



# THE LOST LEGION

• A NOVEL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE •

H·WARNER MUNN

T.L.L.  
\$14.95

# THE LOST LEGION

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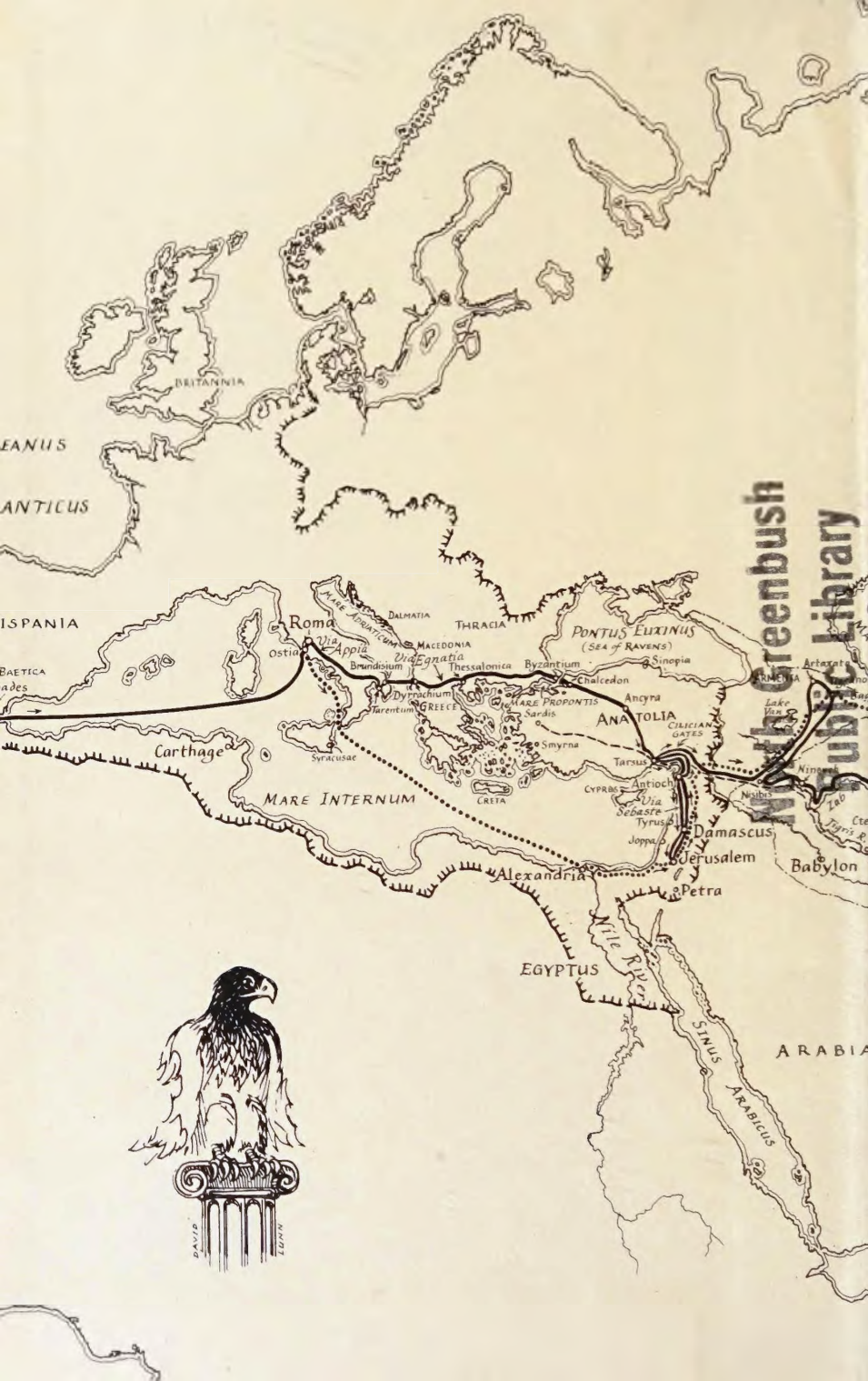
A vast tapestry of ancient times unfolds in this stirring tale of adventure and romance, whose setting reaches from the hills of Rome to the limits of the known world in the age of the Emperor Caligula.

A crack Roman legion, fallen into disfavor with the mad Emperor, has been sent on a seemingly impossible quest: to follow the routes of the silk trade deep into Asia and there recover the standard of the Lost Legion, a Roman army that disappeared without a trace on that frontier one hundred years before.


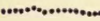

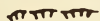

And so it happens that a body of unsung Roman foot soldiers will march out of history into the mists of legend and fable to the regions beyond the pale of Empire, and with them will walk an extraordinary young woman, driven across the face of half the earth by courage, pride, and passion to the fantastic fate that awaits them all at journey's end.

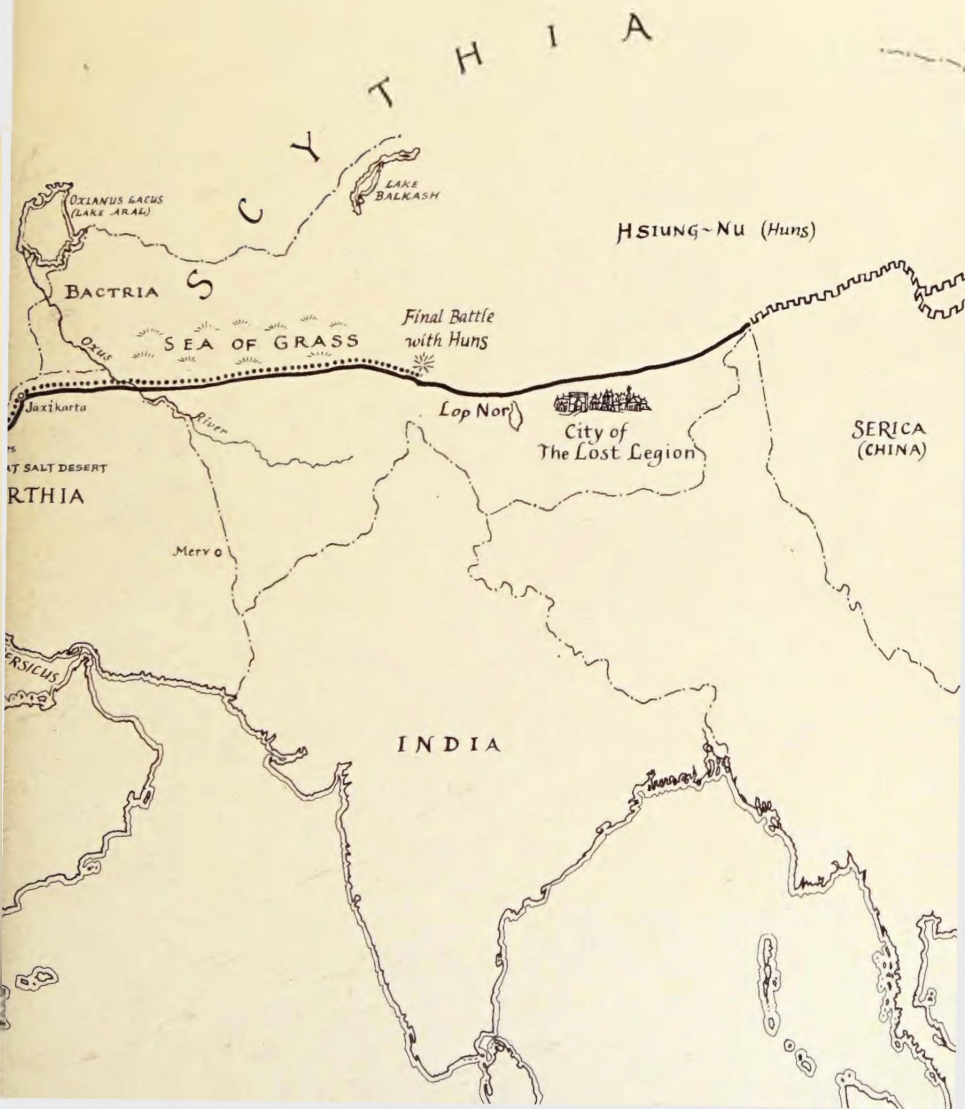








-  *Route of the XIII Legion*
-  *Route of the Man in the Red Phrygian Hat*
-  *Kings Highway*
-  *Limits of THE ROMAN EMPIRE (LIMES)*
-  *Great Wall of CHINA*









*by H. Warner Munn*

THE LOST LEGION

MERLIN'S GODSON

MERLIN'S RING

THE WEREWOLF OF POKERT

# THE LOST LEGION





# THE LOST LEGION

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H. WARNER MUNN

1980  
DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.  
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*For my Sons:  
This tale of Men of Honor*

and

*To the Roman Legionary  
the poor bleeding infantry  
of a thousand  
forgotten battles*





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Above all others, three good friends—Anne, Brenda, and Lorraine—whose characters combine to make Lilia what she is—strong, independent, and lovable.

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I

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ROMA



## PROLOGUE

### THREADS ARE CHOSEN

Many strands are needed for the web woven by the Fates. Back and forth the flying shuttles flash, each one bearing a thread to complete the design which only the weavers know.

Here is a strand of bright color. There is a dark line. A short frayed scrap. Occasionally a knot is tied as a thread comes to its end and is clipped. A life has been discarded and is no longer necessary.

Yet it was once and will remain an integral part of the grand plan.

A farmer straightens his aching back and breathes a weary sigh, looking at the sun. The time will not be sufficient to accomplish all he had meant to do.

Atticus, a young patrician, gives his major-domo instructions for the coming banquet and its orgy to follow. This must go beyond anything ever experienced by his friends in past magnificence and prodigality.

For an instant a sense of futility darkens his spirit. His soul recoils, contemplating itself in disgust, but the moment passes.

Night comes upon the city. Lilia sobs into her pillow, unsure of herself, wanting her lover to be pleased with her, but afraid of his demands and reluctant to abandon her maidenly ideals.

If she could only be sure that Tibullus' love matched hers in earnestness and strength. His grandfather was a man of probity and courage. His father, the senator, held men spellbound with his oratory. What a pity that neither had any interest in Tibullus—as a scion of the family or in his future! Should not a poet be

equally held in respect and trust? Wasn't it also *she* who was failing him?

Eitel, a slave, bleeds under the lash, but he will not scream, for his murdered father was once a prince of the Huns. With every stroke his hatred of Rome deepens.

In a dark alley a youth, Lucas, wields his knife adeptly. No one has seen what he has done—he thinks. He weighs the purse and tucks it into his tunic.

There has been no outcry. There will be none, but as he leaves the alley Lachesis has already measured out his span of thread and Clotho has begun the weaving of it into the design.

The heavy traffic of Rome rumbles through its narrow streets. Kept out during the day for the benefit of pedestrians, the drays now bring in the supplies for the markets, the heavy timbers and marble blocks for the never ending construction of the city.

In the Subura, that teeming district of flimsy, crowded, six- and seven-story tenements, the noise incessantly increases. The bawling of carters, the cursing and cracking of whips over the backs of the straining mules, the arguments over rights of way at intersections, sometimes settled by blows, the continual clatter of hoofs on the cobblestones—all this is reverberating pandemonium.

Yet, through the uproar, people sleep. Such sounds are part of their lives. Those who have worked to exhaustion throughout the day do not hear the noise.

The city vibrates and echoes. The ground trembles, but the sound rises as a whisper to the mansions and palaces on the hills.

Here dwell the nobility. Here are the fine old families. Here are the newly rich and the temples of their tutelary gods.

In the palace of the Emperor it is not heard at all.



## DIVINITY DECIDES

Gaius Caesar Caligula bent a steady, feral glare upon the inwardly quaking informer before him. He did not speak for a long moment.

Behind the throne and a little to the left stood Macro, the Praetorian praefect, Caligula's most trusted confidant. According to well-founded rumor, this man had aided his master in the smothering of his Emperor, the aged Tiberius, less than two years earlier.

Thus Gaius had become Caesar and had rewarded his henchman by seducing Ennia, Macro's wife. Their association was one of expediency. There was little love lost between the two.

Not unaware of this, Ofonius Tigellinus, the Sicilian, realized that in seeking an audience in private to impart the knowledge he held, he might well become the unnecessary member of the three.

His reward might be a bowstring and the hooks which would drag him down the Gemonian steps to be flung into the Tiber. He had not yet acquired the confidence and poise which would eventually raise him to become the vicious accomplice of the future Emperor Nero. He had no foreknowledge. He felt that he had gone too far. His budding career might already be over.

The long rays of the afternoon sun were focused directly upon himself. Caesar sat, chin upon fist, in comparative shadow. The praefect, never taking his brooding eyes from the informer, bent down and whispered in Caesar's ear.

Caligula smiled, without mirth. It was the only expression visible to Tigellinus. He saw it dimly through the ruddy brilliance behind the two dangerous men.

Caligula held the mallet, ready to strike the gong. Tigellinus suspected that the knuckles of that hand were white. A cough, a

sneeze, had before now tipped the scales against a man in the erratic mind of Caesar.

"If, then, the Thirteenth Legion names itself Emperor's Own but *not* in my honor, as it should, I presume it must be in the memory of the Immortal Julius?" His tone was smooth, silky.

"No, Divinity. It is in honor of its commander, Manlius Varro, whom they love and follow as though he were an Immortal."

Caligula struck his heavy fist upon the writing table before him. The stylus and wax tablets jumped. So did the heart of Tigellinus.

"You are a complete fool, Sicilian. An informer must be accurate or his information is worthless. Already you have made three mistakes." He ticked them off with a nervous forefinger.

"I am the only Immortal alive today. Do you classify the riffraff of the legions with your Emperor?"

"The surname of the commander whom you slur is Varus, not Varro.

"And thirdly—you should never have come before me with your lying slanders!"

The mallet swung up. Tigellinus fell to his knees. He babbled.

"Divinity! A moment! Your forgiveness! If you would but examine the tablets. I meant only that the allegiance of the soldiers is misdirected. It should be only to you. Anything less is a crime. There is only one Emperor. Only one brother to the gods. Oh, Immortal Caesar, listen!

"His family name is not Varus, because he is not Roman. He has no right to a Roman name. He has no honorable descent through any gens. He is the grandson of a Spanish lady, through an alliance she formed without honor or sanction, to save her property after the victory of Munda. Baetica was colonized with Roman immigrants and she would have lost her estates without the protection and attentions of the Immortal Julius."

Caligula laughed cynically. "That rings true at least, Macro. Few of his women profited by him, though.

"Go on, Sicilian."

"Her son took his mother's name, Varro, and entered the army as a common legionary. He rose to the rank of tribune. It is all in the archives. I discovered it by accident.

"Her grandson, Manlius Varro, has become commander of the

Thirteenth. He has a brother—centurion in the Sixth Victrix, stationed in Sarmatia.

“Manlius’ son, from a dead wife, is here in Rome. He was sent here to further his education. It seems he has a love for cheap glory and the adulation of the mob. His studies were in the Claudian school. He became a gladiator, and fights under the name of Ajax. Manlius bitterly resents this.

“All, it is said, love Rome, but it is well known that the men of the Thirteenth look to their commander more than to Caesar.

“May I be forgiven for speaking the truth as is my duty!”

Caligula said nothing. Tigellinus anxiously searched his face and continued:

“All of his cataphracts are Spanish. There is not one Roman knight among the whole cavalry unit of the Sixth Ala. Yet, curiously, he insists that his legionaries be none but Roman citizens, by either birth or law.

“Oh, Divinity! I beg you, read the records. Here is the roster of the legions. Here is the history of the Thirteenth. Here is his own family record. It is all written down.”

Caligula’s hand released the mallet. It swung back of its own weight upon its chain. A faint thrum-m-m vibrated in the still air as it tapped the edge of the gong. Tigellinus shivered.

“Continue.” The tone was not encouraging. Tigellinus remained on his knees.

“Get up, man. Stop shaking. Say on. You may, indeed, have a case. I will listen.”

Macro interrupted. “His slingers are all Balearics. The finest in the world. I saw them march past, at your father’s triumph. I marked how they regarded Commander Varro.

“There was a light in their eyes. They were watching him, not Germanicus. I thought then that they would be willing to die for their leader and no one else.

“When this man came to me, I did some research myself, before I brought him to you. The Thirteenth is the only legion in the army that is not undermanned. Nine tenths of them are volunteers. It is overmanned.

“In that parade I noticed particularly the artillery engines. His *carroballistae*, onagers, and giant *ballistae* were in the best condition I had ever seen. Word I received, from sources in Spain,

say that he never moves without ten wagonloads of spare parts for his engines. His baggage train contains three wagonloads of mule-gut cable alone."

Caligula's tense attitude bespoke his rapt attention. His fingers beat a tattoo on the arm of the throne.

"What of the army personnel? Is their training anything unusual or is it conventional?"

"Every man in the legion is an expert swordsman of course, but all have been trained, in addition, as archers. Each knows something about the use of every other weapon.

"Naturally, there are specialists. Some are better than others in the use of any arm. There is no man who cannot use a bow with precision. All can handle a sling, a throwing knife, a long lance, or a short pilum.

"Even the cooks, the sutlers, the farriers and woodcutters, the carpenters, drovers, and the physicians are fighting men.

"I have had a complete set of Thirteenth Legionary equipment sent to us. A Praetorian stands outside now, in that outfit. With your permission?"

Caligula did not answer in words, but a peremptory though negligent gesture gave consent. He maintained his fixed stare upon the quaking informer until the guardsman entered. The sight of this man caught his instant and exclusive consideration.

The Emperor was no stranger to armed men. He had spent his infancy, his boyhood, and much time as a youth in the establishments of the legions commanded by his father, Germanicus. The affection of these stern fighters for their noble-principled leader had included his son, whom they had made the darling of the camps.

The *caligatae*, "the booted ones," or footsloggers, gave him a little pair of boots like their own, made by the army cobbler, hobnails and all—and called him "Little Boots."

They applauded the casts he made with his tiny pilum; they cheered his assaults upon some giant antagonist who cowered in mock fear before his savage attack with short-sword or dagger; they even laughed at the swaggering arrogance which followed his permitted victories.

Unwittingly, they fed his vanity and his contempt for man-

kind. All that was long ago. No man laughed at Gaius Caesar Caligula now, either in sympathy or in derision.

Neither did the Emperor now laugh or smile at the Praetorian guard. He thought that, in all his life, he had not seen before so menacing a soldier.

It was not the man's height, for all the guardsmen were especially chosen for their physique. It was not his countenance, for that was engaging rather than otherwise. It was mainly little differences in his equipment which might have passed unnoticed by a casual observer.

These did not escape the practiced eye of Caligula, degenerate dilettante perhaps, but with the background of the professional soldier.

At first glance the armor of this man seemed no different from that of other legionaries who might have individual fancies as to minor equipment. It was not ornate but functional, almost severely plain, but the instant the Praetorian entered and struck his left breast with his clenched right fist in salute to his Emperor, the difference was made apparent.

To the keen ear of Caligula, the tone of the clashing metal betrayed an unusual quality. He beckoned the man within reach. The guardsman stood like a statue while the overlapping strips of his cuirass were fingered.

The lorica was of fine Spanish steel, at least one eighth of an inch thicker than standard equipment. The five strips, also overlapping, which bent over each shoulder, were of even stouter metal. The one nearest the neck had been brought up in a pronounced curve to form a low collar.

Caligula at once understood the practicality of the innovation. It was intended to deflect the favorite slashing cut of enemy swordsmen. A heavy blow, delivered between neck and shoulder, would sever not only the thick trapezius muscle but also the clavicle and the carotid artery. This point, so difficult to protect, was a peculiarly vulnerable spot.

Beneath the lorica he could see a heavy tunic of Cordovan leather. Here again was a further reinforcement and protection, in the form of a double fold just beneath the curved strips of steel. A strong neckerchief of coarse linen acted as both scarf

and padding between the upper edge of the cuirass and the lower rim of the Praetorian's helmet.

Macro saw Caligula eying the scarf. He removed it and showed that the center of the cloth was leather. It formed the pouch of a sling, which rested, when in place, upon the back of the neck, acting as a shock pad beneath the helmet's rim. It was an article of dress, a protection, and a weapon.

Caligula looked closely at the helmet. "Hand me your galea," he commanded.

Across the front of the helmet was affixed a movable semicircle of spring steel. He flicked it with a snap of his finger. It rang musically. Not broad enough to carry an insignia, it did not seem heavy enough to be of any practical use.

Macro smiled. "With your permission, Divinity."

He took the helmet and lifted the movable piece. It swung up easily. He depressed it. Its radius of movement was little more than an inch. However, the steel had been tempered so perfectly that the Praefect was unable to force it into contact with the main part of the dome.

"It is meant to absorb the force of a frontal blow." While explaining, Macro turned the helmet over and removed the inner cork lining which acted as a shock absorber. Under it were two sets of spirally coiled leather thongs, so situated as to rest directly upon the danger points of the temples.

The cheekpieces, which also covered the main part of the ear, were wider than standard. They not only shielded the cheekbones but also protected the vulnerable softness of throat and underjaw, when they were brought close and buckled.

"The thongs are slings. Each man of the Thirteenth is a trained slinger, naturally not as expert as the Balearics. The pouch, attached to the front of the sword belt, contains four lead balls and six of baked clay. The legionaries are almost as accurate with common brook pebbles as they are with regulation missiles.

"The bow each carries has a sixty-pound pull. The arrows have slots which are purposely thin, so that in battle the arrows are useless to the enemy, who almost universally can be expected to use thicker bowstrings."

Macro displayed two spare strings of fine gut. These were also

coiled into a little pad, affixed by means of a plaster to the back of the helmet's interior.

"On the contrary, the archers of the Thirteenth can reclaim and use the wider slotted arrows of their antagonists, when they have exhausted their own supply. They frequently have used a bowstring as a strangling cord.

"Now for the gladius." He withdrew the guardsman's sword.

"The ball on the hilt is lead. It counterbalances the blade. With a six-inch stroke, our soldier can crush in the facial bones of his enemy. If his sword is broken he can use the scabbard as a war club, as it is also tipped with another lead ball of the same weight. He need never be completely defenseless.

"His sword, as you see, is not standard but is of centurion's length, giving him an additional six-inch reach. It is the long handle which gives him the advantage, so he can shorten it for infighting if he must.

"He is also outfitted with a centurion's dagger. Even these are slightly different from those in the other legions, because they are perfectly balanced for the purpose of throwing. All Varro's men are well trained in that art.

"Turn, soldier."

The guardsman made a smart about-face. "Here, dangling upon his back, held with a cord which a sharp tug will break, behold three star thistles, or caltrops. In need, each man supplies himself from the back of the man in front, to break up an oncoming cavalry charge while on the march, or to lay a danger zone in front of his section of breastworks, if it is attacked by infantry. Here, also, hangs the quiver of arrows. These are slender and light as flight arrows. In so outfitting, Varro has sacrificed penetrating power for distance, though the advantages of both are held in dispute among tacticians."

Macro noticed the Emperor's impatient glance and hastily changed the subject by snatching away the guardsman's shield to display it. "The front bears only a snarling wolf's head—the emblem of the Thirteenth. The weight in itself is little more than the other legions carry—but see here!"

He spun it around. In addition to the arm strap and handhold, three more throwing knives were set in carrying loops and three

caltrops were set along the outer edge where they would not be in the way.

"Observe the upper rim, Divinity. It is formed of fine steel, sword material, and is razor sharp. Brought up under a man's chin, it will sever his jugular—possibly remove his head. It is a weapon in itself."

"Why, the fellow is a walking arsenal," Caesar muttered.

Macro raised the guardsman's right hand. It was armed with a viciously spiked cestus. "The instrument does not interfere with the use of any other. He can wield a short-sword, dagger, or lance. The pilum is the only item in the armament of the Thirteenth which is standard. It could not be improved upon."

Caligula sat for a long moment, pensive, staring at the guardsman's broad back. Chin on fist, he scowled and considered. None of the other three dared break the silence. In the end, he sighed.

"Tell me, faithful Tigellinus, what is your interest in this matter?"

The Sicilian breathed easier. He shifted his rigid position.

"I have only your interest in mind, Divinity. When the estates of a proscribed man are seized, seven eighths of their value reverts to the treasury. I considered it my duty to call your Divinity's attention to a possible threat to yourself and a menace to the peace of the Empire."

Caligula laughed. Macro's smile was cynical. The guardsman gazed woodenly at the wall.

"Leaving the peace of Rome out of our consideration, it had doubtless occurred to you that the other eighth goes to the informer?"

Tigellinus looked horrified.

"Divinity, I ask nothing for myself. I desire only to serve you. The honor is sufficient reward. I place myself at your disposal. I beg of you to accept anything due me under the law, to be used at your personal pleasure."

"I shall so accept, with gratitude. Consider yourself numbered among my clients and permanently attached to my household. You may leave."

He bent a cold glare upon the guardsman. "You also."

When the two had departed, the Sicilian, overcome with relief,



incoherently stammering his thanks, the guardsman's back straight and his stride precise, Caligula faced his praefect.

"What is your opinion of all this, Macro? What do you think this exceptional armament implies?"

"There is no legion in the army—no two legions—that could stand alone against the Thirteenth, should Varro become ambitious and decide to capitalize upon his left-handed pretensions to the throne.

"It may be that he has no such intention. Still, he can scarcely be unaware of his heritage. This awareness cannot be ignored, nor can his possible future plottings. If his descent from the Immortal Julius should become widely known and disaffection arise in the army, who can say what ramifications there might be?"

"True," said Caligula, almost to himself, yet loud enough that Macro could hear. "I squander fortunes to keep the army faithful and in line and it is never enough.

"This Varro is a menace. The legion itself is a menace. Its weapons are splendid but unorthodox. Its methods of warfare may be as unusual. Certainly its records in Spain are extraordinary.

"Still, we must consider both the Thirteenth and its commander disposable. It could probably not work in unison with any other legion under a single command—its allegiance is now suspect. Yet if I get rid of one danger I increase the other. If Varro is eliminated, I antagonize the legion. They are volunteers—citizens. That means that they are men of family; men with relatives, many, no doubt, influential.

"Discounting the foreign cavalry and slingers, nearly six thousand potential dangers remain to ramify and spread disaffection. I must also rid myself of the legion." He paused.

"The Parthian ambassador has sought an audience for some weeks, has he not?"

"He wishes permission to send for a delegation from Parthia to discuss terms for a lasting peace, or so he says."

Caligula scowled. "He lies. He seeks to gain time by lengthening our uneasy truce. When the armies are built up again the war will be reopened. However, it may be that he can become useful to us in this matter. He shall have that permission. Let him send for his delegates. While they are on the road, the Thir-

teenth shall be ordered here. There are many roads that lead from Rome. Perhaps on one of them our dilemma may march away forever. See that the orders are given, good Macro."

"What are your desires concerning my guardsman?"

"Oh, have him killed," Caligula said indifferently. "I leave the matter to your own judgment. But do not delay."

Caligula remained a few moments alone. When he followed Macro, it was with the jaunty mien of a man without care. Yet he would have done well to remember something which even emperors cannot afford to forget.

There is no man so lowly that he has not at least one friend. Before the guardsman was struck down and silenced, he had already talked.

## THE MAKING OF THE WEB

The official dispatches went forth. To Ctesiphon, Parthia's capital, where astute diplomats studied the carefully worded invitation for delegates to be sent—to bind a treaty.

To Hyrcania, which controlled the northeasterly borders of the Caspian Sea, north of Parthia. Out of Hyrcania had come word that bandits had cut the trade route between Rome and the mysterious, unknown land of Serica. Some called this the Land of Silk. Some called it Cathay.

Silk and porcelain seldom arrived now in Rome. The values of each had immensely increased. Bandits must be destroyed.

To Armenia, battleground and buffer state between the East and West, torn by internal dissension and always in fear of invasion.

Here the royal family read between the lines of their message. It requested free passage of a Roman legion through their nominally independent country. Ambitious princes studied each other. They saw the implied threat, should it be refused. How to comply without once more antagonizing Parthia, their rapacious, closest, and mightiest neighbor? Both Tigranes and Iskander made their separate plans.

