



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler  
Lovelace Family Papers.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Now was the time, Vedius Rusco said, for everyone to eat something. "Maybe you won't get another chance for quite a while," he warned the household. "But lightly! Nobody ever made his best fight on an overloaded stomach." Nobody, he corrected himself, except Helius. *Naepor.*

He did not, himself, eat anything. He never did at such a time. Instead, he tried to think about his affairs, to make sure, or as sure as possible, that they were all in order. He thought of his will and was glad he had had the thing rewritten. One copy was safely lodged in Jerusalem and another, as a precaution, was on its way to *Lucianus's father* ~~Marcus Seclator.~~

The will took care of Bracae and Bris, freed and rewarded Candace and all the other slaves, and left Deborah, he reflected with satisfaction, more than she would ever need. It had been rewritten to include a bequest to Lucianus and he wondered if he had been right in deciding against providing for sacrifices to all the major gods -- Jupiter, Juno, Ceres, Diana, Apollo, Neptune, Vulcan, Mars, Minerva, Venus, Mercury and Vesta -- all twelve. Jupiter and, of course, Ceres had been provided for all along and sacrifices to the other

ten certainly wouldn't hurt.

But could they really help? The doubts which talks with Joseph had driven deep into Vedius Rusco drove deeper. Joseph had said such sacrifices could not help because there were no such gods. There was only One, and sacrifices did not move him, only mercy and justice and humble prayer.

"Maybe we ought to put the lights out again," Bracae said.

"Keep every one burning," Rusco said. "When they come let's be as bright as a festival."

"Lights may bother them, at that!" Bracae grinned over the prospect of bothering Salvidinius Muso and Panthers. "Lights could keep them shying away for fear we've baited a trap."

The elation which had risen in Vedius Rusco with the coming of the messengers was higher now and, unexpectedly, for the first time in his life he thought that he had the explanation for this familiar mood. It was that danger brought a man to the very curtain which hid the answer to the final mystery. A man knew about this world, but what about the next? Well, in a little while he might know. He might know whose priests -- Jupiter's, Mithras's, Osiris's or the priests of the mighty one god in whom Joseph believed -- had the right story. And it would be worth knowing. This dying, when you came to look at it, was the biggest thing of all.

"Bracae," he said, "With me out of the way Herod can build hippodromes and fortresses until they choke him. The crazy old tyrant has been aching for this chance. So Muso and Panthers will have their orders. I'll never live to see a prison."

Bracae shuddered at the most foolish statement he had ever

heard from a man supposed to have good sense. They certainly could hold Museo and Panthers off for a while, he said, maybe for long enough to let the General

realize what a mistake he had made.

"And besides," he said, "what's to keep us from at least trying to clear out? We have horses. We might ride straight through the ring. And unless we've forgotten everything we learned the hard way we can hide long enough to get word to Quirinius <sup>up in Damascus,</sup> or even get to him ourselves."

"We just might," Rusco laughed. So one-sided a gamble tempted him.

"Then let's get going!" Bracae shouted.

"The hour that Herod had certain word I'd slipped through his fingers," Rusco said, "every slave in this villa, including Candace would be tortured into knots. And Deborah and Bria and Lucianus would be run to earth and killed."

"I'll turn off for Jericho the minute you get clear. You can hide alone while I take Deborah and the rest away."

"No!" Rusco said. "It's a risk I can't take. I'll just make my fight a good one and settle for that."

"Our fight!" Bracae said. "Ours!"

"Not yours, Bracae! Just me against Panthera and Muso." That was the way to handle it, alone.

"They won't let themselves be talked into that kind of a deal. And anyway, it would be two against one."

"I'll talk them into it," Rusco boasted. "And even if it is two against one I'll see to it that they <sup>e</sup>ver live to regret it. I don't know where I'm going after this. I've been told three or four places. But those two will go along."

They don't deserve to live any longer." He gave the back of his neck a thoughtful rub. "The laugh isn't going to be on Joseph after all," he said and looked around to plan an all-out defense. Just in case he could not make good his boast: ~~at least~~ ~~we can't~~ ~~wait~~ ~~for~~ ~~two~~ ~~hours~~ <sup>nearby</sup> "We've got about three hours," he said. "And when the ~~three~~ are up I want this place as hard to get into as Antonia. If the legionnaires face nothing but knocks they'll maybe leave the fighting to ~~Muse~~ <sup>stz</sup> and Panthera, Round everybody up, the whole household! And give a look to their weapons, though I hope I'll be the only one to use any."

"If the others get a chance they'll all fight like Romans -- or Gauls," Bracae said and hitched his long pants up to his hard, naked middle.

o-o

Beams, logs, broken chests, upended tables were heaped against the gates. Shards of pottery, all available debris, were tossed along the inner base of the high, thick wall.

"If anybody climbs over and jumps into that mess," Rusco said, "he'll wish he hadn't."

The biggest stones at hand were balanced above the gates to discourage the first assault. Doors were braced. Spare weapons were stacked where they could be readily grabbed on need. When all was done that could be done, time remained, so Rusco used it to give his army the best advice he had.

"If it comes to fighting, remember!" he said:

"Crowd the other fellow! You won't get hurt a bit quicker and you just may worry him so much he won't crowd you. And try your best not to fight alone. Keep a man at your back or keep at a man's back. Always!"

He waved them off to rest while they could, and he and Bracae rested. Candace came in and he beckoned to her.

"Sit down!" Rusco said. "Sit down!" Although he would not have admitted it, he was lonely. It was all very well to look forward to the greatest adventure, but that was overshadowed now by the realization that he would not see Deborah again and that he and Bracae would never again sit together like this. Nor he and Candace, he thought, and stroked her hair. She sat stiffly but her warmth and love were there. All three were silent.

