



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler
Lovelace Family Papers.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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

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

"I think too much!" he said. He was not used to so much thinking. His rule was to clear away every problem at each day's end in order to start the next day free and easy. One day at a time, he always said. For months, however, so much had been happening that such clearing away seemed impossible. How could

no
Extra
spacing

a man clear away a continuing mystery? Now and then he tried to tell himself that there was no mystery, only a dream, but too much evidence ^{seemed} was against him.

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

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

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

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

indicating any purpose.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lambs! Us?"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Baa-aa-aa!"

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

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

"Lambs!"

"Us?"

"Baa-aa-aa!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

he turned and went on his way.

But although the beggars were so reassuringly friendly he worried as he tramped through the now pervading darkness. Such a watch as they were keeping indicated unfriendliness somewhere. What was the unnamed shadow against which they were on guard? Was it fire? Thieves? Plundering mercenaries or legionnaires? That thing which, Vedius Rusco thought, the Primus Pilus Naepor and Panthera and, perhaps, the Tribune Muso were planning?

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

"I wonder if they have enough to eat?" she often asked. She had thought one looked like Peleg. "And you remember how hungry he always seemed? If they'd only come near enough to hear," she said, "or stand still long enough, I'd call them in to get warm by the fire."

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

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

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Elizabeth was, indeed, instantly rebuking in that hoarse, warm voice of hers. "Here we are, ready to talk everything over and

you an hour late."

Joseph said he had been delayed, though he said no more.

"Well, I suppose there's time for you to eat something before we begin."

"We'll finish soon," Joseph said. "I'll eat at home. Mary is sure to have something ready and waiting."

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

"And was everything all right?"

"She and the baby were both happy as birds. Of course she'll be glad to get back to ~~her home in~~ Nazareth."

"So will I," Joseph said. His mind's eye filled with a picture of ^{their} ~~the~~ home. There never was such a comfortable house, Mary always said.

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

"We'll start back as soon as the purification rite is done," he said.

"Not until Mary has had a rest," Elizabeth said. "Did it ever occur to you she'd need a rest?" She gave him one of her rebuking headshakes.

Joseph was never quite sure whether Elizabeth was scolding or joking. He wondered -- as he had wondered before -- whether

Elizabeth might have developed a softer manner if she had kept enough fat on her bones to make her look softer.

There are some girls who start out looking like bony little boys and end up looking like bony men, or almost. In between they have a soft season and marry. But the struggle to complete this natural cycle seems to sweat away any briefly accumulated evidences of womanhood. Petallike skin roughens, inviting curves vanish, breasts which had been ample all but vanish. Elizabeth's eyes were still warm and tender, her thin face still had beauty and her gaunt figure was graceful still. But that manner!

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

Joseph nodded.

"Well, I know where she could get a helping hand if she should need one in the Temple that day. Judith will be there. Judith knows when Mary plans to go, and she told me she'd like to be there when Mary was. Her baby is only a few days older, you know.*

"You remember Judith," Elizabeth went on, "the strapping girl with coppery hair who helped us bring Mary from Bethlehem[?] That stable!"

"I do remember Judith," Joseph said gratefully.

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

"Not that they'll ever meet in that crowd," Elizabeth

~~went on.~~ added

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

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

"That's right," he said. In just four days, he and Mary would make the easy trip to Joppa Gate, the steep climb, and the long wait in the golden Temple, ~~for the rite~~. Only those hurdles were ahead.

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

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

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

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

"What I don't like," Elizabeth said, "is that Mary will have to wait and wait. Waiting tires you when you've just had a baby."

"I can't do anything about the waiting," Zacharias said regretfully. "I couldn't put Mary ahead. With so many trooping up to Jerusalem to pay this latest tax, lots of people are killing

two birds with one stone and settling their Temple debts, too. The Temple is packed from dawn to dark -- Court of the Gentiles, Court of the Women, Court of Israel. I swear the Holy Place would be packed, too, if a double line of Levites didn't stand guard telling people to keep down where they belong."

"And every last Levite barefooted!" Elizabeth cried.

"I wonder how they keep their toes whole."

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

"Mary," Elizabeth burst out, "wouldn't complain if you fed her thistles."

"There are beautiful things to see in the Temple," Zacharias said. "And wonderful people. ^{There are} ~~She might even catch a glimpse of~~ Simeon and Anna."

Anna was the great prophetess, famous over all Israel. Widowed as a girl, she had never departed from the Temple since, although she was old now. She fasted and prayed day and night.

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

Joseph stood up. "Well, that settles everything, I guess. I'll be getting on."

"There's one thing more," Elizabeth said. "When you go to the Temple, leave all your goods in the little house. And come back afterwards. Remember, Mary should have a good rest before you

start north."

Joseph said he certainly would see that Mary got a rest.

"And then," Elizabeth said, giving him a look, "you can get to turning out sickles again, and bragging that they stay sharper than any other sickles in Galilee."

For once Joseph did not need to wonder whether Elizabeth was scolding or joking. He knew for sure. He had never, in all his life, claimed his sickles were the best in Galilee; although, come to think of it, they probably were.

"You'll get the first one I make," he promised. "That's what you're hinting for, I guess."

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

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

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

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

ENTER
SUPERASE BOND

He could almost hear Mary's soft rebuke ... as he had heard it a night or two earlier when she sensed worry in his manner.

"You know the holy writings, --- better than I do. You know the Lord says he is always with us."

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

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

"I must remember," he thought, leading Briar toward the house, "to say that to Vedius Rusco!" Rusco, putting his trust in swords and secret tunnels! "I will say it to him.

"And I will say another part of that psalm Mary loves ... 'He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.'"

HERBERT
SUPERASE BONA
25% COTTON-FIBRE

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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

"Gently! More gently!"

The bearers were even more nervous than usual.

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

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

He glared across the crowded ^{audience} hall ~~and~~ everything he saw annoyed him. He hated the fad currently raging among the women

of his court. All of them, not only the courtesans who always did whatever they dared to gain attention, but the wives and respectable concubines of his highest officers, and his own ~~wives~~ ~~wives~~ two-score concubines -- respectable, too, he hoped -- even Tirzah, had taken to carrying tear bottles.

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

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

Herod could not avoid the suspicion that some, at least, saw in so much gold a protection beyond even the accepted

power of amulets. Gold was money. Happen you had to flee the Palace, as many had, a bag hastily crammed with gold ornaments would support you for a long time. If his sister had not been so deep in the fad, he might have done something about his suspicion.