Messengers rode in haste between the Armenian capital, near Lake Van, and Ctesiphon. They also carried pacts to be signed. Promises of allegiance were made on the one side and treaties of protection upon the other. Vows which cynics in neither court ever expected would be kept.

In due course the contents of the messages, garbled and enlarged by rumor, spread in ever widening circles throughout the web of intelligence common to all merchants, without which lucrative trade between the countries could not operate. There were hot words and pounded tables and dark plans plotted, as

many saw ruin facing their own little financial empires. War would create new millionaires and new paupers.

As clearly, the diplomats saw the fact to be true that, if a fully armed legion of Rome were to pass through neutral Armenia and enter Parthia, no other result but war could occur.

Peaceful ambassadors do not need armies to guard them in their travels.

So other sinister messages were secretly carried. Speculators in futures locked their warehouses. Bales of silk lay as idle in the godowns of the East as amphorae of wine did in the harbor warehouses of the Mediterranean.

Now, while assassins were sharpening their daggers and kings and queens had sleepless nights and generals were developing battle plans, the Thirteenth Legion, the Emperor's Own, unaware of its destiny, but fully equipped, had already left Spain and was on its way to Rome.

When the orders came to Commander Manlius Varro that the Eighth Augusta, was being sent in to replace the Thirteenth in garrison, he had been dining alone in the pleasant garden of his ancestral villa in Baetica.

He was a tall man, muscular and spare of body. Past middle age, his black hair, though somewhat thinned by long years of helmet wearing, was only slightly silvered. He had never pampered his body and the lines of chin and throat were taut and fine.

Bees were busy in the flowers, competing with the flashing hummingbirds for the honey treasure. A fountain plashed discreetly, its liquid music no distraction to his thoughts.

Hector, his Greek major-domo, stood just inside the arcade and studied him as he read, his quick sharp glance following the lines of his book, while his strong, sword-calloused fingers peeled and sliced a golden quince.

These two were more than master and slave. They held a certain companionship which had little to do with custom or class. The Greek saw little laugh lines crinkle around the corners of thin lips. He smiled in sympathy. The craggy face of Manlius was not often in such complete repose. It was a happy moment.

Manlius ate, daintily as an epicure, savoring each tiny bite of

the dripping fruit. He lifted morsels with the little silver knife he was using. The sun was warm on his back. The wind was softened to a jasmine-perfumed breeze by the high walls of the garden. His heart was at peace and all seemed well with his particular world.

Hector coughed discreetly. Manlius finished the line he was scanning and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Master, the Quaestor Agrippa from Gades seeks your company."

"Well, admit him at once. Don't keep him standing at the door. What are you waiting for? Show him in."

Then, as Hector turned, "Bring wine. Falernian—the oldest. You know his taste."

Manlius dipped his fingers in rose water, dried them on a linen napkin, unhurriedly rolled up the scroll and tied the strings in a precise knot. He delicately dabbed at his lips, rose from his chair, and turned to welcome his visitor at the exact instant the financial officer of the city of Gades appeared in the garden.

As he moved to greet his guest, the naturally harsh lines of his face were softened by a smile. Quintus Agrippa and Manlius Varro were friends of long standing, although the duties of military and civilian administration in the provinces rendered such visits seldom possible.

Hispania, though long pacified, was still an occupied country and there was unrest, however deeply buried it might be. Officials in high places were not often able to ignore the duties of their posts long enough to maintain a social round, provided that they held, as these two did, a single-minded devotion to furthering the interests of the Empire. For this reason the meeting was doubly pleasurable to both.

Quintus was also of stern aspect. He knew little of softness in judgments, but his appreciation of beauty was well developed. He looked around him now with a sense of homecoming and familiarity.

"Delightful quarters. How fortunate you were to have been stationed so close to your ancestral estates."

"Most fortunate," Manlius agreed. "Without your help and your high connections, it might have been much more difficult."

"Merely a matter of knowing the right people and a little about them. Everyone has something to hide."

"I also?" Manlius smiled. Quintus gave him a keen look.

"If so, you have hidden it well. If not, you are an unusual exception." His answering smile was slight and one-sided only.

Quintus met the world with a cynical, questioning attitude. Years of political double-dealing, vote and position purchasing had raised the quaestor to his present point of eminence. He considered idealism a sham, and a mask for hypocrisy. Yet his own face, plump with years of good feeding and as ruddy as the wines he so relished, was no such mask. Manlius knew that an inner wistfulness lay behind it. As he himself strove to see and recognize the goodness in humanity, so also did Quintus. It was partly for this reason that the two were close friends.

The only difference, in that respect, was that Quintus saw little, acknowledged even less, and Manlius saw much and guessed at more.

His own loneliness and heartache at the loss of his wife through death and his beloved son through estrangement had been assuaged only by the stern necessities of duty and the pleasant surroundings of his much-loved home. Now he asked no more than that of life. He seldom permitted himself to dwell upon these painful subjects. The manifold nuances of life, love, and loneliness he had thrust deeply into his subconscious, but they did surface against his desires—and nights were long. He submerged them now, by a strong act of will.

It was obvious that Quintus was worried. Manlius wondered, but he did not inquire the cause. Whatever disturbed his friend would be unfolded in its own good time.

Instead he gestured toward the rose arbor where a flagon of wine and paper-thin goblets had been placed. As they sat down a slave brought a basket of small cakes and another followed with a bowl of fruit.

Eying the fair hair of one and the dark, floating tresses of her companion and examining, with the air of a connoisseur, the lovely faces and figures of both, Quintus noticed that his bold stare brought a faint flush to the cheek of the blonde.

Neither did he fail to observe that he received an answering glance from the other girl. It was deferential. It was also inviting

and, for an instant, was equally as bold as his own. He felt encouraged. This long, tiring journey might have unsuspected rewards.

The pair curtsied to master and guest and departed. Quintus watched them out of sight. There was little to choose between them, he thought, but there was the possibility of committing a social error.

He poured out the libation upon the tessellated walk, savored the bouquet with anticipation, and sipped the remainder of his wine. He accepted a proffered honey cake. The hum of the bees was soporific. Existence here was placid and the country was at peace. The life of a military governor seemed less wearing than his own. He envied Manlius and regretted again the news he brought.

"You do yourself well here. Which one warms your bed?"

Manlius smiled. He shook his head in denial. "Always the same question. Always the same answer, old friend, as at the other times. You know I have small interest in women, since the light of my life departed from my house. Besides, I have no time for them, had I the inclination. I am not always as idle as you see me today."

"You sicken me. How can you live half a life and that half but the lesser part? Eunice—that slim, quiet lady—was an understanding woman. She would be the first to tell you, 'Accept the gracious gifts the gods bestow!' Granting, of course, that there are any gods, which you believe and I do not.

"Do you think that you will live forever and can take what pleasures you will at your own convenience?" He smiled wryly. "Who knows when your thread or mine will be cut? It may be shorter than we think."

"Ah, Quintus, leave off this old tired argument. Do not continually try to tempt me into your way of life. If I had had a daughter instead of a son—not that I would ever have introduced her to you, you aging satyr!" Manlius hastily added. "Or if, even now, I could see in some lovely face—but, no, there was only one Eunice, there will never be another—I would, perhaps, count the days more precious than I do.

"But I have no daughter, nor will I ever have, for I want no other wife, nor have I your insatiable appetite for dalliance. We

can surely enjoy the quiet of this hour in contemplation of less transitory beauties."

He touched the surface of the fruit bowl with the tips of his fingers.

"Now just look at this, for instance. Out of Tuscany. It is very old, but it has not been marred by time. It will still be admired when our bones—yes, and those lovely children's—will long since have turned to dust."

Quintus picked up the bowl and held it out over the stones of the mosaic.

"Consider how easily it can be destroyed; how abruptly your perfect moment can be ruined; how soon your content can be turned to sorrow. No, Manlius, you are wrong. Your own illustration proves my point. This very piece of art which gives you so much pleasure was created only to be sold.

"Happiness can be bought, if only for a moment. The man who says it can't and refuses to profit by that moment as it passes is a fool. As foolish as you are, for I will not break the bowl you prize, but I have no choice than to shatter your placid way of life.

"You should have accepted what was at hand with gratitude to those gods in which you believe and I do not. Perhaps, if there are any, you have offended them. It may be that they are taking away the gifts you have ignored."

Manlius sipped his wine and waited for an explanation.

"My heart was burdened when I took the road here and you have not lightened it. I know how much all you see is part of you. Your lands, your villa, your authority; that one sacred plot of ground where stands the tomb of Eunice. Forgive me for renewing your pain. You know I loved her too.

"Because of the affection I bear you, I could not have sent a messenger today."

He set the bowl carefully on the table. Manlius waited. His face showed no change in his pensive expression.

Quintus turned the bowl and did not raise his eyes from the unmoving figures.

"The Thirteenth is to be replaced in garrison by my old legion, the Eighth, which is now disembarking at Gades. Upon its arrival here, which should be within two or three days, you are



hereby ordered to have your command in immediate readiness to march. The Thirteenth is being recalled to Rome where it, and you, will be sent upon foreign duty. Here are your marching orders."

He drew out a scroll from the folds of his tunic and cast it on the table.

Manlius broke the seals, unrolled it, and scanned it without emotion. After a moment he said, "Come, Quintus, your goblet is empty. Drown your own troubles in old Falernian.

"You have brought me no new ones. I do believe what we have is only lent for a little while. When the gods take it away, we have lost nothing. It was never really ours."

"You have expressed that view before."

"And I still maintain it."

They sat for a long quiet moment, looking out over the flowers, beyond the fountain, across the valley plain at the blue foothills of the Sierra Nevada. It was a beautiful day. The sunlight gleamed on the farther peaks, gilding the tinted snow.

A man below was plowing with oxen. His encouraging cries came faintly up to the watchers as he applied the goad to the beasts. They plodded on without haste, leaning into the yoke as though time were of no importance and the plowman no more than an annoying gadfly.

There were workers in the valley fields and in the vineyards on the slopes, both near and far. Everything was green, for that year the rain had come at the proper season and in sufficient quantity. The Baetis flowed full in its banks.

The ground steamed in the new furrows and a few birds circled, following the plowman, peering down from above, looking for the uncovered grubs to feed their young.

No one seemed to be working with a sense of urgency or fear, though Quintus Agrippa noticed that many of the laborers were slaves. Here and there an overseer sat in the shade. He could not see that any of these had whips at their sides.

Apparently the hand of authority in this district was light. It appeared to be a pleasant, well-kept land.

The only jarring note in all the landscape was a maniple of legionaries, about sixty men, who were double-timing along the road in full marching equipment and with complete packs.

Quintus wondered what the next military governor would be like. Would the legionaries of the Eighth be kept under as tight control as they had been beneath the eye of Manlius Varro? He rather doubted the situation could be improved. He felt, with all his customary wry pessimism, that it would probably change for the worse.

Manlius, without turning to look at his guest, said pensively, "There was no other message?"

Quintus knew, without inquiring, what his host hoped to hear.

"None through me," he answered, and after a long pause: "You have not yet heard from your son?"

"Nothing directly. It seems that he still resents my letter. He thinks me unforgiving and arrogant. Perhaps I am. Yet, had I not written harshly, I should have been lax in my duty to him. Rigidity, strictness, are my greatest faults. A certain narrowness of mind has always been my curse."

"I know that." Quintus grinned. He slapped his friend on the shoulder. "We two make a single man, you and I. If we could take the best of each of us and meld it together, what a man that would be! But—who would want anything to do with the other one? Charon would throw him overboard. Cerberus would gag on him! Nay, better stay as we are."

"As for Andronicus—what can I say? The last I knew, he was well and whole. That is much for a gladiator. I hear he fights under the name of Ajax and is growing wealthy. I don't think it's known that he is your son." Manlius, who had moodily been studying his sandals, raised his head quickly.

"Frivolous women swoon over him. Crowds follow him in the city. A wine has been named after him. He seems invincible."

Manlius laughed. It was short and crisp. "Invincible? No man is invincible in the arena, nor have I heard of any gladiator who died rich or of old age. Honors vanish overnight and women turn on their rounded heels to follow another swaggerer and worship him on their backs. Ajax? An appropriate name, Quintus, but not a fortunate one. The first Ajax defied the lightning only once! How many more times for this one?"

Quintus had no answer. He picked up the book and looked at the ivory tablet dangling from the spindle.

"*De Re Militari*? This is your light reading for a pleasant af-

ternoon?" He unrolled it and read a few lines. "Annotated. By you? Who was the author?"

Manlius shrugged. "No one knows. It is a recent gift from Matho, my Master of Horse, a native Spaniard. He attributes it to Hannibal, for he is of Carthaginian descent and the book was a family heirloom."

"But the parchment is new. The text is Latin."

"A copy, of course. My actuarius transcribed it. He is a fine linguist. I could hardly deprive my officer of so valuable an original."

Quintus rapidly scanned another section, then retied the scroll and laid it down, shaking his head.

"I wish I had time to read it. Hannibal—*On the Art of War*, indeed! And corrected by Manlius Varro. This is priceless."

"A few random thoughts, no more. Even Hannibal made a few mistakes. Look it over tonight at your leisure."

The dark-haired slave girl passed along the arcade. She gave the quaestor a long, lingering look again. There was invitation in it. Quintus' gaze followed her.

The little byplay was not lost upon his host. "Unless you have other plans?"

"I admit my thoughts were not upon study. Forgive my inattention."

Manlius' glance was tolerant. He chuckled. It seemed to Quintus, as he made his excuses to withdraw, that there was more than mere understanding in the tone. He wondered. Regret, perhaps? Envy? Vows are made to be broken, he thought. What else adds spice to life?

He followed perfume into a corridor soon to be shadowed by the night.

Shadows had already fallen on the Fabrician Bridge in far away Rome, where a boy and girl stood looking down into the sullen water. They had not spoken for some little time. Now Tibullus surreptitiously put his hand inside his tunic and brought out a rose. With a quick, careful movement he slipped it into Lilia's thick hair, just above the ear.

Startled, she raised her hand toward it. Tibullus kissed the small palm and closed the fingers down.

"Keep that for me. Never lose it, amica.

*"Ah, my lady—fairest of the fair—  
Let this flower grace your lovely hair  
And all your life may you sweetly be  
A precious theme for poesy!"*

"Oh, Tibullus! Is that a new one? Did you write it for me?" Her face became animated. She nestled into his arms. Her voice was muffled against his chest. "You can be so dear—so aggravating—so—demanding. Tibullus, I can't. I just can't!"

"It is the only way."

"It can't be. There must be another way."

"You love children. Think how we would both love ours. Parents! Money! I hate both. This would solve everything. My father despises me because I am a poet. He wanted a soldier for a son.

"'To uphold the honor of the family!' he said. I think he would have cast me out if it were not for grandfather. The honor of the family!"

His voice was bitter and harsh. Lilia clung to him, comforting him, kissing him with tear-wet lips. Her words came out with a rush.

"To be a poet is honorable. Be a poet—a great poet. Write a wonderful poem. Many poems! You will be recognized. Money will come to you. Then your father will be proud of you and my father will no longer forbid you the house. He will welcome you—he will invite you.

"'Tibullus, the famous poet,' he will say. 'My daughter's husband. A credit to his family—an addition to mine.' Isn't that worth working for—waiting for? Oh, Tibullus! I can't be a bridge girl—I won't!" She began to cry, softly.

"You may be expecting more of me than I can do. I love you—I need you—I want you. I want you now, Lilia, not in twenty years, or maybe never. How can I write with my thoughts in turmoil?"

"I could do splendid things, if I only had the time. You know it is the only way. Your father could not prevent our marriage then. He would give us money. Maybe a house. Lilia, we could even have slaves! I wouldn't have to work. Oh, Lilia, please?"

She shook her head, slowly, dumbly, looking at him with tragic eyes.

He put his arm tenderly around her. Their heads touched. His lips stirred her hair.

"Come. We must both go home. It is beginning to rain."

Without speaking, they walked thus close, over the bridge, across the Aemilian, for the two were built in tandem, and so back toward the Palatine Hill.

A few late strollers like themselves were lingering among the closing stalls in the market and a poor freedman, who made a scanty living as a water carrier, had stopped there to admire the tunics that were being taken down.

The quality of the tunics displayed was of the cheapest, but they were whole and clean and his was neither. The border of one he especially longed for was just a shade off the royal purple. He stood and stared and fingered the three *as* in his pouch.

The stallkeeper frowned at him. "Domitius, constantly you come here. You stand in the way of customers. Buy something or get out."

"I am a poor man, sir. It costs nothing to look."

"It does here. Go away. Get out so someone else can look. You— Sir? Something beautiful for your lady? Very fine. Only the best."

Domitius glanced once more at the new tunic, sighed, eased the yoke on his shoulders, and moved on.

"Water! Fresh, cool water. Just drawn from the fountain. Who will buy my water? Drink from a cup once kissed by Aphrodite. Water, lady? It will make you even lovelier than you are!"

His cry faded away. The couple walked on as the market closed. The voice of Tibullus was grim. "You see what the lack of money does? That could be me. It may be me. Lilia, is that what you want?"

She did not answer. Her fingers dug into his arm. Slow tears welled. Light rain fell as though in sympathy.

## THE DESIGN TAKES SHAPE

By the time the Eighth Legion arrived in Baetica, weary but jaunty, the Thirteenth was fully prepared to move out. The newcomers were pleased at the prospect of exchanging active frontier service in the dismal German forests for the relatively luxurious garrison duty in the pleasant and peaceful country of Hither Hispania.

Those who were being replaced, with a few exceptions, were looking forward to the possibility of action. There might be some delightful looting. There would certainly be complaisant girls of a different color. Maybe a chance for rapid advancement and increased pay for foreign service.

Each of the ten cohorts, from officers down, considered themselves to be the fortunate ones and their opposite numbers to be the unluckiest of men. However, it was noted by many in the Thirteenth, drawn up in full marching order to receive their replacements formally, that the looks they received from the incoming Eighth seemed unusually commiserating as they passed.

Here and there, men who knew one another cast a sidelong word through the corners of their mouths.

"Ho, Flavius! Got your funeral dues paid up?"

"Ah, Cestius, well met. What a shame to get that nice shiny helmet nicked!"

"Kiss a Parthian girl for me, Vipsanius, but don't do it in the dark unless you take her dagger first."

As this went on, some of the high spirits in the Thirteenth noticeably subsided. The formalities of the exchange of command continued under the hot sun.

Side by side, each with his own personal honor guard, the two commanders marched to the sacellum of the fort. Here, from this stout stone building, was removed the altar of the Thirteenth, in-

stantly to be replaced by that of the Eighth. When the new one was fixed and centered properly, the pay chests were exchanged and the treasure of the Thirteenth placed in the space reserved for it in its heavily guarded wagon.

The plowshare which had originally marked out the dimensions and boundaries of the fort remained in the safety of the sacellum, for this relic was the property and the luck of the establishment.

Later, after dismissal, the golden Eagle of the Eighth would be placed in this treasure house. The hallowed emblem of the Thirteenth was already gleaming at the head of the waiting column, in the hands of the aquilifer, the standard-bearer, who stood ready to raise it at the signal to march.

It was a long tedious ritual. The quadrangle, overcrowded with two full legions standing at attention, steamed and stank of sweat. There was little breeze. When the banner of the Thirteenth finally went down and was furled into its tube, that of the Eighth rose to hang limply on the staff and take its salute. This was a relief to all.

The commanders faced each other for a parting formal salutation; the band of the Eighth struck up its traditional marching tune, honored by long custom, with accompanying verses of song familiar only to the members of that legion: the Thirteenth, the Emperor's Own, moved out stiffly and proudly to the tuck of a single drum, beating a rapid quickstep.

When the long column was completely clear of the fort and launched upon its journey to the waiting ships at the harbor of Gades, it too began to sing its own gay marching song:

*"Oh, trumpets were a-blowing  
When I marched away  
To leave my wife and sell my life  
For a denarius a day."*

Quaestor Quintus Agrippa did not leave with the Thirteenth, although his mules were ready and harnessed to his van. Instead he went into the office of the new commander and remained closeted with him for some time. He too had heard some of the comments of the incoming soldiers.

When he came out he looked sober. The commander of the

Eighth walked to the van with him. Quintus held the reins, looking down.

Commander Marius said, "Remember, this is entirely rumor. Officially, I know nothing. All I have heard has come up through the ranks. It may or may not be truth. Unofficially, I would not give a sesterce for the life of your friend or for that of any man in the Thirteenth Legion."

"I thank you, Commander. I must think about this. Vale."

He clucked to his mules and the rheda rattled away in the wake of the departed column.

The port of Ostia, twelve miles from the city of Rome, was a frantic bedlam when the Spanish transports carrying the Thirteenth Legion hove into sight. A corn fleet from Alexandria had arrived the night before. It was being unloaded at top speed by gangs of perspiring slaves and longshoremen, who shared impartial whip strokes while being driven to a state beyond exhaustion by their cursing overseers.

The harbor master came out to the flagship of the convoy. He was in a condition bordering upon panic. "Immediate disembarkment? Impossible! Completely impossible, Commander. I will do the best I can, but we have almost no available pier space. Some of the wheat is damp and already sprouting. There have been riots in the city this past month, because of short allotments of the dole. I have strict orders that these ships have priority. Otherwise, they would have been unladen at Puteoli. I don't care what your orders are, Commander Varro! They are superseded by mine—direct from the Emperor himself. If I disobey them, it means crucifixion. As a military man, you must realize my position.

"All the wharves on the west bank are closed, because of dredging operations. The whole harbor is silted up again. I can give you two piers and no more, for your horses and heavy stuff. Get them off first. When your ships are empty, leave them tied up. The Fifteenth is waiting here in barracks to ship out for Egypt.

"Yes, of course, some will go in the corn ships. Your fleet will go out as convoy—pirates are raiding again.

"Two ships at a time. If your men want to disembark any



other way, they'll have to swim or wait their turn. Seasick? To Hades with them! They can't be any sicker than I am."

With all the contempt of the civil servant for the military, he turned his back without ceremony, descended into his little boat, and was rowed ashore. As the transports anchored, his shouted curses could be heard above the rattle of the chains.

While the complicated transshipment of the two legions was taking place—a little more speedily as time went on and corn ships became empty and available for baggage, wagons, and supplies—the Parthian ambassadors were finishing their long diplomatic conferences with Caesar.

When transference was completed, the Thirteenth situated in barracks at Ostia and the Fifteenth established on board the fleet, two full days had passed.

Although a courier had gone up to Rome with the information that the Thirteenth had arrived and was being delayed, its original orders remained the same.

When the legion was fully disembarked, it should march to Rome, occupy barracks at the Campus Martius outside the city, and await instructions. On arrival, Commander Manlius Varro was to present himself at the imperial palace without further delay.

Coincidentally with the arrival of the courier, Gaius Caesar Caligula called a final special session in his private chambers with the Parthian embassy.

The negotiations had been long, involved, and tedious and the agreements not completely satisfactory to either side. The situation was now stalemate.

The minor matter of exchanging hostages had been speedily settled. The subject of the partition of Armenia had taken little longer. Although the actual boundary line was still in dispute, for no natural equal median existed within that little buffer state between the two mighty powers, it could be settled later by mutual agreement.

Neither was the signing of a peace treaty any great obstacle. These cynical diplomats regarded it as no more than another shaky armistice in a war which had already gone on for over a hundred years. It was destined to continue for an even longer period.

The prime issue of dispute was as Caligula had suspected it would be. It had been argued before him, by the Emperor Tiberius and by Caesar Augustus.

The subject was twofold, the first section in two clauses—the return of the eagles lost by Crassus at the battle of Carrhae and the repatriation of the descendants of any survivors of that massive and shameful defeat inside the boundaries of Parthia.

The interrupted silk trade with Serica had not yet been discussed. However, both sides knew that its resumption was the main reason for this meeting of minds.

Ambassador Beremes glanced at his colleague. The tiniest flick of an uplifted eyebrow was sufficient to answer the unspoken question. He said, smoothly:

“The mighty King of Kings, Artabanus, third of that august name, blessed by the Light of Heaven, Most Valiant Defender of the Navel of Asia, desires only an immediate and lasting settlement of all our differences.

“He fears neither internal dissension nor invasion from without. His iron hand is strong enough to crush both. Should either rash event occur, the destruction of such a plot, however well planned or treacherously devised, would shake the land and awe the world for a thousand years.”

Ambassador Melites did not add to this but stared directly into the eyes of Caligula. His thin lips writhed with scorn he did not try to hide, knowing their position to be sacrosanct under the recognized terms of privileged embassies.

“We demand,” Beremes went on, “an immediate release of King Mithridates of Armenia, whom you tempted to visit Rome and treacherously imprisoned. Our lord will consider his reseating upon his throne an evidence of good faith. Parthia will move at once to exterminate the outlaws of the Pamirs and again act as middleman between Rome and Serica in the resumption of our mutually lucrative silk trade.”

Caligula was seething. With an immense effort, he forbore to shout in fury his savage understanding of this arrogant ultimatum. Praetorian Praefect Macro realized that the Emperor’s tight calm was no more than a pose. Caligula’s right hand was clenched upon the official ivory baton he held. He was dressed as a field commander. This was the garb he preferred to wear when

receiving foreign dignitaries, yet this symbol of Roman power obviously failed to impress these magnificently appareled envoys of an upstart dynasty.

Artabanus III, of the high-sounding titles, was only one more bubble hurled high on the continuing froth of Parthian civil war. Caligula had long since dismissed him as unimportant. By the time these ambassadors returned, their aged ruler might already be deposed and one of his sons be elevated to the throne.

Nevertheless, Macro saw, to his amazement, that Caligula's face remained impassive. He admired Caesar's self-control but prayed that he might not be obliged to remain to face alone that volcanic and hysterical anger which would inevitably erupt after the departure of the Parthians.

The baton quivered in Caligula's hand. He breathed heavily.

"I had already considered the return of Mithridates and will gladly permit it at the proper time. He has been notably discontented in his stay with us. Owing to his unavoidable detention here, which, because of his obdurate refusal to co-operate with us, he brought upon himself, he will undoubtedly maintain a permanent resentment toward Rome.

"Therefore, I must insist that he be recognized only as ruler of the half of Armenia to which Parthia may now lay claim. Hither Armenia must in future be administered by a scion of some native house which will be favorable toward Roman interests. Decisions affecting this section of the country will, of course, be subject to countermanding by our legate, who will be passing through, not as a military governor, but in the capacity of adviser."

The two ambassadors looked at each other but they were not particularly dismayed. This was an unexpected situation but no great obstacle. Civil war between the quarrelsome rival states in the western half of Armenia, which would now come under the authority of Rome, would be inevitable. They knew of two young princes who would struggle for power. Surely one of them might have leanings toward Parthia and a desire for reunion with the East.

Should the legate decide to remain and prove difficult to either faction of the partitioned country, there were skillful assassins to be bought cheaply at any time. And if he was *not* to remain—

what secret orders had he already been given and whither was he bound? Very likely also a matter for an assassin.

Melites nodded at Beremes. Both bowed to Caesar. "It is thus agreed," said Beremes. "The pact is concluded."

Caligula relaxed. The first phase of the plan was satisfactory. He called for wine and for his secretary. The contract was haggled over, point by point, but all knew that these were mere formalities. When signatures were finally affixed and seals in place, the day was far advanced. All were weary.

Caligula rose, signifying that the audience was at an end.

"We shall meet here tomorrow at midday. I am advised that the man whom I shall send as legate to Armenia has already arrived in Ostia from Spain. I invite you to go with me tomorrow, outside the city, to watch him bring his legion in. If you have not yet had the pleasure of observing a fighting legion of Rome, the scene should prove interesting—and perhaps educational."

The two ambassadors bowed low and politely. Walking backward and never removing their gaze from the throne, they left the chamber.

After the ambassadors had departed Macro went to a side door and, without speaking, jerked his thumb at the two guards who were waiting in a small antechamber. They brought in a chained prisoner. Caligula glared at him.

"Do you know who I am, pirate?"