It got to be <sup>well</sup> ~~an~~ hour after midnight and the men and women of the household moved about with self-conscious stealth, ears pricked for sounds outside. There were no sounds save from owls, a distant jackal, a tile slipping off the roof. Only such small sounds under a sky full of stars.

The woman who was minding the hourglass turned it again. A new sound, not birds, animals or a roof tile, seeped through the wall and the doorkeeper gave a warning hiss and the watchdog talked in threatening undertones.

"Check the gates!" Rusco said to Bracae. "I'll look from the balcony."

He got quickly up the <sup>cramped</sup> circular stairs, keeping back out of sight until the tip of his javelin had snuffed the lamp. Then, hugging the wall in darkness, he looked out.

A hundred yards down the hill a compact hedge of spears stood up into the sky like grape-vine stakes and in front of the hedge three men, two stiff in armor, stood in close parley. The ring of mercenaries, <sup>encircling the entire hedge,</sup> was a little farther away.

On second look the hedge was not as compact as at first it had seemed. It was split. Rusco counted. About forty in the larger section, twenty-five in the smaller, and the smaller flew a pennant which startled him. It was a vexillum. The twenty-five had to be Arrius Messala's veterans. No other unit with the Tenth was entitled to a vexillum. A strange centurion stood at the point of command. Obviously Messala could not have delivered his message and returned in time to take charge.

"I don't like that," Rusco told the night. It was one thing to handle Muso and Panthera. It was another to persuade seasoned legionnaires, under a possibly unfriendly leader, to stand idle in disobedience of an arrest order.

Sixteen men of the forty formed a hollow square around the two armed leaders, raised shields against missiles that might come from the villa and advanced. When they had got forty or so yards from the gate they halted and one of the two leaders stepped forward.

"Hello, the gate!"

Rusco recognized Muso's patrician drawl. Panthera was the other one. Back with the main body the third leader stood alone, a long robe swaying in the breeze. Tibni-

+ ben-Ginath;

*The traitorous Herodian Jew!*

Whatever, Rusco wondered, had become of Naepor?  
"Is that you, Muso?" Rusco called from his  
shadowy post. "You're up late!"

Muso stiffened into the formal pose of a herald.  
"I speak for Salvidinius Muso, Tribune of the  
Tenth Legion and for Panthera, Pilus Prior of the Eighth Cohort,  
who speak for Orfitus Proculus, <sup>General</sup> Commander of the Tenth Legion,"  
Muso cried, stilted and slow. "You are required, Vedius Rusco  
Philippicus, to submit to arrest on order of Herod, son of Anti-  
pater, King of Judea."

"What charge does Herod dare make against the  
Road Commissioner of the Emperor?" Rusco was proud of the  
amazement which he put into the demand. "Name your charge!"  
He could be formal, too. But then anger took hold. "What  
do you mean, 'arrest'?" he cried.

"Yes, arrest!" The sullen bellow came from in-  
side the square.

"You're even noisier than usual, Panthera,"  
Rusco called.

"For crimes against the Emperor, <sup>Caesar Augustus</sup> and Herod!"  
This was Muso again.

"What crimes?"

"Make it easy for yourself, Rusco," Muso  
coaxed. "We promise safe conduct if you surrender."

Some of the encircling mercenaries began to  
crowd closer curiously and the vexillum's leader motioned

and his twenty-five shifted to keep from being pushed against the group with Tibni-ben-Ginath. The shift seemed a deliberate effort to keep separate and Rusco had a thought.

"Centurion! You there, with the vexilium! Come ~~up!~~ forward!"

The leader ranged alongside Muso and Panthera but kept himself separate, as he had kept his men.

"What is your share in this, Centurion?" Rusco demanded hopefully.

"I have direct orders from General Proculinus," the Centurion replied, his voice somewhat defiant, "I am not to advance my vexilium unless the forty under the Tribune Muso and the Pilus Prior cannot make the arrest alone."

"Are the forty from the Tenth?"

"Not them! They're the bodyguard of the Sadducee standing with them!"

On his dark balcony Rusco breathed a pleased, "By Jupiter!" Calculating little ~~Orfitus~~ Orfitus had not been able to keep clear of this thing, but he was trying to shift as much responsibility as he could. "By Jupiter!" With the vexilium holding off, it shouldn't be hard to talk Tibni-ben-Ginath's fight-for-pay boys into standing aside while he fought Muso and Panthera.

"You lie, Centurion!" Anger pushed Panthera beyond his protective circle. "You do not have an order to keep out of this."

The Centurion shrugged.

"Vedius Rusco! " Panthera bellowed. "We charge you with treason against great Caesar Augustus and Herod."

"And call upon you to surrender!" Muso cried.

"Centurion!" Rusco shouted.

"I hear."

"Centurion! This need not be a fight for more than three. Do this. Tell the Sadducee's men that if they want to storm my walls they will, maybe, take me but plenty of them will be hurt. Say that if they agree to stand aside I'll come out and fight Muso and Panthera. If those two can take me I'll be taken. But if the Sadducee's men won't promise to leave the job to Muso and Panthera I'll fight in here with all my household."

The Centurion gave an admiring laugh and ran back. Shortly an approving shout went up from the bodyguard and rippled to the mercenaries who began to break their ring. They had no intention of missing what was sure to become a legend.

...Vedius Rusco Philippicus, against two enemies and one that bull of a Pilus Prior who claimed he could lick anybody. ..

"All right, you two!" Rusco called down. "You heard! Make up your minds!"

"The forty agree!" the Centurion cried, trotting back.