The bearers had retired, panting with relief from terror, and other slaves took their places while the Chief Eunuch cocked bony knees, ready to spring on them at the first slip. Two slaves with fans wafted aside the stench of Herod's sweat and breath and two more, with whisks so light that even his tormented skin could endure them, dabbed at the flies which the stench drew. ^{The} ~~an~~ ~~appointed~~ ~~other~~ slave stood at the foot of the bed with the usual huge tray for assuaging Herod's appetite. It was piled high with baked duck, fattened on figs, brain sausage, roasted wild boar, mushrooms, asparagus, apples from far-off Etruscan farms, pastries, cheeses and a half dozen wines.

Herod motioned angrily for wine but when the cup was presented it brought a new irritation, and about this, also, he could do nothing. He wanted glass, but his tremblings and convulsions were now so unpredictable that he no longer dared put glass between his swollen lips. His shakes and writhings had more than once left him with a mouthful of glass bits and, even though he spit and rinsed at once, hours of fear followed lest fatal shards had got to his insides. So he used gold, hating its metallic greasiness which no cleaning seemed to remove.

Tirzah creaked forward to report some ominous news she had. ~~Ravaged Soemus stood opposite. Farther from the dais another apprehensive group formed, the court astrologer-physician;~~

she had. Soemus stood opposite. ^{the Ismaelite} In length of service ~~he~~ was the tyrant's oldest companion. The two were bound together partly by their shared memory of the queen whom Soemus had secretly loved and whom Herod had adored and murdered. But Soemus was bound also by a loyalty so deeply rooted in his nature that ~~he~~ had survived even the shame and guilt of long obedience to Herod, although this had ravaged his face.

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

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

"Gently! Gently!" the Chief Eunuch hissed.

The fly perished, beaten to death in mid-air by four assailants, and Herod's all-purpose finger moved. The tray slave put a hand to the wild boar but the finger said "No!" and said an

even more impatient "No!" to Tirzah, wild to get her tale told. It kept beckoning to Soemus while rales clattered in Herod's chest as though to flee the corruption there.

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

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

"She comes, Herod," Soemus said and beckoned and

through a rear entrance, unseen hands pushed a young girl. Her body was virginal and unlike the court women all around she wore no gold and carried no tear bottle. But her dress was court-style and so revealing that as she advanced she blushed under the gaze of ~~so many~~ ^{the crowd}.

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

~~Soemus~~ ^{Soemus} "There will be no shadows, Herod," ~~he~~ ravaged ~~the~~ promised ^x "You shall see her plain."

Half-sitting, half-lying, with eyes now closed, Herod moved his swollen lips. All knew the word he was repeating although he made no sound. "MARIAMNE! MARIAMNE!" Then, ^{de-} defying pain, he did make sounds. He prayed, the sounds stumbling from a throat in ruins.

"Oh, god! All gods! God of these Jews whose temple I rebuilt. Baal, to whom cheated Esau turned! Astarte whom my ancestors adored! Thou Ormazd of the Magi! Ammon! Jupiter! Woden! Zeus! Mithras! Zalmoxis! Enlil! Let this, at last be MARIAMNE! Give back the life which was taken."

There was no other sound throughout the hall. The girl was a statue. Soemus held his breath, anxious for her, though not for himself. He ^{believed that he} ~~said~~ he was safe. No one else owned as he did, exactly Herod's memory of the innocent royal victim of plots and counterplots and tyrannical jealousy. No one else could even hope to succeed in the doomed and haunted search. The courtiers were stiffly silent; and safely out of her brother's sight Tirzah only shook her wattles in impatience to tell her story. The Chief

Eunuch strangled a cough.

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

"This ~~M~~riamne? This pot cleaner? Get her out of my sight!" ~~He closed his eyes again.~~

Soemus instantly gave the girl a little urgent push. To him she was almost ~~M~~riamne. Almost, almost, as so often in the past, he was seeing again the girl whom he had worshipped when he was young. ~~Hiding resentment against stubborn Herod,~~ ^{Quarrelly Perfectionist} he pushed the rejected counterpart and did not relax until she was safely out of sight, he hoped beyond recall.

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

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

"The Magi!" Soemus whispered to the Chief Eunuch. "He points to the sky, the stars. He asks news of the Magi."

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

"The Magi have gone, Herod."

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

"They neither brought nor sent a report," Soemus said. "They fled. They have left Judea."

Grimacing with pain, Herod strained to lift his head. He looked to where Geber usually stood.

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

The finger commanded Soemus to deny the astounding charge.

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

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

"My men report seeing a beggar who is, almost certainly, Geber," Soemus said quietly.

The finger curved. It became a leg-fetter.

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

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

Propped among his cushions Herod swelled with fury.

traitor's

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

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

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

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

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

"Tibni-ben-Ginath, the Sadducee, is not in the ante-chamber," Soemus said. "He did not appear today."

The finger commanded, "Send!" and Soemus motioned and the Officer of the Day hurried off. Herod watched until he was gone. Then, as though Tibni^{also} were of no consequence, Herod closed his lips on the apple-mush and turned the all-purpose finger to the contortionist.

In his long tyranny he had learned that there were occasions when he must bide his time and he knew how to bide his time. If he might not instantly question the Sadducee he could, at least, seem to enjoy himself. Food, acrobats, the contortionist, the dancers, the courtesans' breasts and bellies! There was also, a sudden secret smile said, a tyrant's power.

His finger pointed first to a wine jar, then into

the east and Soemus understood even that.

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

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

"But the Temple will refuse," he whispered.

"Not now," Soemus said.

"What do you mean?"

"A new order has been enforced," Soemus said. "The ceremonial vestments of the High Priest now are held by the commander of the Fortress of Antonia. After each wearing they must be returned. As long as that order stands, the Temple will not deny the Palace even its best wine."

Herod and his finger ordered dancing. He let himself be stuffed while his ~~round, red~~ mouth puckered over dancers and courtesans. The role of spectator provided one of the only three pleasures left to him. He could eat, sleep and watch. He watched and gorged and began to grow torpid. But the engine must serve until he had learned about the rumored king. Cursing Tibni-ben-Ginath's slowness his finger summoned Soemus. It pointed to the Chief Eunuch and curved into another leg-fetter.

"He says," Soemus told the Chief Eunuch, "that if you want to stay outside the dungeons, get Tibni-ben-Ginath here at once."

