



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler
Lovelace Family Papers.

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FLIGHT FROM HEROD

By

Delos W. Lovelace.

Good last Sept
May 27, 1957
Wey & to the
last version
Some for Paul's which
presented every
falling

BOOKS BY DELOS. W. LOVELACE.

Journey to Bethlehem

Flight from Herod

One Stayed at Welcome
(in collaboration with Maud Hart Lovelace)

Gentlemen from England
(in collaboration with Maud Hart Lovelace)

FOR YOUNGER READERS

Rockne of Notre Dame

Ike Eisenhower,
Statesman and Soldier of Peace

That Dodge those
The Golden Wedge,
(in collaboration with Maud Hart Lovelace.)

The Virgillian verses quoted in
this novel are, from the The Singing
Farmer, an evocative translation of
The Georgics, by L.A.S. Jermyn in mem-
ory of his son, Peter, dead in World
War II, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, Eng. ~~and~~
publisher.)

quoted by permission of the publisher
Publius Virgilius Maro (70-19 B.C.)

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FOR MY WIFE.

CHAPTER ONE

At intervals, while the bold sun climbed above the horizon, Elizabeth had been dosing the wobbly new lambs, hoping, in spite of their discouraging weakness, that she had rescued them in time.

"Sillies!" she said under her breath. "Even three-day old-lambs ought to have sense enough to stay with their mothers!"

She pulled the rag teat from Number One and gave it to Number Two. She bundled both into a blanket and was pushing them within range of the heat thrown off by a brazier when Number One baa'd forlornly.

"Ssh!" said Elizabeth and glanced toward a curtain that cut off a far corner of the room. There was no sound from that quarter. Not a creak! Not a rustle! And Number One drowsed off, and his twin drowsed. "Now keep shushed," she added, shaking her red head rebukingly.

Always sure that she could improve any state of affairs, Elizabeth was forever giving something or someone a rebuking, corrective headshake.

She walked to the window, pulled open the shutters and shook her head now at the sun. It was growing warmer so that the

brown hills were beginning to push through a scanty night fall of snow.

"A pity," she murmured to the sun, "that you couldn't have helped a few hours earlier!"

A third headshake disapproved a beggar slouching along the unfrequented byway which passed the house. "A beggar outside this humble lonely ^{place!} ~~house!~~ Whatever is he doing here?"

A sudden clatter caused her to whirl about. Her six months-old-son who had reddish hair like his mother's and the build of an infant Samson, sat staunchly on a sheepskin in the center of the room. He had thrown the toy he had been playing with, a stoppered bottle with red and green beads inside. Delighted with the noise, he crowed, and Elizabeth shook her head at him.

At first blush Elizabeth seemed to be a tyrant but closer acquaintance revealed her as not at all formidable. Tall, spare and gaunt, she was graceful as well; her thin wind-roughened cheeks had a sculptured charm; and her warm blue gaze always betrayed that, however duty-bound she felt to correct things and people, she understood and forgave the worst of both.

Elizabeth always ended by forgiving. Her time, her strength, and -- often to her husband's mild dismay -- the family goods belonged to anyone. No friend was ever refused aid; no beggars ever turned empty handed from her ~~house~~. ^{door.}

Softly she retrieved the toy. There was still no sound from behind the curtain. Mother and baby still slept.

And why not, after the time they had had, Elizabeth reflected. [?] She thought back to the stable at the inn, ^{on Bethlehem} and said,

"tch-tch-tch!" in disapproval of that beginning of everything.

Of all places to have a baby! A cave, stabling cows, horses, goats, even a couple of camels! And afterwards through two nights and a day, what fuss and confusion! People coming. People going. People Oh-ing and Ah-ing! Only Mary had not been upset. She was serene as always. And the baby had slept through everything.

Elizabeth congratulated herself afresh that she had found this house, such as it was, for Mary. Her own house was only a half mile away, a spacious one to do credit to a Temple priest of consequence. Zacharias, as Elizabeth always managed to make new acquaintances aware, was not merely one of the obscure hosts on duty in the great, golden edifice which Herod was slyly rebuilding in the shadow of the Fortress of Antonia in Jerusalem, although admitting only repairs lest he be accused of sacrilege. Zacharias was a senior priest of the hand-picked division of Abijah.

But the house of a senior priest was too full of bustle and hustle, Joseph had decided. So Elizabeth had found this one and had brought Mary and her son here this very morning.

She had brought them before sun-up and getting them settled had not been easy. Of course Joseph had helped, but it hadn't been a man's work and she scarcely knew what she would have done without that big copper-haired girl from the inn, who had come along to lend a hand.

Judith! That was the girl's name. She wasn't, as a matter of fact, a girl except in name. She had had her own baby

only a few days earlier than Mary. But she was one of those wonders, so hearty that they are up and about almost before the midwife's back is turned.

The house in which ^{Judith} ~~she~~ had helped Elizabeth settle Mary and her son was indeed humble. Its single room was large but it did not offer even the decent elevated section of dirt floor which in most houses kept human occupants a few inches higher than their beasts, at night. ^{The donkey} ~~Small~~ Briar, Mary's mount all the way from Nazareth, had stood that morning as high as his mistress until Joseph hauled him outside to forage.