"Make up your minds!" Rusco called again.

Muso and Panthera knew that their minds had been made up for them. They had no choice. A Tribune and a Pilus Prior could not expect men to follow them into battle if they, themselves, would not fight two against one.

"Come down and be killed!" Panthera bellowed.

"Vedius Rusco, traitor to Caesar Augustus, surrender or die!" Muso was hugging his patrician formality close.

Rusco walked down from the balcony.

A raging Bracae met him. "Two to one! You can't do it. You haven't a chance."

"Turn it around," Rusco said. "They haven't a chance."

"Let's mount and run for it."

"We've gone over all that. Now here is what I want. Put ten men on the wall overlooking the fight. Divide the rest between the garden and courtyard entrances. Muso and Panthera may talk that Sadducee into cheating. I don't trust him, and I guess among his forty he could find a few willing to break a pledge. If more than Muso and Panthera jump me outside, the spears of our ten can cover me until I can get back."

"Do I go out with you?"

"What else?"

"And you expect me to stand and watch?"

"You do not lift a finger. That's an order."

Candace hurried up, lamplight shining on her armor.

"And you stay inside!" Rusco told her.

"In my country women fight," she cried, "I'll fight with you."

"You stay inside!"

"I'll fight with you!"

Rusco motioned silently and two of the slaves

seized her. She struggled and called to Bracae and when he shook his head she cried despairingly to Rusco, "What did you teach me for if I can't help -- now?"

"Come on, Bracae!" Rusco said and the <sup>Door Keeper</sup> warden unbarred the door, and the gate, and the dog crouched and talked in undertones and the two men went out.

O-O

The moon was ~~well down the sky~~, but <sup>still</sup> bright. The light would be good although full of the warped shadows of night. Unexpectedly the Centurion had posted his veterans to form a square within which the fight would take place. He had made them kneel so that all behind might have a clear view. The bodyguard was scattering along the square's east <sup>side</sup> and nearby <sup>-ben- Ganath & Salvadinus</sup> Tibni, Muso and Panthera were talking.

The mercenaries were collecting on the north and west. They were acting as though they had been freed of any further duty by the arrival of the Sadducee's bodyguard. They were milling around excitedly to find good places from which to watch the fight. They were in such numbers that the shifting bulk of their main body seemed to make the shadowed ground move.

A small group stood clear of all the others, or rather the others all stood clear of this small group. Earlier in the day this group had numbered seventy-five men. Then it had numbered seventy-one, a fumbling, muttering seventy-one who had so enraged the Marshal at an afternoon inspection that he had said they <sup>52 mercenaries</sup> needed more work and had sent them on night duty at

at the villa. But they had scarcely started for the villa when one man fell out for no reason and another suddenly sat down, saying he was tired, and another said he'd catch up as soon as he got rid of junk he never should have packed in the first place. Another saw something to the east and went to take a look. Another went west. And on reaching the villa the balance had closed ranks and had looked at one another and pinched their mouths, and gestured, and darted glances left and right and fingered their weapons.

"Well, <sup>||</sup> we just have to stick together," the pantomime said. "If those others try to cold-shoulder us they'll find out. The very next one will find out."

Looking at this group, now numbering barely sixty, Vedius <sup>Rusco</sup> was reminded of lepers keeping clear of the whole world and calling "Unclean! Unclean!" He was puzzled until he remembered Bria's broken cry. Could these hang-dog men be the ones who had done <sup>the deed</sup> ~~that thing~~ Bethlehem?

he saw Pelagius

He saw, behind all the mercenaries, a few beggars, <sup>and</sup> and as he advanced toward the vexillum's square he was ~~additionally~~ <sup>saw</sup> ~~puzzled to see~~ more beggars and hard-muscled men of the countryside drifting through the warped, night shadows.

"I might stall this business if you'd like a daylight fight better," the Centurion offered under his breath. Muso and Panthera were approaching. "Messala said I was to see, if the chance came, that you got a square deal."

Rusco shook his head. His foes could not take any better advantage than he could of the warps and tangents of light and shadow which the night created.

"But I'd like to have you referee the fight," he said.

"Why not?" the Centurion said.

"Panthera and I propose that the fight be with swords and daggers only," Muso said to Rusco.

"Speak to the referee, if you'll accept him as referee," Rusco ~~shrugged and nodded~~ <sup>gestured</sup> to the Centurion.

~~Muso and Panthera hesitated, then nodded. The latter looked doubtful.~~

Rusco continued in a louder voice than was entirely necessary; he wanted the audience to react and he wanted Muso and Panthera to feel the reaction. "Any weapons at all suit me," he cried. "Any or none. I'll fight naked and bare-handed if that's what you like." And Holy Jupiter! What if they take me up!

He got his reaction. "Bare-handed! Naked!"

The audience repeated the words gustily. ~~This incredible Vedius Rusco Philippicus would take on his own in the buff.~~ <sup>start</sup> ~~his whole body had to come off~~ <sup>start</sup> The legend of the greatest centurion since Pullo and Vorenus began a new chapter. ~~Muso and Panthera stiffened.~~

Rusco knew why Muso and Panthera proposed discarding javelins. Throw or thrust, he was ten times better. He would have been almost sure of one center shot and they would have been lucky if either had nicked him.

"All right, swords and daggers only," the Centurion said. "And now here are the rules. Vedius Rusco Philippicus takes the south side of the square. The Tribune and the Pilus Prior take the north. This will bring the moonlight over

everybody's shoulders but not in anybody's face."

"Let's toss for north and south," Rusco said, aware that he was leaning over backward to be fair. The moon, for a fact, would fall a trifle into the faces of Muso and Panthera.