The Chief Eunuch's knees almost collapsed. He had

been repeatedly frightened this day. By dread of involvement in the Magi's flight, by Geber's defection, by the dangerous requisitioning of Temple wine! Now the Sadducee's tardiness increased his fright. He appealed miserably to Soemus who dared stand firm when Herod would not be appeased.

"Tibni is the one to throw into your dungeons, Herod," Soemus said calmly. "Not even a Chief Eunuch's fingers can snap loud enough to hurry a Sadducee of Tibni-ben-Ginath's rank."

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

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

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

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

priest delivered the Temple wine.

Herod slept on and at last a servant slipped into the great audience hall to inform the Chief Eunuch that ^{the Sadducee} Tibni-ben-Ginath had arrived at the Palace, ^{from his home} ~~The Officer of the Day had lost no time hurrying the Sadducee from his home.~~

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

The Chief Eunuch shrugged off the whisper. It told him nothing that he did not know. He had already sent three messengers to conciliate the waiting Vedius Rusco, ^{Philippus} But the news of Tibni-ben-Ginath turned him to Herod, and he wakened the tyrant instantly, although fearfully and very gently.

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

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A young, towheaded captain of mercenaries not far into his twenties strode into the Palace ante-chamber where Vedius Rusco Philippicus was waiting to face Herod with the same old demands. More men, more materials for Caesar Augustus's roads. He and Bracae had been waiting for two hours. A polite Eunuch had come three times to explain that important matters were keeping the tyrant occupied, but Bracae was beginning to rumble indignantly. Rusco, although aware that he was being snubbed, showed no resentment. He had, however, grown watchful.

He had begun to be watchful midway in his long wait. About then, the throng of courtiers who usually watched and tried to listen to whatever transpired in the jet and crimson audience hall had suddenly been shoved out, and the great doors had been closed. That had been suspiciously unusual.

Then, only a few minutes ago, the Sadducee, Tibni-ben-Ginath, gaudily dressed as usual and plainly frightened, had hurried into the ante-chamber beside a court officer and at once had been admitted, almost pushed, into the audience hall. It was most unusual for even an Herodian Sadducee to be admitted ahead of an Imperial Roman commissioner. Something was afoot.

Rusco, cautiously alert, was wondering what it might be, and bracing himself in case it involved himself, when the young towhead who had been wandering aimlessly ~~around~~ caught his eye and registered broad surprise. The surprise was a boyishly clumsy attempt to make any watching spy doubt that the towhead had come purposely into the ante-chamber seeking a man so unpopular with Herod as the Road Commissioner. But the acting would have deceived no one, especially after the towhead drew close, with a look of badly concealed admiration.

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

Rusco waited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe he's decided to come out in the open."

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

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

"If Herod starts something while I'm gone, who'll protect your back?"

"There won't be any fighting, at least not in the Palace," Rusco said. "Herod might order a dungeon, if he thinks he can get away with it, but he'll think twice before he hustles

an Imperial Commissioner off to ^{a surgeon} ~~one~~ while a Legion general looks on.

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

Rusco laughed. "Well, I don't like to be left with Herod for very long today without having Proculinus tipped off. Get along."

Bracae left, his face reluctant, his pace fast.

The polite eunuch came again after a while, but this time only as an attendant for his chief.

"Come!" the Chief Eunuch said to Rusco and stood aside.

"Please come!"

Rusco handed his sword and dagger to a mercenary reluctantly. He had to do it. Only one in ten thousand was allowed to carry arms into Herod's presence. But when he walked into the great audience hall, at the respectful gait which was due a king, his red military cloak swung as though its owner were fully armed. The walk across the empty echoing hall, ominously stripped of its usual throng, was a walk for none but a man armed at least with courage. Rusco paced coolly along the gleaming marble floor. And approaching the dais he noted that only two of Herod's intimates were in place beside the gasping mound on the soft, golden throne-bed. Soemus stood on the right and Tirzah on the left. Herod's sister was one in ten thousand; she wore a dagger in her girdle. The Chief Eunuch was behind Rusco, but a familiar, richly dressed, misshapen figure was missing. Where was the hunchback?

Vedius Rusco sighted Tibni-ben-Ginath and noted the Sadducee's poorly concealed perturbation. Tibni was often at

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

Rusco paused beside Soemus and felt, rather than saw, a warning in the ravaged face. He was surprised by this, although he and Soemus were on good terms. He had always felt sorry for Soemus whose treacheries and cruelties were, after all, another's treacheries and cruelties, never his own. They all always sprang from Herod's ruthless finger.

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

"Herod supposes," Soemus smiled, "that you ~~have~~ come to ask the usual?" *with your usual request? petition?*

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

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

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

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

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

thinks you might succeed."

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

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

"It isn't an easy thing," Soemus said. "Tibni failed even with good helpers."

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

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

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

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

Herod pointed to the Sadducee.

"It was really Tibni-ben-Ginath who dropped your name into the box," Soemus said. "In fact he had hardly begun to talk today when he suggested you as the very man for it."

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

begin to know him well enough, and must only have put forward a proposal that someone else had put into his own mind.

Naepor! It would be old Helius Naepor, of course. Helius was the brains of this quartet. And knowing Helius, Vedius Rusco knew exactly, he was sure, how the mind of the Primus Pilus had worked.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's just as I said," Tibni-ben-Ginath interposed again, an anxious rasp in his voice. "It's nothing. It's just finding a baby!"

A baby! Rusco's control still held, but inwardly he was flooded with shame. What foulness had he revealed to Naepor who had proposed him and to the Sadducee who had approved the

proposal and to Herod who had snatched at it, that all three could believe he would betray a baby to a tyrant who killed men and women without a thought and would just as readily kill infants?

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

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

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

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

"No!" he panted. "No! By Jupiter, Ceres, Mercury ..."
He tolled off all the Twelve. "... No!"

"What?" Herod heaved up, glaring.

"Watch yourself, Vadius!" Soemus warned recklessly.

"No!" Rusco panted.

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

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

Herod's finger wagged furiously at Soemus.

"Herod says you must do this," Soemus interpreted, ^{may the Jews be pleased}
"because peace is at stake. The Jews ~~will not be pleased~~ if Herod does not seek out and worship this new king."

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

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

"He'll come around," Soemus whispered. "And he's the man for the job," he added in a crafty attempt to protect his friend. "His wife was a Jew. Jews work on his roads. A Jewish carpenter from Nazareth is working in his villa right now. As Tibni says, he has friends --- and by marriage, a relative or two --- among the Jews. He'll cool off and then he's just the one for you."