The house had the usual flat roof, and limestone walls. It blended so inconspicuously into the countryside that passersby scarcely saw it, and certainly forgot it as soon as they got out of sight. And there were few passersby, for no road ran before it, only the byway on which Elizabeth had noticed the loitering beggar.

A gentle knock fell on the door.

"If it's that beggar," Elizabeth said, "he'll get a piece of my mind!" And she jerked the door open with her most forbidding headshake.

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

Like most shepherds, he seemed ferocious. He had the usual, alarmingly tousled head of hair and carried a staff with a crook big enough to hook a leopard. Draped over a shoulder he

wore the usual villianous red-dyed sheepskin and at his belt swung the usual pouch crammed, as though to mock the daintier ^{fare} diet of townfolk, with rank cheese, musty olives, dried figs and stale bread all mixed in with stones for his sling. But in spite of all this he seemed only kind, perhaps because he carried under one arm, a set of pipes, with their promise of gentle music.

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

"I've heard about you," Elizabeth said, lowering her deep vigorous voice. She nodded toward the curtain in a signal for him to speak no louder.

"There?" whispered the shepherd, looking toward it. The room was silent. Silently, he touched his hand to head and heart.

"You are one of the four who came to the inn that first night," Elizabeth whispered. "Joseph told me about you. The day before, he said, you saw three Wise Men in Jericho."

"The wise men are still in Jericho."

Young John, with a triumphant gurgle, threw his rattle across the room again and his mother seemed glad of a chance to vent her feelings in action. She ran to chase the toy and then began to poke and pat her son. Pats and pokes found nothing amiss. He was as dry as a bone.

One of the lambs gave a broken "Baa-a" and scrambled out of the blankets. His stiltlike legs buckled, bent and

sidestepped but he staggered half across the room before collapsing.

The shepherd lifted the slack woolly morsel, sniffed and looked up in amazement.

"This lamb is tipsy!" he whispered hoarsely.

"He's just had a few sucks from a rag teat," Elizabeth whispered in indignant denial.

"You gave the lamb wine?"

"They both got lost last night. I found them stone cold in the snow. They looked as though they'd never pull through, so I gave them what Zacharias always takes to warm himself."

"You gave the lambs WINE?"

"Now see here! What's wrong with that?"

The shepherd put the lamb down. It balanced doggedly. Then, drawn by the scent of its kind, it staggered back to the blanket and "Baa-aaed" again at not finding the expected natural substitute for the rag teat. The shepherd wrapped it in the blanket, felt the twin, and turned back to Elizabeth.

"I guess it's all right." He could not help smiling.

"I mean, such stuff for lambs. A man certainly does live and learn. You can give the pair back to their mother."

"I knew I was doing the right thing." Elizabeth was full of confidence now that she had confounded an expert. "But where are the rest of you?" she asked. "The other three who came with you before?"

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

"I don't remember your names, though Joseph told me."

"I am Esrom, and the others were Obed and Zorobabal and Beor."

"Oh, yes! Beor, Joseph said, had a yellow beard like a half-moon."

"That's Beor all right. And the quiet one was Obed and the excited one was Zorobabal."

Elizabeth threw a question like a sharp stick.

"See here! We didn't say at the inn where we were going, and on the way we met, I'll swear, not a soul. So how did you know where to come?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Two beggars?" Elizabeth protested. "You mean one!" She rushed to the window. "There are three!" she cried. Her ready suspicion darted at Joseph and Esrom as though they had to be responsible for this trio since she was not. "What under high heaven brought them here?" she puzzled.

Joseph went to the window, and sure enough there were three! And the newest arrival, skinny, barefooted and wearing

X only a tattered burlap loincloth, resembled Peleg, the odd beggar who had walked ~~W~~orshipfully alongside Mary for part of the journey down from Nazareth.

Three-fourths naked and apparently half starved, Peleg had still been the biggest braggart Joseph had ever heard. He had been the laughing stock of the travelling party which had drawn together for protection against robbers. And when Mary took his part he had become her adorer, as so many did, once within her gentle spell.

But Peleg, Joseph remembered, had turned west for Meggido, fifty miles to the north. How then could he be down here now? Joseph decided that the resemblance must be only an accident, but his surprise held on.

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

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

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Elizabeth flung both hands high.

"Hoity-toity! Aren't we thinking big thoughts! Something indeed! And whose lives?"

Joseph smiled at Esrom and took a staff of storax wood, from beside the door. It exuded a faint cinnamon odor.

"Well," he said, "Briar is tethered just a little way off, in plain sight. And since I'm sort of unnecessary around here, I'll get to work."

"Joseph, have you found work so soon?" Elizabeth demanded.

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

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus!" Elizabeth said slowly, as one says the name of a great man. "Mary will be so pleased! She may be awake."

"I doubt it. After such a night," Joseph said, but he tiptoed to the curtain. He pulled it aside a small space and looked into the gloom within.

Mary was still asleep. He could tell by her soft breathing. He could see the brown brook of her hair flowing over her blue dress embroidered in mellow yellow. It flowed as serenely as she slept.