"We're suited," Panthera grunted.

"The fool!" Bracae whispered. "He's so anxious to show off that he doesn't see you offered him an advantage."

"Positions!" the Centurion commanded.

The three placed themselves as directed. Panthera reached for his sword.

"Do not draw!" the Centurion warned. "But when I command 'WALK!' advance five paces and halt. You will be twenty paces apart. Then I'll command 'DRAW!' Then you will take your weapons but do not move. But when I command 'GUARD!' you are free to go wherever you choose. You are free to do anything you are man enough to do."

Rusco stooped and retied the laces of his boots. In addition to helmet and breastplate he was wearing shin and thigh guards and he started to give a final fix to all of these.

"Let me!" Bracae said and tightened here, and there, and then looked up for Rusco's approval or dissent and loosened and looked again. At last he stood back with tears in his eyes and pinched up some dust and spat on it and dirtied Rusco's neck where the flesh, above the breastplate's dark collar, invited a blow.

"Candace will go free with everyone else," Rusco said. "But ask Deborah to see that the girl either

is invited to stay with her or is helped back to Numidia."

"She and Candace can't be parted now. But as long as Bria lives, she'll say you should have married Candace."

"It's too late for that," Rusco said. "But one more thing. I hope Deborah goes back to Rome and I hope you and Bria stay with her."

Bracae dropped his hands to say that they were empty, that all of him was emptied, of any desire to go anywhere.

"And remember! You have an order. Stay out of this!"

"Not if Muso and Panthera live!" Bracae exploded. "If they live I'll kill them both or die trying."

Rusco threw his head back in laughter which drew amazed looks from the spectators, and angry suspicion from Muso and Panthera. But it was not pretended laughter. He felt wonderful.

"That's an 'if' you'll never need to work on," he promised.

Muso and Panthera finished for each other the services which Bracae had just completed for Vedius Rusco, and Bracae got outside the square and looked around and now it was his turn to note the hang-dog mercenaries, and the thickening crowd of country folk and beggars.

The Centurion held up a hand to ask if the combatants were ready. He got three nods in reply.

"WALK!" he commanded, and "HALT!" he commanded, when they had taken five paces.

ben-9inath

Panthera glanced to where Tibni had set himself among his bodyguards. Tibni waved. Vadius Rusco made sure his dagger slipped easily but he did not draw it. Against two he would not give his shield hand the double duty which had been a calculated risk against Panthera alone.

"DRAW!"

Rusco whipped his sword out, making the flat of the blade whine against the sheath and a murmur approved the showmanship which he knew he should have regretted.

"GUARD!"

o-o

Rusco heard Bracae roar an appeal to Woden, saw tall Candace race through the main gate, glimpsed Bracae lumbering to meet her and heard the audience loose a long shrill "Ya-a-a-a!" But after that he was very busy with his enemies. Muso and Panthera had leaped apart and were quartering in. He rushed the Tribune. He counted on two strokes before he would need to guard against the slower Panthera. The second stroke drew a scarlet line along Muso's forearm. It was not crippling, worse luck, but he hoped it would make Muso's sword hand slippery. Thereafter, however, he had little leisure to hope for anything.

Panthera was at him like a bull and Muso like a leopard and their points reached high and low and Panthera's big foot tried the stamping trick and Muso tried an uppercut with his shield-edge and would have lost shield

and arm if Panthera's blade had not turned back Rusco's counter-stroke.

They were always at him. They never got far apart. Neither was willing to fight alone long enough to let the other slip in behind. But just the same Rusco always faced two swords, high and low, always had to watch front and at least one flank, and once his thigh took a swipe from Muso which might have been serious if Panthera had struck it; and once sparks showered off his helmet and if the helmet had not been proof against even Panthera's sword the fight might have ended there; and once his shoulder took a numbing blow, and once his ribs took a bruising clout, and once a dagger screeched on his breastplate; and as the fight rolled on and on, blows battered his shield while it rose, circled and weaved in defense and, now and then, reflected the golden moon as calmly as might the untroubled surface of a lake.

His own sword kept raking at Muso's foxy face and threatening Panthera's groin and clattering against their shields. He kept them off balance but he was tiring and commonsense warned that he had better finish one of this pair or they would finish him. But the high mood which stood higher than ever before assured him that he was not too tired. He would never be too tired. Like those demigods got by deities upon mortal maidens he could fight forever.

Well, at least he could fight until his opening came! And then his sword struck so shrewdly that not even Panthera's bull-grip could hold his shield. It fell to the rocky ground and while Panthera was reaching for it, the opening came.

Rusco rushed Muso.

All along Rusco had heard the crowd's shrill "Ya-a-a-a-ing!" but as he rushed he heard a different sound. A hoarse roar swelled and suddenly was the only sound anywhere, as wide and deep as the world and more deafening than thunder. It filled Rusco's ears as he flung himself upon Muso. It drowned the crash of his shield against Muso's shield. As his sword slipped, more surely than seeping oil, into Muso's neck it turned Muso's scream to open-mouthed silence. It smothered the groan which Muso gave as he fell. It let Rusco spin silently, knowing that now he had only one enemy to finish. *He advanced.*

Panthera stood erect ten feet away, staring. Behind Rusco the roar began to break, amazingly, into the familiar elements of a general battle. But Panthera was unaware of this. In a fright which made him deaf, he was discovering again what oldsters meant when they said that Vedius Rusco Philippicus was the best. Once again he saw, and braced to meet, a terror, long-fanged and flashing like a wolf. The implacable living death from which he had once fled! And this time he could not flee. *Rusco closed.*

Off to one side Tibni-ben-Ginath saw his chance. He had failed to find the Messiah Herod had demanded, but at least he could rid the tyrant of an encumbering Road Commissioner. He signalled and three of his bodyguards leveled their spears and charged.