Herod's blood-shot eyes considered the suggestion, and

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

o - o - o



At the entrance to the hall, mercenary guards made way hastily before another advance. Bracae's cough signalled, "Here we are!" Another voice, reedy, but confident, said "Proculinus does not need to be announced," and the smallest, most arrogant feet in all of Caesar Augustus's twenty-eight legions began a hob-nailed strut along the marble floor. Heavier hobnails hammered behind and two scuffing, bare feet brought up the rear. The general of the Tenth Legion, attended by an aide and a very needful slave, and followed by Bracae, was come to pay a call of state on Herod the Great.

Orfitus Proculinus was a rolypoly little man saved by only a handsbreadth from being a dwarf. He prided himself on being the best legion commander in the Empire. He certainly sweated the most. Fat beyond all rivals, because fatness made him man-sized in at least one dimension, he sweated if he so much as stood up and sat down. After the walk from the Palace gate he was running sweat and as he drew near to Herod's dais he thrust a hand behind his back.

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

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

phrase

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

pts

He was, undeniably, the Empire's vainest general, and one of its most ambitious. Standing, he believed, head and shoulders above all rivals, he was cocksure that one day soon he would rise to the governship of a province, at least. Meanwhile he did all that he could to rise. He had hurried to Vedius Rusco to show himself prompt in protecting a loyal Roman against Herod. How better could he advance himself with the Emperor? Contrarily, he could be counted on to show himself just as prompt against any disloyal Roman. If disloyalty had even been hinted, Vedius Rusco might have rotted his life away in Herod's deepest dungeon for all of Orfitus Proculinus. But of course Vedius Rusco was not disloyal. None stood so high in the favor of Augustus.

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

~~Herod granted.~~ ^{is} ~~Proculinus~~ ^{he} ~~said,~~ ^{coming down from the salute} "I trust, oh King!" ~~Proculinus~~ ^{he} said, "that my visit,

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

Herod's ~~grunt~~^{grumble} showed plainly how untimely it was.

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

"I guess we were pretty late," Eracae whispered, sliding close to Rusco.

"You're here when I need you," Rusco whispered back.

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

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

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

ridiculed Galilean crudities.

But no such ordinary give and take satisfied the little General. He was aware of how an envoy should speak. At the end of his peroration, Herod ~~granted once more and~~ aimed a finger at Soemus.

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

Herod could not be sure that any message from ^{an} the Idumaeen ruler of Rome's subject Jews would be relayed to the Emperor by a Roman general. Romans backed one another, especially against non-Romans, as Orfitus Proculinus now was backing Vedius Rusco.

But the General's offer might be sincere and if so it was a chance for Herod to impress the Emperor with his loyalty. He could not afford to miss it. His finger waggled urgently at Soemus.

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

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

"It will be my pleasure to take full advantage of the

opportunity which Herod allows," Proculinus said, ^{making each} ~~licking his lips~~
~~as though the phrases were meat and drink.~~ ^{word by word.} He was having the time
of his life.

But he was too much aware of the value of time to waste
it, ever. He had accomplished the diversion for which he had been
brought.

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

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

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

"Vedius!" he cried. "My friend, Vedius! If your business
here is also finished do come with me. Without the latest
infomation concerning your highways, my report to the Emperor will
be incomplete."

question

He tried to Herod in a bar which was both a

and a Roman general's independent announcement of intention. "With Herod's permission, I shall take Vedius Rusco Philippicus with me."

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

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

Rusco bowed. Proculinus held out a hand which instantly met the required towel. Framing flowery speech was sweaty work. He sopped and with the others backed away from the throne and down the dais. Then they all strode toward the door.

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

o-o-o

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

ready on duty. ~~They~~ ^{two} were Tirzah's livery.

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

"I flatter myself I know how to handle a king," Proculinus said. His self-satisfaction was enormous.

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

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

"He had me in a state, too."

"State or no state, he had to calm down when I reminded him that I am the Emperor's envoy in Judea."

Proculinus smiled in practiced graciousness. "Won't you come to my quarters for a drink?"

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

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

"It's too late to use the Joppa Gate," he said to Bracae then, squinting up at the sun. "We'd run into crowds. Let's take the street of the Candlemakers down to the Dung Gate. Nobody will be using that now."

2 pages
back

wearing Tizab's tunic

One of the ~~extra~~ attendants, turned back into the Palace, the other trailed in the wake of Vedius Rusco's black, ^(black) but not unobtrusively enough to be overlooked by the old campaigner, Bracae.

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

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

"Just the other day," Bracae grinned, "Bria told me to start looking the other way when a fight came along. She said I was over-due to get my ears knocked down."

"Maybe we both are," Rusco said and the ^{familiar} well-known elation gushed up. "We're being trailed, so I guess we can just about count on a ~~mix~~ ^{Some sort of a} fight, ~~as a part of the plot to shut us~~ ^{a writing}

He smiled at a recollection of ~~the thing~~ ^{quoted.} Joseph had said. How did it go? Whoso sheds blood, his own blood shall be shed? Well, he certainly didn't intend to let his blood be shed ... not at least while Joseph lacked that warning.

"Maybe you ought to go back for the general's drink," Bracae said, pretending worry.

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

"How many do you think will jump us?"

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

"Not too poor, I hope."

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

"The Tenth doesn't work for the Palace except on Orfitus's say-so. And it isn't likely to be any of the mercenaries on guard at the Palace today. ⁽¹⁾ ~~That towhead is officer of the day and I~~

~~think we can count on him to make sure that any of his men who are sent after us never catch up."~~

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And watch out for slings, too."

"Slings?"

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

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

"It'll be from one of those that we'll be jumped," Bracae said.

"But only one man will jump," Rusco said. "The pack in the street is what we'll need to worry about."

"Well, don't forget I'm along!" Bracae said again.
"Don't try to do it all yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm right here, old bull!" Rusco laughed. "Right beside you. And here they come."

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

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

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

slowly, "W-o-d-e-n!" Bracae bellowed, ^{an} ~~his~~ ^{passed} exhortation ~~long-~~ drawn out, ^{called him} like a piece of taffy. It was not a prayer for help. Bracae could manage without help if W-o-d-e-n would supply just a little more breath while he settled these sandfls nipping at his great thighs. "W-o-d-e-n!" he bellowed and mowed away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The worst, Bracae swore by Woden, was the theft of his cloak, but in addition he was bleeding at one shoulder and a splitting headache made him groan.