Between her pallet and the shallow chest which had been pressed into service as a crib lay a spindle and a bundle of wool. He remembered her happily spinning as she rode on Briar's back on the journey down to Bethlehem.

He tiptoed to the crib. Tiny and still, the baby slept

in his warm nest. His lashes made feathery arcs on featherfeather-soft cheeks. From the neck down, of course, he was swaddled, small body encased in a firmly-wrapped cloth held tight by a criss-crossed band.

Joseph, a craft perfectionist, smiled at the evidence of Mary's skill. He turned back toward the door and Esrom joined him.

"I'll bid you goodby," Esrom said. "I have an errand in Bethlehem."

"Thank you for coming," Joseph said.

"Here!" Elizabeth called. Joseph was lifting the latch but he turned and she heaped his hands with slabs of fresh bread and a wedge of pale yellow cheese. "You don't want to disappoint your three friends," she scolded.

Joseph and Esrom went out.

There were four beggars now.

CHAPTER TWO

^{All} ~~Elsewhere in Judea there were puzzles far bigger than~~ ^{was} ~~a few beggars on a road not likely to yield alms.~~ Puzzles had been sprouting throughout the whole country ever since the strange radiance over Bethlehem -- the star, moon, sun, fire or whatever it had been. More and more, thousands were remembering and puzzling over the ^{et} promise of the ~~old~~ prophets. Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, others too, had made the promise. Each had used different words but the promise had been the same.

"...he shall reign as king."

"...ruler of Israel."

"...the Lord whom ye seek shall come to his temple."

"...and unto him shall the obedience of the people be."

"...and the government shall be upon his shoulder."

"And his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor...Prince of Peace."

Each had promised in a long-gone day of oppression.

Each had kindled the hope of freedom. Could it be that the time of fulfillment was at hand? Why not? What better time than now, when Israel lay under a double oppression, the conquering sword of Rome and the tyrant heel of Herod the Great?

Herod in his palace remembered ~~only~~ "...he shall reign as king", and braced himself against the threat. Well, ~~by guile and treachery~~ he had got rid of more than one pretender to the throne on which he had sat for so long. He knew how to get rid of one more.

He was too guileful to involve himself openly in the riddance. These touchy Jews were trouble enough under merely normal afflictions: taxes, labor drafts, land seizures, the quartering of mercenary troops and such. If they ever suspected that their tyrant had struck at prophecy there would be no holding them.

But the thing could be done without involving the palace. ~~This was a chore for a Jew.~~ So Herod had sent for ~~the~~ ^{his} ~~Chief Sadducee,~~ ^{The Chief Sadducee} ~~Pilni ben-Ginath.~~ And ~~Pilni,~~ ^{back in his} ~~back in his~~ ^{his} mansion, ~~which~~ ^{where} ~~had sent for two others who were now on their way.~~ ^{he occupied for hours of his time. A lecture has been given} ~~was had requested in the palace, need for two others who were~~ ^{now in their way.} 0-0-0

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

The Primus Pilus of the Roman Tenth Legion was sometimes compared to a bull, and even to a hippopotamus. As a small hippopotamus he would have been just about right. As a man he

was too fat and lunched too much. He drank and ate at all hours to take his mind off the disappointment which always gnawed at him because of the honors and success he had missed. But when, on rising in the morning, he sucked in his paunch and cinched it tight with a belt as wide as both his hands, he looked less the hippopotamus he had grown to be and more the fighting man he once had been. *When the darkness had reached him at*
Down Back in the Fortress of Antonia, *today* he had *left* taken off everything -- helmet, garrison cloak, hobnailed marching shoes -- everything which would readily identify a Roman officer and he had made the centurion Panthera do the same. Of course they had kept breast plates and swords and daggers but long, striped native cloaks hid these and as they walked along the quiet street they might have passed for two, *Early-rising* Jerusalemites. They went around a maze of alleys and lanes and approached the house again.

"Wasn't that boy watching when we went by before?" Panthera asked, motioning across the street. *The centurion* He was taller and younger than Naepor, with bold sleepy eyes in an olive-skinned face, and a small sensual mouth.

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

He wanted a drink, he was getting downright dry, but he was willing to play cautious even though it was impossible that anyone could have discovered their mission. How could anyone

have had time? They had set out as soon as he received Tibni-ben-Ginath's message. But, on the other hand, the Fortress might well be under the eyes of spies for the High Priest in the Temple next door or for Herod across the bridge or for General Proculus, or even for all three. You never knew, and caution always paid off. So they went around again and when they approached the house for the third time the street was, at last, empty.

"Quick, now!" Naepor elbowed Panthera and lurched after him. The door was unlocked as the Sadducee had promised. Measuring the contents of the broad hall with a shrewdness gained from a thousand lootings Naepor told himself that Tibni-ben-Ginath could pay plenty. And would have to, if only for the reason that his summons had broken up a needed ^{morning} nap. Even after ~~four~~ ^{two} days the memory of those lights all over the sky still kept a man restless at night.

the chief Sadducee
"Come in!" Tibni-ben-Ginath advanced soundlessly across a rug so rich, soft and thick that it must have cost, Naepor reckoned, twenty times his own whole year's pay as Primus Pilus. "I hope you understand why I set this place for our meeting," the Sadducee added. "It is so much more away from everything and everybody ^(^) ~~than the Fortress.~~"

He was a slight ~~man~~ man, usually arrogant in manner. Today, however, he was conciliatory, an attitude which a ^{worldly} Sadducee ^{and Jew} seldom assumed toward any Roman. His dress flouted every austere rule of his religion. A multi-colored robe, entirely unlawful, parted as he moved to reveal a tunic of lavender silk suitable only for a Greek or a Persian. His shoes were Egyptian-style,

stitched across the toes with gold and silver thread.