Bracae shouted, but his voice was lost and it was the warped shadows of the spears, racing ahead, which

warned Rusco. He got his shield over in time, but it could not hold off three points and they went clean through him as his own sword went through Panthera. Turning, with the spears tearing at his bowels, he got his dagger out and stabbed one guardsman and fell on top of Panthera. And Bracae struck down the other two and knelt beside his master and friend, and Candace, crying in the voice of a woman, flung herself alongside Rusco.

The appalled Centurion signalled and his veterans swung into a protecting circle around the three and, of necessity, dead Panthera; and the circle turned aside the stampede of mercenaries now in full flight from bitter country-folk and beggars. Trying most desperately of all to escape were the hang-dog sixty. And the vengeful assailants tried most furiously to reach these.

The melee trapped Tabni-ben-Ginath, attempting his own escape. At first he ran unrecognized and, being unarmed and no threat to anyone, was let alone. But an accidental blow made him shriek and Peleg looked close in the moonlight and shouted, "The Herodian Sadducee!" At that Jews swept in from every side and broke him bone by bone, nose, jaw, skull, the arms he raised in protection, the legs on which he tried to flee, until a dagger at close quarters tore his throat wide open.

Four of the country-folk were not fighting. Rapt Esrom and quiet Obed and excited Zorobabal and Beor with his half-moon beard only watched and listened.

Country-folk and beggars alike were crying one word as they slashed and stabbed with weapons snatched from their panicked victims or as they flailed with staffs as murderous as weapons. They slashed and stabbed and flailed as one, as though the host of them

swung like one sword in one giant hand.

"Bethlehem!" was the word they cried, although a few cried the old name, "Ephratah!" But old or new, the word always sounded as though it were spoken by hearts instead of throats. It was full of passion for the town which, although so small, had been great through generations and now was desecrated.

"Bethlehem!" "Ephrathah!"

Bethlehem, where Rachel was buried and the proof, a pillar still standing; which had been on Jacob's lips dying in alien Egypt; which had been a special prize when Joshua divided milk-and-honey Canaan among the conquering Tribes; which had nurtured the good judge, Ibzan. Bethlehem, which had received Ruth, mother of Israel's noblest line; where Samuel had sacrificed to the Lord; for whose sweet waters David had longed; lodestone which drew back from Babylonian exile one hundred twenty-three sons. Bethlehem, brief haven for the warrior Johanan before he fled Chaldean wrath into Egypt, and lately haven for a carpenter now fleeing with his wife and child from the wrath of Herod.

Shouting the name, Country-folk and beggars, all answering a summons greater than themselves, hunted their prey reckless of any penalty Herod might ever demand, and chiefly they hunted the unclean sixty.

Rusco did not hear the shouting. Holding fast to Candace, he did not feel her tears although they rained upon his face. He saw her practicing gaily with Deborah. He saw Deborah. He saw Miriam plain. He saw Joseph's wife, serene and innocent-eyed, holding her baby close as she rode off on the donkey with Joseph walking

by her side.

He remembered how Joseph had quoted from the writings.

"Eracee," he said, "Joseph will be sorry he had it right."

And then he shut his eyes to end the business of dying.

He had been taught, in the hard school of his time, that when death comes there is nothing to be done about it except to clear the road for the living as fast as possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In Jerusalem, Nepte was one of the first to hear of the death by treachery of Vedius Rusco Philippicus after his great double victory. Those who had been witnesses, could not spread the news fast enough. It spread faster than Imperial couriers could have carried it. Men said later that the very waves and wind swept the story to the Empire's farthest shores, completing a legend which the Legions would retell for generations.

When the first confused shouts of returning soldiers roused Herod's city the yellow girl was already awake. She lay on her pallet, building the day-and-night dream which filled her fancy more and more since she had teased from Panthera the will giving her freedom, if he died. It was the dream of where she would go on that day, and how.

The confused shouts ran on and she listened.

Vedius Rusco Philippicus, dead!

"I hope his women died with him," Nepte cried, springing to the window to hear more. She had known of the planned arrest but she had not expected this ending to it. She listened again.

"But first he killed two, Panthera and..."

Listening no longer, Nepte danced around the floor.

"The dice fall for me! The dice fall for me!" she

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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whispered in wild exultation and sat down for a moment and hugged her naked knees against her naked breast.

The news continued through the window.

At the Rusco villa, a riot. Mercenaries and Jews in a savage melee. Nothing, she told herself, could be better for her purposes. Nothing! She leaped up and, still naked, began systematically, to carry out her long-planned program.

She threw her cheapest, brightest clothing into a heap and spilled rank perfume over the heap.

She made a neat, innocent bundle of the richest clothing and veils that Panthera had bought for her and enclosed inside it a bag holding Herod's reward and the remainder of Tibni-ben-Ginath's denarii.

She tied to her naked waist the pouch in which Panthera kept his plundered pearls, emeralds and rubies.

She hung around her neck, in another pouch, the most precious possession of all, the will, and <sup>then</sup> dressed in the perfumed clothes.

It was, of course, illegal for a freed slave to run off before an officer of the State had sanctioned her freedom. It was death for such a one to be caught taking money and jewels not bequeathed to her. All such property belonged to the State. But Nepte's whole dream-plan stood upon Panthera's money and jewels.

"I'll take the risk. I'll not be caught. I'll get away. and I know where to," Nepte whispered.

