do."

Bria jerked free. "What?" she asked, sharply ^{As though} ~~that~~ she ~~must have~~ hoped the thing was some sort of retaliation against ^{those who} ~~whatever~~ men had done the other thing in Bethlehem.

Bracae started to tell her.

"No!" Rusco said.

Bracae told on to the end in grim defiance.

"I won't have it," Rusco said.

"I'll go and glad to," Bria cried. If she had not been able to help those in Bethlehem, she would not fail to help the one child she had ever been able to think of as daughter. "Just let me get into a pair of Bracae's pants. If I have to run from a mercenary I don't want this," she brushed at her full dress, "tangling my legs all up."

"You'll have to walk to Joppa Market," Bracae said. "But you can rouse a trader there and buy a horse."

Silently, Rusco handed her his purse.

"You and I'll go along, for a little way,"

Bracae said to Rusco. "Candace can stay behind and count to a hundred and then get the lights all on. They'll throw a glow above the walls and keep the mercenaries looking this way long enough for Bria to get through."

"I'm ashamed to give permission," Rusco said.

"But I do."

"Somebody has to warn Deborah," Bria said.

"I know! And there's another thing! Tell Deborah and Lucianus ~~and Mithras~~ to watch for any pursuit after Joseph. If they see one they can take horses and find Joseph and mount him and Mary and ride with them until they are beyond Herod's reach."

"I'll get into those pants," Bria said.

"And we'd better get into armor," Bracae said.

When Bria came back, trousered, Candace was with her, fully armed and armored. She had already been told what she must do and trailing behind her came half a dozen women helpers. Rusco looked at her with more awareness than he had ever shown before, but it was only to say, "I wish you had gone with Deborah. ^{!!} ~~You could be safe in Jericho.~~"

Buckling the breastplate in which he had given her so many lessons, Candace looked away. "I'd rather be here with you," she said in a low voice.

"Well, keep near me if any trouble starts,"

Rusco said.

"Put your women at their stations," Bracae said to Candace. "When the three of us slip out, count a hundred. Then light every lamp and candle."

Rusco went through the courtyard gate, and Bracae and Bria followed. He felt sure no one outside had been roused. He counted a hundred and looked back.

Sudden light was diffusing above the villa walls and even from the balcony where Deborah had first sighted Lucianus. The moon was brighter than he would have chosen, but by flitting from bush to tree, to copse to rock they worked down the hill undetected.

"I can throw a Venus myself, when I have to," Rusco thought, ~~to himself~~. He was pretty sure they were past most of the mercenaries.

"Here I go," Bria whispered and threw her arms around Bracae and then drifted lower on the hill.

She vanished. Rusco and Bracae waited. No unusual sound came back.

"Let's make some noise of our own now," Rusco said.

"Bria's clear," Bracae said. "If she weren't we'd be hearing hollering. I'm glad you thought to look out for Joseph," he added.

~~"That family sticks in your mind," Rusco said.~~

They both began to scuff carelessly up the rocky hill. Some one called. Dark forms began to close in on them.

"Run for it!" Rusco laughed and they ran and the courtyard gate slammed behind them and the calling voices cried in frustration.