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

"There is wine," Tibni said. "Some from my best Hebron vines." Nothing in his tone hinted that this best was going to be wasted on such guests. He led the way to a great, open, flowery court and Naepor, eyeing his host's rich clothing in this flood of sunshine, set his price higher.

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

Naepor knew he was on his way out. And he knew that on retirement he would never be offered any such civil post as the one for which his old comrade Vedius Rusco had been drafted, ^{or ~~the~~ ~~position~~ ~~of~~ ~~Primus~~ ~~Pilus~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~Tenth~~}. He might be offered none at all. All his life he had tried to rival Rusco but he was fat and nearly finished and Rusco was still rising. He sat down sullenly, broad head sinking between thick shoulders, coarse hair bristling, thick lips ~~revealing the greed which had~~ ~~always betrayed him.~~ parched for wine ⊗

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

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

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

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

Tibni-ben-Ginath patiently waited to talk business until Naepor should pause long enough between drinks, and meantime ^{he} looked calculatingly at the olive-skinned, sleepy-eyed young centurion.

"I am sure," he felt forced to say at last, "that you

discuss

would not bring an ally of too little ~~experience~~ but I know almost nothing of your friend here, scarcely more than his name and rank."

Panthera's small mouth curved in a self-satisfied smile.

"The General thinks well of him. That ought to be enough for you," Naepor growled. "Only today, on my recommendation, Orfitus Proculinus promoted Panthera to be Pilus Prior of the Eighth Cohort. Don't worry. Just tell us what you need."

Tibni-ben-Ginath settled softly among cushions on the third side of the table and folded his womanish hands.

"Herod," he said, "has ordered me to do a thing which I cannot do alone."

"You know me!" Naepor said. "Pay enough and I'll get it done for you."

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

"Who hasn't?" Naepor said. "The rumors are up and down every highway. Every time people see a woman near bearing, they wonder."

"That's right," Panthera broke in. "Only a few days ago, in Sebaste, I ran into a lot of Galileans travelling this way to pay the tax Quirinius had put on the Jews, and I tried ..."

But Naepor ^{hurried on} was not interested in anything Panthera had tried in the Samaritan city of Sebaste, ~~and he hurried on.~~

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

"Nonsense!" Tibni said.

"Nonsense, nothing! I certainly heard something and saw

something, too." ~~Then~~ Naepor grinned. "But maybe Panthera will go along with you. He was kept under covers by personal business and he didn't see any lights and didn't need any, and the only voice he heard wasn't from the sky."

Tibni's shrug made it plain that loose talk was offensive, even when vague.

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

"But plenty do," Panthera broke in. "Some say they mean a great leader has been born to the Jews who'll help them lord it over all other people."

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

"This new-born -- whoever he is -- who may not have been born at all -- ", Tibni spoke with a rush. "Herod has told me to find him."

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

The Sadducee hesitated. He was a practical man. He had profited by allying himself with Herod. And the only harm had been the epithet, "Herodian," that is to say, "Herod's toady," thrown at him occasionally by some holier-than-thou compatriot. Moreover, prophets' promises for seven hundred years had failed to produce a Messiah. He took no stock in the new rumors. Nevertheless, he was a Jew, and he did not propose to lay himself open to a charge, by other Jews, of betrayal. That would hurt. It might even lessen his value to Herod.

He considered with the limber conscience which let him be both a Sadducee, especially charged with the defense of the sacred High Priesthood, and a supporter of Herod who now made High Priests into errand boys. He found a solution. He must, at least, pretend to make the search Herod had commanded. But did he need to pinpoint it? He did not.

He set out to confuse the hunters he was trying to hire.

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

That was certainly confusing the trail.

Naepor, however, did not seem confused. ~~He did not seem to be really interested.~~ "Crazy old fox!" he repeated. "He must be really scared. What does he want to do if he does find this Messiah? Strangle him, as he strangled his own uncle? Smother him, as he smothered his queen ^{Mariamne} ~~Miriamne~~? Drown him as he drowned ~~Mariamne's~~ ^{Mariamne's} brother? Execute him on a faked charge of treason, as he executed that earless High Priest, Hyrcanus?"

"Herod only wishes to join other Jews in worshipping the Messiah," the Sadducee said, flushing.

Naepor bellowed scornful laughter.

"And what a double lie that is! Since when has Herod ever worshipped anybody in Judea except Herod? And when did he get to be a Jew? He's still a lousy Idumaeon in spite of what he

calls his conversion."