He folded his arms and looked back at Caligula with scorn. He was a slim brown man who bore the marks of beatings but had somehow kept his pointed beard trimmed and his shoulder-length hair neatly braided into a stiff tail.

Heavy muscles bunched out, despite a long incarceration. The light of day hurt his eyes, but he gave no sign of it as he stared back, uncowed.

It was the Emperor's steady gaze which first flickered and dropped. It was not until then that the prisoner spoke.

"Yes, Roman, I know who and what you are. You are a murderer who calls himself a god! You are a representative of an upstart race which rules the world through fear—which permits no man to call himself free; no woman to retain her honor; no king to keep his throne—except on your terms."

A guard struck him a vicious blow across the mouth. Caligula raised his jeweled hand and the second blow did not fall.

"Would you like to be free?"

"I am Vorco, a Volscian. I am free. It is only my body you hold."

"An Etruscan! Your tribes were defeated and enslaved centuries ago. You still have the audacity to take up arms against Rome? Incredible!"

"While one Etruscan lives and remembers that he is descended from the ancient lords of Italy, he will remember that you are thieves. You dare to call me pirate? Upstart! My fathers were kings before yours crawled out of the swamps!"

"Guards, leave us. You lictors also. Stay, Praefect."

When the others had gone and the door was closed, Caligula said, "You shall have your liberty, a swift Liburnian to take you to your home grounds in the Adriatic. You may even command there again."

Vorco started. Caligula smiled with understanding. "You thought I do not know your rank? Because you were taken in metal without emblems? Hardly. Many knew your face. You were saved for a particular purpose when the others were crucified. You will be released for a purpose. The time of the purpose has arrived."

"What is the purpose?"

"I wish the death of a certain man."

"Then kill him yourself. I am no assassin!"

"You will kill him in battle, if you agree."

Vorco looked at him. It was a long, considering stare. "We have a saying among the Brotherhood. 'Trust a hyena, a viper, or a shark—never trust a Roman!' Why should I trust you?"

"For the chance to get away."

The pirate laughed, unpleasantly. "And what are my chances really? But you have a point. Make it plain. Who is this man whose life irks you? A Macedonian prince? An Egyptian noble? Perhaps you have a brother?"

The last shot struck home, but Caligula gave no sign of it. His tone was even as he replied, "You are a commander of a fleet. He is the commander of a legion. Thus you are equally met in rank. You may equally meet in that sea which you know best."

"In a few days a fleet of transports will leave Brundisium for Dyrrachium. The flagship will carry this man. You will destroy this one ship at all costs, whether or not any other is taken or attacked. You will be notified of the date of sailing, by the Resident in Dyrrachium."

Vorco studied him.

"This man? A Greek? Who is he?"

"His name is Varro. You will know him as legion commander by his insignia. He is a Roman Spaniard."

"A Roman! All I have ever wanted to do in my life is to kill Romans! Undo the chains. I only regret that it is not to be you."

Caligula struck the small gong at his side. The pirate was led out and Macro was about to follow when Caesar said, in a small tight voice, "Remove his chains. Make sure he travels in all haste to join with his brother scum.

"When this is over I want him back alive. There are many ways to die and he shall know them all." There were flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth.

Macro hesitated. "Divinity, are you ill? Shall I remain?"

Caligula exploded at last. "Leave me!" he shrieked. "Get out, you fool. Father Jupiter, am I surrounded with idiots?"

He flung the mallet at the praefect's head as Macro hurriedly closed the door. The gong crashed against it and an alabaster vase flew into shards upon the tortoise-shell paneling.

Alone in the chamber, Caligula gave full vent to his fury. He screamed like a thwarted child. He beat upon the arms of the throne until his hands were bruised. He frothed. His eyes rolled upward in his head until only the bloodshot whites were visible.

His fingers, clenched and cramped into claws, raked at his bleeding cheeks and tore at the golden necklace as though he was choking. The jeweled wreath he wore flew into a corner.

Suddenly he became rigid and fell. His feet drummed on the floor. His body twitched in epileptic convulsions.

The physician, hastily summoned by Macro, who well knew what to expect, rushed in. He was followed by slaves who picked up the Emperor and carried him out. As a plug of soft wood was thrust between the gnashing teeth he was heard to say—before his temporary insanity completely claimed him, "The second

step!" Only the praefect, of all those around him, knew the meaning of those words.

That night, while the mad ruler of the Roman world lay pale and weak in his bed; while Vorco, the Etruscan pirate, was being hurled by fast post horses across Italy to friends who would speed him out to the islands in the Adriatic which sheltered the pirate fleet; while the night traffic roared in the streets and insomniacs cursed the noise, the Thirteenth Legion, fully transferred from their ships, lay sleeping in the barracks at Ostia.

Briefly, the Fates paused. The busy shuttles slowed in their flashing through the Web of Life. Lachesis laid down her shears.

"Rest, sisters. Soon there will be too much for us to do."

## THE LOST LEGION

*Form on the standard!  
Quick to the standard!  
Hasten! Hasten! Hasten!  
To the standard!*

Harsh, peremptory, commanding, the brazen trumpets sounded assembly. Whistles blew. Already, the men had eaten. Now the column of march took form.

Company pennons popped and snapped in the morning wind which came in chill from the harbor. The standards for each of the ten cohorts fluttered bravely overhead as they were raised. The golden Eagle, on its long staff, gleamed in the first rays of the sun.

Commander Manlius Varro ran his eye along the perfect alignment of the rankers. All seemed in readiness. He nodded to Tribune Mancinus, his personal aide and second in command. The tribune wheeled and barked, "Forward, march! Trumpeter—sound!"

Again the echoes stuttered along the almost empty streets of Ostia. A few dogs barked. Some longshoremen stopped to look on as the hobnailed boots of six thousand men struck the cobbles as one. A drum took up the beat. Whips cracked and the mules of the baggage train surged into their collars.

Centurions sent orders cracking down the line. "Vipsanius, slope that lance. Valerius Rufus, get in step! One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four! Hup! Hup! Hup!"

"Close up that gap, second maniple! Pick it up—smartly now! Hup! Hup!"

The longshoremen resumed their journey to the docks, scarcely bothering to look back. They had seen it all before, far



too many times to find it interesting. It was only one more legion, moving in, on one of the many roads which led to Rome.

Assuming that his command would be granted the usual ten-day rest period before orders were issued for whatever duty was planned, Manlius granted a three-day leave to a tenth of the force. Tribunes relayed the permission down through the ranks, by way of the chief centurion, Primus Pilus, to senior centurions, junior centurions, subcommanders of maniples, decurions, and quadranions.

When the booted ones finally received the good news and the lucky among them their passes, a veritable fury of boot and bronze polishing stormed through the barracks. Finery was brought out or borrowed, trinkets to please feminine hearts were dug up from the bottom of pouches, where they had been long stored away for just such a moment. Addresses exchanged . . .

"Cypassis Enita? That she-wolf? She'll drink you under the bench, steal what you've got left, and walk a straight line out the back door after and lead your best friend to her bed. Now I know a nice little taberna down by the Cestius Bridge—" "How about the bridge girls?"

"Those girls they call dice, because they pass from hand to hand under the arches? Stay away from them, boy. I'd want to be drunk first. Better look for a stroller or a street sweeper."

"Cinara! That's the one for me! Smells like roses—every tooth perfect—smiles all the time and when she talks it's like singing. Just nice, Cinara. Thought about her for five years."

"So I said to the eunuch that runs the place—decent fellow he is, too—even give you credit for a day or so, if he likes you—I said, 'What's that pinkish color that all your girls have daubed on their cheeks?'

"He says, 'That, sir, is the hue known as the Thigh of an Agitated Nymph.'

"How do they know?' says I . . . "anyway, it's got *me* agitated!"

So they went forth in their various directions, to the inns along the Tiber. A few set out on journeys which would take them far from the city to their distant homes and aged parents, to wives

and children who had almost forgotten them, to sweethearts whom they might find married to other men.

Just before evening darkened the narrow streets Manlius, in full dress armor, mounted a hired town chariot and with an honor guard of his Spanish cavalry entered the city on his way to report the arrival of the legion.

All were without weapons, for within the pomerium, that halloved boundary of Rome, no loyal citizen might bear arms. Here no armed legion was permitted to march, except during a triumph or as a parade of the city cohorts which policed the streets and kept the peace.

Along the Flaminian Way the market carts, wains, and heavy wagons were just beginning to pour into the city. Everywhere, torches and corner cressets were being lighted for the rumbling night traffic.

The chariot and cavalcade moved slowly along with the press. As it diverged away from the market and warehouse section to near the Capitoline Hill, the streets became less choked. Here and on the Palatine lay the seat of government, the impressive temples, palaces of wealthy, ancient families and the more ornate ones of the newly rich.

Now that it was no longer necessary to use whips to clear a way through the struggling bedlam, the bawling curses of the troop leader subsided. The squadron and chariot clattered along in voice silence. There was only the sound of iron-shod hoofs and wheel rims, striking sparks from the pavement.

At length they drew up at the imperial palace, not huge, but a columned and domed structure chiefly of marble, its front beautifully dressed with ornamental glass set in stucco.

A winding tessellated pavement brought them to the entrance, where the bronze doors were opened by an obsequious slave who had obviously been awaiting the commander's arrival. Manlius entered, passing between two heroic statues—one of Caligula himself and one of the god Jupiter, with whom he claimed kinship.

He was quickly led through splendid rooms and tortuous corridors to a small, almost spartanly furnished chamber. The only furniture in this cell was a plain unpolished table with writing materials, a bowl of fruit, and a flagon of wine. Two stools, with-

out cushions or ornamentation, were set near the table and an earthenware cup was at each place.

The only evidence that this was not a room in an army barracks lay in the quality of the wood. It was a rich plum color, such as Manlius had never seen before, and the surface was of a fine grain, almost invisible.

As he was inspecting the table he heard a quick step in the corridor. The hangings were flung aside and he raised his eyes to behold the entrance of the ruler of the Roman world.

Manlius bowed. His observant eyes saw a slightly built, dark-haired, handsome man, little more than a youth. The reports of Caligula's dissipations seemed belied by his appearance.

He was simply dressed in a toga of white linen, its only regal embellishment an inch-wide border of imperial purple. There were no sagging pouches under the sharp eyes which inspected Manlius with a nervous, almost febrile, darting glance that flicked over every inch of him in a second. Manlius felt himself being as mentally catalogued as he knew he was also estimating his ruler.

Caesar might be erratic in mood and impulsive in emotion, but he certainly possessed an incisive judgment of an opponent. Manlius immediately felt himself to be an opponent, without having more than a suspicion of a reason why he should be considered so. If Caligula also had this hidden thought, it was not evident.

Manlius saluted, instead of bowing, which seemed to please Caesar. "Excellency, I am happy to report that our journey was uneventful. The men are in good health and spirit and we await further orders."

"Please be seated, Commander. Take some refreshment. The wine is Pramnian—your favorite, I understand."

"Caesar would appear to be well informed." He poured out a small amount for himself, as Caligula politely refused the first proffering of the flagon, then filled the Emperor's cup.

Caligula wet his lips and set down the wine. "A commander must always make himself aware of not only the needs but also the preferences of his command. It can be a pleasure to do so, as well as a duty. I envy you, Varro. I would rather be a field commander, such as you, than be a magistrate, a senator, or a Caesar. I feel at home in this little room. It is like having a drink of

cool spring water after being surfeited and sickened with hot, spiced wine. But you greeted me as Excellency, Commander, instead of Divinity. Do you doubt that I am a god?"

Caligula's glance was sharp and piercing. His voice was infinitesimally edged. Manlius framed his answer carefully, without hesitating.

"According to my early teacher of philosophy, Philo the Stoic, all men live and have being through the breath of God, which therefore is preserved and perpetuated throughout life. It thus renders themselves godlike—unless they deliberately pervert that divine essence. Only you, Caesar, can know in your most secret self whether or not you maintain that essence in its original purity. I would not have the temerity to express an opinion upon such a private quality."

Caligula chuckled. "I was advised that you are an excellent soldier. I see now that you are also an experienced diplomat. Commander, I believe I have a mission for just such a man as yourself."

His delicately strong fingers lifted the flagon. He filled Manlius' cup to the brim. "Drink, Commander. A legionary's draft. Let the bottom of the cup be dry. I think that we are men who can speak honestly with each other as equals. Few of us can in these decadent days.

"I have too many sycophants who scrape and fawn. I do not think I have many friends. I need a loyal friend. One who can obey an order unquestioningly, even under severe circumstances and perhaps contumely, if it be necessary to further the cause of Empire.

"He must be able to keep a secret, to accept a duty without swerving from it or holding mental reservations. He must be one whose integrity will not permit him to disavow a pledge. His mission must be accomplished—if necessary, to the very point of death. The honor of Rome is in the balance.

"Commander Manlius Varro, have I described you? Drink your wine before you answer."

Apparently, Manlius had a choice. Actually, he knew that he had none. One does not refuse a ruler of supreme power, who also considers himself to be a god. However, it was not through fear that he answered Caligula as he did.

In Manlius' heart and soul Caesar stood no higher than the humblest slave. Rome was all. It was not to Caesar that he made his promise and pledged his honorable vow. It was to Rome.

"Caesar, your request shall be my command. I accept it as my duty."

Caligula relaxed. His smile was warm and boyish. He again poured out wine in the manner of a host who entertains a friend.

"Then I can explain without reservations. Commander, you have no doubt studied military history. What can you tell me of the defeat and slaughter of Marcus Licinius Crassus' legions at the tragic and disgraceful battle of Carrhae?"

Manlius relaxed. This was his element. He leaned back, sipped his wine, and crossed his legs to gain an instant of time. His active mind worked swiftly. This was no idle question. But why? He answered with a slow choice of words.

"In my opinion, the entire campaign was a massive error in judgment. Parthia and Rome were at peace in the outset. True, this peace was little more than one of those uneasy armistices, such as exists just now, but negotiations were in progress for a permanent and satisfactory end to a long and exhausting war.

"As I understand the situation, Pompey had avoided antagonizing Parthia throughout the Armenian campaign. He had enough trouble there and with the King of Pontus, who wanted Pompey to arbitrate in his favor in an internecine complication.

"However, Crassus, with eleven legions, although some historians say seven, invaded Mesopotamia, which was then at peace. This was the second mistake, for the expedition was no more than a gigantic treasure hunt."

Caligula nodded in agreement. "Go on."

"Mesopotamia, by treaty, had been expressly recognized as being under Parthian suzerainty and no war had been declared. A Parthian embassy journeyed to Syria to meet with our ambassadors and protest against such faithlessness. As could be expected, at the same time the nation was making ready for war. The next spring Crassus drove deeper into the country and met the main force of the Parthians at Carrhae. The third mistake, for he offered battle after admitting to the young Parthian general, or surena, that this invasion was without the sanction of Rome and was, in effect, a private war of his own making."

Caligula grunted. "Crassus was a greedy fool. His legions were personally raised. They were not paid from the Empire's treasury and they followed Crassus for the promise of loot."

Manlius continued. "I agree. Because of this lack of patriotism, when the battle began to go against Crassus the legions lost heart and many surrendered. It was carried out most ineptly by Crassus and his subordinates.

"In fact, the whole campaign had so many mistakes that it is difficult to single out the most fatal of them. After all, what could be expected from looters? In the main, the fault was that of Crassus alone. I suppose we should not be too harsh in our evaluation. Both he and his son paid for it with their lives."

"There, I cannot condone his action. The loss to Rome in men and prestige was incalculable. We have not yet recovered from his damnable folly."

Manlius revolved the cup upon the surface of the table. "That is true. After the surrender it was found that twenty thousand Romans had lost their lives. Ten thousand more are known to have escaped through Armenia, into Syria, fighting their way out through the mountains with great courage and audacity. I have heard that the Parthians settled another ten thousand men as colonists in Antioch, the capital of Margiana, and never permitted their repatriation. All in all, if I may say so, a most disgusting and shameful page in our history!"

"You think you could have done better, then?"

"Hardly worse, Excellence."

Caligula studied him, resting chin on fist. His smile was disarmingly frank and open. "I believe you could. I trust that it may not be necessary for you to prove it. Still, you may be obliged to do so. This mission which you have accepted will possibly renew friction with Parthia.

"We are presently at peace. Armenia, that perennial bone of contention, is to be partitioned satisfactorily to both empires. Parthian ambassadors are now domiciled in the palace. Negotiations are going forward. We hope they will result in a permanent settlement of all our differences.

"Your journey will take you through Parthian territory, but you can choose your route at your own discretion. It must be made absolutely clear to these ambassadors that what you do

and where you go is entirely your own decision, without the bidding of myself or the expectation of any support from Rome—if you find yourself in trouble.

“Nothing can be done to help you, without renewing the war. If you fail and perish, you may never be avenged. If you succeed, Rome cannot give you the honor of a triumph or award your men foreign service chains. It must seem to Parthia that you come as did Crassus, at your own will and at your own expense.”

He unrolled a hanging map upon the wall and indicated Italy upon it.

“The only assistance which can be reasonably given you has been to arrange shipping for your legion’s transport. It is presently being assembled at Brundisium. You will embark there, cross the Adriatic, and disembark in Dyrrachium.

“From that point you will travel according to your best judgment, subject to any change of orders which may be transmitted through our local embassies. You will, of course, present yourself to these as you pass through our territories and colonies.

“I suggest that you plan to travel through Macedonia to Byzantium and thence into Armenia. Under conditions as known to us now, this would seem the safest route. Our Resident in Byzantium may have suggestions which, as he will be in close touch with local events, it will be wise to heed.

“If nothing interferes with our present plans, you will travel northeasterly through Armenia, avoiding confrontations should it be necessary to pass through the eastern sector of that country, by way of the Sea of Ravens, to the Caspian and easterly still through the very edge of Parthia, where you must be most circumspect to avoid trouble.

“Beyond this point, our maps do not go.”

He rolled up the map and took down another. “This is the best we can offer as a guide. It has been composed by such knowledge as has come to us in little gleanings. I am afraid that most of it is fancy, traveler’s tales, and imagination. We know that there are mountains, deserts, and rivers. Where to locate them, how to cross them, and what savage tribes may exist there, we do not know.”

Caligula placed a finger on the far edge of the map. “Here—

somewhere—at the very eastern edge of the world, lies the empire of Serica, whence comes our silk. It cannot be a very large country, for it is said to be entirely surrounded by a wall, like our own cities. Very likely this is a lie. We only know that silk is grown there, processed into cloth, and traded with us.

“We know that silk passes from hand to hand across Asia—some say the journey of the caravans takes two years to reach Parthia by camel, others say five. Everyone who handles it takes a profit. No wonder it is so valuable here. My wife, Caesonia, desires a silk dress. The Emperor of Rome cannot buy the material to have it made, for it is not available.

“Silk is a mystery. A mystery and a secret, jealously guarded by the Sericans. In fact, Serica means Land of Silk. We do not even know the name which the people who dwell there have for their own country, for this name comes also from the Parthians.

“Is silk shorn from an animal, like sheep or goats? Does it grow on a bush like cotton? Is it created from the filaments which anchor shellfish to rocks—like byssus?

“If anyone in the Middle East knows the answer, we of the West cannot find it out. Parthia has grown wealthy and prospered as middleman in the silk trade. Part of your mission will be to establish a new silk route which will by-pass Parthia. This is the least I hope you will be able to accomplish. You must reach Serica!

“Important as this is to our trade, it is not your primary interest. I commission you to a far greater effort. You are to search for, discover, and bring back for repatriation the descendants and the golden Eagle of the Lost Legion.”

Caligula viciously dug his finger into a blank space in the far eastern border of the vague map. “Somewhere here, according to a report which was smuggled to us in a bale of silk more than fifty years ago, is a Roman city. It was established by the legion which fought its way out of Parthia, after refusing to remain in Antioch and to remain prisoners for life as abused colonists.

“They went eastward, after Carrhae, over the border as that other one did northward into Armenia. They were given, or took, land at the edge of Serica; built this city and were given, or took, native women. They have never considered themselves anything but Romans, or at least they had not at the time of writing.



"Owing to these constant wars, we have never been able to contact them or they us. Now there is a chance. Once a Roman citizen, always a Roman! It may be that they possess and can bring with them the secret of silk, but for the honor of Rome they must return into the comforting shelter of the Empire's borders.

"Your historians are faulty, Commander. There were eight legions at Carrhae. We have the Eagles, in our archives, of those six which were slaughtered and the one which was brought back by the valiant legion which refused to surrender. To recover those seven standards has cost us much in blood and diplomacy. It must not be said that one is still lacking.

"This is the third part of your mission, Commander. If all else fails, bring or send back that Eagle!" Caligula slammed his fist down upon the table. The flagon and cups leaped and fell. The remaining wine ran over the floor among the scattered fruit.

Manlius said quietly, "Though our blood must be spilled like that red wine, the honor of Rome shall be redeemed. I accept the mission."

Caligula stared moodily at the wet, ruddy mosaic. His chest heaved. He wiped his forehead and a little fleck of foam from the corners of his mouth. With a great effort he became calm.

"Then, Commander Varro, I now declare you my Eastern legate to Serica. I regret deeply that the title must remain a private matter between us until you return in glory. Even more woeful for you is this: to receive the honor, you must be prepared to accept shame and personal disgrace at my hands, before the Parthian ambassadors. No word of our plans can be allowed to reach their ears, or the project's success will be invalidated.

"In one hour I shall receive you in the audience room. Ostensibly you will have been called there to be publicly reprimanded for mismanagement of your administration in Hither Hispania. Only you and I will know that this is deceit. Personally, I trust that you will understand, and fully believe, that these remarks of disparagement will be an inner torture to me.

"I have the greatest admiration and respect for your excellent past record, your splendid skills and broad knowledge. Your abil-

ity is obvious and the appearance of your highly trained and able men is most commendable.

"You must be prepared to march out at dawn, apparently to all, and to these Parthians in particular, under the cloud of reprimand and utmost disgrace. It is imperative that these Parthians see that the order of a Roman Emperor is obeyed immediately, without question of any kind."

Manlius was dismayed. "Excellency! At dawn? I doubt if I can gather my men in that short time. If I had been advised earlier . . . Many have been granted leave. They are scattered about the city. Some have even left for far places in the country. We expected the usual leave and it has been issued already."

"Ah, well." Caligula set down his cup. "Two hours after dawn, then. That should be sufficient. Even better, perhaps. The lazy Parthians should be up and about by then. They can watch you depart."

"If a few men are lacking, you have my permission to recruit whatever replacements you need to make up full strength, but no later, mind."

"Prepare then to accept public shame. I shall say, 'March out of my sight, Commander, and take your legion with you. March east, into oblivion, and let me see the last of you forever!' I expect you to do this!"

Manlius could not speak. He bowed. An instant later he was alone. The hangings swung together behind Caligula, leaving the mind of the commander in turmoil.

He sprang to his feet and paced the confines of the chamber. The plan, as outlined, was feasible. As outcasts, his beloved legion might be regarded as mercenaries who could accept commissions impossible to accredited soldiers of the Empire. They could succeed gloriously. They could also be slaughtered with impunity, unavenged by the power of Rome. He felt a cold chill at the thought. Is someone already walking on my grave?

He could not ignore the almost certain likelihood of failure. Death he had never feared, but he must come back with honor. The stigma of a lasting disgrace was a possibility he felt that he could not abide. Ah, Eunice! I know now that you left me at the right time!

His son! Manlius groaned. Since Andronicus had sold himself

to the gladiatorial school to pay off a gambling debt instead of continuing his education in ways suitable to his family traditions, there had been no communication between the two men. Manlius well understood the pride which had impelled the young man to do this, instead of asking for financial help. It was inherent—but to become Ajax! This he could not understand. This was deterioration of character.

If the name of Varro should be blotched in the records of the military, it must not be stained in the eyes of his son, or he would descend even further into vulgarity. Somehow Andronicus must be informed of the truth. And if Manlius was to march at dawn, somehow, too, he wished to find a way quietly to protect his son, even against his terrible ambitions, from the perils of the games—which so few survived.

If the young man might be offered some honor as glittering and conspicuous as that of a gladiator—something in which he could feel an equal pride and be able to shine in the eyes of the frivolous women who apparently had come to mean so much to him!

To what position, within the society of Rome, could such a man as Andronicus aspire? It must be something glamorous, exciting, lucrative, and with the possibility of advancement.

Manlius laughed. The sound against the stone walls of the room was hollow and strange to his ears. He had it! The Praetorian Guard. The crack troops of Caesar himself—the most elegantly outfitted unit in the Roman army, the most honored, most respected, most highly paid professional soldiers in the world.

The Caesars ruled only through the continued favor of the Praetorians. No young man could refuse the offer of such a coveted position. To rise through the ranks, to a post of Praetorian praefect, was well worth the giving up of a gladiatorial career. Deep within the thoughts of praefects was the knowledge that the men who created and upheld emperors owned the world.

They held within themselves the necessary qualifications to assume the throne of an emperor.

Manlius struck his fist into his open palm. Two strides took him to the door. He raised his hand to ring for the slave. He must get a message to his son! A bribe to the praefect!

The hangings opened as he reached them. The slave bowed.

"You are summoned to the audience room, Commander. Pray follow me."

Left behind them, a neglected and overlooked splash of wine gleamed beneath the table—as ruby red as a drop of blood.

Almost at that moment, far below the Palatine Hill, an unconscious, grizzled man, with the scars and deep tan that betokened long military service in the East, was dragged unceremoniously out of a waterfront tavern and flung into the alley behind it.

The burly proprietor looked down at him in contempt. "If he tries to get back in when he wakes up, club him again."

He weighed a thin purse in his meaty hand. "At least this will pay for the drinks. See if you can mend that broken table and mop up the wine. Bacchus, be good to me! Two smashed amphorae! Why didn't you kill him?"

"Say the word," grunted the giant Nubian slave, who acted as both pimp and bouncer. He tenderly manipulated his flattened nose, speaking thickly through his rapidly swelling lips. He gave the sprawled body a vicious kick.

"No, not here. Let the watch find him. They know what to do with brawlers."

The slave rapidly went through the man's clothing. He found only a cheap ring and a bronze foreign service insignia, good for a few sesterces at a secondhand weapon shop. These he pocketed as the proprietor had already turned away.

He turned over a bronze diploma in his fingers and puzzled out a few words on the pocket-sized certificate of discharge. One eye was almost closed and blood ran into it from a cut above, dripping down on the incised lettering.

"Centurion Longinus. Syrian service. Twenty-year veteran, eh? Well, you won't get a farm with this!"

He dropped the diploma into a nearby sewer opening and went back, limping, into the tavern.

## TWENTY CITIZENS OF ROME

There was no sleep for Manlius that night and little for the tribune who was acting provost. Immediately upon Manlius' return to the barracks, orders went forth. Out hastened the squads into the city, with truncheons and shields.

Into the taverns, turning the brothels upside down in the hunt, dodging pots and pans, they went on their thankless job. Their ears rang with screaming curses from viragoes who saw their well-heeled prey snatched from them. They took bruises, they urged, they commanded, and they gathered in those who were on leave.

Some, even thus early, had already made the alleys and lay unconscious, stripped and robbed. The long-practiced legionary police cuffed them back to consciousness and continued to hunt down other quarry throughout the less fragrant quarters of the noisy metropolis. Into strange doors they poked their wary, authoritative way to find their resentful friends and comrades. Along the river front, into the slums of the Subura, up and down all the flashy haunts where soldiers in search of wine, women, and adventure could be found, the net was drawn and tightened.

The cry went up: "Recall! Recall! All leaves canceled. Manlius needs you."

The groups grew larger and marched in strength as units coalesced into formations, finding here one, there two, to gather into their numbers. By the hour of false dawn the count was made of those returned. The city had been combed. If there were distant stragglers, they would come back unknowing from their far destinations to find the legion gone. The likelihood that they would follow the legion in its march to Brundisium was small. Far more likely that they would report to the nearest

checkpoint, receive new assignments, and be absorbed into other units.

Manlius looked over the reports.

"All present and accounted for, except twenty men, Commander."

"Send in a decima, with a couple of officers, to recruit a score of volunteers. They must be between five feet eight and ten, with good teeth and muscles, not over thirty years old and citizens of good character."