"Rome!" She spoke aloud. Rome was her goal. Since she did not dare go back to Egypt, Rome was the city for her skills, the

biggest, richest, most corrupt city in her world.

In the cheap, perfumed clothes, Nepte slid unseen through the doorway of her lodgings and hurried toward the Joppa Gate. Men and women were sifting from every house to demand more news of what had happened at the Villa Rusco, but she went unnoticed. She had a natural talent for whatever could be done best in the dark.

Bold, in spite of the treasure in her bundle and beneath her skirts, Nepte cajoled pawing guards until they let her through the Gate. They often let rankly perfumed women of the streets go out before dawn for early trade in Joppa Market.

The Market, too was aroused. Watchmen and merchants had gathered in excited groups, but she slipped by and, keeping to the darkest lanes, passed deserted booths until she reached a horse-trader's stables on the outskirts. It was deserted also and she was able to steal a horse and saddle and bridle him. She led the animal until she was sure <sup>no one was remarking her</sup> ~~she was sure she had not been seen~~ ~~she was sure she had not been seen~~, then mounted and rode hard.

The port of Caesarea was only a little more than fifty miles up the coast.

"You'll cover a good piece of that before daybreak," she promised her horse. "They we'll hide all day and do the rest after night falls."

At Caesarea Nepte's plan was to present herself as a foreign lady of rank. She had the necessary clothes and veils and jewels and she did not doubt that she could act the part. But to arrive without suitable retainers might cause dangerous suspicion.

"I'll have to take that risk, too," she told her galloping horse.

Risk would lessen as soon as she found a slave-dealer to

provide her with respectability in the form of a maid and two strong bodyguards in proper livery. Two mutes. Most certainly mutes. And the maid a mute, also. She knew edchuahdeaderler in Caesarea. Panthera had let that bit of helpful information slip.

"And then passage on a ship," she confided jubilantly to her hurrying mount.

"At Caesarea, a man will find a ship ready to sail for almost any port in the world," Panthera had said.

Certainly for Rome, Nepte thought.

She kept her horse to a strong gallop. She did not expect pursuit. In the confusion following Vedius Ruco's death not even a State informer would look for Panthera's slave until a few days had passed. But when she did halt she would most emphatically, pick cover to conceal her after the sun rose; and even now she kept to the darker side of the trail, against any chance observer by moonlight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

By the same moonlight Helius Naepor led the hunt at a slow trot along the Jerusalem-Jericho highway. He was behind the Chief Eunuch's schedule, but he ~~meant~~ meant to be. He had been as late as he dared in starting and he did not care if he fell farther behind with every mile. He rode with his thick shoulders bowed.

He could hear the Tenth already. Naepor, the giant killer! Once let the troops hear how their Primus Pilus had fought the battle of the Dead Sea -- five legionnaires crashing down on an unarmed carpenter, his woman and their baby -- and the whole legion would be as hard to handle as the Eighth was for that empty-head, Panthera.

"Vedius Rusco," he whispered bitterly, "would have thrown this job in Herod's face."

Vedius Rusco had, in fact, thrown this very job in Herod's face. He had not only refused to help Herod hunt down babies, he had helped this very carpenter and his wife get clear. That was why Muso and Panthera were south of Jerusalem right now, trying to trap a better man than the pair of the ever could make together.

He won't have his tunnel to help him get

away. I fixed that. It was Panthera's doings, though. You don't turn an old comrade in even when you hate him.

Naepor's shoulders bowed lower.

~~But~~ <sup>I sent</sup> I sent Messala.

He wished he had remembered to bring something to drink, although he had taken in plenty just before leaving, after he got the Chief Eunuch's last order.

"You'll find fresh horses waiting just west of Jericho, where you turn south," the Chief Eunuch had said. "If you push you ought to run them down by dawn or not much later."

"Run them down! Run them down!" Naepor imitated the Chief Eunuch's thin voice. This wasn't a job that called even for smart scouting. Except maybe for some hard riding, it was a job that anybody could have done. The carpenter had been at Rusco's villa only four days before. So he could have been in flight for only three. With a woman and baby along he wouldn't have got far below Jericho even now.

This piddling assignment wasn't, Naepor told himself, worthy even of a corporal, let alone a Primus Pilus. It was a chore for a recruit. A silly chore for just such a silly recruit as he himself had been when, high in the Alps, he had thought the fleecy clouds were Olympian meadows where Jupiter or Ceres or any of the twelve might come strolling.

Now why, Helius Naepor thought, was he remembering that? It hadn't entered his head <sup>for</sup> in years but it had come back twice inside a month.

At the relay station the service was slower than cold honey. In spite of the Chief Eunuch's directions the remounts were still in their stalls and, of all things, eating!

"You were to have your fastest horses fit and ready," Naepor <sup>Said,</sup> "He didn't really care, but he had to protest such a lack of discipline. "If I run these stuffed cows, they'll quit in the first hard quarter mile."

The hostler looked back steadily, and even in the moonlight the hate on his face was unmistakable.

"Mercenaries!" he muttered. At least that was the way the word sounded.

Naepor rammed his javelin at the man's belly.

"Don't you know men of the Tenth when you see them?"

The hostler squirmed aside from the javelin point and raced into the night. Naepor let him go.

"Word of that Bethlehem thing has got down even here," he said <sup>as he said</sup> to his four followers, <sup>charged mounts.</sup> "Nobody ~~as yet~~ was <sup>even yet</sup> entirely clear on what had happened in Bethlehem but one report was repeated oftener than any other.

"By Jupiter!" Naepor said. "If Herod did that, I can't figure how he'll ever sleep again. Killing babies!"

And what do you think Herod will do with this one you're going after?