"That very first stone got me," he said. "It came in under my helmet and caught me right on the nape of my neck." He had said it before he realized what he was confessing. His jaw dropped.

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

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

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

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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

His signal alerted the hosts below to their sacred labors which Moses had first decreed, which David had set forth anew, which Solomon had ~~elaborated~~ ^{increased}, which Zerubabal had reconstituted and which now were continued under the half-mad Idumaeen convert who sat on David's throne.

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

Now, in the Court of the Priests, the silver

trumpets of three Levites echoed ^{earlier} the golden warning and one priest crouched over the wood heaped on the Altar of Burnt Offerings and huffed and puffed at shavings stuffed down among yesterday's embers and a thin blaze licked upward and then a thin wisp of grey smoke. At the peak of sacrifice the wisp would grow to a thick, black, oily cloud. from the lookout

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

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

Behind the Altar of Burnt Offerings stood a panel

more than a hundred feet high. Under a bordering vine and grapes of solid gold, it bore a picture of Solomon's long-gone Temple. Between the panel and the Altar stood the Holy Place with its Golden Altar of Incense flanked by the seven-branched candlesticks and the table^s of old and new shew bread, ^{each} laid with a cloth of gold. Reverent priests already had trimmed the candles and brushed the Golden Altar free of yesterday's incense ashes and spread hot coals on the newly cleaned surface. Now another priest set about the rite which had fallen to him by heaven-guided lot and from which he would be barred all the rest of his life. This was the envied, holy task of spreading over the coals fresh incense to carry prayers for all the people sweetly up to the Lord.

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

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

O O O

"It's opening!" strapping copper-haired Judith cried.

In the thirty-fifth year of the reign of the dying tyrant,

Herod, and in the seven hundred forty-seventh year of the founding of Rome and a thousand years after David, another company of new dedicated mothers was going up to Jerusalem's Temple to regain the precious privilege of approach to the Golden Altar.

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

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

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

Judith looked around ^{over babbling heads,} ~~in the still dim light.~~ The morning was cold. The snow which had fallen in the night was being churned into a yellow mush by the crowd already gathered at the Joppa Gate.

She was looking for another young mother, the one whom she had helped out of the musty stable at Bethlehem, ^{early in the} ~~just before~~ ^{morning} ~~one day ago~~ more than a month ago.

The pleasure of that morning was still fresh in her mind. Judith's pleasures usually came from every day things.

Making a meal. Sweeping a floor. Having a husband. Having a baby. Nursing him. Swaddling him. Digging in the earth.

Things that had to do with ordinary living. But her memory of that ~~other~~ ^{morning} mother was a peculiar pleasure. About ^{helping that other young} ~~that earlier~~

^{mother and the top from} ~~morning in~~ Bethlehem there had been a joy ~~---~~ Judith had not tried to explain it even to Aram. But she felt joyful now to think that she was making the purification rite on the same day the other young mother was making it. She was glad, too, to have her son making this trip with the other baby.

Judith looked around and sure enough, farther back, she saw a donkey and a blue dress embroidered in mellow yellow and a tall sun-blackened man with a staff as formidable as a spear.

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

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

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

0 0 0

Joppa Market was beginning to bustle. Accustomed as she was to the scanty wares in Bethlehem shops, Judith had been marvelling at the booths here, all overflowing. And not just with homemade stuffs! Here were rarities hurried in from every land by merchants eager to share in the prosperity which Herod, like the earlier despot, Solomon, had brought to Judea. Here was everything and on every hand and at every price. Here a mistress

might, for a few pennies, clothe a slave for a whole year and then, perhaps from the same dealer, buy herself a dress costing enough to clothe a hundred.

GILBERT
SUPERASE BOND
25% COTTON FIBRE

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

But not even the market could hold Judith's eyes after the huge leaves of Joppa Gate had swung wide enough for entrance. Scores trying to be first inside bumped her and would have bumped harder if Aram had not boldly blocked them off.

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

~~judith did not blame them~~

Judith

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

The cobbled street climbed ~~and its~~ ^{by} shallow steps, which had saved camels many a slip ^{and} now saved foot travellers and donkeys. At either curb, lop-sided huts of the poorest of all the city held one another up.

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

"Aren't we lucky," she said, "that the Priest Zacharias has already given us ~~the ticket~~ ^{again} for our donkey? 😊"

Mentioning Zacharias reminded her of Elizabeth's cousin and she looked around again, but there were too many donkeys now to find the one named Briar.

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

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

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

To the north and south along the western hill there was now proof aplenty of the grandeur of Herod's Jerusalem. The

new mansion of the High Priest. The Sanhedrin's impressive council chamber. The ornate homes of merchants waxing richer and richer and of Sadducees, Pharisees and Herodians, all new and almost dwarfing the old, unkempt, abandoned palace of the Hasmon~~ean~~ dynasty whose leaders Herod had slaughtered.

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

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

~~At that~~ Judith smiled broadly, and Aram, remembering the plans they often made for plenty of babies, read her smile and he laughed, and so did she.

O O O

Almost impregnable, Jerusalem lay on its two hills, lay balanced on two fingers of rock at the end of the great plateau which ~~began within sight of Nazareth.~~ *stretched far to the north.* With so many new buildings shining now under the sun it was truly Jerusalem the Golden.

Judith and Aram stared reverently. *J* This was a place that had stood against conquerors almost since Abraham. First it had been Uru-salem, the hill of safety, an outpost against the Pharaohs. Then it was the chief town and holy place of the Jebusites. Then David had won it and Solomon had *adorned it.* Nebuchadnezzar had torn it down and Nehemiah had rebuilt it. It and Babylon ~~and the Greeks - chief city~~ had been great together.

Now Babylon ^{was} ~~and Athens~~ were gone, but Jerusalem remained great with Rome, although Roman spears in Antonia glinted above the impregnable walls of the city. Almost impregnable, said the spears, enjoying their moment as Babylon had enjoyed hers. ~~It would still be great when Rome had fallen.~~

These things were the color and texture of the thoughts Judith and Aram were thinking as they stared.

~~After a few moments~~ Judith opened a pack of bread and cheese and figs and they munched companionably. She opened her dress and gave breast to the fat baby who sucked with little breathless gasps. When he had nursed, she laid him over her shoulder and patted his back and soon he fell asleep.

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

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

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

O O O

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

Hatred for Herod grew in every Jew whose climb to the

Temple was profaned by the shouts. The High Priest and the Sanhedrin had protested when Herod had built an amphitheater down there. And always when the noisy betting, cursing and shouting over gladiators and runners and charioteers billowed up, ^{Jews} ~~and~~ felt the tyrant's open insult to the nation's place of holy sacrifice.