"Immediately, sir."

"Senior Centurion Arrius, the general wants twenty volunteers by sunup. Get some men out after them. Be sure they are standard height and rugged. Oh yes, they've got to be citizens."

"At once, Tribune."

"Centurion Ciscus, the Old Man says to pull in twenty new men. Strong lads, now. Citizens. Got to be volunteers. Jupiter! Enjoy yourself, Ciscus."

"Decurion Probus. Got a special detail for you. Arrius wants twenty men in a hurry. Citizens. Volunteers. Some chance! Better take clubs.

"Qualifications? Sure. The usual ones. Anybody that can stand up with a pack on his back and eat army rations without puking.

"Use your own lousy judgment, you do most of the time anyway. You got about an hour and a half—get at it."

Near the Forum, not far from the Campus Martius, there stood, and still stands, a small temple dedicated to Mars. A little open square fronts upon it and here Decurion Probus set up his table for recruiting.

His ten men spread out the sample outfit of equipment they had brought, arranging it where it would be most showy in the torchlight and be attractive to prospective recruits. The recruiting detail were striking in their own appearance. They wore their best equipment, well-burnished armor, polished boots, and an extra-high plume on their dress helmets. A few had even borrowed medals and service chains to which they were not entitled. The general effect was magnificent.

The decurion, a jolly-looking man, opened the recruiting tablets. He sat down at the table with a grin and picked up a

stylus. He scattered some shiny coins loosely among the plump little bags which sat waiting on the table and nodded to the trumpeter, who blew a series of furious blasts. A drum began to rattle a gay, enticing beat.

People drifted into the square to see what was going on. A few farm wagons, homeward bound out of the city, pulled up. Their drivers were willing to spend a little time while resting.

A youth in a ragged tunic bent and fingered the equipment. His eyes shone like the light which ran along the gleaming sword.

"Is it new?" he asked wistfully.

"Just made last week. Never been used. Every recruit gets a whole new outfit. Sign your name and you'll get everything you see here. All new."

"I never had nothing new in my life before." He hesitated, then squared his shoulders and stepped up to the table. "I can't write, but my name is Domitius."

"Last name?"

"Never had none."

"Give me your hand, Domitius. This is your name. Make a scratch here. This outfit is yours, but leave it here now, so others can see it. You'll get it when we get back to camp.

"Here is your bag of salt—your salarium; here's your sesterce to bind the bargain. Stand over there.

"Next, now? Who'll volunteer with this brave boy to see foreign lands, get three hundred denarii a year, and lead a life of glory at the expense of his Emperor?"

Domitius took a step toward the group of soldiers. He turned back. "Anybody want this yoke and water jars? Help yourself, I'm done with them. I'm a legionary now."

He went over to the group and stood proudly beside his fellow legionaries. The wind stirred their waving plumes like scarlet flames as two quitted the group and strolled casually toward the stalled farm wagons.

The drivers of those first in line suspiciously watched them coming. The wagons creaked into slow motion, but as the goad was applied to the oxen of the fourth vehicle the laughing soldiers reached it and pulled the driver down.

"Here's your chance to get your hands off the plow, farmer.

Come on. Make your scratch on the tablet and we'll make your fortune for you."

The younger man of the two jumped down from the wagon. He followed the struggling countryman as he was being dragged away.

"No! Not Balbus. My mother needs him to run the farm. Don't take my brother. Please! I can't do the work he can, but I'll be a better soldier than he will."

The press men looked at each other. One remarked dubiously, "Ciscus said volunteers."

"Ciscus!" The other spat on the ground. "All right. You! Get out! Come along then, boy. In twenty years you'll have a farm of your own and a good mule to work it."

The older man looked on, dumbly inarticulate. His big, caloused fists clenched helplessly on the goad. He watched his brother inscribe his name—Galba—in big, sprawling letters upon the articles which irrevocably took him away from home. Galba held out one clumsy hand to receive the little bag of salt. He pocketed the coin he was offered, without speaking.

"It will be all right, Balbus. Give them to Mother. Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't see her to say good-by."

The brothers caught each other in a bearlike hug. The legionaries waited. Then the older man climbed slowly into the wagon, fumbling for the handholds. Great tears rolled down his cheeks into his beard. He struck the goad into the wood.

"Balbus. Take good care of Mother. She—she always loved you best, anyway."

The wagon creaked ponderously out of the square. The driver, head sunk on his chest, did not look back.

The little crowd swelled, drawn by the tuck of the drum. Three other young men strolled casually up and signed. Their names went down on the articles. They pouched the salt and the sesterces given at recruiting and went into the group, laughing at some joke that one had just finished telling. "Titus; Kervashe; Licinius," Probus read off, musing. "Well, they can each hold a stylus—how about a sword, I wonder? That Kervashe looks mean enough to be a good fighter."

A man came staggering toward the table, his arms wide



stretched as though he could not bring them down to his sides. His hands were scraped and bleeding. His clothes reeked of wine. His eyes were blackened and almost closed.

Probus discounted this, recognizing the injuries as minor. He thought he knew a good recruit when he saw one. "Thinking about following the drum? Right this way. Here's a sesterce. Just sign here and go over to the wineshop with it. Set you right in no time."

"Can't," the man mumbled through swollen lips, tenderly tonguing a loosened tooth. "Been crucified. See my hands? All blood. Can't put my arms down. Stiff. Can't find my nails. Where are my nails? Can't get back on the cross without my nails."

"You don't have to go back there if you sign your name. Nobody can make you go back. We'll take you with us."

"Don't have to go back? Don't want to go back. I'll sign. Where do I sign? Help me get my hands down and I'll sign. L-on—what's the rest of it? Don't tell me, I know. G-i-nus. Longinus."

He stood back and looked proudly at his work, took the sesterce as though he did not know what it was or why he was given it. He collapsed on the curbstone and sat there mumbling, with his head in his bleeding hands.

The recruit who had signed just ahead of Longinus sat down beside him. "My name's Antimon. I've got some nails like none you've ever seen. How do you like these? Bent them and put them together myself. I'm handy that way. Want to try to get them apart? Wager my sesterce you can't do it."

Longinus groaned and pushed the puzzle back into Antimon's hand, then with a violent shove pushed the boy away. "Get out of here. Let me alone. I ache, I bleed, I can't think—I'm crucified, aren't I? Maybe I'm dead."

"If you say so." Antimon laughed and went back to the group, tossing the entangled horseshoe nails from hand to hand. Soon he was offering them to another recruit, deftly twirling his sesterce over the backs of his knuckles without dropping it, cleverly palming it and taking it apparently out of his neighbor's ear.

Back in the city there was a distant noise of shouting. It had been going on for some time. One of the cheap, flimsy tenements

was burning in the heart of the Subura. Two rival fire gangs brawled in the streets to decide which would put out the fire and which patron would be able to buy the ruins cheaply. In the meantime, the building burned on unhindered.

Away from that spot Decius ran in fear. No one pursued, but he knew that the owner had seen him fling the torch and probably marked the direction in which he had gone. A squad of the City Cohort could not be far behind.

The fugitive saw the recruiting table. This seemed like safety. Without asking questions, he gave his name, made a big X on the tablet, and breathed again.

Just in time, he thought as he hid himself in the growing group of volunteers. The soldiers, with prisoners, marched into the city square. The centurion in command pushed briskly into the group, sniffing. "There's smoke on this one! Take him!"

The recruiter shoved back his stool, almost casually. There was a brief tussle and the town officer found himself on his back in the street.

"This man is an arsonist. He likes to play with fire! Is this a haven for rogues?"

Probus laughed and loosened the sword in his scabbard. "Go back and polish your equipment, pretty boy. This man belongs to us now. If you think you can take him away from us—try!"

The centurion hesitated. He scowled and swore. He picked up his plumed dress helmet, straightened out the broken feather, and shook dirt out of it. He swung on his men.

"What in the name of Pluto are you grinning at, you lump-headed fools? One of you want to go after him? No? No one at all? Then move! One-two-three-four! Double time!" They left the square at a quick trot.

Lucas tossed the knife idly to and fro, on a tenement landing, not meeting his mother's eyes. "I did it because I wanted to do something nice for you." She savagely kicked the scattered coins off the landing. They caught the faint light from the candle inside her door and glittered as they fell.

He had cleaned the knife, but she knew. She had always suspected, he thought, but now she knew. He was hungry, dis-

pirited, and repentant. He listened almost without hearing, as her fury poured over him.

He tossed the knife. She struck it out of his hand. When he bent to pick it up she struck him savagely, once, twice—loud, hard, painful blows that rocked his head from side to side.

“Knife fighter! Thief! Alley runner! You did it for me? Liar! Good-for-nothing!”

His face remained impassive. He turned, with a shrug, and started down the stairs. Her sobbing curses followed him. At the next landing he stopped and looked up.

“Farewell, Mother.”

“Go where the wind blows. I’ll never miss you.”

Out of her sight, tears came. He stumbled down the remaining flights, out into the dusk of the street. Without knowing where he was going, he walked aimlessly toward the sound of a distant drum.

As he approached it, another young man stopped a moment to watch the recruitment. The shrewd eye of the recruiter fell upon the strong physique of the onlooker. He classified him as a passing slave bound upon some mission. He got up, stepped out, and caught the messenger’s arm.

“I’ve been looking for just such a fine fellow as you. How would you like to be a legionary? A fine farm someday, a big mule all your own, money in your pouch, an exciting carefree life, almost your own master—a chance to see foreign lands. Come, how about it? What do you say?”

“I am Morgo, a slave of the house of M. Ascanius Fuscus. It is impossible. Let me go. I am on my master’s business.”

“Would you like to be a legionary, I asked you?”

“Would I like to go to heaven? You play with me. Let me go.”

“Just a moment.” Probus kept a firm grip upon him.

“Hey, fellows! Take a look at our friend’s forehead.” He pushed back the young slave’s low-cut bangs. “See?” There was no F.U.G. brand for *fugitivus*. “I think we can do him a nice favor.

“No cropped ears, either. At least you’ve never run away. Any lash marks? Nothing on your back? Good. Let’s see your hands. Still got your little fingers. Better and better. Don’t try to fool me. You’re no slave.”

Hope began to dawn in the eyes of Morgo. "Sir, you know if I am caught I can be crucified or thrown to the beasts in the Circus. How can you hide me?"

"Nothing could be simpler. Who would think of looking for any but free men here? In a few hours we will be on the march and you can be one of us."

"A slave cannot be a legionary."

"Of course not. If you persist in thinking that you are a slave, then you must become a citizen and own land. You have no money? Then you must earn some."

"Here, take this rag. Polish the hilt of my sword. Ah! A splendid job. Well worth a sesterce, isn't it, boys?"

"Now you have money of your own, which you have earned by your own labor." Probus placed the coin in the slave's limp hand.

He picked up a handful of earth from the street. "Give me the money and put the dirt in your pouch."

Slowly, uncomprehending, the slave did as he was told.

"Now. You bought that land which I gave you and to which I have a right as a citizen. As a slave cannot own land until he is freed, you must be free. If you are free, I declare you a citizen."

"Citizen Morgo, I am happy to accept you as a recruit for the Tenth Cohort of the Thirteenth Legion. Be proud. You are now a member of the Emperor's Own. Sign here."

On the Palatine Hill, crowded as it was with the stately patrician homes and the raw, flamboyant buildings which were being erected by the newly rich, there were still unspoiled spots of wildness. Little hollows among the rocks, fringed with weeds; small thickets of brush existing untouched—these were corners of the past where children played and dreamed. Here and there, yet unharmed, stood trees which had never been planted or tended by man.

There were sites which had not known the weight of masonry or the scrape of a tool. They were few and soon there would be none, for to dwell upon the Palatine was a distinguishing mark in Roman society. It was a coveted honor for those who were relentlessly pushing upward from the lower strata and fighting for place among the old families.

In these little havens of quietness among the turmoil of the great city the din of the streets was muted by distance. Here lovers could find seclusion and privacy. If they looked mostly into each other's eyes and listened only to their own hearts, they might, like the children, create and believe in their own happy world.

In one of these close green thickets, which had been hollowed out to form a tight green arbor by trimming branches and plucking up some of the brush in the center, a boy and girl sat in their secret place.

It was almost sunrise. The pale light through the leaves showed each the sadness in the other's face, though the streets below were still shadowed. Tibullus looked away and picked threads from the hem of his tunic. He rolled them up into little balls and threw them away. The girl hugged her knees and anxiously watched him. She smoothed down the rough slave tunica she had borrowed when she slipped away from the house for this meeting.

Lilia was small and daintily made and very young. In her soft face the only hint of her unformed character was the strong line of her chin. The determination implied in the set of this was belied by her quivering lips. In all her life she had been refused nothing. It had been difficult to cajole her into doing anything against her own desire.

There was no petulance in her expression as she waited for him to speak. It was that of hurt misery. In her heart, desire warred strongly against all her principles and ideals. She was very near to surrender.

She searched his face. Handsome, talented, ambitious—attractive beyond any other boy she knew. Her heart pounded. He was so handsome! If she had not been looking at him through a mist of glamour, she would have seen him as her parents might.

A loosely jointed youth, unsure of his own qualities, a doubter, a wisher, not a doer, but one capable of devious scheming to attain his own ends.

He pushed back his thick black hair with a nervous gesture. "It is time to go, if you really mean to do it, Lilia. The doors will be open soon. Have you changed your mind?"

Now it was her turn to look at the ground. She felt ashamed.

Her heart pounded as though it would shake her whole body. Surely he could hear it.

"I want to—and I don't. Oh, Tibullus! Dear Tibullus! There must be another way."

"You know there is not. You promised last night. We go down to the Temple of Jupiter. We make our promises to each other. We come back here and marry ourselves. After a while we tell your father, when it is too late for him to do anything about it."

"He will kill you. He will send me away. Darling Tibullus, that will kill me. Don't make me do it. It will be an end to everything."

He fixed his eyes on his feet and moodily stirred the sand of an anthill with a worn sandal. He crushed it flat and poked bitterly at the frantic ants, watching with some pleasure a crippled one drag itself away.

She pressed a little closer and touched her cheek to his. He did not return the caress.

"It is because I have no money. I cannot give you jewels."

"Cornelia was happy with her living jewels. I will never ask you for any other. We have talked that over and over, too. I only want to be really married—with people around, by a priest, with cakes and wine, and those I love to be there and see."

"Ah, now—

*"My woman says she'd marry no one but me,  
Even though Jupiter should offer his plea.  
What a woman says—when her lover is there—  
Write it on water, or the clouds in the air."*

Her eyes filled with tears. "Catullus! Must you quote Catullus to me? And only that one cruel epigram—written when he was so bitter, after he was disillusioned in love—cheated by that wicked Clodia!

"I am not your woman yet, you know. I am your girl. Just your girl, who loves you only. You can make me your lady, if you will, in the right way. I would be the lady of your house, with so much pride, even if it has no more than one room—even though you had nothing but cobwebs in your pocket.

"It is only because I am so afraid that we cannot hope to be happy, if we begin without honor. I will tell you a truth and

make you this promise. If my family were to send me away because of you, I would come back and find you, if I had to walk across the world."

He looked up then and laughed with real amusement. "Oh, Lilia—Lilia! What great words. When did you ever walk a mile in your whole life?"

"When I came up here to meet you. It is just a mile and a half. I counted every step. Fifteen hundred of them."

"Then walk with me now a little farther, down to the Temple of Jupiter, and repeat that promise there. If the priest is there, we will say we are orphans and not give our right names. He will record it so. See, I have brought the vervain for Jupiter and the incense for the sacrifice."

She sat quite still—thinking. They were long thoughts before she announced her decision. Tibullus moodily stirred the twigs with a little stick, not looking at her.

"I will go." She took a little bag out of her bosom. "And here is the parsley for Venus and the incense for my sacrifice."

"Lilia! You were teasing me! You did mean to, all the time!"

She kissed him tenderly, understandingly. "Tibullus, you do not know what I would do for you. But I wish . . ."

She did not finish the sentence. Hand in hand, they went down the hill to make their vows and plight their troth before the altars of their gods. Jupiter first, the shrine of Venus after, to reach which they must first pass the Temple of Mars, where faintly they could hear the thrilling sound of an army trumpet and the beat of an army drum.

They walked down the Street of the Bulls and, passing through the Velabrium, that crowded tenement district, they went on by way of the Vicus Jugarius—the Street of the Yoke Manufacturers—to the Capitoline Hill.

By the time Tibullus and Lilia had knelt and kissed and sacrificed in the Temple of Jupiter, where they did not find the late-rising priest, and had left the altar, some other recruits had been gathered.

One of these was a soul-sick patrician, temporarily in a mood of renunciation.

When he was a child his parents had taken Atticus to the

Temple of Jupiter. Standing small in the cool shadowed portico, looking up at that immense figure of the god, he was filled with a sense of its omnipotent majesty. He made his first public obeisance. He repeated his prayers with awe and dropped his pinch of incense reverently into the glowing brazier. These vows he made with a feeling of dedication and wonder.

By the time he was a youth the vows had been long obscured by greater pleasures. Before he donned the man-toga of a knight, they had been ignored and completely forgotten. He no longer believed in divinity, the honor of men, or the virtue of women. The lovely term maiden, with all its beautiful connotations, was a theme for obscene jokes among his roistering friends.

Upon this dreadful morning of self-revelation and cruel insight, drunken, sick, and exhausted from an all-night orgy, he mistook the way to the vomitorium and reeled out upon the street in the gray light of an ugly dawn.

With the sour lees of the wine boiling up in his throat, he sat down upon the high curb with his feet in the gutter and buried his swollen face in his trembling hands.

At last he staggered down the street to the sound of a calling drum in the square of the Temple of Mars. There he seized the stylus and wrote, in a spirit of terrible contempt, with letters dug deep into the wax;

Lucius Sempronius Atticus—Patrician and Eques.

He was still very drunk.

Immediately following his name, the recruiter added that of a boy who for some time had been covetously eying the gleaming trumpet. The trumpeter, noticing this, took it from his lips, held it out, and slyly winked. He nodded encouragingly toward the recruiting table.

The boy suddenly made up his mind, stepped forward, and made his mark. The trumpeter looked over his shoulder, led him over to the others, and let him handle the polished brass. He winked again in complicity.

“Good lad, Proxillus!” he said. “See me by and by. I’ll talk to the Master of Horse about you. He can use a second trumpet.”

He took back the instrument and blew a mighty blast. It



pierced through the meditations of Tibullus and Lilia. Drawn by curiosity, they turned from their direct route, pushed through the little crowd, and stopped to watch for a moment.

The keen eye of the trumpeter fell upon them. "Here's a likely lad, hey, Probus? The twentieth, if we can get him."

"Young man, step this way. Come closer. How would you like to be a hero? Make your girl proud of you. Do your duty for your country. How about it now?"

Tibullus grinned weakly and backed away but found his arm grasped in a detaining grip. People seldom shook off the hand of Probus.

"No. Stay a bit. Look at this beautiful armor. It would fit you like a second skin. Try on this helmet. Why, you look like a general!

"Doesn't that make him handsome, sweetheart? Ah, it does! See her eyes shine—what's your name, now? Tibullus? Well, Tibullus, if she liked you without that helmet, she'll love you with it. What are you? Clerk? Scribe? A poet? Wonderful! If there's anything this army needs, it's a good poet. My father was a poet, but a bad one and rather luckless.

"He wrote poems in honor of Venus, until he caught the soldier's disease. Then he composed odes to Apollo and the god got disgusted and knocked him down with sunstroke. Father got the idea and shifted over to Bacchus. He did all right until he made a bet that he could drink the entire output of one winery in one week.

"I write a little myself. How do you like this one?"

*"Rome expects you to work your way,  
She's counting on you to earn your pay."*

"You don't? Then you don't know good rhyming when you hear it. I don't believe you are a poet at all. I'll bet a sesterce you can't even write your name. Right here—here's the stylus!

Tibullus frowned, then said:

*"Remember, we've been taught to share.  
I hope she'll always have it there!"*

"Hey, fellows! He's made a fool of me. He did it! He wrote

down a new couplet and signed it for me, right here on the records. Good for you, Tibullus!

"Well, here's your sesterce. Here's your bag of salt.

"Here's our twentieth recruit. Just fall in with the others, young man. Pack up the stuff, boys. Job's done."

A swift, strong shove thrust Tibullus into the group. It had all happened so rapidly that he still did not quite understand.

Only the roar of laughter which went up at his dawning look of comprehension, and Lilia's scream at the sight of him being snatched away, brought him to his senses.

He tried to fight his way out, but the effort was futile. There was no more sympathy for him among the recruits than there was from the seasoned soldiers guarding them. A blow from the decurion's vine-stick dazed him and struck him back. A legionary caught him and held tight.

"Don't run, boy! That's desertion. You're in the army now. Make the best of it. You'll be out in twenty years."

Lilia ran beside them, hurried little steps to keep up with the long marching stride that they fell into as they took the road for the Campus Martius. She was crying and her hands were clenched until her fingernails drove deep into her palms.

A sympathetic few followed, cursing at the soldiers, shaking their fists, patting Lilia commiseratingly on the shoulders.

Under their feet, the little bunch of parsley meant for Venus lay useless now—forgotten and crushed.

## “FOR A DENARIUS A DAY”

Not far outside the city, at the beginning of the Appian Way, the Thirteenth Legion was in ranks, standing easy, but not at ease. They were waiting, as they had been waiting since dawn, for the coming of the recruits, or any laggards who might return.

During that time there had been several omens, not all good. A flock of ravens flapped heavily over from the east, gorged with carrion. One dropped a bloody morsel near the standard. The men stared at it and a murmur ran through the lines.

There had been thunder on the left. Damp kindling, on the portable altar of Jupiter, failed to ignite until the third lighting. Now the chaplains of the ten cohorts were poking about in the entrails of a sacrificed sheep, seemingly in disagreement over the augury.

A chill wind blew, whipping the smoke of the city low over the Servian Wall and obscuring the low, pale sun. The morale of the men sank as they waited. They were already depressed by lack of sleep, disgust, and disappointment at the sudden change of plans.

Only loyalty to their commander, and the knowledge that his impassivity hid an equal regret kept them from grumbling. The thought of the long double row of tombs, along the route they must soon take, did nothing to raise their spirits.

While they stood there a sibyl passed on her way to one of the small Grecian temples on the Esquiline Hill. Some of the legionaries called out to her as soldiers will, partly, but only partly, in mockery. A gruff veteran of several wars tossed a small coin to her as she walked by. She made no effort to catch it and it fell to the ground.

“Ho, sibyl! I would buy a prophecy. Read my future for the worth of the coin?”

She picked up the silver and he held out his palm, with a cynical smile. She shook her head and returned the piece. Gently, almost pityingly, she closed his fingers over it.

"Legionary, you know well that a soldier has no future. Ask me nothing and keep your money. I have no need for Charon's oboli."

"Have you no kind word for any of us, sibyl?"

"Yes, to those of you who love wine, I say—drink well and often. The Shades are long dry."

The bluster went out of his voice, but he insisted. "At least a little seeing for us, sibyl. What can we expect?"

She hesitated, then without warning or her own volition the spirit seized her. Her face convulsed. Her eyes rolled and her body became rigid. Her voice dropped an octave. The timbre was that of a man, guttural, threatening, warning.

"Yonder the smoke of the city flies east! Under it marches the Lost Legion. Never the smoke returns—never the legion.

"Heavy the smoke scuds—thick the arrows fly, thickly into the ranks! Yonder the edges whip away. Far, far the ranks grow thin.

"The eastern sky is wide—beyond, the smoke is lost. The lands of Asia are wide enough to bury you all.

"Never the smoke returns. Never the legion!"

Wailing, she hurried toward the city. The cold wind blew. The men shivered.

Near the barracks there was a line of small shops which catered to the needs of army men. Here could be purchased small images of Mithras, the great bullfighter, the soldiers' god, secondhand but serviceable items of clothing, equipment, or even little luxuries.

Farther away and less obtrusive were buildings which housed less reputable necessities. Near one of these, a small wineshop, there was already a crowd of drinking spectators, both men and women. Some of these broke away and followed the company of surrounded recruits, to become part of a fringe of curious hecklers.

The decima stopped at the very end of the line, the spot reserved at the tail of the Tenth Cohort for new members. From

here, as the volunteers progressed in ability and training, and their useful skills became apparent, they would be promoted forward to other units and thus scattered throughout the main body of the legion.

Now they were a unit by themselves. They would be trained together, eat and sleep together, and perhaps, if they were dull or stubborn, even die together.

Nearby, Tibullus and Lilia clung together in quiet grief. Some of the new recruits watched them in sympathy. Others were already regretting their sudden decisions and were lost in somber thought. A few, especially Morgo, Decius, and Lucas, were happy. No matter what army life might be like, what they had escaped was worse.

Tibullus looked anxiously around. “Centurion, let me have a tablet? Please? Has anybody got a piece of paper? Oh, Jupiter! Just a little piece of paper and a pen?”

A public scribe pushed through the crowd with his inkhorn and a piece of paper. Tibullus searched for a coin. He was radiant as he seized the paper, dipped the pen into the ink, and hurriedly began to write.

Lilia was beginning to understand. “But we haven’t got a cake or any wine.” She whimpered and lifted her tear-wet face to him, without much hope.

“It doesn’t matter. The paper matters. We’re going to do it!”

Already, at the far end of the ranks, there was a movement. The legion stiffened to attention. Crisp orders rang down the serried companies. Commander Manlius had just come out of headquarters and was walking toward his horse.

Oblivious of the imminent interruption, Tibullus frantically scrawled on and finished his sentence. He looked over his shoulder to judge the time remaining. There was very little.

He thrust the marriage lines into Lilia’s hand. “Get all the signatures you possibly can, after I am gone. Oh, Lilia! Try hard. Get a lot.”

A woman came running up with a pitcher of wine in one hand and a hard biscuit in the other. She thrust both into Lilia’s hands. “Here,” she panted. “Get married, if that’s what you want. This is all I could find.”

Tibullus snatched them from her. “The gods bless you!” He

hugged the woman and some of the wine spilled down her back, but she only laughed.

There was a crackling rattle of lance butts on the pavements. The commander was standing at his horse's head. The aquilifer took his position at the extreme right of the column. The golden Eagle gleamed bright in the morning sun. A little distance behind, the standard-bearer unfurled the legion flag to the wind and stood at attention, waiting for the trumpet.

The clouds had not delivered their promise of a shower and now were scattering. It was a good omen. One of the haruspices came up with the liver of the sacrificed sheep. Manlius read it, knowingly. He nodded.

Tibullus broke the biscuit and crammed half of it into his mouth. He washed the morsel down with a gulp of wine. "I, Caius, take thee, Caia," he said thickly, and handed the remainder of the biscuit to Lilia. He watched while she choked it down and drank a swallow. "I, Caia, take thee, Caius."

She hugged him, close and tight, not caring that the forgotten pitcher now smashed on the pavement. No one laughed. She whispered into his ear, so that no one else could hear, "Where you are, Caius, there I, Caia, will also be." There was only another instant to be together. They spent it in each other's arms and made it sacred with a kiss. Then Lilia felt herself urged aside with a firm but not unkind pressure.

Tibullus was pushed back into the ragged formation of the new recruits. It tightened into a close knot. She could no longer touch him and there was nothing left but the memory of his arms about her, his strength, and his warm breath on her lips.

She heard his voice: "Oh, Lilia! Help me now!" And she could not reach him.

The legion was almost ready to move out. The trumpet caroled:

*"Come and listen  
To the officers talk.  
Then we all will take  
A little walk.  
Come! Come! Come!"*

But they are already gathered, she thought, when she heard

someone in the crowd fit the old words to the lilting notes. They are all there and they have done with talking and they will soon be gone. Oh, gods, what shall I do without him? Don't you care?

The roll call had been made. The commander looked back along the line. He grasped the handgrip on the saddle of his white stallion, for he rode without stirrups, as all the cataphracts did. He vaulted lightly into place. He rode to his usual place at the head of the Spanish heavy cavalry and made ready to lead out the column. He raised his hand. It fell.