They rode on and were just short of the turn-off when they heard behind them the pounding hooves of a recklessly ridden horse.

"Block the road!" Naepor said. "Let's see who's in such a hurry. It can't be couriers. There's only one."

A shadow thickened and rushed at them and became a huge roan rearing and scattering foam from a wide mouth as his rider see-sawed him to a halt against four spears.

"I ride on private business," said a big weary voice. "I don't want trouble but I won't be stopped. Pull over!"

"Bracae!" Naepor cried.

*Naepor!*

~~"What are you doing here?"~~

*The Roman's Pileus*

Naepor said cautiously that he was on a mission.

"But you! What business is so big you'd kill a horse to finish it?"

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus is dead," Bracae said.

"Vedius?" Naepor's hands fell heavily to the pommel of his saddle. "Vedius! No! How?"

"By treachery after a fight with Muso and Panthera."

"But Muso and Panthera were only to arrest him."

"They'll arrest nobody any more."

"You killed them?"

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus killed them both in fair fight but then Tibni-ben-Ginath's sneaking bodyguard

Vedius.  
killed Rusco." Bracae's voice thickened with savage satisfaction. "And the Sadducee is good and dead, too. His own Jews finished him when they stampeded the mercenaries."

"What Jews?"

"Jews from Bethlehem and all around. A mob of Jews! I never saw such a sight."

"But Rusco!" The world drew away from Helius Naepor. He stood alone, naked, cold and frightened. He would not have admitted while Vedius Rusco still lived that he felt closer to his rival than to a brother, but ~~it~~ was so. He had loved him above kin.

"Vedius Rusco Philippius is dead!" For years he had never allowed himself to speak the distinguished cognomen, but he used it now.

"They were only to make an arrest," he repeated dully.

"I'll be getting along," Bracae said and looked at the four legionnaires and they lowered their spears without awaiting permission. He whipped his reins sharply across the roan's neck and was off again at breakneck speed.

0-0-0

Riding into the ghostly wasteland below the Plain of Moab, Naepor thought of the dead. Not only Vedius! Tibni was dead, that cheating peacock! Muso was dead. And not much loss to anyone! Panthera was dead, with only Nepte to mourn him. And she would be purring around a new protector by morning, unless she had already stolen away to a new base of operations. She'd make it, if she had.

~~had already stolen away to a new base of operations~~  
 unless she could steal enough from what Panthers had left, to buy her freedom. ~~She'd make it, if she had.~~

X A thought tickled Naepor like a feather. He, he alone, was left to haul in <sup>all the reward</sup> whatever Herod would pay. I'll get Herod's whole heap. There was no one left to share and no one left to make trouble by talking.

He lifted his head, and in place of gaunt rocks and shadowy hills, he saw a golden shower falling all around him. He rode along in this enriching rain. He would retire and go back home and buy a farm. Vedius Rusco always liked a farm. First, of course, he had to find the carpenter, but that was nothing.

He was skirting the Dead Sea, before the craftiness which had helped him keep on top of sixty centurions, warned him to give a thought to Bracae.

Bracae, of course, had been riding to give Deborah the news about her father. But by now he would have told of meeting the Primus Pilus and four legionnaires and he and Lucianius would be putting things together. Deborah and that smart Bria, too. They all would suspect ~~that~~ he was up to. They would have been with Vedius Rusco (Naepor now had little trouble withholding the Philippicus) when he helped the carpenter get away and would know the carpenter's route and would be planning to warn him if only out of loyalty to Rusco.

Naepor spoke to the four behind him. The horses ~~picked up at Jericho~~ had had time to shake down their food.

"Gallop!" he ordered, and put his horse to the

faster gait. He'd show Bracae! He'd run down the carpenter and take him back by a different trail, farther east.

Why do I always think "the carpenter"? It's the young mother Herod wants, and even more, the baby.

He held his horse to the gallop and on the barren, rocky track east of the Dead Sea he began to figure time. The moon was sinking into clouds along the west and the desert air was sharp with predawn cold.

"Look!" one of his four <sup>men</sup> said.

On the left, in dense shadow made by some giant boulders, something stirred. Tethered horses <sup>Twelve!</sup> They might have been overlooked if the smell and clatter of the five approaching animals had not made them restless.

"Whoa-a!" Naepor cried. Twelve horses were too many to pass. Their owners might already be set in an ambush.

A head popped from behind one boulder.

"What do you want and who are you?" a voice demanded.

"I am the Primus Pilus of the Tenth Legion," Naepor called.

"Hey! You could be at that."

Naepor passed over the impudence in the tone ~~of~~  
~~the reply~~

"I'm hunting a man," he said. "A squat man with a patch over one eye. Maybe you've seen him."

"Squat? A patch?" The voice was thoughtful. "No."

"He might have slipped in with a caravan or even

a smaller party. Have you seen a southbound caravan, or three or four travelling alone, or even two or three?"

"I certainly have." The voice began to laugh. "Would you count Gestas?"

"Gestas, the robber?"

"He was around yesterday. And Hassaf, a tricky monkey who runs spices from India to Damascus, was just a little to the south. And so was a small party of two with a baby and a donkey."

"I guess Hassaf's outfit is where I ought to look," Naepor said.

"He won't be far, and he'll be angling a little westerly to hit the Red Sea. The pair with the donkey probably will be close behind. Take a look at them, too."

"Why are they worth seeing?"

"You never saw such a pair." The man stepped clear of his rock, both hands upheld to show that they were empty. As though Naepor thought, twenty-two other unseen hands were not full of weapons in the darkness behind him. "Do I look like a softy?" <sup>the man</sup> ~~he~~ asked.