With Herod's ancentry thus brought into public view, Tibni-ben-Ginath was filled with a secret shame. It was shameful that any true Jew -- especially a Sadducee -- should be doing a ~~thing~~^{service} for an Idumaeen. Jews had despised Idumaeans for centuries. Now, with Herod on Judea's throne, they hated them worse even than Romans.

"Herod's sand-flea grandfathers below Beersheba bit the backsides of Jews at every chance," Naepor bellowed, his continuing laughter adding to Tibni's shame. "And even though Herod is a convert he bites your backsides, too. Remember the golden Roman eagle he tried to stick up in the Temple? I wouldn't give this goblet of wine for any Messiah's chances if Herod found out where he was."

Tibni had no good answer so he tried to make a quick one convincing.

"Herod doesn't harm anyone any more," he said.

"He's just a sick, feeble..."

"He's a killer!" Naepor grunted. "And he'll be one till he rots. If it wasn't that most of the time he's too sick to think straight, or remember what he said yesterday, he'd be killing right and left every day."

"He's a half-dead, feeble old man," Tibni insisted.

"But he has as much shrewdness as ever and that tells him to honor any Messiah who appears. If he does this, he may win over many Jews who now hate him."

He drew up grandly, as though conferring a favor.

"It is because I thought you'd like to win Herod's patronage and make a little money in the bargain that I asked you here. I'll be glad to let you both help me make this search that Herod asks."

"Of course we'll help," Panthera said eagerly. "In Sebaste ..."

Naepor scowled in reproof at the man he had just succeeded in elevating to the command of six hundred legionnaires. "You talk too much, Panthera," he growled. "If you don't look out you'll talk yourself out of a lot of money." He turned to Tibni-ben-Ginath.

"Why do you need us? You could use your High Priest's spy ring and never pay them a copper."

"I -- I prefer not," Tibni said coldly.

"Come on, come on!" Naepor said. "Why do you have to buy our help?"

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

"I see! I see!" he shouted. "You're afraid to use Jews! You know what could happen, even to a Sadducee, if a Jew spy began to worry, and talked and spread word of what you're up to. Those who believe in the old prophecies, almost any honest Jew, would chop your head clear from your neck for helping Herod's dirty work along."

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

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

"Of course I'm willing!" Naepor spoke quietly also. "But let's not tell this swine so. As long as we don't, we've got him where we want him. He has to do what he's been told to do or Herod will break him. And he doesn't dare do it himself, or use the Temple's spies or any other Jew, for fear they'll tie him in. He's got to use us, and we'll make him pay." He was triumphant as Tibni-ben Ginath returned in less open anger and sat down again.

"All right!" the Sadducee confessed softly. "I'm inviting you in because I need you. But do not misjudge my necessity. What I need is not much and I shall not pay much. I want only to find a lately born child whom some people call their Messiah, if any such has been born at all."

"We'll find him - if -" Naepor's expectation made Tibni wince - "if you make it worth our while. We'll have to cut a lot of sharp corners and they won't be worth cutting if you don't make it worth our while. All three of us."

"Two!" corrected Tibni.

"Three!" Naepor insisted. The Tribune of the Eighth Cohort, pink-faced, foxy Salvidinius Muso, ^{brought in,} must be ~~brought over~~.

~~If he suspected any crooked work he would ask questions, Naepor well knew, and Muso was, himself, too crooked not to smell something~~ ^{crooked} when Panthera used the Cohort as it would have to be used in order to push this hunt.

"The Tribune Salvidinius Muso, also!" Naepor told Tibni. "I can send some men from Panthera's cohort out to search and if General Proculus asks questions, I've got a fine answer. The ^{new} tax

which is being collected for Rome. Every Jew hates it. Thousands are talking revolt. I'll just be using Panthera to hunt for the beginnings of tax riots here and there.

"But I can't tell such a yarn to General Proculinus unless the Tribune Muso keeps his mouth shut. Muso is assigned to the Eighth Cohort. He won't be there long; the general is kicking him upstairs to make room for a new Tribune, and a good thing, too. Because as a fighting officer, Muso is a joke. But he will be there while the search is on, and if he gets suspicious he could spoil everything. You've got to pay him, too."

"I won't have this known to anyone else," Tibni said nervously. "Least of all the Tribune Salvidinius Muso. Patrician though he is, I have never trusted him."

"Muso won't let himself be squeezed out. He needs money too much--he always needs money," Naepor said. "He is on leave, on the seacoast, at Caesarea, but when he comes back he will have to be taken in. At that, you're lucky. It isn't often a Jew can buy three Romans. The likes of Panthera, sure! But no Brannus! What chance do you think you'd have of buying another Roman aristocrat with blood as blue as Muso's?"

"Three are too many," Tibni said wearily. "I'll give up the whole thing."

"You can't and you know you can't," Naepor scoffed. "Herod's sickness makes him forget things and it may kill him tomorrow, but if he lives and remembers, and you haven't done what he ordered, you'll land in one of the dungeons he is filling up all over Judea. You've got to see this through."

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"I can ^{get you} pay only what Herod ~~is paying me~~," Tibni said craftily. "And that isn't much."

"How much?"

"Five thousand denarii."

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

"Impossible!" Tibni dry-washed his womanish hands of a bad bargain.

"You know Herod gave you a lot more than five thousand." Naepor eyed Tibni. "I'll bet you got -- seven times five!"