Aram and Judith crossed the bridge, and at the Temple's main western gate, the noisy, grumbling but good-natured press of worshippers -- young and old, the poor in tatters, ~~of busby~~, the rich in warm shawls and immaculate robes -- went into the bedlam of the huge outer court where Gentiles, also, might stand.

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

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

Each money-changer sat against a pillar on a padded stool with a big money-box on either hand. One box held only shekels and half-shekels of Temple coinage. The other had many

compartments to hold alien money, Greek, Roman, Tyrian, Persian, Egyptian, Syrian. The Temple would not accept these because they were stamped with the likenesses of bulls, owls, hawks, horses, and kings and emperors and so violated the commandment against graven images. Temple coins bore only the seven-branched candlestick or a palm branch or a lily or Solomon's temple.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now don't tell me, my poor, poor friend, that you have brought your own sacrifice! Nobody with any sense brings his own sacrifice. If everyone brought his own beast or bird how could you squeeze yours even as far as the Court of the Women, let alone higher? No! You must just pick a sample from those in the pens and cages and you pay and are given a ticket which says you have paid and tells what you bought, and you hand the ticket to the proper priest in the Court of the Priests, and he sees that a proper sacrifice is taken from unblemished animals all ready and waiting."

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

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

"Look over there," Aram cried and Judith turned as every-
one was turning toward a shrunken female figure in brilliant silks and jewels ~~whichever was~~ ~~flashing~~ through the crowd, shielded by four anxious slaves.

"What an awful old woman!" Judith said.

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

"Is she the princess Tirzah?"

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

After Tirzah was lost in the crowds, Aram and Judith turned to the wide stairs leading up to the Court of the Women. Aram had not gone around to the Gate of the First Born. He was taking Judith and their son through the Beautiful Gate. That led directly into the women's court and, Judith had been told, the trumpet chest for her purification pennies was just inside, and not far off was the gallery where all the mothers would wait until summoned to take part in their special ceremony.

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

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

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

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

The Gate stood at the top of broad, alternately white and blue marble steps. They took off their sandals and climbed,

and inside Judith paused uncertainly. There were thirteen trumpet-chests each guarded by a severe, white-robed priest.

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

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

"Do I just drop my money in?"

and show the ticket

Zacharias saw us. "Show it first to the priest. ~~He'll give you a ticket.~~

Zacharias Of course you know you'll never see the doves. ~~the priest Zacharias~~ has picked out. But ~~take~~ *keep* the ticket and wait in the gallery.

Let me have the boy now. I'll go and redeem him."

"Aram, in his turn began to act nervous.

"The redemption ceremony isn't long," he said. "Just two prayers and the payment. I just give the baby to the priest and the priest gives him back when I pay." He felt his girdle to make sure he still had the five shekels.

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

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

She could see Aram, their son in his arms, and a dozen other men, their arms also full, mounting the steps which led to the Court of the Priests. The tall carpenter Joseph, carrying his baby, was in the group.

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

O-O-O

"It's your turn now," Aram said later as the organ began the hymn which called mother^p to purification.

He had returned some time ago, still carrying in two careful arms the son he had redeemed with those long-guarded shekels. The baby had been crying furiously and Aram had given him into Judith's care with a puff of relief.

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

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

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

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

"Not into the men's court!"

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

"I think I have it right," she said, ~~swallowing hard.~~

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

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

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

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

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

"You'd better hurry," Aram said. And she drew her veil over her face and walked across the blue, rust-red and white marble floor of the Court of the Women. She felt afraid. She could not see ^a the blue and yellow dress, the crowd was too great. It helped, through, ^{to know} that the other mother was there. Thinking of her, Judith remembered that her son had been given to the Lord and received back from the Lord, and that she herself was about to perform her own act of equal piety. She stood straight and sent a reassuring smile back to Aram.

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

would, and dropped it into a pouch.

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

"This is worth the trip up from Bethlehem and ten times more," she thought and looking around, suddenly tearful, she did at ^{last} least catch a glimpse of that other young mother and her baby. They seemed to stand out from the others. "Because I know them," Judith thought. ~~and~~ She felt again the joy she had felt when she helped them make the trip from that stable in Bethlehen to the small lonely house Zacharias's wife had found.

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

0 0 0

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

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

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

"See that Joseph," he said, "the husband of the one you

helped from Bethlehem. A great thing has happened to him."

"What?" Judith asked.

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

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

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

"Simeon, the holy man? Why?"

"Why? I don't know," ~~she said.~~

~~As Mary joined Joseph,~~ Aram and Judith gazed across the court at the people to whom this wonder had happened.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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

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

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

He came at length to a small doorway and knocked.

"I'll go in first" he said to the two behind him, and went in.

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

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

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

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

"They are just behind," he told Simeon.

"And Anna is coming," Simeon said. "She is on her way."

"According to thy word," Simon said and paused again.

"I'll go look for Anna," Zachariah said. "The tunnels are hard going. She may need a hand. And then I'll stay outside. The woman, Tirzah, is in the Temple and our people are ~~watxhing~~, to see if she tries to pry. I'll get their word better if I stay outside." Simon did not reply. His eyes were on the door.

Zachariah went out, but he found no trace of Anna and heard no step of hers, and when he returned Joseph and Mary had gone in, so Zachariah took up his post in the semi-darkness. He ~~had~~ heard footsteps then and he looked ~~anxtously~~ away, for Anna. or even Tirzah, but it was only a fellow priest carrying the ceremonial vestments of the High Priest.

The Progress Bulletin.

For the issue of Sat. Aug. ~~22~~ 24

Valley Church Page.

From St. Ambrose Episcopal Church. Ly 6 7170. or 6 3333.

St. Ambrose Episcopal

Claremont

Again

The Rev. John E. Stevenson of Ontario will ^{again} conduct the 8 and 10 a.m. services tomorrow. Holy Communion will be celebrated at 8 a.m. The Rev. Mr. Stevenson is supplying in ~~the~~ place of the rector, the Rev. Frederick Q. Shafer, who is on vacation.

Next Thursday, at 10 a.m., the Rev. Kenneth Eade of St. Paul's Episcopal church, Pomona, will lead the meeting of the St. Ambrose Prayer Study group at 10 a.m. in the church. Holy Communion will be celebrated at the close of the study meeting.