"You look like one of two men Herod has been wanting for months," Naepor grinned. "You look like Gestas's other half, like Dimas, the robber."

"Me? A robber?" The voice was all hurt innocence.

"Never mind, Dimas," Naepor said. "The Legion isn't interested right now in anybody but the man with the patch. Let's hear about your wonderful pair and then I'll

ride after the caravan."

Not denying the name Naepor had bestowed, Dimas hopped nimbly onto a boulder.

"It was like this," he said. "Yesterday this pair came walking along, a tall, scorched man and a young woman with a baby, and a loaded -down donkey. And out came my crowd from behind a little hill."

"A nice clean ambush!"

"That pair didn't scare at all," Dimas said, ignoring the accusation. "The man said, 'Peace!' and she gave us a sort of friendly look. Nobody was scared, not even the baby. But, believe it or not, I heard someone asking if we could be of any help. And it was me."

Naepor waited.

"'No, thanks,' they said. They were getting on fine. They were just going to Egypt. Imagine! Hundreds of desert miles with only what a donkey could carry. And people like Gestas all along the ~~road~~<sup>trail</sup>. But these two were just walking along. 'Peace!' he said."

"And you don't know where I'll find my big fellow with the patch?" Naepor ~~said~~<sup>asked</sup>.

"Squat, you said before."

"But big, too."

"No. With Hasaf, maybe."

"I'll have a look, " Naepor said, and waved and rode off and took a deep satisfied breath. Barring a run-in with Bracae, he was in the clear and his quarry was just ahead. All he had to do was ride. Ride to Herod's reward. And Herod was generous with blood money.

Blood money! Naepor shook his thick shoulders.

O-O

The long cold desert night was ending. The dawn was opening all around, a leaden dawn with heavy mists in the hollows between the dun hills which, like retreating elephants, blocked the eastern horizon.

Off to the right the Dead Sea looked like the belly of a floating dead fish. Aloft a vulture searched in great slow circles for carrion. His small head made him look, at such a distance, headless. He looked, Naepor thought, as though he might be sailing his slow circles hours after being beheaded, hours after being dead.

Dead! All night long, except when talking with Dimas, he had been thinking of death and of the dead. He closed his mind against a new thought ... that the man and woman and baby would be dead, too, in a little while after he got them back to Herod.

But that isn't my funeral. It's the man who gives the orders who's to blame.

"Come on," he said to his four. "We won't be long now if we shake it up."

Just as they broke into a run he saw, far ahead, entering a ravine which carried the trail southward, three tiny figures. They were as small as figures he had sometimes made idly beside a campfire, from broken twigs. One was certainly a man, one was certainly an animal, and the third, he was fairly sure, was a woman.

"Follow me!" he cried and turned his horse up a rocky short-cut which would bring him back to the trail at the far end of the ravine. It would bring him there, he estimated, just about the time the three figures emerged.

He reached his goal in triumph. The three were not yet in sight and he halted his party on a hill overlooking the mouth of the ravine. The trail on which his quarry must walk was still thick with mist, but the sun was getting higher.

No softness now, he told himself! Panthera, Muso, Tibni-ben-Ginath were dead and he would need to share with no one. Vadius Rusco was dead, so that if he didn't make a fool of himself he could live high, and never be galled by a higher rival again.

He stared toward the ravine and planned how he would pounce after charging grandly down. It would be an easy charge, the hill was not steep. He would aim for that scrubby evergreen. He would halt there and swing an arm to send his men in for the capture.

Reins held close to his paunchy middle, he waited.

Mary, the donkey and Joseph walked out of the ravine. Mary walked first; she carried the baby in the crook of one arm. Joseph walked last, with his staff.

The mist along the trail caught the sun and, drifting, gleaming, called Naepor back to lofty meadows seen long ago. He saw again the immaculate fields where once, he had been sure, a god or goddess would come walking. Rapt and awed, he leaned forward in his saddle.

The mist caught in the swinging folds of Mary's blue dress and swirled about her. The sun glanced brightly off her swinging brown braids; it outlined the swaddled treasure which she cradled in her arm as she walked through the feathery vapor.

Naepor could not think. His mind was a tangle of fantastic questions.

Did a man ever go hunting for a thing he had lost in his youth? And if he hunted, could he find it?

X If a man had thrown virtue away, could he find it again?

If a man, all his life long, had never been able to resist wrong, could he at last find the strength to stand for what was good?

He dismounted and went to the brow of the hill and stood there, looking down. The woman with the baby approached, the donkey and the man following, and as Naepor watched, motionless and silent, he got one question untangled and answered. He knew that not fear of Herod, not loss of the reward,

not loss of his post as Primus Pilus -- not anything -- could make him charge down the hill as he had planned.

He was no longer a gross, swinish hunter intent upon blood money. Although he was sweat-stained, dust-covered, dirty from head to foot, he felt wonderfully clean.

The woman, the baby, the donkey and the man passed and moved slowly into the distance.

"But weren't we .." one of Naepor's four men stammered.

"No!" Naepor said. "No!" He climbed onto his horse and turned the beast north. "Follow me," he said.

At the north end of the ravine he saw a dozen riders coming toward him at a gallop. He recognized Bracae's half-naked bulk, Deborah, Bris, Lucianus, followed by Micipsia leading a group of mounted, armed slaves.

Helius Naepor came abreast of them and halted and they halted. He raised his ~~right hand, and wheeled his horse.~~

o o o

They all watched while the man, the donkey, and the woman and baby disappeared to the south. In that direction Heliopolis lay. It was long, long miles <sup>away</sup>, but Rioncolura on Egypt's border, where Herod's power ended, was less than half the distance.

(end)