"Thirty-five thousand!" The Sadducee fell back on his cushions as though he had been struck.

"I caught you!" Naepor roared. "As sure as I'm drinking your prize Hebron wine you're getting thirty-five thousand. I remembered something and caught you! I've lived *long enough* among Jews to know how much they think of the number seven. It's practically magic. What's that yarn of the Scribes about somebody named Joshua, and seven priests blowing seven trumpets and circling Jericho seven times a day, and on the seventh day bringing the walls down?"

"Ten thousand! Not a mite more," Tibni cried desperately.

"Five thousand to Panthera, ten to Muso, twenty to me," Naepor told him. "And next time don't try to be so smart."

"No!" Tibni cried.

"No?" Naepor brimmed his goblet slowly.

SUPERASE BOND

20% COTTON FIBRE

"No!"

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

"Fifteen thousand!" Tibni's tone was that of one willing to reason even with the most unreasonable.

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

"Twenty thousand!" *Tibni said. //*

"You're wasting our time!" *Twenty-five ~~thousand~~ "*

"All right, all that you ask," Tibni wheezed.

Naepor lumbered back to his cushions.

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

Tibni clapped his hands for a moneybox and paid. Tight-lipped, defeated, he watched while the Primus Pilus poured from a snow-chilled jar, drank and poured again and again before turning once more to the exit.

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Out in the street Naepor refused to share Panthera's mood of triumph. This thing of hunting down a baby! Any way you looked at it, it was a thing a man shied at.

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

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

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

"This," he had whispered, "is what Jupiter, Ceres and Venus walk on when they stroll from their palaces."

And he had almost cried out, thinking he glimpsed upon the immaculate field the majesty of Jupiter, the purity of Ceres, the rosy robe of Venus. "Why not?" he had whispered. "This meadow must run clean to [^]Olympus. Some of the gods could be here this very day. I might see any of them this very minute."

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

The desire had not lasted. Naturally! he scarcely had got down the mountains when he felt only his usual thirst, a budding torment even then, and in the first town he had drowned his vision of fleecy meadows, strolling Olympians and virtue and truth. But it had come back sometimes, although less and less often, to be sure. It was years, now, he realized, since it had come back.

And it had never come, his fumbling mind recalled, except when he was shamed, when, as now, he had some dim awareness of letting slip a virtue, a truth which, briefly, he had almost had in his hand. ⁹He shook his head. He decided that he needed another drink.

"It's Tibni's worry," he grunted, pulling free of his own worries. He nodded two or three times and blinked. "This hunt isn't our funeral. Tibni's responsible. We're just taking orders. We're just doing what we're hired and paid to do. If any harm comes, the blame'll be on the fellow who did the hiring. That'll be Tibni, ^{-ben-Qinath} or maybe Herod."

"I suppose you^{are}'re right," Panthera said.

"Sure I'm right," Naepor nodded craftily. For the first time in Panthera's experience the Primus Pilus did not seem quite sober.

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

the countryside was honeycombed.

As he began to follow a descending stream-bed, a distant, yellow-bearded shepherd drew away ^{from} two companions and standing among browsing flocks made arm signals. These were the rollicking inventions of a happy-go-lucky mind. First they thrashed like small, fretful legs, then they made a gentle rocking. Joseph was quick at signals. He rocked his own arms gently and jovially to reassure his yellow-bearded questioner that the baby was coming along fine.

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

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

About the beauty, more or less, of the only daughter and only child of the famous Vedius Rusco Philippicus there were,

admittedly, several schools of opinion.

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

She is almost Miriam, Vedius Rusco often thought. For him the remembered loveliness of the Judean wife he had lost when Deborah was born would always be matchless.

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

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

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

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

accompanied the light.

"Just the moon and stars and nightingales!" Bria had said, frowning when Deborah grabbed the honey cake. A girl who had won the grown-up privilege of her own study, boudoir and bedroom and who was old enough to be receiving marriage offers ought to be able to wait for breakfast. Munching might be all right in front of a foster mother. But in front of servants and slaves! Well!

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

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

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

It was the persisting hope for some clue to the strange

^{and}
light, -- she stuck to it -- the strange enchanting music that had brought her to the balcony but it was the approaching young ~~Tribune~~ lieutenant who now brought her up on tip-toe.

He had turned away from the dusty legionnaires of the infantry detachment. They slogged steadily on toward Jerusalem under their usual seventy-five pound packs at their usual three miles an hour. The solitary horseman grew swiftly recognizable as he headed up the private lane which led to the villa high on its limestone hill, with a sooty slave keeping pace, an unstrung bow and a quiver of arrows bouncing on his back.

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

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

Deborah smiled down and Salvidinius Maso faded forever from her mind and exultantly she confessed that she was falling in love at first sight. High time, too! Wasn't she almost sixteen?

The young lieutenant made himself tall in the saddle to catch all -- all-- of the sudden vision ahead, and paralleling Deborah's own confession he told himself excitedly that he was head over heels in love. And high time! Wasn't he almost twenty-one?

At his side the sooty slave made a confession of his own. As his broad nostrils trapped faint savory odors from the villa kitchen he confessed that he was hungry enough to eat half a horse.