Matho, Master of Horse, roared out in his leather-lunged bellow:

“Stand to horse!”

Each man seized his handgrip. The next commands cracked like the snap of a carter's whip.

“Prepare to mount!”

and in rapid succession:

“Mount!”

“Column of fours!”

Manlius was twenty feet ahead.

“Follow me!”

“Forward—ho!” shouted Matho.

The cavalry began to move. The wind billowed their red cloaks. The horses danced and their trappings jingled. A cheer went up from the crowd.

Now the infantry had room to follow. Up went the standard in the hands of the signifer, high, proud, and visible to all. It streamed out over his head. Up into the clear air went the gay company pennons. The tribune of the Thousand Cohort, crack troops and first in line, raised his arm.

“For-r-ward mar-r-ch! Trumpeter—sound!” Down came the arm. The sharp commands rippled down the line. Like a great snake, the column lengthened itself imperceptibly. It tensed—it shivered. The drum boomed, the brass struck up the marching tune.

The Thirteenth Legion was on its way.

Out of the huge drill field clattered the six hundred horsemen, not caparisoned today in their heavy armor which made them the hardy cataphracts feared by all enemies. Instead, they were

lightly dressed, as was usual on the march upon home grounds or in a friendly country.

They sat straight in the saddle, gripping the reins lightly, looking neither to left nor right, left hand casually placed on hip. Their every motion was graceful.

Their yellow banner, with its sable lion ramping up against a castle in red, floated free at the spearhead of the cavalcade, where rode Matho, two horse lengths behind the legate.

Spanish cavaliers, all of them, some, like Matho, of ancient Carthaginian lineage. These traced their ancestry, with pride, back to the laughing men of Hannibal and Hamilcar, who had surged through Spain like a sea, on their way to render Italy a battleground.

Now these, their sons distant in time, fought for Rome. They were swarthy, bearded swaggerers with flashing steel and eagle stares; quick with a blow, large in their capacities for wine and love; admired, respected, and often hated for their arrogance by the rank and file who slogged on foot through the dust clouds they left behind.

In column of fours, the cavalry left the Field of Mars. As they rode through the suburbs of the city to reach and pass through the Appian Gate which led south, they raised their voices in song. Although they were auxiliaries, the marching song of the legion was their song too.

*"The trumpets were a-blowing  
When I marched away  
To leave my wife and sell my life  
For a denarius a day."*

The first troops passed through the gate. The black beards opened and the white teeth flashed. The horses pranced, glad to be on the move.

*"The ladies' tears were showing.  
I'm sure I heard them say,  
'How terribly sad, to lose this lad—  
For a denarius a day!'"*

Following the horsemen, the baggage wagons belonging to the cavalry took the road. They carried the armor, weapons, and



other heavy gear. Fodder wains, the portable smithy, and riding farriers and grooms would bring up the tail of the procession.

As the drivers clucked to the mules, amid the loud crack of the whips, they too sang and the chorus rang out:

*“Then drink, drink,  
Let the cannikins clink,  
And with wine let us make merry!  
With the dawn  
We must be gone  
And there will be some to bury!”*

Behind the cavalry and its wagons the legion uncoiled itself, a gaily patterned python as seen from the roofs of the houses, its scales gleaming in the sun. Rank upon rank, undulating out of the Campus Martius, marching in perfect stride. Tramp, tramp, tramp, the hobnailed boots of the caligatae struck the stones in unison to the beat of the drum.

Above them, the flaring pennons of the various centuries; higher and more flaunting, the cohort flags leaned against the wind, and largest of all, the standard of the thousand waved in insolent beauty. Ahead of the fluttering display of pomp and power, the golden Eagle led the way, its beak open as though it screamed defiance, or sang as did the men who followed:

*“When, at the end, I get my licks,  
I’ll take the ferryboat  
Over the Styx,  
With nothing to spend,  
Bequeath, or lend,  
But my denarius for the day.  
  
For-r-r—the generals get the money,  
The tribunes get the honey,  
The soldier gets to whirl about  
Whenever he hears an officer shout:  
‘Form fours! All for-r—  
A denarius a day!’”*

On they went, century after century, bearing their equipment lightly with the ease of long use. In the first line were maniples of chosen men, all young legionaries, carrying two javelins

each; short, double-edged thrusting sword; four-foot-long, semi-cylindrical shield; helmet, breastplate, and greaves.

Shock troops for the individual centuries were these, strong, ambitious, and vital—the first to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. They swung by the watching crowd, who thrilled to their snap and vigor.

Behind these ranks came another set, of veterans well tested in battle, dependable men who could be counted upon to support and relieve the tired men who would take the brunt of the fighting. These were armed in the same manner, including the little extra items of equipment peculiar to the Thirteenth. Their feet came down solidly, maniple following maniple, one hundred men in each.

In their turn, they passed in parade the many who had gathered here to watch. These now saw the remaining third type of soldier go by—all senior veterans. Their weapons were similar to those preceding, except that they carried long thrusting spears instead of javelins, for their function was to act as reserves and join the fight only when called.

Their drum marked the beat so closely to the larger one at the column's head that it seemed a single hand struck both. As the Thousand Cohort disappeared, it was singing:

*"The commander rides on a fine white horse.  
Centurions get the medals, of course!  
The man in the ranks?  
He gets, for thanks—  
His denarius for the day!"*

A little space separated the First Cohort from the Second. Soon the next banner and silver Eagle appeared, and the Second, arranged in similar manner to the First, surged into motion. The tribune first came into view, marching beside the banner, then the youthful, able principes; the older, perhaps a little weaker, hastati following; then again, the supporting triarii.

They went by, cohort after cohort, until all ten had passed. After a short gap, marching as did the rest, like marionettes upon a single string, another six companies came: all light infantry, all triarii, powerful veterans armed with javelins, sword, and small round shield, razor edged along the top as had been the larger ones which the heavy infantry carried.

*“Pipers will play  
And trumpets bray.  
So others will do what I’ve done today  
And drums will beat  
For aching feet  
That march till Judgment Day.”*

So all the cohorts went by in their turn, to the marking beat of the drum and the braying tubas and the crash of cymbals, which raises the hair along the spine. Before it had time to lie flat again, the bagpipers, who played for the barbaric Balearic slingers, raised their screaming cry and set the echoes screeching back at them in that early dawn.

With cheeks puffed out, red-faced, the pipers strutted and swung, fingering their three-holed single chanter, squeezing the bag under arm which supplied the growling drone. In route step, the slingers padded after them. They wore soft shoes with thick soles, for more active use and running. Being sharpshooters and sniping marksmen, they did not bother to march with the precision of the legionaries.

These island irregulars carried no packs, except a small pouch of lead slugs for especially accurate shooting, a larger one for clay balls, and a few naturally round stones for which they were always on the search. Over their shoulders they carried a four-foot throwing stick, with a short rawhide thong and leather pouch for heavier missiles to lob into a crowd.

They considered themselves the men most necessary to the army, as did, in fact, each unit—those whom the legion could least do without.

These hairy wild men could not sing in tune to the pipes, because only the pipers knew if there was any tune at all that they were playing, but they sang, regardless:

*“There are many roads that lead to Rome.  
There are roads that lead away,  
And I have trod them all, it seems,  
For many a weary day.  
  
So drink, drink,  
Let the cannikins clink,  
And with wine we’ll now make merry.”*

*With the dawn  
We'll soon be gone  
And there will be some to bury."*

Over the worn stones rumbled the artillery. First, sixty small carroballistae, the rapid-firing, javelin-throwing field guns of the ancient world. These were horse-drawn weapons, fondly called scorpions, for they faced backward and the sting was in their tails. They must be wheeled rapidly into position and, in action, must sometimes be shifted with the utmost haste to be placed at best advantage.

Following them came patient mules, pulling heavy wagons laden with ironwork for the powerful siege engines, bar iron for cavalry smithies, and the larger forges which the armorers used; bags of charcoal, ingots of lead, copper, and tin; supplies for the bakers—the ovens and the sacks of grain; the personal effects of the marching men.

The leather and canvas tents for the officers were also in these wagons. The Thirteenth Legion did not house eight men to a tent, as did the other legions, but only four, although at a pinch five or even six could crowd into one for shelter. Each group of four men carried its tent in four sections and fitted them together at the coming of night, carrying such pieces of leather or canvas as part of a regulation marching pack.

On they rolled. Hospital supplies, paymaster's cart, with its locked iron chests, presided over by the signifer, who doubled as standard-bearer, subtlers, butchers' wagons. Knowing that they too were necessary to the support of the fighting legionaries, the men of the wagons, who also might be called upon to bear arms, felt pride in themselves and sang as loudly as the others:

*"There's a thump and a thud  
That gets in your blood  
And unless you are made of clay—  
You cannot stay.  
You will march away  
For that denarius a day!  
Oh-h-h, boys!  
That denarius a day!"*

They passed. Out of the Campus Martius, into and out of the

suburbs of the city; into the long double row of tombs which lines the beginning of the Appian Way—three hundred and forty-seven miles to Brundisium, and Brundisium no more than the first step on their long journey. They passed—into history and out of the ken of those who watched them go.

For a long time after the legion was out of sight the boom of the big drum could still be heard. Then it faded, as had the grunting brass, until it became no more than a vibration on the air, felt but hardly audible. The crowd, dispersing slowly, knew that the legion was truly gone.

The final distant breath of evanescent sound whispered away. It was not until then that a wide, covered litter was picked up by its bearers and carried back into the city. Inside, hidden by the leather curtains, Gaius Caesar Caligula yawned and patted his open mouth lightly with a perfumed palm.

He smiled and said to Macro, who reclined beside him, “Step number three and well accomplished. On they go toward Parthia. I wonder just what they will find there among those suspicious people?

“Hopefully this by-blow of the Immortal Julius is permanently removed. If he is, I shall have disposed of a threat to the throne. There will be an excuse to attack Parthia, for which we are prepared. If so be that he somehow manages to return, we will find another excuse for war. It must come soon. I will be surnamed Parthicus.

“Still I win, if he brings back another silk route, the Eagle of the Lost Legion—perhaps even the secret of the silk. Any one of these.”

His laugh was cynical. “Who but a god could make a plan like this? Who but a god could have my thoughts?”

Macro placed a finger to his lips and gestured nervously where the bearers must be listening outside the curtains. Caligula ran an expressive finger across his own throat. His smile was chilling to the praefect as he muttered, “As soon as we reach the palace . . .”

He continued in a louder tone, “Get out the roster and strike the Thirteenth from it. It shall be a concern of mine no longer.”

Over their heads, the wind and the smokes of Rome blew east.

## VIRGIL GIVES ADVICE

Lilia had not stirred from where she stood since her new husband had passed out of sight, looking over his shoulder to find her face among the others. "Have everybody sign the paper," he cried.

*He didn't say farewell.* She suppressed the little mean thought and stood staring at the wagons until they were all gone. Perhaps they would let him go. Maybe he can break away and come running back. They might not miss him or chase him if he hid. They wouldn't break up the formation just for that one person—would they?

He can't be so important to them as he is to me. Oh, Tibullus!

It was not until she knew beyond doubt that there was no more hope that she turned away, head bowed, her eyes blurred with tears.

"That pitcher will cost you one sesterce, two *as*," she heard a voice say, but the meaning did not penetrate her dull and bewildered mind.

She looked up. "What?"

"You broke it. I'm not going to pay for it." It was the woman who had brought the pitcher of wine and the biscuit. Finally Lilia understood.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break it. Please sign my paper." She held it out like a little scolded child. The scribe had long ago left with the inkhorn and the pen. This last crushing blow was more than she could bear. She began to cry in great, helpless sobs.

"There. There. Forget the pitcher. It was cracked anyway. Have you got any money?" Lilia dumbly shook her head.

"So he's gone away and left you. Lucky you got him to marry

you. It don't show. How long gone are you? Have you got a good master that will take care of you?"

"I don't understand."

"The baby. How much more time have you got?"

Lilia was shocked and indignant. "Me? A baby? I just got married! How could I be?" And she thinks I am a slave, too.

The woman chuckled with genuine amusement. "You are younger than I thought. Luckier, too. Come, have a drink with me. It will take the wobble out of your legs. You look as though you need it."

Lilia did feel faint and dizzy. She felt the edge of a cup against her lips and a hand at the back of her head. The wine was rough and sour. It made her cough.

"Drink it down. All of it. I know a house slave steals better, but it's all you'll get here. It's Vatican, the worst—and the cheapest in Rome, but it is the soldiers' wine and that's why I like it. If you are going to be a soldier's woman, you must learn to like it too, even though it be no better than vinegar.

"I have drunk Pramnian and wine of Chios, but you can't buy it here. If you've got a taste for Falernian, this pig of a wine seller probably never heard of it. Vatican and Vesuvius, sour as they are, act quickly. They drive away grief and drown misery.

"Child, this is a day to forget. Any wine will help you to do that."

The woman raised her head proudly and Lilia saw the hurt in her eyes. It came to the girl, in that moment, that it was not she alone who stood in need of comfort.

"I am sorry," she said, and touched the woman's hand. "Was your husband a soldier? Did he go away too?"

"Long, long ago. So long that years mean nothing now. We met in Armenia. He was a Roman soldier. My mother hated him and tried to keep me away from him. She hated all Romans for the destruction they have brought to our country.

"She was in Tigranocerta when the Romans wrecked the city. She is probably still there. She vowed she would never leave it until I came back alone. She was very angry when I met my man. Before he asked me to marry him, I could not have guessed what I might answer. When he did, I knew I could never be wife to any other."

"You must have loved him very much," Lilia said, out of politeness. How could this wine-drenched dissolute ruin have ever experienced the same sad sweet pangs which were tormenting her own being?

"Dear child, who are so lately born, when you have lived a little, come back and we will talk again. When *he* lived, I was alive. When he died, I knew that I was dead and the world was dead. It was long ago—so long ago."

She drained her cup and filled it for the fourth time. Lilia sipped her first, still without liking. The woman talked on. Her words had begun to run together a little.

"He wanted me to go with him when he was sent to Libya. He was in the Third Augusta. We had a nice little house, not large, but almost new. We had one child, a boy. He was beautiful. Three years old and only one blemish on his strong little body. A scar on his forehead like a streak of lightning, where he fell and cut it on a broken dish. How we loved him! How he cried!

"I weep no more now. I have shed too many tears. I have said farewell to too many men, but I never said it to my little boy. I never had the chance."

She sighed, and then looked at Lilia, or as nearly at her as she could. Her eyes were vague.

"I did not want to go to Libya. I thought we had too much here to leave. So he went and I stayed—like you. It would only be a year.

"Dear child, it is not the great sorrows that are the hardest to bear. It is the little reminders of them that bleed a soul to death. When they brought me the news, I was arranging roses in a vase. I can see the design on it now, after twenty years. He had been buried a month before and I did not know, but he died for me that day, in that little room. I did not stop my work.

"I put the last of the flowers in the vase. My mother loved roses. Even as I did so, I knew I should never to be able to look at roses again. And they are everywhere—everywhere."

Her glance sharpened suddenly and she hunched forward, fumbling for Lilia's hand on top of the table.

"Go with your husband, dear. Follow him. A woman must go where her husband goes. If you don't, this cup of wine, that bis-



cuit, will curse this day. You will never forget it—all your lonely life.”

“I don’t like wine very much.”

“I didn’t either—then, but it helps one to forget. Once, when I was forgetting, I lost my little boy and I could not remember where, or what happened, or why.

“After that, there was another memory to forget. There was wine to forget it with and more wine and men and other men, and time passed—and then I looked into a mirror. The years had come upon me and I was as I am today. Whatever that is.”

She looked at Lilia as though they had never met. She lifted another full cup in a trembling hand and drained it. There was no recognition in her half-closed eyes. They drooped and closed completely. Slowly her head came down upon her arm, which rested on the bench. The cup fell from her lax fingers.

Lilia set down her still half-filled cup and looked at the proprietor of the wineshop.

“She’ll be all right. Just leave her there to sleep it off. I’ve heard her tell that story a hundred times. I’ll look after her.”

Lilia walked slowly away. There seemed nothing else to do. As she went along the street toward home, one thought ran through her mind, as firmly fixed there as had been the Armenian’s phobia against roses: “A woman must go where her husband goes.”

It was not until she was nearly home that she realized what she held crumpled in one tightly clenched hand. The paper had not even one signature on it—and she had meant to do so much for Tibullus.

She entered the house by the rear. The sun was well up and for an instant she dreaded discovery, until she saw that Chloris, her own Greek slave, was waiting by the cistern.

“Quickly, mistress, into my chamber before someone sees you. Your morning clothes are there. All laid out for you. Oh-h-h! Those grass stains! And wine on my tunic! Whatever shall I do? What have you been doing inside my dress? Lilia! How could you? I’ll never get my things clean. I have been so worried!”

Thus chattering, Chloris pushed her into the little cubicle at the back of the house that was her own private room. Lilia found herself stripped and seated on the cot almost before she knew what was happening.

Chloris dashed out and immediately reappeared with towels, a bowl, and a ewer of hot water. Still scolding, she knelt and bathed Lilia's feet and legs and tenderly dried them.

"Chloris, stop! Listen. Let me talk a minute. Chloris, you've got to help me. My, you are cross. You sound like my mother."

"She is in the sunroom. I think she is working on that old tapestry again, with her maids. No—hear the organ? She and your father think you are still asleep. I said you had a headache and wanted to lie abed a little while."

Chloris brought out clean clothing that she had hidden beneath a bedcover. An almost transparent silk undergarment, then the tunica, less than knee length. Light sandals for house wear. An ankle-length stola of white linen, belted in with a wide turquoise-colored belt, clasped with a ruby-eyed silver lizard.

She adjusted Lilia's hair into the latest fashionable mode, bound it by a fillet of white silk dotted with golden spangles, and placed an ivory comb to best advantage.

She stood back and admired her creation. "Oh, mistress! You are as lovely as Venus herself. I love you so. You mustn't ever frighten me like that again."

She rolled up her own dirty clothes and kicked them under the cot. "Tell me now. You've got to tell me. What were you doing?"

Lilia had recovered her usual aplomb. "Nothing very important," she said with an air. "Only getting married."

The last she saw of Chloris, as she quitted the room, was the aghast face and open mouth, into which her slave had crammed her knuckles to stifle the scream that wanted to come out.

Lilia passed through the servants' passageway which flanked the atrium. This large main room in the building, actually two houses in one, was vacant at the moment. She could hear voices raised in argument beyond the curtained entrance to the master room.

A strange voice said angrily, "This is usury. You are a thief, not a banker. An interest of forty-eight per cent on a six-month loan?"

The answer was too low for her to catch. This was no time for an interruption—at least, not the one that she would have to make.

She went on toward the front of the house and stood looking

out. The tiles were cool under her feet. An elegant curtained litter passed. The social morning visits were already beginning.

Lilia took a pear from a bowl. She flicked away a speck of dust with care and nibbled daintily, leaning against a caryatid in the portico. Old Silenus leered licentiously down at her from his column at the gate. Lilia did not notice.

She thought furiously. With no signatures of witnesses, the paper was useless. How could she prove that she was married? Father would think that this unconsummated, non-witnessed, almost illegal marriage contract was less than nothing. If Gaius Aemilius Liletus even bothered to read it, he would probably laugh and tear it up. Then she would have nothing but a memory.

"A woman must go where her husband goes." Her father would not be moved in the least by that argument, however much it tugged at Lilia's heart.

Pensively, she picked at a tiny spot of decay in the pear and lost her taste for it, replacing the half-eaten fruit beside the silver bowl. With a sigh she turned away, passed through the atrium with its central pool, fed by rain ducts from the open catch in the ceiling, and so into the marble-veneered sunroom.

The desultory, seemingly never ending repair of an ancient tapestry was continuing, as Chloris had said, but only by the serving-women. She felt that now she could understand faithful, loving Penelope and *her* weaving better than before. Her mother was playing softly on the water organ and singing, almost to herself.

*"Oh—little one who wakes from sleep,  
Never think that love comes cheap.  
It is bought by tears in lonely nights,  
Paid for by postponed delights,  
As you will someday realize.  
It may come in strange disguise  
But—you can reach no happier heights,  
So—be of patience and good cheer—  
Go gently into your future, dear."*

Her mother looked up and smiled. The words of the song had touched Lilia's heart and made her situation almost unbearable.

She longed to be held close—to be a little girl again. She took a step toward her mother, who continued playing. Neither did she stop singing. This was not the time for confessions, it seemed. Later.

Lilia returned to the atrium. The client had left. The curtains were open and she could see her father sitting at his desk. He looked stern and bitter. He had that *banker* look. Evidently this transaction, whatever it was, had not gone well.

“Father?” she ventured timidly. He placed a finger to mark his place in the newsletter he was reading, that monthly report to financiers of the Empire. He was totting up figures on a tablet. He frowned and she felt smaller and younger than ever.

“May I talk with you? I have something to tell you.”

“In a little while, Lilia. Run along now. I am very busy.”

He turned back to his reading and she turned away. He called after her, as a polite afterthought, “I hope your headache has passed?”

She kept on walking without looking back, knowing that if she had answered he would not have heard—that he would still be reading. She passed by the niches which housed the lares and penates and gave them a tearful smile and a quick genuflection. These cheerful Gods of the Little Things are my only helpers in this household, she thought. Later. Everything is later. Maybe too late.

She sobbed and ran up the stairs to her own room in the women’s quarters. As she went, she could hear the music and the lighthearted singing from the sunroom. She flung herself on her bed, knowing for the first time in her young life how sad a song of love could be.

Then, lying there, she heard a quick step entering the room, felt soft arms about her, cuddling her head close, and the warm body of Chloris pressing tight against her.

“Oh, my lady! My sweet sister! Please don’t cry.”

Lilia turned, inside the embrace, and clung to Chloris. She smelled fresh and clean. “How lucky I am to have you. You are my only friend.”

The Greek girl held her for a little while, asking no questions. Gradually Lilia told her the whole story, with many repetitions, while she became calmer and more her usual self.

"What am I to do? What can I do?"

They sat up. Chloris was understanding, sad, and pensive. "I cannot have my lover either. How can I advise you, mistress?"

"But you can see him every day. You know where he is. You know that someday he will be yours. I may never see mine again. He may never come back. I almost think I should have gone with him."

"My lady! With the army?" Chloris looked horrified. She pushed Lilia away at arm's length and shook her. "What a thing to say. How could you? I should tell your father."

"You wouldn't, Chloris? I tried to tell him and Mother too, but I know what they would say. Oh, Chloris, I must talk to somebody. There just isn't anyone but you. Don't tell him until I have time to think."

"No, I won't. Of course I won't. But I ought to, you know. Why don't you talk to Julia? She's always full of ideas."

Lilia's face lit up. "Oh, I will. How could I have forgotten Julia? Run! Run quick and get her. Chloris, I promise you, I will give you money to take to your sweetheart, so he can buy you. Oh, go! Go, right now."

Chloris stood up, indignation evident in her every stiff motion. "My lady, I do not love you for money."

Lilia ran to her before she could quit the room. She kissed the Greek girl and Chloris' anger melted. "I know who my best friend is and it isn't Julia. Now go quickly and prove it." Chloris went.

Screens had been set up around the nymphaeum in the enclosed flower garden at the rear of the house. This marble-lined shallow pool was a favorite retreat of the women of the house during the long days of summer. Julia went there without hesitation, expecting to find her chum, as she did, already soaking in the sun-warmed water. Chloris was dipping more from the cistern.

Julia undressed and slid, nude as was Lilia, into the pool. She lay back luxuriously to enjoy the falling rain of the fountain that Chloris was feeding. It was then, while Chloris was drawing tight the screen at the entrance and setting out the oils, per-

fumes, and scraping strigils, that Julia learned of the events of the morning.

"I never heard of anything so romantic in my life," she bubbled. "Darling, what are you going to do?"

"I hoped you might think of something."

"All I think about is the tragedy of it. You mean to say he is really gone, and he never did . . . ? I mean, well—you never had a chance—there wasn't any time?"

"Lilia, it is just like a Greek play. Maybe the gods have cursed you both."

"Oh, don't be silly, Julia. The gods don't care that much about me and Tibullus. They only bother themselves about the affairs of kings and queens and important people like that. But he is so much to me! I love him so. He is my very heart. If I could go to the commander? Do you suppose he would let Tibullus go if I begged him?"

"I was going to ask Father to buy a substitute, but I know he wouldn't do it. He'd be only too glad to know Tibullus was gone."

"Mistress?" The Greek girl timidly interrupted. "Why not ask the gods for advice? I always do."

The two turned to her. "You mean they help you? You get answers? How? Through witchcraft?"

"No. By just asking. Anybody can do it. There are two good ways. Bibliomancy is one. Virgil, you know."

The other girls nodded eagerly. The custom was widespread of opening the works of Virgil at random, then closing one's eyes while running a finger down the lines and reading wherever the finger stopped. This might offer advice on a problem or give guidance for the affairs of the day.

"What is the other way?"

Chloris looked at Julia. "She can ask Fortuna."

"Fortuna Virilis? Her temple is too far. Praeneste is a long way. We might not get an answer for weeks. There is always a crowd waiting for the sibyl to get in the mood for answering questions."

"I think she means the temple here in Rome, Julia. There isn't any sibyl here now, Chloris. She died last month and the new one has not been chosen. Besides, this Fortuna only helps wives

to keep the love of their husbands. I know Tibullus loves me. I don't need to be told so. I just want to know how I can get him back to be with me."

"That is what I meant, my lady."

"Oh, stop calling me that! You talk as though I was a matron. We are all girls together and thinking about the same things and all the same age and all lonely. Call me Lilia for once."

"My lady," expostulated Chloris, horrified. "Your mother would skin me."

"Speak for yourself, Lilia." Julia bridled a little. "I'm not lonely. There's Marcus, and Lucas, and Vicinius. And Junius, I think—though he's always making sheep's eyes at that fat Hestia. And—"

"That's plenty. I believe you. You aren't lonely. You don't need any help. Chloris, what *did* you mean?"

"I have a little Fortuna of my own. She likes me. I always ask her and she almost always gives me good advice."

"Then go and get her. And bring back the Virgil, too."

It was not long before Chloris brought a little terra-cotta figurine of the goddess, a bowl, and the thick volume Lilia had asked for. The girls clustered about the articles like naiads come up from the pool to watch the proceedings. Their dark hair mingled together as Chloris filled the bowl with water.

A thick disk of cork, which had lain in the bottom of the bowl, now floated upon the surface. Upon this she placed the tiny statuette, with the back of the goddess to a nick in the bowl's edge. This mark she oriented to the north.

They waited expectantly. Chloris said, "You must spin the disk, my lady. When Fortuna stops turning, if she looks at the exact spot she started from, that is a sign that you are to do nothing. The very next turn will give you your first answer. If she looks elsewhere, then you must turn her three times more. But if you get your first answer and you need others—you are allowed two questions for that particular day.

"You take two out of three, to read the signs. If two agree, then whatever you want to do will turn out well. If all the signs are different, it may mean a definite no, or something else, depending upon what you have asked in your mind.

"You must not ask aloud at this time."

Lilia put out an unsteady hand, hesitated in thought, and gave the cork disk a quick spin. Fortuna turned dizzily around—around and around again, until the girls thought she would never come to rest. When she did, the goddess gazed steadily toward the north. “Now again, mistress,” Chloris commanded. “You have three turns, if you want that many.”

South, southeast, and east the little figurine pointed her pretty nose. Chloris and Julia looked disappointed, but Lilia smiled. Evidently the omen, to her, was propitious.

“Now the Virgil. Let me see what he has to say.” Julia handed her the book. Lilia closed her eyes, touched the pages, turning them with damp fingers, and said, “Oh, Julia! I daren’t look. What does he say?”

Julia stumbled over the words in the *Aeneid* where Jupiter comforts Venus: “‘Fear not my daughter; fate remains unmoved for the Roman—.’” She paled and could not go on. “This is uncanny, Lilia. Do you want to continue? I am afraid. Does it mean anything?”

Lilia looked joyful. “I think so,” she answered dubiously. “Let’s try again.”