---X---

"I'll wait outside," Zacharias said. "The woman Tirzah is at the Temple, and our people are watching to see if she tries to pry. I will get their word better if I wait outside."

Simeon did not reply. His eyes were on the door.

Zacharias went out and Joseph and Mary went in and Zacharias took up his post in the semi-darkness. He heard footsteps and looked down ^{the tunnel} anxiously, fearing Tirzah, but it was only a fellow priest carrying the ceremonial vestments of the High Priest.

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

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

"He wants to hold the boy." ^{He would be up to} Zacharias ^{thought} smiled in the gloom, ~~and~~ now Simeon's old, slow arms would be reaching for the swaddled bundle, not taking, but receiving. The holy man would first look down and then turn his eyes upward as though the grating ^{with the} ~~had been~~ a window facing Jerusalem, or even Heaven.

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

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

"According to thy word," Simeon said and paused again.

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

Zacharias wished Elizabeth ^{were} there to hear.

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

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

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

Simeon said something more, about the thoughts out of many hearts being revealed, and then steps, well down the tunnel, became louder, and in the light of the wall lamp Zacharias saw Anna, the ancient propheteess, hurrying toward Simeon's cell. At first he saw only something like a crumpled parchment, long out in the weather, but then he thought: Here is beauty!

Anna had had great beauty and its aura remained. She was of the tribe of Asher whose women always had been the most beautiful in Isra^lel, the only ones entirely worthy to be the

brides of kings, and among her generation she had been the most beautiful.

She vanished into Simeon's cell and shortly another step grew plain, a strong hurrying step.

* "Tirzah!" A fellow priest ^{to Zacharias} said in a low voice. "Up above, Tirzah is demanding permission to ^{come} search down here." ✓

¶ Zacharias instantly rapped on the door and called.

"What is it?" Joseph stepped out.

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

"What is this all about, Zacharias?"

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

"Herod?"

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

"I'll get Mary. But where do we go?"

"A little way ahead this tunnel branches off and the branch leads down to a house in the Street of the Candlemakers. You and Mary can leave that after dark and be just a family going home as hundreds do go, every evening, out of Jerusalem."

"I'll get Mary."

* "Don't do anything to make her afraid."

* Joseph made a spreading gesture, with both hands, to say that neither Zacharias nor anyone ^{else} need fear that Mary would be afraid. Even when she ^{had} heard Vedius Rusco's warning, given on

his return from the stormy interview with Herod, she had not been afraid. Joseph had, of course, agreed with her that they could do nothing about that warning. Although Joseph had seen at once how it tied in with the watch kept by Peleg and the other beggars.

x "We won't come to any hard," Mary had said. "We came safely to Bethlehem. We will return safely, to Nazareth."

Joseph smiled now at Zacharias.

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

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

O.O-O

Above, in the Court of the Priests, the long day of sacrifice was ending. At the washing place, behind the Altar of Burnt Offerings, priests were beginning to scrub tired hands and aching feet and the clean-up crew was sloshing water over stained marble tables and the floor. The final contingent of worshippers began to drift back to the Court of the Gentiles, tired fathers, mothers, babies. The touts tried for no more profits but instead stood in nooks counting the day's gains. The money-changers, each by his own column, closed their coffers and awaited the arrival of porters and guards. Beggars sifted slowly through the crowd.

High on the four hundred and fifty foot watch-tower a

white-clad priest raised a golden trumpet and blew a lonely
twilight note.

ALBERT
SUPERFINE
COTTON FIBRE

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that even Herod, and even with my help, couldn't fool the beggars."

"I suppose the odds are against it," Rusco agreed.

"Somebody, somehow, usually tells us just about everything," Peleg said meekly. "We know ^{> Uddin Rusco} what happened between you and Herod yesterday. We know Tirzah's people tried to kill you later. We know that still later you carried a warning. We know that ~~in spite of your warning~~ the man and woman went into Jerusalem today."

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

"Who else knows you have come?" Rusco said. Admiration for Geber replaced suspicion. The hunchback was in as great danger as any one. Greater! His ^{motives were} ~~reason was~~ obscure, but the consequences of his present act were plain. He was risking his life.

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

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

Deborah and Lucianus came into the room,

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

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

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

o-o

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

"Now what exactly do you have to tell us?"

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

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

"Why not?" Rusco asked.

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

"But why has Herod settled on this carpenter?"

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

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

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

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

In Rusco, the words "perilous business" started elation rising as though on a cue. But this decision to help, he ^{warned himself} ~~realized~~, was not his to make alone. And because he had always tried to let any allies share the responsibilities of a decision, as they had to share the dangers which the decision brought on, he looked toward his daughter and the others.

Deborah spoke instantly with ~~glowing~~ enthusiasm.

"Joseph is wonderful," she said. "Of course, we'll help him."

X "Naturally" Lucianus agreed. "He and his wife could ^{stay on} ~~be here~~ for the wedding."

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

SUPERFINE BOND

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

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

Bria ^{had} ~~had listened with growing disapproval.~~ She liked Joseph, and her first inclination had been to take the ^{family} ~~three~~ in, but as talk of the wedding ran on and she had time to think, she realized that ~~three~~ ^{three} guests might bring the whole villa into the torrent of Herod's anger.

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

Bracae snorted. "Risk!" he said. ^{(U) Since when is} ~~"Since when are we at~~
~~the Villa Rusco~~ afraid of a little risk?"

Everyone looked toward Candace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

0 0 0

There was a considerable wait before ^{they} Deborah and Candace came back, and with Joseph only.

"Where are the others?" Vedius Rusco asked. He ~~realized~~ ~~that he~~ felt disappointed at not seeing Mary.

"They were cold," Candace said.

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

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

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

"She fell asleep before we finished," Candace said.

"She was in the midst of telling us, Joseph, how pleased she was to meet ^{us all} ~~your friends~~ — because we are your friends."

"Of course, the baby slept through everything," Deborah

said in a knowing tone.

I guess

Bria turned around. "Well, Candace and I will see to ~~some~~ ~~eat~~ food, ~~for Joseph~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~others~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~house~~ ~~and~~ ~~we~~ ~~will~~ ~~be~~ ~~back~~ ~~in~~ ~~an~~ ~~hour~~ ~~or~~ ~~so~~."

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

"I'm told not to go home," he said. "I'm told to come here. I'm told one thing and then another. What is this all about?"

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

"It will be just for tonight," Joseph said solidly. "I told Mary we would be off to Nazareth tomorrow."

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

"Wedding?" Joseph said.