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

"I hope this is the home of Vedius Rusco!" the lieutenant called up.

"Of Vedius Rusco Philippicus!" Deborah corrected proudly. It was not every Roman who could boast a cognomen, and very few could boast one so famous. But then, noting that beneath his helmet his hair, as she had expected, was yellow, she smiled again.

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

"Don't tell me!" Deborah leaned toward him,

her bare amber arms catching the light, the cool green of her dress seeming to float her an enchanting handsbreadth nearer. "Let me tell you!" And she laid a golden finger on her mouth and gave a sibyllic Um-m-m-m!

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

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

"You have been serving in Egypt, but the legions there are 'sleek, slack and rich.' that is what you once wrote. Half of the soldiers have even traded off their helmets and breastplates. ~~All are fat and soft and their fat, soft general~~ ~~isn't it?~~. You want service with a fighting outfit. So your father turned to old friends, to my father and to General Orfitus Proculinus of the fighting Tenth in Jerusalem. And you took your first chance to get out of Egypt as soon as your transfer came through."

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

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

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

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

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

first syllable. But then she forgave him. "And now come into our house. You are just in time for breakfast."

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

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

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

"There'll be a side gate somewhere, Micipsia," Lucianius said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A girl a year or two older than Deborah, and so tall and strong that she might have been Bria in girlhood except that she was the color of autumn oak leaves, came into the room. Deborah put an arm around her waist and Lucianius decided that this must be a slave even closer to her young mistress than Micipsia was to him.

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

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

she took a club to Bracae and of how Bracae spanked her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"^{believe you!} ~~I bet!~~" Lucianius laughed. "Our fathers had a job taking you prisoner. You were too brave to kill, to say nothing of being too pretty."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Until I had to take Deborah over," Bria broke in cheerfully. "And what a handful I took! And now I must take over breakfast. Your bath is ready," she reminded Lucianus, striding away.

In spite of that ^{Roman} ~~such-discussed~~ fondness for baths, Lucianus did not follow. He looked at Deborah, and after a moment they sat down, side by side.

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

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

on the field of battle."

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

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

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

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

He paused, losing himself again in Deborah's eyes.

Candace from her corner gave a small reminding cough.

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

CHAPTER FOUR

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

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

One was Deborah and her increasing, innocent absorption in love. One was the ~~new highway to Gaza~~ ^{(end of the new highway} which he must start shortly and the new quarrels which it would start

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

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

But at least, he decided, he had been right in seizing the chance to bring on a rival ^{Salvidius} against Muso. ^{The} ~~Salvi-~~ ^{Tiberius} ~~dinius~~ with his boasts of family wealth and prestige was a liar by the book. Good old Marcus reported that the Muso gens only recently had been saved from actual poverty by Augustus who would always have ^{positions} ~~positions~~ for the families of broken-down senators.

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

Vedius Rusco rejoiced again that Lucianus was coming.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No!" Rusco said confidently. "When Herod goes after me, he'll send more than six and they won't dare fail to finish the job." He eased his javelin back into its socket.

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

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

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

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

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

"I wouldn't put it past Herod to trump up some charge against me when I ask for men and supplies for the Gaza job," Rusco thought. "And then I wonder if I could get word to Quirinius before Herod arranged one of his favorite little accidents."

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

o-o-o

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

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

"You shall be my luck!" Octavian cried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Young Vedius had determined not to be of this ma-

not merely centurions but

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

Modelling himself on the two friendly rivals, Pullo and Vorenus, praised by great Julius Caesar, he had in every way out-distanced his own chief rival, Helius Naepor. ~~who had succeeded him as Primi Primum the Tenth~~ Indeed when he retired it was said that even Scaeva, that third paragon whom Julius Caesar had jumped seven grades to make Primum Pilus of the Twelfth, had not equalled Vedius Rusco Philippicus.

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

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

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

any conqueror. And now they would not submit to Rome, plotting endlessly against Herod and so forcing the Emperor Augustus to go along with the tyrant's plots against them.

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

o-o-o

Thinking of spies and ways of confounding spies, Rusco found his mind turning to Joseph and the problem of the dining room. He was glad that Deborah was at the villa in case

Joseph came early. She and Joseph had become at ease with each other while the villa was still building. She would give him the key of the cautiously locked room. He might be at work already.

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

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

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

behind them.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But has Joseph come?"

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

"You've kept that locked?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Is everything all right? The mother?"

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

^{Hadn't} Boy or girl, Rusco ^{thought he} knew exactly how Joseph felt. ~~He had~~ felt the same, sixteen years before? He nodded in understanding.

Joseph squinted once more at the guilty ^{beam} timber.

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

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

o-o - o

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

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

No extra spacing.

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

kitchen with unlimited hot water.

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

She consulted with Bria about breakfast, and
Only when her father and Lucianius emerged, oiled and massaged and casually clothed in belted tunics and soft sandals did she call for Candace, meanwhile noting with delight that Lucianius was talking a mile a minute while her father listened in a companionable silence which he never had offered to Salvidinius Muso.

Bria hastened in from the kitchen. She was disturbed.

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

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

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

"The poor dear!" Deborah mourned.