The second trial brought forth, “Then live for a while and endure for a happier day.”

Lilia’s eyes were dancing. “Once more. Three times for Virgil, too. Now!” And read: “Tomorrow ingeniously plow the briny deep.”

She flung her naked arms around the other two and hugged them close. “Oh, good Virgil. Wise Virgil. What a helpful friend! He has told me what to do. I’m going to follow Tibullus, even if I have to go as far as the ocean before I can catch up to him and bring him back. I will do it, somehow. I know I will.

“Thank you, Chloris, thank you—thank you. You are as wise as Virgil.”

“But, Lilia—listen. Fortuna said no.”

“No, she didn’t, Julia. She told me just how to travel. Remember? South. That would be from here—from this house. That direction would take me straight to the Appian Gate! Then southeast. The Appian Way runs to Capua, southeast, and turns there toward Brundisium.”

“And Brundisium is east of Capua? So what?” There was a



dawning comprehension in Chloris' eyes which she would have liked to deny.

"Brundisium is where that miserable legion is going and where Tibullus is being forced to go, to take ship with them, and if I can't get him away, I am going there too. Maybe I will even go on the ship!

"Wherever he goes, there I will go. A woman must go with her husband!"

Julia's forehead wrinkled with unaccustomed thought. She rolled over on her bare stomach and flattened out on the warm tiles. The tinkle of the fountain went on uninterrupted. She was considering.

"Maybe I can help you on your way, as far as Antium. My aunt lives there, and she has written to Mother often, asking us to come down. Father is always so busy and Mother doesn't want to leave him by himself—those girl slaves, you know—so we never do go.

"There is such a wonderful bathing beach. And new boys! All the really nice people go there about this time, except us."

Lilia lay drowsily listening, enjoying the kneading of Chloris' expert hands, feeling the scented oil being worked into her relaxed muscles. Her tautness and tension were vanishing with the decision she had made. The details of what she meant to do did not seem to be so important now.

"Antium, Julia? That is off the road. The legion won't be going there."

"I know it. Of course you don't want to go to Antium. There is a posthouse where the gravel road turns off from the Appian Way and you could take the stage there, for Tarracina.

"Think of it. It would be so easy for you to catch up with the legion. It only marches a regulation twenty miles a day and then goes into barracks for the night. Maybe not at the turn-off, although there is a big field there. I remember seeing soldiers exercising on it once, when we visited a few years ago.

"If you ask and I ask, they'll let us both go—maybe. Together, that is. Neither one of us could go anywhere alone. I'll have a week at the beach. You can get your boy out of the army and come back to Antium and find me. We'll take plenty of money. Go straight to the commander. Wear your best clothes. Tell him

who your father is. He won't dare keep Tibullus! Don't let Auntie see him and nobody will ever know, but you and me. He can stay at an inn until we go home. Oh, Lilia, it will be such fun!"

"What if your mother does decide to go?"

"I told you! Mother would never trust Father out of her sight for a whole week. I know he won't want to go. He doesn't like any of Mother's family."

"Mine either," said Lilia thoughtfully. "It sounds good. It might work." She rolled over, luxuriating like a lazy kitten. Chloris' loving fingers massaged the oil delicately into her mistress' torso. Her face was disapprovingly sober.

Julia raised herself on one elbow. "I wish my skin was as white as yours. I use asses' milk and chalk and everything I can think of and it doesn't do a bit of good. Even pumice won't lighten my dark skin. Mother says she thinks Father has a touch of Numidian in him, way back somewhere."

Lilia inspected herself. "Yes, it is white, isn't it? Yours is nice, though. I like a golden-brown skin. It looks so warm." She frowned and touched one pink-tipped breast. "This spoils everything. I wish I didn't have this awful birthmark. A horse head and red as blood. I can't paint it out or cover it up. It always shows through. Such a terrible place to have it!"

"Tibullus won't care. I'll wager he'll like it. You can always undress in the dark if he doesn't. I hear Greek wives always do that. Is that so, Chloris? Is it because they are modest, or did the custom begin because Greek women were all so plain years ago that they didn't want their husbands to know about it? Ow! Not so hard!"

"I am sure I would not know about those historical matters, Lady Julia." Chloris had finished scraping down Lilia's straight limbs and was now digging deeply into Julia's shoulders. Her voice was deceptively placid and distant. Her face was calm. Only her trembling fingers betrayed her annoyance. She continued pummeling Julia's smooth brown back unmercifully, despite the rising wails of protest.

## COMMANDER MANLIUS MAKES AN ENEMY

There was a great flurry of packing for the trip, once permission had been granted. Wispy things to be giggled over and held up and admired—later by Tibullus, the girls hoped. Julia's comments brought blushes to Lilia's cheeks. Chests to be emptied and re-packed after leather bags and little wooden trunks were filled.

Chloris fared well, to the point of embarrassment of riches. Then jewelry, a small store of gold coin—"For emergencies. Travelers always have emergencies"—this from her father. A nice new traveling cloak as a going-away gift from Mother—and finally farewells and much waving of hands and scarves. The whole household had turned out to make the adventure memorable.

Where the gravel road diverged from the paved Appian Way, which drove on straight as a ruler toward Tarracina, the two girls and Julia's maid alighted from the stage, with their luggage marked for Antium.

"The Via Appia. The Queen of Ways!" complained Julia, rubbing herself. "Almost three hundred years old and they haven't got it finished yet. Give me a litter every time. Are you going any farther tonight? If you aren't, I'll stay with you until the morning rheda for Tarracina comes."

"Perhaps I ought to go on. It doesn't seem that we have come very far."

"Twenty bruising miles. Hostler! Did a legion camp here last night?"

The man swept his glance boldly over Julia. "Right over there. Why? Do you girls need one?" Lilia colored, but Julia only laughed, preening as she always did if she was noticed by a man.

"I'm surprised you saw it," she retorted.

"Wouldn't have, if you'd been here," he answered cheerfully, and went on unharnessing the tired horses, whistling through his teeth.

While the fresh horses were being brought out, the three lunched hurriedly and Lilia whispered, "I think I will go on to the next posthouse. I don't like this one. Julia, aren't you afraid?"

"Of him? Don't be silly. The rheda for Antium will be here in an hour and we'll be at Auntie's before dark. I know his kind anyway. He's only a tease. If I slapped him, he'd probably cry."

She squeezed Lilia breathless and kissed her hard. "Ho, driver! Get these things back in the boot. Take good care of my little girl now, do you hear?"

"Yes, Mother!" He gave Julia a grin that matched the hostler's. "Cute kid for her age, ain't she?"

Julia shook her head sadly. "You don't know what that poor child has been through." The whip cracked. The horses jumped and the stage rolled out of the yard onto the highway which led toward Tarracina, Capua, and the great seaport of Brundisium.

Now that Julia was left behind, Lilia felt a sinking sensation of loss. But she did not permit herself to admit that any situation might be one with which she could not cope—or which money could not ease. It was mainly because of this, that she had decided to leave Chloris at home. Determination and resolution she had.

"A woman must go where her husband goes." That was something Lilia must never forget. It had echoed in her mind in Rome as the stage was rattling down the long Street of Tombs and passed by the elaborately colonnaded mausoleum her father had designed. It was empty as yet, but there was a niche in it which belonged to her. Untenanted as it was, it seemed that the last tie to a former life was broken when, looking back, she saw it pass from sight.

She closed her eyes, but inwardly she rode again where, mile upon mile, the beginning of the Appian Way had been enclosed on either side by high continuing walls, the houses of the dead. It did not seem a good omen for a long journey.

The walled enclosures invaded only for a short distance the hidden open fields to left and right. Here were the deeply in-

cised inscriptions on the tablets and carved markers, the openings which gave admittance through the wall for mourners or curious passers-by to view sarcophagus or urn. Beyond the wall, the long parade of shafts and obelisks raised their peaks, topped with marble vases.

Here also could be seen the domes of private mausoleums for family or clan and the roofs of elaborate storied structures built and maintained by burial societies operated by some large corporation.

She thought she could still hear how the echoes rumbled between those high walls. The slender, dark spires of the long line of cypresses marched backward as the stage passed by. The spreading umbrellas of the pines, the giant ilex, some few older than the city itself, all moved gently in the wind as though beckoning her to reconsider and return.

But she had not! She was still journeying forward. Her decision must remain irrevocable, she thought, and yet . . . Oh, lovely Roma! My city—my home—my country! It is not for nothing that the poets reverse your name and call you Amor—Love.

The busy hum of the city had faded as the stage rolled on into the open country of the Campagna. Rome, the city, was gone—Rome, the Empire, was knit together by the roads. She wondered if, to keep Tibullus as husband, she must travel more than one.

She opened her eyes and looked back. The posthouse was just disappearing from sight. Now she felt a second pang of parting. Her young gossip and companion, her last tie to the known and familiar, was left behind.

The night before, directly after the Thirteenth had gone into camp and the organization of it was running smoothly, one of the new recruits appeared at the commander's tent, seeking an interview.

Manlius' first impression of him was favorable. He saw a tall, strongly built man, scarred by sword cuts on hands and face, well muscled and of middle age. His soldierly bearing, his deeply burned coloration, indicated a veteran of foreign service.

He returned the salute. Here obviously was officer material.

The only thing he did not like was the shadow of resentment clearly written in the recruit's face. "Your name, soldier?"

The man, standing quiet at attention, stiffened even more. His voice was crisp, even—and faintly angry.

"Lucius Cassius Longinus, sir. I am no longer a soldier. I was senior centurion, Third Cyrenaica. Discharged on completion of sixteen years' Judean service, sir."

Manlius lifted an eyebrow a hairsbreadth. It was his only sign of surprise. "What are you doing here, Centurion?"

"A mistake has been made, sir. I wish to be released in order to return to Rome."

"Did you sign the articles?"

"I am told so, sir. I was—I must have been drunk at the time. I had much on my mind and I had a few drinks to forget."

"Dishonorable discharge, Centurion Longinus?"

"No, sir!" His voice was indignant. Manlius studied him a moment before speaking, then held out his hand.

"Your diploma, Centurion. Let me see your discharge."

Longinus looked down briefly, then met the commander's steady stare with a tinge of shame in his eyes and voice.

"I awoke in an alley, sir. I was sick and I had been robbed. My money, my medals, and my service record were gone. There had been a fight. I went into the taberna and there was another one. I was beaten. There were eight of them, sir," he hastily explained. Manlius' lips twitched.

"I do not remember signing the articles, sir. I know I walked down the street. I think I fell. I do remember hearing a drum. I have served my time, General. I wish to be released."

"Stand quiet. I will have the articles brought." Manlius went to the door of the tent and gave orders to his standifer.

When the guard returned, Manlius scanned the report of the recruiters. "Is this your signature?"

"It seems to be, sir."

"Do you recognize it?" Manlius snapped.

"Yes, sir."

"Then, Centurion Lucius Cassius Longinus, you are now a common legionary of the Thirteenth Legion and there is nothing I can do."

"You have the power to cancel my recruitment, sir."

Manlius shook his head. "You signed of your own free will. You were not forced to do so. The law is clear in such matters. You are a volunteer. Volunteers sign articles for twenty years' service. You have no diploma. Nothing to prove that you have ever served a day in the army. No medals—no service records. Your wounds could have been received in brawls, the arena, or as an outlaw. Personally, I believe your story. Legally, you have no proof."

Longinus said nothing.

"You are aware of the penalty for desertion, Legionary Longinus?"

"It is crucifixion," Longinus answered, almost in a whisper.

"Have you ever seen a crucifixion?"

"I once commanded a detail in charge of one, sir."

"You would not wish it for yourself, would you?"

"No, General. I dream about it sometimes, General."

"Then accept the fact. You are now a legionary, but I promise that, at the very earliest moment possible, you will be reinstated as a centurion. Unofficially, I am sorry for you. Actually, you know that you are far better off here than you would ever be as a civilian."

Manlius' gaze swept admiringly over him. "Consider. You are a fine figure of a man. Do you really want to bend that straight back over a plow? Your eyes are squinted from looking at far horizons. Could you bear to look down into a furrow to search for stones?"

"We are going into lands of mystery where no Roman has ever been before. Be glad. You would never have enjoyed that farm. Can you think of anyone who ever has, or who got out of the army young enough to work it happily, if he did? Come on! Give me a name. Just one.

"Nobody? You know you cannot. Why, you wouldn't know what to do with a farm if you had one. Dig it up with a trenching tool, maybe? Cut the hay with a short-sword—fork it with a javelin? Curse a lazy mule the rest of your life?"

"Bah! The army is your life, your home. Your hand fits the hilt of a sword, not a hoe. Lucky you, to be back again."

Longinus straightened to attention. His every fiber quivered

with suppressed emotion. "Sir. Have I your permission to withdraw?"

"Dismissed, soldier."

Stiff-backed, with extreme military precision and exact stipulated length of stride, Longinus left the tent. A little distance away, he relaxed. His hand fell to the hilt at his side and his scarred fingers clenched around it until the knuckles whitened. There was no one near enough to hear his muttered growl. "My hope of forgiveness gone. Is this the first of my punishment? My sin, but his fault that I cannot escape it."

"Hear me, Heaven. I swear, before I die, I shall see that man's blood on my sword!"

The disgruntled veteran was not the only one that night to come in contact with the stern interpretation of regulations as conceived and laid down by the commander of the Thirteenth.

Lucius Sempronius Atticus, patrician and knight, was unaccustomed to labor of any kind, or even to walking any great distance. The twenty-mile march in his dissipated condition had been agony to his sore feet and back. The heat, the dust, his aching head and continual thirst caused him to wish for death many times before the first day was over.

If one straggled, the blow of the centurion's vine-stick was quick to follow. Centurion Ciscus, whose charges these recruits had become, quickly turned into the most hated man in the Tenth Cohort—possibly the entire legion.

The recruits weaved from side to side, devoid of any kind of formation, disliking themselves, the army, the knotted lump of vine that was so quick to rise, so painful in its descent—and too tired to swear.

The young patrician suffered more than all the rest. If it had not been for the support he received from the strong arm of Longinus and at other times from Galba, the farmer, both long injured to hard labor, he would have been obliged to fall out.

His pain, his weariness, did not excuse him that night from acting as sentry and standing watch, as part of the system which, it was hoped, would eventually make him into an iron-thewed legionary of the Empire or kill him. Neither did it, on this particular first night, enable him to stay awake.



He resented the ridiculous idea of acting as a stationarius in a peaceful country. He yawned and stood with eyes closed. His head drooped. So did his lance point. The ache soaked deliciously out of his relaxed muscles. It was very quiet. Frogs croaked far away and the muttering sound was a lullaby.

He snapped awake with a startled jerk. The rattle of his fallen lance shocked him out of his stupor. For a few moments he strode his beat, with what he thought was a soldierly bearing, but the few moments of drowsiness had stiffened his legs.

No one was around. No traffic moved on the dark highway. He looked about him cautiously. The camp was asleep. All was quiet, except the hypnotic coaxing of the frogs. If he sat down, just long enough to rub the cramps out of his legs and loosen the thongs of his new boots, no one would know.

His hands moved more and more slowly. His head leaned back comfortably against a tree. He yawned again and in an instant was sound asleep. It was thus, an hour later, that Manlius—carrying out his usual midnight inspection before retiring—found him, his head sunk on his breast, his helmet shiny with dew, and his lance clutched in an affectionate embrace.

Manlius stood there, considering. He knew that the sentry was a new member, yet this infraction of discipline could not be overlooked or tolerated. He removed his own heavy wool cloak and tucked it firmly around the sleeping form. He slipped the lance from the lax hold and stood like a statue, guarding the post, until the relief came.

The decurion of the guard was quick to grasp the situation. He was about to kick Atticus sharply but Manlius stopped him.

"Let him sleep. He will need all the rest he can get. He will be flogged in the morning. Have the boy bring my cloak to me before it is done."

Just before dawn the officer's cloak was brought to Manlius' tent. Atticus, greeted sternly, stood for a bitter estimate of his fault, his qualities and probable future worth to the legion and the world in general.

He took the tongue lashing without a word, but when burly Centurion Ciscus signaled for the men with ropes to tie him and lead him away for punishment he twisted free.

Manlius regarded him without comment.

"Sir! I appeal! I am Lucas Sempronius Atticus, a Roman knight. A patrician should not suffer the touch of a plebeian."

"In the ranks there are no patricians, only legionaries. What you were before is of no importance. What you are and what you do today is all that matters. What you did last night could have brought death to a hundred men."

"If you were in enemy country, you would not have the mercy of the whip. Your death would be required."

"Then I admit the justice of the punishment and concede its necessity. I submit, without resistance, on one condition."

"I listen, with interest."

"I would not be touched by the hands of these men. They are filthy. There is no need to bind me. I will stand against the post."

"Twenty lashes, laid on well."

Before the assembly, patrician Atticus was led through the lines into the square center of the camp and his back roughly bared. He stood calmly a few inches from the post without touching it.

Ciscus seized him by the hair and twisted his head around to look into his face more closely. "Dirty, are we? You'll cry for your mother before the fifth stroke. Hold that post tight, you puling brat, and keep your head against it, or I'll take your eyes out so you won't see my dirt."

Atticus spat contemptuously and eased fractionally farther from the wood. Ciscus spread the thongs with his fingers. He stripped them down and let them trail long behind him. He took a first practice swing past the bared back.

The boy did not shrink away. The next blow came down like a rain of fire. He stood there proudly as the strokes fell. He began to count. It was the tenth stroke before he gasped, caught his breath with a choking sob. The counting continued, but the numbers came out as strongly as before, although hardly as understandable to either the crowd or the centurion.

"Eighteen—nineteen—twenty." Indeed, there now were tears, but they were forced out by pain only. He had not begged, touched the post, or cringed away from the lash.

He turned. He looked at the blood-spattered ground, the dripping thongs, the sweating flogger. He faced Ciscus with scorn.

"One day I hope I will do the same for you. Then perhaps I

shall see you cry." He meant to walk proudly toward his place in the ranks, but after he had taken a few steps his knees buckled. He fell, face forward, on the hard-packed earth of the parade ground.

Centurion Ciscus picked him up. His face was hard and impassive. He singled out a nearby medicus. "Tend him. Get him into the hospital wagon, until he can walk. We'll be moving out soon."

He looked at Manlius for confirmation of the order.

The commander nodded slightly, without expression, and turned away toward his horse. Atticus opened his eyes. His glance fell upon the broad receding back under the dark red cloak which had kept him warm and dry through most of the night. He stared at it until the commander was completely out of sight.

He did not know that Ciscus had strode quickly through the wagon park and intercepted Manlius as he rode by. "Sir—a word?"

Manlius reined in. "Yes, Centurion?"

"May I suggest, sir, under the circumstances—I mean—well, I would like to say—"

"Come to the point, Centurion Ciscus, my time is limited."

"Well, sir"—the embarrassed words came out with a rush—"I believe we have officer material here in Legionary Atticus, when he shakes down. I'd like to have the handling of him, sir. He's got guts, you see, and the men know it now. They'll look up to him later, sir. I thought you ought to know."

Humor showed in Manlius' eyes. "The thought had occurred to me, Centurion. Train him well. If he doesn't break, see me later. Maybe—when he can handle the weapons and do his twenty a day without sweating—we'll see."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!" Ciscus turned away.

"One other question, Centurion."

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you have a personal interest in this? A favor, perhaps?"

"A favor, Commander?" Ciscus' tone was almost horror. "Never asked a favor in my life, sir! Don't want any. Don't give any. No, sir, no favor! For the good of the legion only, sir!"

"I see." Manlius' eyes twinkled. "Excused, Centurion."

When the wagons rolled out, Atticus was unaware. He was in a state of deep coma. Not long after, he was brought to consciousness by almost unendurable pain. He shrieked once, then clenched his teeth. No one should enjoy his torment.

The wagons rolled, rocked, and swayed over the wide, joined stones which paved the Appian Way. He was rolled roughly about, although the surgeon held him face down upon the built-in bunk. He twisted about to see who was torturing him. The old man was rubbing ointment, not ungently, but with a firm hand.

"Oh, stop! I'm all right. I can't stand this."

The old man was surprisingly strong. "Lie still. I'm almost finished. You will heal quickly. It's only eunuch's fat, with some salt, sulphur, and a bit of mandragora. This will make a man of you. A little pain is good for the soul."

"Then today I have the finest soul in the legion. Finer than everybody's, especially finer than Commander Manlius'. That demon!"

The surgeon cuffed him sharply. "No more of that now, or I'll rub oil of cloves in these cuts. You wouldn't like it. You won't die. You'll be all the better for this. You won't sleep on duty again."

"I don't believe I'll ever sleep again." Atticus' whisper was faint, but he managed a feeble grin. "Do they have to hit all the high stones in the road?"

"Let me tell you a little about this commander you call a demon. Wherever you may have to go—depend on it, he'll lead you there. He's not like some of these campfire generals that say, 'Go out and die like a hero!' He says, 'Follow me!' and by Jupiter, the men do follow. They love him. Someday you will too. He's always in front."

The young patrician gave his mentor a disgusted look but said nothing. He winced as the knowing fingers probed deeper into the cuts and buried his face in his arms. The surgeon continued, "I was with him when we went on a hurry-up expedition against an insurrection of the mountain tribes back in Baetica.

"They had been the last to submit. Some of the younger hot-heads of the Asturi and the Cantabri got together and laid siege to a town. It wasn't much of a place—had a wall and no engines—but it was strategic. It commanded a pass and we didn't want

to lose it. Besides, there were some Roman families and quite a lot of women. Could have been rough for them.

"Well, we made a forced march. It was damned hot. The sun beat down on the flats and before we ever got up into the foothills the weaker ones were already falling out. Mind you, all good soldiers—maybe a little soft from garrison duty, but pretty tough. They followed along, after.

"There was just no breeze at all. And heat! You never saw anything like it.

"Some of the boys went mad. Others dropped dead with strokes. Double time all the way and we could see smoke coming up black in the hills. The rest of us marched on. We couldn't stop, or thought we couldn't.

"Follow me!' said Commander Manlius and we did. At noon the sun was a ball of fire. We were in among the rocks then and they were heated. If it had turned dark, I think those stones would have shone red. The way opened up into a valley where there was a little clump of trees. Even the officers were ready to mutiny. They begged the commander to halt.

"Romans may be dying,' he said. 'We must march on.' They insisted and he gave in and agreed to give us a short rest.

"Everybody crowded into the shade and just dropped. Most of us slept. We couldn't help it. Suddenly a centurion yelled, 'Where's the general?' We grabbed at our swords and staggered up.

"Commander Manlius was right where he had halted, waiting for us, standing like a statue out in that blazing heat.

"Are all of you rested now? Then—follow me!

"We didn't stop again. Good thing, too. Another hour or so, the town would have been taken. I tell you, lad, when we brought them back to Baetica and marched into Corduba, the people were out on the balconies and there were flowers all over the place and the girls coming out into the street and kissing us and laughing and crying.

"It wasn't Rome and it wasn't exactly a triumph, but it was the nearest thing to it I ever hope to see. There were no derisive songs from the ranks that followed the commander, nothing sarcastic to keep a swelled head shrunk; no slave behind him in

the chariot to whisper in his ear, 'You, too, are mortal.' Nobody laughing at him.

"Just tramp, tramp, tramp of army boots and people cheering and loving him! Why, he ought to be Caesar—could be, too, if he wanted to try!

"Now you just do some deep thinking. Remember the oath you took? 'To follow the leaders under whom you will be summoned to fight—against any enemy whatsoever; not to abandon the standards; not to commit any action contrary to law.'

"That's the sacramentum, lad. Just make sure that when the commander says, 'Follow me!' you do it. He'll be up front, as long as he's alive. And when he dies, you'll never find a better man to follow."

"All right! All right! I believe you. I'll get that bastard Ciscus, though, someday. He enjoys that whip too much."

The surgeon was indifferent. "Suit yourself. He's a good soldier too, in his way. Mighty independent. Boasts that he has never done a favor for anybody in his life and never asks for any. He's one of God's creatures, same as you are. Same as all of us."

"He is a filthy swine. A pig looks up to heaven only when it is flat on its back and dead. That's the way I want to see him."

With a groan, he relaxed, holding on as firmly as possible to the sides of the bunk. The surgeon observed him a few moments, climbed into the opposite bunk, and also slept. It was not often that he had an opportunity to ride when he should be marching.

## CAMP FOLLOWER

Three hundred and forty-seven Roman miles long, composed of blocks polished and cut to form angles which could be jointed together without cement to form one whole mosaic of stone, the Via Appia, oldest in Italy, drove on toward Brundisium.

Twenty-four feet wide throughout most of its length, well cambered and drained, marked with *mille* stones every thousand paces, serviced by posthouses, taverns, and other way stations for ordinary travelers, barracks and camping sites for the military, it bore an immense traffic.

The Via Flaminia was its only competitor in length, running as it does from Rome to Rimini, but the importance of the Appian Way was far greater. Like the Great North Road of the British Isles and the Grand Trunk Road of India, both of which were yet to come into being, it was the main artery of commerce from the south. Along it passed, in both directions, the restless stream of life which circulated throughout the Roman world.

Here one saw pilgrims and peddlers, with packs and staffs; the long trains of pack mules and donkeys; cattle with their drovers; goose girls and boys guiding their talkative charges with long switches as they waddled to market; flocks of sheep, herds of goats, sounders of swine snuffling along.

All scattered to safety at the urgent bleat of the mail drivers' trumpet, whose light, fast carts had precedence over all traffic except the state-owned post chaises, the biroti, used by government couriers.

Here rumbled the local short-distance traffic: the hay wagons and farm ox carts with their clumsy, solid wheels; the drays for long-distance hauling, carrying wood, charcoal, and produce; wine, pottery packed in straw, olive oil; onions and garlic in sacks and garlands; high-wheeled, low-bodied wains laden with

lumber, blocks and slabs of marble and tufa for the building construction which constantly increased.

Threading their way through all this rolled the light one-horse chaises and mule carts, decked with ribbons and tinkling bells; the chariots, the gigs—all the gaudy and brightly painted equipages of the wealthy travelers, bound for the sea and pleasure spots, plumes nodding on the heads of their gaily bedecked horses.

Here the whips cracked loudest as they flashed by the long column of the marching legion, patiently slogging four abreast on the left side of the highway, in the covering mist of dust which always accompanied them.

The booted ones passed Aricia and went almost happily into barracks where the raised causeway, six feet above the fever-laden Pontine Marshes, first plunged. It drove arrow straight, as though the surveyors who plotted it had grudged one extra moment spent with the mosquitoes.

The next day they marched through Forum Appi without stopping, except for the usual rests, and were able to camp again without much annoyance. Then the dust began again.

Lilia, in company with the other stage passengers, stopped at Forum Appi. It was a haunt of the boatmen who plied the long canal which paralleled the highway. The food was poor and the beds lumpy. She did not sleep well but was cheered with the thought that over forty miles lay behind and her meeting with Tibullus could not be long delayed.

The stage left at sunup. The morning was bright and clear. The breakfast was better than she had expected. Everyone seemed in good spirits.

Southward toward Tarracina, down along the spine of Italy, they rolled, the soft sea air blowing inland from their right, rendering the heat bearable. The travelers could see the high Apennines, which they eventually must cross.

Far ahead of them the length of the legion rippled as it moved on. It clanked and clattered like the armored entity it was, dominating the landscape, pushing forward, pressing against the opposing stream of traffic which unwillingly made way for its menacing strength.



As though drawn along in its wake, though dwarfed by its immensity, the stage which carried Lilia hurried in pursuit.

Her heart leaped within her at the sight of the rear of the overtaken column. She eagerly peered out of the window. Here she would see Tibullus, if anywhere in the passing, for she knew enough about the army to know that all new recruits were placed in the very last century of the last cohort, until they had been promoted, if ever.

Yes, there he was! Her boy, her lover, her husband! An awkward, sulky-appearing lad, as the other passengers saw him. He was weighed down by a heavy pack, limping with sore feet, his lance at an odd angle.

She repeated the word "husband," over and over, until it almost lost its meaning, trying to make herself believe that it was really true, seeing him with eyes hazy with glamour, not as he really was.