"Mine," Deborah said, blushing. *proudly*

"Ours," said Lucianus. "We do hope you'll wait for that."

At this development

Peleg looked at Crookback, plainly asking guidance.

Crookback looked at Vedius Rusco. Persuade them to stay. But make sure that the wrong guests do not see them.

he says said no

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

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

"Good," Rusco said. "There ^{is} no need to rush off."

But now, Joseph, you ought to get some rest yourself, and a good

Ready to see that at the Council

X

bath before you start it."

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

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

"Thank you for what you have done," he said, and the beggar touched hand to head and heart.

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

"Jesus."

Crookback bowed like a courtier. *"I have a favor to*

ask. "When they awake, may we see him?" ~~he asked.~~

"Why, of course," Joseph said with pleasure. And there was silence.

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

But Geber seemed calm and unafraid.

They are Mariam's people, too. And Deborah's, Rusco thought, trying to comprehend. He looked at his daughter who was standing very still, *her eyes blue pools of wonder.*

*No
with
lover*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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

"What is it, Joseph?"

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

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

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

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

ing and getting the baby ready."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rusco stood up and dropped on Joseph's shoulder a hand calloused by sword hilt, spear shaft and the stinging rasp of slings.

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

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

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

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

Rusco pushed the curtain back from his bedroom doorway.

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

~~He lifted a night lamp off its wall hook.~~

~~"I still wish you'd stay for the wedding," he said. "Mary is going to be sorry to miss it. I could see that she likes weddings."~~

Joseph's silence answered.

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

0 0 0

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

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

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

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

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

Candace brought food for everyone.

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

all.

"I wish we were going home to Nazareth," Joseph said.

"Mary has been talking of almost nothing else lately."

Around Nazareth, he thought, the countryside would soon be blooming with more flowers than he could name. But Mary would be able to name every one. The streams in springtime abundance would be giving drink to fig, pomegranate, olive, apricot, date and walnut trees. Grapevines would be clothing their black stumps in rich leafage. Life and beauty would burgeon on the folding hills. How the larks would sing, winging up to the sky, and how the bluebirds, lighter than feathers, would perch on the greening branches, and how the doves on Mary's own roof would coo, while she rode into the sterile south toward Egypt!

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

"This one will be a lot longer," Joseph said soberly.

Bria beckoned to Candace. "We'll pack provisions for the trip. Plenty of them!" she said.

"Perhaps," Deborah said, "I can help Mary. And I'd like to tell her all about the wedding." She ran off.

Lucianius handed his map over to Rusco and the latter approved and handed it to Joseph.

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

"It'll be a rough way," Lucianius said. Like most

young men he was doubtful that anyone ~~else~~ than himself had the strength for a rough road. "The country east of the Dead Sea is rugged."

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

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

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

"The Tribes climbed them," Joseph said. "So can we. ||
~~When the Tribes came out of Egypt they climbed them by thousands!~~
~~And hundreds of thousands!~~"

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

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

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

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

"It certainly comes in handy these days," Rusco said. "The whole region is parched and tormented. It's flat sometimes,

rolling sometimes, and sometimes just a windblown litter of ~~bits~~,
~~of~~ ^{chips} black stone, but always desert. And hot! You'll need to
be careful of water."

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

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

"Where do you think you'll go in Egypt, Joseph?" he
asked.

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

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

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

"City of refuge?" Rusco repeated.

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

day's journey."

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

"I'll make it," Joseph said.

"Now ^{how} about money?" Rusco said.

"Egypt ^{wants} ~~needs~~ carpenters," Joseph replied. "A carpenter can earn all he ^{cares to} ~~needs~~ in Egypt. I don't need more money than I have."

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

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

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

"I have my staff," Joseph said. And at that Rusco shook his head in such long-suffering exasperation that Joseph had to smile, even while his heart filled toward this big, ardent Roman. ~~Among his own people there were not many who would have been as quick to offer aid so freely.~~

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

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

safety, and the safety of Mary and the baby did not hang on such things.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He took the plunge and found, in strange, cold

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

He thought of Mary, waiting for Joseph with a gentle ease which could not have been greater if she had been holding Cere's comforting hand. He thought of Herod.

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

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

It would take time to think this through. Rusco rubbed his neck and looked at Joseph.

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

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

Prob

Night still held, although the moon was low now and the stars were paling. There was a great emptiness beneath the arch of sky, and silence also. The dog did not bark and the watchman did not say a word as he opened the wall gate. Alongside Peleg and Crookback, wordless also ~~xxxxxx~~ awaited the boon Joseph had so willingly granted.

The whole small group which gathered to watch the departure was silent, and continued silent even after the three had gone. ~~As though their memories depended upon their xxxxx~~ To the last one they were slow to speak for fear that words might jar from their minds ~~and xxxxxxxx~~ some essential part of the picture they all wished to keep as long as their memories lasted.

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

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

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

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

~~This child, this Jesus ... If I could help only a little, it might be worth ... whatever comes.~~

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Night still held, although the moon was low now and the stars were paling. There was a great emptiness beneath the arch of sky, and silence also. The dog did not bark and the watchman opened the wall gate without a word and the little donkey which Bracae had ready did not bray but sidled close to Joseph, as he and the baby and Mary drew away from Peleg and that Crookback who once had been Geber.

The small group which had gathered to watch the departure was silent, even after the three were gone. As though remembrance depended ^{upon} hearing, they were slow to speak for fear that words might jar from their minds some essential part of the picture they all wished to keep.

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

Bracae had rolled blankets on Briar to make a seat for Mary. Settled there, with the baby in her arms, ^{she} Mary had looked up and around at the vast empty darkness before she said goodby.

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

"The Lord bless thee and keep thee," Deborah had said, and Rusco had heard with surprise the blessing ^{he had} so often ^{heard} spoken by Miriam, and Deborah had been surprised, ~~too~~ to find herself thinking of her Jewish mother who was dead.

Candace had said nothing but ^{she} ~~she had~~ ^{she} leaned close to Mary ^{as though} for comfort. Mary had embraced them all and thanked them.

"Whether she comes back or not, she'll be with me always," Candace ^{had} thought.

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

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

Their petition fully granted
Peleg and Crookback had watched from the shadow.

Joseph's sandalled feet and Briar's delicate hooves had made no sound. There was nothing to hear and indeed, you might have said, there was nothing to see because man and donkey

and the donkey's riders melted almost at once into the night.

Rusco remembered another thing which Joseph had once quoted to him out of the holy writings.

He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

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