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

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

Bria frowned.

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

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

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

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

0-0-0

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

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

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

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

This is where I belong, not in that stinking

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kitchen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

still snarled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

o-o -o

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus -- Joshua! An earlier Joshua had tumbled Jericho, had made the sun to stand still on Gibeon and the moon

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

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

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

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

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

But the sound could not drown out other worries which came crowding. Enemies would hover over this chosen one like panthers and vultures around a lost sheep. Rulers, fearful of their power. Others in high places jealous of their position. ~~Evil men with axes to grind like those~~ ~~like that Sadducee, Tibni-ben-Ginath,~~ who had stared so long at Mary on the way down from Nazareth. ~~Evil men with axes to grind.~~ He remembered the centurion Panthera. Only the timely arrival of Vedius Rusco at Sebaste had kept that one from troubling Mary.

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

But he did not have Mary's ~~serenity and~~ faith.

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

o-o

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vedius Rusco took it gladly. The enterprises of these two men were far apart, but more and more they got on like old cronies, enjoying friendly talks and even arguments -- about gods,

for example. Rusco put his trust in Roman gods, of course; chiefly in Jupiter and the rest of the major twelve. The carpenter believed, as all Miriam's people did, that there was only one God. Rusco liked to draw Joseph out on this subject, and he saw a chance now. He sat down and motioned for the carpenter to join him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was smiling and Joseph laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hocus-pocus?"

"All this stuff in your Temple!"

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

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

deal that went on."

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

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

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

Priests did sometimes make shameless substitutions, Joseph conceded.

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

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

"I know," he told Rusco, "that much is not right. But I

think I know why we don't protest enough to bring on a reformation."

"Why?"

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

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

Joseph paused.

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

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

Joseph nodded.

"Is there always nothing in it?"

"Nothing but the Lord," Joseph said.

"What?"

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

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

"Pompey?"

"He was the one who broke in. He was a general almost as great as Julius Caesar, ~~or the Emperor.~~"

Joseph waited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joseph accepted the invitation of Rusco's hand.

"How do you like carrots?"

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

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

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

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

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

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ter were luminous and tender. Vedius Rusco did not even look her way.

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

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

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

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

GILBERT
SUPERASE BOND
55% COTTON FIBRE

CHAPTER SIX

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

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

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

They had urged live snakes unlimited in and around the new villa's kitchens. The Greeks had pointed out that in Athene's

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

new kitchen in the latest fashion and a few extra snakes would be hardly any trouble. Although, if you asked her, frescoes were coddling even the world's best kitchen crew too far.

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

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

GILBERT
SUPERASE-BOND
25% COTTON FIBRE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bracae swore by Woden. Like Bria he wasted no

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

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

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

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

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

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

o-o

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Bracae failed to slap the woman down for her

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her eyes cursed him and her fingers clawed.

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

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

the garden.

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

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

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

"That's all her kind ever worries about. She'll come off better at the auction than most honest women."

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

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

~~And, oh, oh!" the cook cried, "Isn't Nepte giving the commander a look!"~~

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

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

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

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

Everyone ran to look.

Distantly down the slope which fell away from the villa wall, the Egyptian stood ^{invitingly} ~~merely~~ close to ^{an officer} ~~a tall soldier, who~~ ~~seemed to be~~ of pilus prior rank. Nothing about her pliant pose suggested a disgraced slave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Training," Bracae started to explain, then broke off.

"By Wodent!" he bellowed suddenly as the men and their leader came closer. "Look who that Pilus Prior is!"

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

Bracae had already opened the gate. He hurried out in
advance of everyone, ~~else~~. He wanted a good look at the Pilus Prior.

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

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

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

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

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

The prolonged nearness to Vedius Rusco had done

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

The commotion outside broke in on all this.

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

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

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

"If these are men of the Tenth," Lucianius said, "how is it that their leader lets them raise such a hulabaloo so near your villa?"

"It isn't good manners," Rusco agreed. "But it will probably turn out to be just an accident." He could think of only three in the Legion who might wish to annoy him. And his old rival, Helius Naepor, was too shrewd a hand and Salvidinius Mueo was on leave in Caesarea--besides he was too enamoured of Deborah--and the centurion

Panthera whom Rusco had reprimanded in Sebaste for ~~bethering Joseph's~~ wife did not command a cohort and never would.

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

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

O-O-O

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

A mongrel, Rusco had decided early, and had seen the record bear him out. From the beginning Panthera had played favorites when he was on top and had begged favors when he was underneath. When rations were short, when prizes were divided, he always came up with something extra. He always had an excuse, even

a downright lie, for a duty undone. His mind was always on women, any woman. And where other men might have been embarrassed, he grew only boastful when his bottomless craving caused his real name to be forgotten and replaced by the name of the animal considered the most concupiscent in nature.

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

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

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

"These people can't be mixed up in the riot, centurion," he had said, and another thing he still remembered was the relief

X that came to Joseph's face, and how his strong hand had ^{relaxed} released its grip on the staff he was holding.

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

"Suppose then that we let them go along."

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

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

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

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

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

"Know what?"

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

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

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

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

Vedius Rusco had sent Panthera packing.

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

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

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

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