Lilia had little time to judge his unhappiness, for the dust rolled in and the leather curtains were hastily let fall and tied fast. The rheda rolled on, beside the marching men, pushing the foot traffic and animals off the side of the road, contesting the way with other cartage.

With curses and slander and scurrilous comment upon all whom the stage driver met, he slowly gained upon the column. The rheda went by the baggage wagons and ambulances, the companies and divisions, the cavalry at point and the tall man who rode in front. Finally it came, a good two hours ahead of the Thirteenth, into the yard of the mansio which serviced the stage line.

At this way station, government controlled and maintained, travelers were expected to show an official passport. As Lilia had one good only to, or in the direction of, Antium, she entered with some trepidation.

Her luggage was unloaded along with that of an elderly couple bound for Capua, who planned to stop over and hire a rig in order to visit friends in Tarracina. They were a placid pair, who seemed no longer afraid of death or time.

Lilia chatted pleasantly and animatedly with them and did not correct the mistake. When she observed the near approach of the harassed servant who was trying to arrange matters for the

transfer of passengers, care for a sick child, supervise the change of horses, and check passports—all at the same time and while answering questions from several people—she stepped aside.

It was easy to slip away, casually ask directions from a female slave, and disappear around the rear of the inn. She remained in seclusion, listening and marking time. Eventually she heard the stage driver, with whose rasping voice she had become all too familiar, whip up the new steeds and encourage them with the information that he knew they were the laziest horses in Italy, but he would try to get a few miles out of them before they fell dead from exhaustion.

She then entered the inn, claimed her luggage, showed a discreet amount of money and, in a fine blending of anxiety and grief, asked for a room for the night, lamenting the inexcusable thoughtlessness of her grandparents, who had inconsiderately forgotten her and hurried off to Tarracina, taking her passport with them.

The innkeeper seemed skeptical but showed her into a small, clean, pine-paneled room fitted with a narrow corded bed, a single chair without cushion, a simple commode with ewer, basin, and chamber pot. Used to luxury as she was, this seemed adequate but spartan.

While her luggage was being brought up, she threw back the linen sheets and inspected the thin mattress. It was hard, but there were no lice. She sat down and tried to think how she should manage.

Trees shaded the inn and the rooms were comfortably cool. She bathed away the dust of travel, brushed her hair, and bound it with a blue ribbon. She dug out nard and perfume from her small traveling kit and, finally satisfied with her face, put on one of her prettiest tunicas and draped a light shawl over her shoulders. Clouds hung low—there was a threat of rain to come.

Just before dark she strolled out as though to take the air in the courtyard and, with heart pounding wildly, took to the now almost deserted highway. Inexperienced as she was in travel by herself, she realized that there could be danger for a girl alone in the night, where it would not be likely during the day inside the well-regulated public conveyances.

The campsite used by legions on route march had been casu-

ally pointed out to her as the stage passed by. Her plan was vague in the extreme. She envisioned herself confronting the commander, announcing herself as the daughter of one of Rome's most prominent bankers, and demanding the release of her husband in his name. If this was not feasible, then surely she would be able to buy his freedom. Money had smoothed her life. She had great faith in its ability to continue doing so.

She knew that the borders of the camp would be patrolled by sentries walking a beat. When she came in sight of it she saw one, a stationarius who was not expected to pace, at the entrance to a long street, lit by cressets raised high on poles. It was lined, on both sides, with leather tents.

Lilia stood in the shielding darkness, considering. She had no idea where Tibullus might be. She had to see the general. She had money. Everybody liked money—even generals.

She plucked up her courage and walked toward the sentry. She came upon him abruptly. "Be off. The camp is out of bounds to you girls." His voice was gruff and uncompromising. Inwardly, Lilia quaked.

"I want to see the commander." The light of the torch fell upon her face, partly hidden by the hood of her cloak. He looked into its shadow with admiration.

"You fly high, little lark, but you can't nest here. Spread your pretty wings and flit."

She bridled. It was obvious what he took her for. What an insult! She straightened to her full height, hardly to his chin, and said, "I am Lilia Metellus, daughter of Liletus, the banker. I have journeyed from Rome, carrying an important message to your commander. I demand to be taken to him instantly."

He laughed. "In a tavern girl's outfit? With that perfume? Tell *me*, dulcia. I listen better!"

"I must see him. I have something important to ask him. Please send someone, or let me look for him."

She tried to crowd by. He dropped his lance in front of her as a barrier and with his free hand pushed back her hood.

Her hair fell free and he saw her face in the full light. He whistled. His voice was hoarse as he breathed, "Tell you what—give us a kiss and you meet me here in an hour. I ain't no officer, but I'm a lot younger than the commander and I like

you better than he would. I'll be off duty in an hour. What do you say?"

He grabbed her shoulder. His bristles were sharp against her cheek and his breath was sour with wine. Lilia screamed, "Tibullus! Tibullus! Help!"

She twisted out of his grasp, leaving her cloak behind. The lance fell to the ground and his shield clattered against it.

"Pluto!" he panted. "You're no lark but a slippery little eel. An eel is no good until it is skinned." He caught at her shoulder again and the gold clasp broke, baring it. She turned and raked his face with her nails.

Suddenly a stern voice interrupted. "Standifer! What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

The sentry became as rigid as a bar of iron. A drop of blood ran down his cheek and dripped off his chin. He did not move but stood staring straight ahead.

"A tavern wench, Tribune Mancinus. I was sending her on her way, sir."

The tribune eyed him keenly, suppressing a smile with some effort. "Pick up your shield and lance, sentry. It would appear that you have been wounded in battle. Possibly you should ask the victor to assume your arms. Apparently she is the better soldier."

The standifer gazed woodenly ahead. The tribune turned his attention to Lilia. He said kindly, "Child, you are too young for this. You are the fifth one who has been turned away already. Be thankful that you did not get into the camp."

"Pick up your cloak and go back to your tavern. Tell your master to send us no more of you girls. It will do him no good."

He was about to leave. Lilia seized his hand in desperation. "Sir, I beg of you. Take me to your commander. You can do it. I must see him. I cannot reach him in any other way. I pray you. Only he can help me." Now that it was over, she felt afraid. Her eyes brimmed and her lips quivered.

There are few men who can resist the tears of a pretty woman. Tribune Mancinus was not one of them. He picked up the cloak and fastened it around Lilia's shoulders.

"You don't look like the other girls, at that. Is it really important that you go to headquarters?"

"Oh, so important! It is my very life to see him."

The tribune hesitated. Then he made up his mind. "All right. I'll get a reprimand probably, but what's one more? Come with me."

She smiled up at him, thankfully. He was so tall and strong and protecting. She did not know it, but when they walked away together the tribune felt a good deal taller than he had a few minutes earlier.

When they were out of sight the sentry relaxed. He said, with bitterness, as he stroked his smarting face, "Just like the damned song! The tribunes get the honey!"

"Someone to see you, sir."

"To see me? This is hardly my province, Tribune. You know what to do in these cases. See that she is removed." Manlius dipped his pen in the ink and said, without raising his eyes, "You should have known better than to come here. I've had enough of you girls who hang around every barrack and camp-site, feeling sorry for the army. Return to whoever sent you and tell him that if he punishes you I will personally see that he is flogged."

His gesture of dismissal was peremptory. He continued to write.

The tribune shrugged. "You see?" His voice was sympathetic. "Come. I will see you safely to the gate."

There was a sob in her voice. "I implore you, sir. Please listen to me. I am not what you seem to think. I have followed you from Rome, to bring back my husband, who was tricked into your command."

Manlius looked up sharply. Lilia took a step forward.

"I am Lilia Metellus, wife of Tibullus Metellus, whose father is a senator. My father is Gaius Aemilius Liletus, corn merchant and banker. I have brought money to pay for his substitute, when you let my husband come home. A terrible mistake has been made."

They studied each other. She felt pierced by his steady gaze.

"We were on our way to get married. You took him. We had to get married right there in the street. It was terrible."

The commander's face was stern and lined with deep grooves. He looked burdened and haggard, as though faced with an almost insupportable problem. Was he committed to a duty too great to bear? Momentarily she felt close to him. It came as a shock that people in high places were not free from worry.

She wondered if this mission, whatever it was that took the legion away from Rome, was something he secretly dreaded. All at once, without knowing why, she felt sorry for this man.

Then the quiet communion was over. He had smiled. In doing so, the lines smoothed out and she saw the real person, almost gentle, surely understanding, behind the official mask of his frown. Her heart leaped. It was going to be all right!

"Forgive me for misjudging you. I have heard your father's name. All the way from Rome, you say? Is your father with you?"

Lilia shook her head, not trusting her voice. His shrewd gaze was unsettling and she could not meet it. He raised her chin with a firm finger. His smile was now quizzical.

"He does not know about this mad venture of yours, then? Surely you did not come alone?"

She nodded, still not daring to speak.

"You may go, Tribune. Please remain within call. I shall probably need you."

The officer saluted, his face impassive, and quitted the tent. Manlius pulled the ties and the flaps fell. He unfolded another stool, motioned to Lilia to sit down on the other side of the table, resumed his seat, and said, "I am a father too. I have a son with whom I am much concerned and I am far away, also. I would have liked to have a daughter. Now tell me all about it."

At that kind tone, the relief was too great. She hid her face in her hands and began to cry again. Manlius waited patiently. When she had finished he said, "Whenever you are ready. Now?"

The story came out with much repetition, in a mixed-up way, hindered by occasional sobs, involuntary hiccups, and much drying of eyes. At some point she offered the small bag of golden aurei.

He shook his head and pronounced judgment, checking off points on his fingers as he did so. "I regret that I can do nothing in this matter. You acknowledge that your parents were against this union and that it has never been consummated. You have no proof that a marriage has ever taken place, except the hastily scribbled lines you have shown me—a contract without sponsors, family permission, witnesses, or the signature of a priest.

"In my opinion, it would appear that you have been overcome by infatuation for this young man. Knowing no more than you yourself have told me, I would say that he is very likely a fortune hunter."

Her head went up indignantly. He raised his hand.

"Do not interrupt. I speak from a better viewpoint than yours. I know you do not see him in that light. I cannot take your money. Neither can I, nor shall I, release him. You admit that he signed the articles in his own hand, that he is a free citizen of Rome and of an age to be responsible for his acts.

"You think he was deceived. Many recruits the next day have presented the same argument. In your case I have no other recourse than to act in place of your father and do as I am sure your father would have me decide. I must, in the morning, make certain that you are returned to Rome. But—what shall I do with you tonight?"

He paused, in deep thought, then went to the tent opening and looked out. It was now completely dark. The rain that had threatened was rapping against the walls in little dashes.

"I would not care to trust one of my men to see you safely back at this hour, nor would you be as secure inside that inn as you may think you would be. These tabernas and mansios are notorious for rough characters. I have no accommodations for you, unless I turn men out into the wet.

"You have been singularly fortunate to have come here without harm. I cannot assume the responsibility of permitting you to leave here alone. You must remain in my tent tonight."

"May I see my husband?"

"It will be better that you do not. Neither tonight nor before you leave. You have been very foolish. Forget this unfortunate attachment as though it had never been. Thank the gods that

you have been lucky enough to escape with as little grief as you have felt. Believe me. This is not the end of the world."

"It is to me. It is to Tibullus."

"It will not be to your father and mother." His grim tone ended further argument. He raised his voice. Tribune Mancinus returned.

"Bring blankets and a cot. This young lady will sleep here tonight."

The tribune raised a quizzical eyebrow but made no comment.

Manlius said, "It is time to make my rounds." He left the tent.

Lilia prepared for sleep, with one eye on the entrance, drew the blankets up to her chin, turned her face to the tent wall, and lay quaking. This was not a boy she could manage. This was not Tibullus. This was a stranger—a man! Exciting—dangerous? She could not make up her mind. She began to dream.

Her drowsiness passed when he came in. As he bent to blow out the lamp she saw, with a little thrill, his strong profile as a shadow on the wall over her head. His mere presence was overwhelming.

She did not dare speculate upon what Julia might have done in her place. She thought she knew. Her half fears were unnecessary.

Manlius was not even a dark shadow when the lamp was extinguished. She heard his quiet movements but they did not come near her. His garments rustled. His boots fell to the ground cloth; she knew when he pulled up his own blanket; she heard him sigh.

A cresset outside flared in the wind, casting strange patterns against the roof as the tent flap moved in the wind. The rain was soothing. Later, after it had stopped, she woke with a start. The commander was talking in his sleep.

Lilia could not understand his mumbled words, but they seemed distressed and his voice was that of a man in pain. Once he mentioned the Emperor. That was plain enough. Was he praying to him? Then why did he grit his teeth? He seemed to be angry.

She was too drowsy to remain awake and drifted off, wonder-



ing who Eunice might be. Her own problems seemed a little less. She felt motherly and protective. She wished she could help him and on that thought she fell asleep.

She awoke to find the tent empty. It was still before sun up and already the commander was gone. She dressed hurriedly.

"Are you awake?"

"You may come in," she said, before she realized that she had graciously given permission to an important general to enter his own tent. The humorous situation amused both.

They looked at each other and smiled. She felt then as though life still held some promise. As always, morning had reduced the insurmountable worries of the night before to their proper proportions. She said hesitatingly, "Will you not reconsider? May I see Tibullus, at least?"

He shook his head. "I explained that fully last night. It is better that you do not. For both of you."

He sat down at the table and motioned Lilia to take her place. A boy, one of the cook's helpers, brought in a tray. His eyes were big at the sight of the unusual guest. He served quickly and went out with haste as though he could not wait to spread the news.

Outside, as they ate, the work of breaking camp went on. It was a quiet meal, for both were busy with their own thoughts. The food was plentiful and good, but spartan in quality. Dark army bread, with olive oil and salt for dipping. A dish of ripe olives and a bowl of wheat porridge, laced with honey. A cup of hot, sour army wine, heavily diluted with water—in deference to her, Lilia suspected, and rendered more palatable with honey. For dessert, a handful of raisins sufficed.

Their only comments were on the quality of the food.

There was no sign of the luxury her host's rank might have afforded, other than the silver service on the wooden tray. They ate with fingers and silver spoons. Neither missed forks, for they had never used them.

By the time breakfast was over, the men were ready to take down and pack the commander's tent. All the others were already folded, except the large cook tent for the officers' mess and the even larger one which served the cavalry.

Morning devotions had come almost to an end. Those who

were initiates of Mithras were still worshipping quietly, their heads bowed in the direction of the rising sun. Most of the remainder had attended the services at the shrine of Mars.

Now, at the sound of another trumpet, the men assembled. Standing beside Manlius, Lilia at last saw her young husband. Her heart was full at the sight of Tibullus. He looked so tired. Surely he could not have slept well. Had he been worrying about her?

If she had only known the night before that she had come to the right gate after all!

Purely by accident she had almost reached him, for the end of the quadrangle that she had entered contained the tents of the Tenth Cohort. She could see, from where he was located in the line, that his tent must have been the third from the end.

She made a mental notation of the fact, knowing that the arrangement of the units never varied. Somehow she would escape whatever method by which the commander meant to return her to her parents. Somehow, the next night, tonight, she thought with an expectant thrill of joy, she would avoid the sentry at the entrance and be united with her lover. Once she was truly married, she would not be sent back.

As though the commander surmised her coming deception, he turned to her with an amused twinkle in his eye. An orderly had already brought up his horse, but he did not mount at once. Instead he placed an arm around her shoulders. His seamed face showed no sign of the perturbed spirit of the night.

"You shall be guest of honor today, my dear, and see the march past." He signaled. The Master of Horse bellowed something incomprehensible to her and the cavalry began to move.

She had seen the formality of this before, at the Field of Mars, but not as so close and so conspicuous a bystander.

The long column moved out. Each officer saluting and every head in the ranks turned in the direction of the commander—and toward her, beside him, the only woman in the camp.

Line after line came toward her and went by in its turn. Each was like the rest, except that the expressions were different. Some of the men were cynically appraising her and the commander; some were stolidly wooden-faced, their attitude disapproving;

some appeared concerned; a few looked envious, but all were admiring her in their own way.

She had little interest in them or their private thoughts. Now *he* was coming. Now! This very moment! He was here!

"Oh, Tibullus!" And in his eyes she saw such disgust and cold hate as she had never suspected could glitter in the stare of any living man. He had known she would be there. The news had run through the camp. He did not understand.

To Lilia, rendered hypersensitive by the disappointment of the night before and more than vulnerable by her delight at seeing her supposed lover, this unexpected revelation of his thoughts was too much.

Tears came to her eyes; she sobbed and involuntarily shrank back. The commander's strong arm tightened against her shoulders.

Tibullus saw the motion. His face became even more scornful. He muttered something to his next in line, without taking his eyes off her. Lilia could not hear what he said but read "My wife—" on his lips. Even as horror came upon her at the misunderstanding, she began to make excuses in her mind for him.

What else could he think? She saw the faces of his tent mates turn toward her. They were smiling or laughing and talking to each other as they marched. She guessed what they were saying. She surmised what they all must think. She remembered the sentry, the tribune, the boy who brought the food. Each one had seen and knew a little. Each one would have a different story to tell. By now Tibullus must have heard them all.

She knew that although men pretended to despise gossip and maintained that this lay in the exclusive province of women, they spread a story no less quickly. This tale had flown, in all its variations, through the ranks, growing huger as it was repeated.

And the march past had given it fresh substance.

Manlius gave orders to Matho, the Master of Horse. Lilia found herself seated before him, without really knowing how she had got up on the animal's back. She had not time to thank her host, or much inclination to do so. Manlius had already gone to take his place at the head of the column.

She twisted around to watch him ride away. Her jaw set. Her lips were a straight line. Tonight would be different. She made

up her mind to that and made her plans as she was carried back to the inn where she had left her luggage.

Behind her, the talk rippled up and down the line.

"By Jupiter! I didn't think the Old Man had it in him!"

"She really wanted me. I could see that. She was just getting ready to say yes when that nosy tribune came along."

"Pretty close to each other, they was, when I brung in the food. Laughing together, and real happy, I'd say."

A countercurrent of thought set in, responding to these slurs, no one could say how or when. It began as a growing feeling of resentment, a spontaneous reaction to her childish beauty, an admiration of her tiny, delicate figure. Perhaps it started among the older men as an undefined feeling of protectiveness, a dim, almost forgotten memory of other little girls.

"His wife? Forced to sleep with the commander? Damnedest thing I ever heard of!"

"A recruit's wife? Why didn't he take a tavern girl? Never thought the Old Man would do that!"

"Came all the way from Rome to see her husband and the general takes her? That baby? Why, she don't know what's happened to her!"

"Poor little thing! Did you see her crying? Never got to talk to her husband, I hear."

So the comments ran, as something gay disappeared from the scandalous conversation. The men slouched as they marched, their spirits sank, their faces took on a glum and angry look.

There was no singing. Even the younger and wilder spirits among them sensed that this was not the time to show any envy of the commander's good fortune. They slogged on, heavily, conscious that the general feeling would be against them if they made a scurrilous remark.

Unaware of all this, Lilia and Matho waited at the inn for the arrival of the mail cart from Tarracina to Rome. The Master of Horse was impatient to get back to his command. Lilia did not care if the cisium ever came.

When it arrived at the posthouse, it did so with a flourish. The lean, wiry driver leaped out, gave Lilia and her luggage a quick glance, dashed into the building at a run, and seized the mug of hot wine that was already poured and waiting.

Almost instantly he reappeared, gulping down huge bites from a long roll of bread, slashed open and filled with greasy beans, hot sausage, and fried red pimentos. The sight revolted Lilia.

He swore impatiently at the horse boys who were replacing his lathered worn-out steeds with a fresh pair. They worked rapidly and with an economy of motion, but not fast enough to suit him. Time was of the utmost importance with the mail. His sharp words scourged them to greater speed.

These tublike carts had large wheels, light and fragile, to insure express velocity. Their bodies were swung on leather straps to make them ride easier. They had regular drivers who kept a tight schedule and had a fierce pride in maintaining it with a noble unconcern for life and limb. They made exceptionally good time, as much as sixty miles in ten hours.

Passengers were carried at their own risk. Only those who were in the utmost haste ever trusted themselves to the hard characters who drove with fury and recklessness.

"Tonight," said Matho to Lilia as he placed her bags in the deep curve of the floor, "you will be in Rome."

"Not if she don't slap her little round rump in here. Come on, sister, I'm behind time."

He threw a parcel of letters into the container, slammed down the padded cover, picked Lilia up bodily, and sat her down on it with a thud.

"Hah!" he shouted. The whip cracked like broken branches in a thunderstorm, the horses laid their ears back and leaped, Lilia was hurled backward off the seat, and the Master of Horse was left behind in a cloud of dust.

Before they had traveled a mile, Lilia felt herself bruised. She was flung about from side to side, too numb to feel pain, too frightened to protest. She was unable to retain a firm hold on the leather straps meant for that purpose. As often as she grasped one, it was torn from her grip by a lurch of the cart in the other direction. Finally she gave up trying, settled down on the floor, and braced herself among the parcels and bags. They bounced around and settled into places which held her in an uncomfortable but more rigid position.

All she could see was the tops of the trees that raced by, the whip that never stopped circling overhead with nerve-shattering

reports, and the broad back and cropped bullethead of the driver, covered only partly by his leather skullcap, which bore the wings of Mercury.

He kept his eyes on the road, turning around only once to grin at her lying there with her stola rucked high on her bare legs. "Thought you fell out, sis. Hang on. Now we're going to travel.

"Ho, there—you in the road! Make way for the mail!"

Crack, crack went the tireless whip on the backs of the suffering horses. Lilia, having repeated all the prayers she knew, began running through them again. Before she had finished, they arrived at the next posthouse.

She climbed out and staggered inside, dizzy and with an erratically throbbing heart. Her eyes were blurred, her ears deafened, and she was sick inside. Somehow she made known her wants and a mug of cold water was brought. While she was drinking it the mail driver shook her shoulder.

"Come on, sis. Can't wait for you. Got to go whether you come or not."

She gave him a frantic look and, clutching her middle, ran to the back of the inn. Bile was bitter in her mouth and she retched.

She heard the rumble of the fast cart as it left the yard. She held her head and moaned. That man! That horrible man! She was certain that he had gone with all her pretty things.

Nothing seemed to matter. At least she was not in custody and on the road to Rome.

She was not even surprised when she looked about for her luggage and found it was not on the ground or back in the wine room. Her possessions had been cut down to the clothes she stood in, one plain ring, and her bulla, a modest gold pendant on a thin chain. Fortunately, around her neck she carried hidden the soft leather bag containing the money with which she had hoped to buy Tibullus free. Everything else was a windfall to the rascally driver.

Few women traveled without escort. The innkeeper was narrowly considering her. She wasted no words but turned her back upon him and started walking down the highway whence she had come.

She looked back once, in time to see the innkeeper shrug and

turn back into the inn. She knew he had been watching and hurried on. She had no time to waste. She had lost at least eight miles.

After reaching the first milestone, she felt able to relax and walked more slowly. She had no definite plan, except to elude the sentry somehow after dark, to avoid the commander at all costs, and somehow reach her husband. He must not be permitted to believe what he obviously did.

As the day wore on the heat increased. The traffic on the highway thickened. She rolled up her cloak in a little bundle and trudged along. It seemed that everyone was staring. She realized that she must present an odd figure in the traveling clothes she wore. They were suitable for a young lady of quality, but certainly out of place on a tired pedestrian on a dusty road.

Somehow she must render herself less conspicuous. She was grateful when a carriage, with a middle-aged woman and her two grown sons, pulled up beside her, offering a lift. She climbed in thankfully.

Her carriage had broken down, she said. Her driver had gone back for a wheelwright. They had not seen the work going on? How strange! Now she wished she had remained at the scene. The carriage must have been hauled away with all her baggage. But it had been so hot near the marshes.

Yes, she knew it was imprudent to walk alone on the highway. She had expected that her driver would have overtaken her by now.

They rolled on into Tarracina, perched high on its limestone cliffs, a fairy city under the hot sun, blessed by sea breezes.

The Temple of Jupiter Anxarus, where she told her companions that her driver would be expecting to find her, was close to the city gates—impressive as befitted the father of the gods, its portico and columns of dark stone and well patronized, it appeared. They let her off at the central walk, rather reluctantly, waving worried good-bys. She called after them, "I will send a messenger to my uncle. He will be waiting to hear from me," and they looked relieved. When they were out of sight she walked slowly down into the market district.

She passed by a stall where calamare were being seethed in olive oil. The delicious smell of the frying squid made her realize

her hunger, but she knew better than to show gold in the crowd that was gathered around. In a secluded alcove, she surreptitiously drew out one aureus and held it in her hand until she came to a money-changer.

With the handful of denarii she received she bought a small purse, a change of underwear, and an outfit suitable for a farm girl, of the pretty reddish-brown wool from Canusium. This would not show the dirt and would not attract attention if she were obliged to walk the roads. It began to seem far too risky to hire a rig and driver, as she had first planned.

Neither would it do to stroll, eating, through the market, dressed as she was. She paused and considered. The public baths must come first.

Here she bathed, was oiled and massaged—the last time for a long while, she ruefully admitted to herself. Farmers' daughters do not throw money away with reckless abandon.

She regretfully donned her new clothes. The linen undergarments were coarse and harsh, not like the sheer fabric she had discarded. Those were linen also, but the finest imported Egyptian and so sheer that the material was known as "woven wind."

Clean again, but not looking like the same girl, she stopped next at a dealer in used clothing and traded her fine cloak and her tunicas, both inner and outer, for a rough palla.

This heavy shawl was so tightly woven that it was windproof and, while it would not keep out rain, the natural oil retained in the heavy homespun wool would prevent dampness from fog or mist from soaking through.

She received some small coins in addition. After she had walked away she remembered that she had neglected to buy walking sandals, went back and haggled with the dealer, insisting that a worn pair be included in the deal. They parted in mutual admiration, Lilia maintaining stoutly that she was a merchant's daughter, the dealer claiming that she was doubtless a female bandit and would die rich—though he hoped, for the good of honest folk, quite young.

She put on the heavy footgear and dropped the flimsy dress sandals she had been wearing into the pocket formed by the triangular end of the shawl, like the neuk of a shepherd's plaid. If



necessary, she could draw this up over her head to hide her face, or for protection from the weather.

Then, feeling that Tibullus would be proud of the way she had managed her money, she went back to the enticing stall, bought a quinarius' worth of the squid, and went on, eating them out of a rolled-up grape leaf. She was thrilled as never before to do such an adventurous thing. She took big bites. It tasted even better that way.

## NEW FRIENDS

The highway turned northward sharply to avoid the marshes near the seacoast, passed through the busy town of Fundi, and angled back through a lush country studded with handsome villas. Here the air was sweet with lemon groves and flowers. Vineyards covered the low hills and the fields on either side were filled with fruit gardens and olive plantations.

The walking shoes were comfortable at first and she made good time. Her short tunica reached only to her knees and was no impediment to her march. She did not feel especially tired, but rested in Fundi at a small, clean wineshop just off the forum.

This opened directly onto the sidewalk and Lilia sat there at one of the several small tables, where she could watch the passers-by, as well as by turning her head view the interior of the shop.

Several young couples were doing the same and enjoying the warm sun while they ate and chatted. Wine jars held erect in circular holes cut in the counter top gave a selection unlikely to be found outside of the city.

Lilia chose Moselle from the Rhineland and the attendant lifted a jar out of its rack and tilted it over a pouring block into a rough baked clay cup, without ornament, but glazed. She sipped slowly, while olive oil was being heated. When it was ready and smoking, she dipped crusty fresh bread into it and ate it with a little salt and a slice of cheese from one of the many hanging from a rack near the lantern suspended above.

In her new clothes, no one paid any particular attention to her, except the stallkeeper, who noticed her golden ring. He gave her a sharp look as though he suspected she might have stolen it.

After she left the square, following the route which the legion must have taken toward Formiae, she slipped off the ring and

unfastened the necklace, equally suspicious on the throat of a farm girl, as it was gold and of fine workmanship. She put them in the pouch which contained her money—out of sight and, she hoped, safe—and walked on with a lighter heart.

It was now the tenth hour of a summer day—measured from dawn to dusk—approximately four o'clock in modern reckoning. The day's march must be over. The legion would be encamped, or in barracks if they had reached the next town and there were such permanent facilities that might be vacant.

She had no way of knowing which it would be, or how much farther. She walked on, growing more tired as dusk approached. More than before, she wished she could step off that standard five-foot pace which the legionary was supposed to stride. One thousand to the mile, each mile marked by a stone, numbered from Rome, hour by hour, day by day.

Oh, Mercury—speedy aid to travelers! How do they ever do it? She sat down under a tree and rubbed her aching legs. Her other bruises now demanded attention. She touched the places gingerly where she had been bounced against the sides of the racing mail cart. A blister was forming on her right heel.

Three milestones, another, and one more fell behind her. Then, all at once, while she was thinking with growing concern about these small but painful annoyances which were becoming more grievous, she looked down from the crest of a small hill at the familiar, serried arrangement of tents set up in an otherwise empty field.

Smokes were rising from the cooking fires and she immediately felt hungry, although she was too far away to smell the kettles; there was movement in the streets; sentries had already taken their posts at the four points of the compass where stood the gateways.

Lilia left the road, ensconced herself between two boulders where she could not be seen by passers-by, and thankfully took off her shoes. She lay there watching.

She marked the situation of the commander's tent, the headquarters, the shrines. She judged, from these landmarks, the proper row in the section assigned to the Tenth Cohort; she determined the third tent from the end and fixed it in her mind until she was positive she could find it in the dark.

Once she was certain she saw Tibullus come out of that tent, look around, and go back inside. Her heart gave a leap. Soon she would be with him.

She rested, and dozed, and waited, trying to ignore the gnawing in her stomach. When it was so dark that she could not distinguish individual tents, she limped down the rough bank and, crossing the highway, came through the edge of a marsh and so to the encampment. The croaking of frogs covered what little noise she made.

It was easier to enter the camp than she had supposed it might be. She approached the southern end of the quadrangle, from the long side. The low hum of man life was not so sinister and menacing as it had seemed before. It had already become familiar to her ears.

Lilia's dark clothes and long shawl covered and hid the whiteness of her face and arms. She was almost invisible. Once she lay flat at the jingle of the moving patrol, which passed slowly about the borders of the camp. She felt uplifted by a sudden gaiety and followed their course with an imaginary bow and arrow, picking them off one by one.

When the group had passed, and was around the angle of the tent street, she ran crouching to the third tent in the row and paused. Her elation was gone, her heart pounded at her own temerity, her breath came in little hurried gasps, and she was dismayed at what she had done.

Now she was really afraid. Was this the right tent? What terrible things might happen to her if it were not? Even if Tibullus was there, would she be welcome?

Before she could think of anything else to weaken her resolution, her hand, almost independent of her shaky will, reached out and scratched lightly on the leather flap.

It was too late then. "Tibullus?" The light whisper was little more than a mouse squeak, but it was heard inside. There was a grunt of astonishment in a voice she did not know, a rustle of moving bodies. She turned to run, but arms were already about her, dragging her within the lighted tent. The flap fell behind her, men were swearing and laughing at the same time in their surprise—and there was Tibullus, moody as always, amazed, mouth open. "Lilia—how did you get here?"

He was not angry. It was all right. In an instant she was released by the one who had pulled her inside and she was in the arms of Tibullus, feeling that, in his tight clasp, nothing mattered now. She had come home.

The other three men hurriedly made room for her and she sat down beside her husband. Her fears vanished as she looked at them. They made themselves known to her by name, smiling sympathetically, speaking in hushed, secret voices.

Two of them were as young as Tibullus. There was Titus, a dark-haired boy who had been working on a painting of the other lad and hastily set it aside at the interruption. The second was a tall, strong fellow with a cheerful face. He introduced himself as Antimon. Lilia wondered what a Greek was doing in such company but did not ask. He was obviously also clever with his hands. He bashfully showed Lilia a little wooden figure of a legionary. It saluted her when he pulled a string. This made her laugh, lightened the tension, and set them all at ease.

The third man was a dour fellow. It was he who had grabbed her at the entrance. He was a harsh-featured man, much older than the others, stern, brusque, and dark with sun and wind.

"My name is Longinus," he said, and nothing more. He sat watching her intently. Whenever she looked up she caught his fixed stare and she could not guess what he was thinking. Even when her back was turned, she felt his eyes boring at her, studying and appraising, as her nervousness grew.

She was reminded of the posthouse keeper. This man was also making plans which included her. Yet it was he who motioned to the two youths to follow him and broke off the whispered conversation of the group with a quick order.

Antimon and Titus seemed to accept his authority although he was dressed as they were and carried no insignia of rank. Longinus beckoned to Tibullus, who followed the three outside. Lilia could hear a low murmur of voices but not the words. Soon Tibullus returned with a piece of meat and a broken chunk of bread.

He gave it to her, handed her his canteen and, while she devoured the food hungrily, said in a husky tone, "They are going to leave us alone for a while and visit out of sight, in other tents, but they will have to come back here to sleep."

"Lilia, how could you do what you did last night? Is your father going to buy me out?"

Hastily she explained. Tibullus did not seem convinced of the innocence of her stay in the commander's tent.

"Can you guess the stories that I heard about you? I never expected to see you again. I didn't think you would have the courage to face me."

"Didn't you have any faith in me, Tibullus? You know how much I love you. Only you. You must know now. Haven't I proved it by following you? By coming to you like this?"

"You didn't get any signatures on that paper. You didn't get the proof of our marriage. You didn't force your father to get me out of the army so we can live together."

"I have done all I could. I came to prove to the commander that I was your wife. He was good to me and kind—in his way.

"He wouldn't take my money. He wouldn't release you. When we are really one, he will have to let you come back with me to Rome."

"You don't know him. He has a heart of iron, they say. He never gives in, never goes back on his word.

"If you couldn't bribe him with money to let me go, you may have to try the other way you say you didn't. How do I really know you haven't already?"

"Oh, Tibullus!" Lilia looked at him in horror. The canteen fell and gurgled out the remainder of its wine. "Do you want to get out of the army that much?"

"He was nice. He acted just like my father. He talked like him, too. Tibullus, he was kind to me—he took care of me, even though he was angry because I came.

"If you can't come back, then I am coming with you, but we have got to be really married."

"We shall be. That is why the others left us. Make up your mind, Lilia. I am going out for a few moments." The tent flap fell before she could put out a hand to stop him.

This was frighteningly all too soon. She had not explained thoroughly enough. Did he truly believe her—really understand?

She had no way of knowing which blankets were those of her husband. She spread wider those in the farther corner and

smoothed out the wrinkles. Her fingers trembled as she slowly unpinned her tunica and unfastened her belt.

She folded her clothes carefully, as though dragging out the action would postpone the inevitable. She placed them out of the way, at the foot of the pallet she had arranged. Then she drew stole, tunica and palla up over her shivering body and tried, by taking long deep breaths, to calm herself and suppress the growing panic which was rapidly overcoming her.

It was too late to turn back. She blew out the light.

A horse stamped in the distant line and sighed gustily. Somewhere a man laughed. A hunting owl hooted. She heard the measured pacing of the nearest sentry, the tiny jingle of some loose buckle on his lorica, the smart thud of his lance butt on the hard ground, when he reached the end of his beat and wheeled to stride away again.

There was darkness in the tent and it was quiet. All her senses seemed sharpened beyond bearing—beyond endurance.

A cricket chirped; a frog boomed in the marsh. The owl flew low over the camp and she distinctly heard the dry whistle of the air through its pinions. A little terrified squeal faded away. She knew that the hunter would soon feed and felt as helpless as its prey.

She lay on the rough soldier blanket and waited. The sweaty smell of it mingled with the odor of the leather tent and both were strong in her nostrils. The fibers of it were harsh against her skin and rankled.

Was this what marriage meant? A waiting and a dread?

She felt herself to be the loneliest and the most fearful person in the world. Where had the hope gone and the love and the high ideals which had sustained her on the long journey?

She was so tired. Her body ached, the ground under the blanket was like stone. Her heartbeat was fast and shook her with its thudding. It seemed higher in her chest than usual—she felt herself choking.

Then there were the quick, familiar steps. The tent flap was lifted and he came in. Before it had time to fall, her thoughts raced.

In a split second, she felt her heart give a wild welcoming leap and almost stop. She had time to think with regret of her far,

safe home and those who loved her—to feel a surge of courage and fatality. This, after all, is why I came! She felt love and trust rush back again and her heart resume its measured beating.

The tent flap closed and all was dark. The strong arms of Tibullus took away her breath and her fear was gone. In his embrace the coarse wool changed to silk and the earth was soft as down.

The ache in her muscles passed away under his magical hands. All was dream and mystery and wonder.

Yet because he was young and disappointed—hurt and angry—he was not gentle, he was not kind.

Lilia was still awake when the absent men re-entered the tent. It was not very large for four and small for five. She shrank close to Tibullus, who was already asleep, feeling a little resentful that he could sleep so easily.

They came in quietly. If they knew she was awake, they gave no sign. No rough jokes were made. There was no jostling and each found his place in the dark without difficulty.

Comforted by a feeling of safety, she was drifting peacefully into slumber when she was shocked out of her dubious security by a stealthy hand which passed along her thigh, stroking carefully from knee to hip.

She held her breath, not daring to move. The searching fingers traced her outlines above the blanket, lightly touched her side and bare shoulder. They hesitated, insinuated themselves under the blanket edge in the direction of her breast.

Instinctively she realized that she was in great danger. Whatever followed would determine the course of her life to come among these men. Without allowing herself to admit the thought into her reasoning mind, she knew that she would not be able to depend upon the protection of her husband. Whoever this man might be, Tibullus would not fight for her.

She sighed deeply, as though she dreamed in her sleep, then, instead of thrusting the intruding hand away, she clasped it in her own warm fingers, drew it to her face, and laid her cheek upon it. The trusting action of a small child.

The hand stiffened. There was shock and there was surprise, plainly evidenced. It remained there under her soft, easy breath.



Her lips were almost upon it and she could feel a raised scar across the back of the big knobby knuckles.

Very slowly the hand withdrew itself completely from her loose grasp. It slid from under her check and returned, lightly as a mote of dust upon a cobweb, to touch her hair.

She lay still, no longer afraid. This was not a seeking—it was a caress. She was being loved and the touch seemed like a kiss.

The sense of protection came upon her stronger than ever. Lilia slept.

*“Wake up! Wake up!  
You sleepyhead!  
Are you asleep or are you dead?  
  
Get up! Get up!  
Get out of bed!  
And we’ll take a walk this morning!”*

She woke with a start at the sound of the trumpet. All around, the bustle of breaking camp had begun. It was not yet dawn, but she could smell the smoke from many little fires. Except for herself, the tent was empty. Tibullus came in, his face anxious, carrying a small bowl of hot wheaten porridge.

“Eat it quickly,” he commanded. “You’ve got to get out of here. The tents are coming down. We’ll keep this one up as long as we can, but it won’t be very long.”

“Are we going to the commander and tell him we are married now?”

“You don’t tell the commander anything. He’ll tell us! If they find you here I’ll get flogged. Lilia, you have got to go home.”

She stopped eating and hastily scrambled into her clothes. Her small chin jutted out. “Tibullus, you know I can’t go home now. If you won’t come with me to see the general, I’ll go alone.”

“I wouldn’t dare face him.”

Lilia was furious. Pushing him aside, she left the tent. If it had possessed a door, she would have slammed it.

Along the street she hurried. The labor of breaking camp stopped as men turned to stare. Some few recognized her and grinned. One said, “Go it, sis, my money’s on you!” She saw then that Tibullus was close behind. She pulled away from him when he caught at her, as she reached the commander’s tent.

Manlius came out, fully dressed and frowning. His scowl was even blacker as he recognized Lilia.

"You again? Legionary, what does this mean?"

Tibullus tried to answer. He mumbled and stuttered helplessly. Manlius eyed him for a moment, then disgustedly turned away.

"Is this your husband?"

Lilia nodded. "And now we are truly man and wife. You cannot send me back," she announced triumphantly.

"You are laboring under a misapprehension." There was grimness in the commander's tone. "No women, married or single, are coming with this expedition.

"Legionary, return to your quarters. Girl—come with me."

Tibullus turned, with as military a manner as he could summon up, and marched away without a backward look. Lilia felt her arm seized again, in an iron grasp she could not break. She was hurried along the horse line to the troopers' quarters.

"Matho! Where in Pluto's name are you?" Manlius thundered.

The Master of Horse came hurriedly out of his tent, still swallowing. When he saw the two, he laughed, understanding the situation at once. The events of the night before had been widely circulated among the officers.

"Outsmarted you this time, did she, General? She's got good courage. Might make a fine soldier. Why not let her come along? Probably do better than some of those other volunteers."

"My husband didn't volunteer. You men stole him and I want him back."

Manlius looked at her wearily. "The gods know why, I don't. He was not gallant enough to speak for you, or fond enough to bid you farewell. I presume you spent the night with him in his tent. Were his companions there?"

"They came in later." Lilia contemplated her toes.

"Did any of the others harm you?"

Her face flamed. "No more than you did! They were kind and understanding. They were good friends to myself and my husband."

Matho choked and Manlius gave him a hard stare but Matho's

smile lingered on his strong brown face. He had known his superior far too long to be intimidated by him.

Manlius said, more kindly than before, "I wish to be your good friend also. I shall not be, if I permit you to go with us. You do not understand what dangers you run here. These men are good soldiers. They are wolves in battle—they are brothers in the tent.

"Each carries a section of the tent. It does not belong to himself alone. Each one carries something necessary to the common good. Outside of their personal equipment, the food, the firewood, the cooking utensils are shared. Everything in the tent is common to all. Everything. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Lilia paled. She met his gaze steadily and without fear. Her answer was sturdy. "I understand, but I know I can feel safe with these men in the future, or I would not have been safe with them last night. I want my husband to come home with me, or I shall go with him."

"Neither of those things is going to happen. Matho!"

"Sir?"

"I place this stubborn child once more in your care. Stay with her until the march begins. Ride back with her a few miles. Try to provide transportation for her to Rome, if you can.

"If that is too much trouble, or takes too long, set her down and let her walk back. If she resists, spank her. It might be a good idea if she were spanked now."

There was a twinkle in his eye. Lilia was too vexed to see it.

"Come with me, little one." Matho led her into the big mess tent which fed the troopers. After Manlius had disappeared and could not see her, she laid her arms on the table, put her head down, and sobbed.

Matho awkwardly patted her shoulder. She shook off his hand and refused to look up. The troopers in the tent, who were finishing their breakfast, crowded around offering encouragement and sympathy.

It was a democratic outfit which—once upon the march—paid little attention to strict regulations, or much deference to officers.

The fat cook brought out a honey cake that he had been saving for himself and a cup of sweet wine and stood by while she ate. She smiled wetly at him in thanks. The men beamed.

Feeling better, she once more watched the march past, but this time the Master of Horse held her firmly in front of him on the saddle. This morning the commander led off, as before when leaving Rome, his white horse a beacon, twenty feet ahead of the cavalry. Next, Matho's second in command, in the position which should have been Matho's.

The cataphracts followed, seasoned veterans in the fore, each unit with its special guidon, their perfectly matched mounts—shining ebony, stainless white, warmly hued chestnuts and roans—all passed by, dancing on tiptoe, curvetting as though they well knew their proud beauty and were on review.

The baggage train followed, the mules tilting one ear forward as they strained against the harness at the feel of the little slope out of the field.

The remounts crowded raggedly past, herded on by the miscellaneous mounted younger men. They rode horses which did not match in color and called themselves in sardonic humor "Matho's Orphans." They had yet to prove themselves in battle, but they had a fraternal, clannish pride of their own. Their eyes were as rigidly front, they held their heads as high, their guidons popped in the brisk morning breeze as loudly as those of the others who were leading the parade.

Not a face turned in her direction, but Lilia knew that every man had seen her, sitting sideways across Matho's saddlebow, wrapped warmly against the wind in the wide fold of his long scarlet cloak.

She was perceptive enough now to sense emotions which a few days earlier she might have missed. No rough jokes were flung at her today. No one whistled. There were no smiles or smirks. She felt that every man sat straighter under her regard. She was conscious also of a tenuous impression of friendship which was almost affection and definitely interested. However she might regard the general, she knew that she had no enemy here.

They were gone. Matho's strong arm tightened about her waist. His free hand tugged his stallion's head around and they

started back along the way she had come, with such high hopes, the day before.

They rode in silence. The morning was lovely and men were early at work in the fields they passed. Now and then they met a farmer's cart and took the edge of the highway to give it room. There, the horse's hoofs did not ring and strike pale twinkles from the stones, but plocked lightly into the soft dirt.

Little puffs of dust hung in the air after they had gone. The breeze was dying down. One milestone fell behind and then another. The day would be sultry. Now that the sun was well risen, Lilia was too warm under her cloak.

Where their bodies touched, she was beginning to perspire. The heat, the gentle jogging of the horse, the quiet, her weariness—all conspired to make her drowsy. Her head drooped on her guardian's chest. She was almost asleep. The Master of Horse changed his grip upward upon her and a little more tightly.

She felt the air waft cool against her moist skin. Now, as they rode on, she was aware that, because of the motion of the horse, the weight of her breast pressed rhythmically against his arm. At first the sensation was too slight to be remarked. Soon her newly awakened emotions made her realize that he was fully conscious of the pleasant change in their position and that the renewed tightening of his clasp was not accidental.

His arm about her waist felt like iron and she was dismayed by the thoughts which came unbidden to her mind. Her drowsiness passed in a flash and she twisted in his firm embrace.

When she saw his face, and the calm look in his black eyes, she knew she had nothing to fear.

He smiled and his clutch relaxed. She felt ashamed of her thoughts. Her cheeks felt hot and it seemed that she must say something. The only thing she could think of was "You know I am a wedded wife"—which seemed both inappropriate and a tacit admission of what both might have been thinking.

"I know you are, daughter," was all he said, but there was an undercurrent of understanding that did not need to be spoken.

Now, as they rode on, she lay cradled in his arms like a cherished child, and women they met smiled as they passed, taking the pair to be lovers.

They rode by another milestone without pausing. At the next, Matho drew rein. "Here we part," he said, and released his grip.

Lilia slid down and almost cried out when her sandals touched the ground. Both feet were asleep, apparently dreaming of lightning storms. She made a wry face and began rubbing circulation into her calves. Matho reached down to support her, without dismounting. She took his calloused hand in both her soft ones and laid her face against it.

"You have been very good to me," she said without looking up. He gently pulled his hand away and laid it on her uncovered hair.

"Go home, little one. Do not follow us again. Go home to your people and live softly. The army is not the place for such as you."

He bent quickly. Before he could caress her, she put her arms around his corded neck and kissed his leather cheek. Matho pulled away and wheeled the horse about. "Go home, now! Go home!" He dug in his spurs.

Before he was out of sight he turned in the saddle and waved farewell. Lilia was standing still, watching. She saw him touch his cheek where she had kissed him, before he disappeared, riding on in haste to overtake his command.

She stood looking after him for a brief moment. Then she tightened her belt, sighed, and set out to follow, with a tired, limping step.

She started over, after stopping to think. One must never begin a journey unluckily. Making sure that the right foot struck the ground first was extremely important. Maybe that was what had brought her bad luck yesterday.

There were four miles to cover over highway which she had previously trodden and afterward there were the regulation twenty which the legion would march today. If no conveyance was available she would walk. It was far, it was weary, but it was not impossible.

Today would be better. It could be luckier than the day before, for now she knew that what she planned to do could be done. She knew also that, while she had one implacable adver-

sary in the person of Commander Manlius, she had some few interested friends who would help her if they could.

She had a new foster father. She had a husband who was not very angry with her. She thought herself beloved.

The road was not so hard, the world not so wild and lonely as yesterday it had been.

## LILIA STRIKES A BARGAIN

"One denarius that she doesn't go back!"

"Even money? I'll take it. Who else wants to bet?"

"Two denarii at those odds." "Five sesterces." "Here's another."

"You are all fools. I'll be stealing your money."

"Safer than betting with those clogged dice of yours, Gemellus."

"Silence in the ranks!"

The legion marched on, following the seacoast to the next campground just beyond the wealthy resort town of Sinuessa. Once in a while someone shot a swift look backward along the road. Occasionally a trooper turned casually in the saddle. At the rest periods, which seemed fractionally longer than usual, there was a subdued murmur among both officers and men.

Only Commander Manlius seemed unconcerned. He appeared oblivious of the hard looks which were almost constantly directed at his back. There was no singing now.

Far behind, Lilia plodded on. She passed through Formiae by the third hour of the day, having made up the lost distance and added to it another two miles. She thought of hiring a rig in Formiae but hesitated to attract attention by doing so. She walked slowly, considering, and finally passed both hiring stations without stopping.

She bought a small loaf and some grapes to carry with her in the pocket of her shawl and went on, swinging her purse as though she were merely out for a walk. No one gave her a second glance in the market. She was quite pleased with her peasant disguise.

At the third miliarium she turned off the highway, following a brook which ran close to the cliffs. A little path led to a view-



point overlooking the Bay of Caieta. Here the brook leaped over the edge in a wide arc to plunge into the sea.

Lilia sat beneath the shadow of a broad umbrella pine, which shrank back from the brink as though in horror of it, and rested for the first time. She bathed her feet in the cool water and unwrapped her lunch. She threw the grape leaves tidily over the edge and watched them circle down.

Before eating, she washed her face. Then she poured out a libation from her cupped hands to the manes of Caieta, the aged nurse of Aeneas. Reputedly, she was buried somewhere in the vicinity, at least according to Virgil.

She ate pensively, savoring the flavor of the simple food. The bay was dotted with bright sails like drifting flowers. Farther out, an impressive penteconter was moving up the coast with a favorable wind, all oars drawn in. She watched it swing around the sharp headland and pass by the beacon on the point, the shore lined thickly with the stately villas of the rich.

How good the world was to people! How wonderful to be alive!

When Tibullus became famous they would have such a villa. Horace had been no more than the son of a freedman. Perhaps some wealthy patron would sponsor Tibullus. Maybe her father, once his anger was abated, would be the one.

She rested. A hummingbird came in from over the abyss of air which was edged by the cliff, sipped lightly from a flowering thorn and, refreshed, darted as quickly away.

Ah, lovely creature! Happy, carefree world! How could all nature so rejoice and she be the only one to know such sadness?

It was at that moment she heard footsteps, small ones, trudging up the hill. The path which paralleled the brook did not come to an end at the cliff but went perilously down by a zigzag course to the beach.

Over the lip came the head of a grubby little boy. His face was dirty and tired. He was woefully thin and ragged.

He saw Lilia and his face lighted up. He ran to her, holding out a basket.

"Lady! Buy my mussels? Please, kind lady? Fat, juicy mussels. Only one sesterce? Just gathered, lady, the freshest you ever ate."

Lilia looked at them and was revolted at the sight. Raw mussels, indeed! Who could eat such things? They smelled!

She shook her head. "I have finished eating. Give them to your mother."

He dropped his basket in despair. She thought she saw traces of tears dried in the dirt on his cheeks. "My mother needs money. She is so sick. She sent me to buy medicine and I cannot get it now. Lady, just one *as*? Anything?"

"She sent you for medicine, with no money?"

The boy hung his head, not meeting her gaze. Behind his back he twisted his little brown hands together ceaselessly.

"I had berries to sell in the market. To buy the medicine." His voice became almost inaudible. "I ate them all. I was so hungry. I didn't mean to. Only a few—and then they were all gone. Now she will die and it is my fault.

"I thought—maybe someone would buy mussels. Lady?"

Some of the softness had gone out of the sky. It was a merciless, steely blue. One *as*. The smallest coin in existence.

Lilia plucked the little bag from her bosom and impulsively poured most of the coins into his hands. The remainder she tied securely and slipped the bag back into its hiding place.

"Take these to your mother. Be careful with them and hurry."

He stood looking at the treasure with unbelief, then fell on his knees, his face radiant, kissing her hands and holding them tightly. The gold shone on the grass.

Lilia cuddled his head to her breast.

"Go now. I must go."

She looked back once, wishing that she had not eaten all the bread and grapes. The boy was ravenously dining. He was cracking the mussels with a stone and cramming the meat into his mouth, oblivious of the tiny sharp bits of shell that he overlooked. He did not see her staring in horror at his absorption with his clamoring hunger.

Lilia returned to the road. The world was still beautiful. But not to all. She had never known a day's hunger in her life. This was an insight into another world—of famine, of misery.

The butterfly saw for a moment the toad beneath the harrow.

One fluttered gaily, one suffered. The two were separated only by the accident of birth.

Mile after weary mile the strange pursuit went on. Unnoticed in the double flow of traffic, Lilia tried to match the marching pace of the seasoned veterans ahead. She never came in sight of the long column, though she traveled unburdened and with a quick step.

It seemed that she must be walking at their steady speed, although she realized that their long strides must equal two of hers. She was pleased to discover that the lameness soon worked out of her muscles. She was not so happy to find that the blister was either enlarged or joined by another one. Her left foot was becoming sore too.

She set her teeth grimly and tried to ignore the nagging pain. If men could do it, she could too. They were flesh and blood, weren't they? She was learning endurance.

Patience was a little harder to acquire. Lilia continued to revolve in her mind various plans which might cause General Manlius to relent. Nothing seemed practical, knowing what she did of his disposition. She was finally forced to admit that unless Tibullus was able to escape by desertion, which seemed unlikely, she would be obliged to go with him.

"A woman must go where her husband goes." She repeated it over and over, until the sentence became a litany and the words fitted themselves to the rhythm of her step. She found them somehow comforting. They became an anodyne that not only encouraged her spirit but rendered her oblivious to her tired feet, the dust, the noise around her, and the people she met.

Because of the torpor she had induced, she hardly observed that she had passed through Minturnae, except to remember later that she had noticed, by the sundial at the river bridge, that the day was half over and that half the day's march of the legion must likewise be done. By that time she had reached the growing village of Trifanum, a short distance beyond.

A slave train was clustered around the fountain as she came into the village, so she did not stop to drink and rest. She walked on, looking into the open stalls, considering whether she would eat there or wait until she arrived at some place where she could

wait for darkness and enter the camp as she had the night before.

She bought some figs and nibbled on them, as she pretended that time meant nothing to her. She paused to watch pigeons bobbing about the feet of some old ladies who were tossing crumbs as they sat in the shade of the village shrine.

She dawdled, for she did not wish to hurry and be recognized for a stranger by her haste. Before she wanted to reach the edge of the village, she was already there. Well, there would be other eating places.

The Taberna Caediciae was situated at a junction of two well-used thoroughfares. The two-hundred-year-old Popilian Way ran northerly from the very toe of the Italian boot, bringing travelers and produce through this important intersection.

Here the Via Appia turned eastward to the mountains and traffic was diverted with it, or went on to the capital.

The tavern's reputation was excellent, both for the wine and food and for the quality of its beds and entertainment. Behind it were big stone storehouses which held hogsheads of wine, racks of cheese, and rows of suspended hams and sausages.

The nearby villa of the proprietors overlooked the establishment and was as impressive as anything of its size that Lilia had seen in Rome.

A weary and hot Lilia hesitated in the courtyard, toward the middle of the afternoon, remembering her dwindling supply of money, and that to eat she would have to offer a piece of gold. She had spent the last of her smaller coins on the figs in Trifanum. Perhaps she should ask to earn her dinner? Her stomach turned over in fear at the thought. If they let her—if they didn't detect her for a lady right away—what unpleasant job would she have to do?

Suddenly impatient with herself, she set her shoulders and looked about. A rheda had rolled in to discharge its passengers and found the way blocked by a newly arrived wagon. An officious slave—the yardmaster—ran out from the wagon room of the mansione to meet the travelers and see to their bags. He seized the horn of the wagon's off ox and yanked at his head.

"Out of the way, peasants. We need no hay. Make room for the stage."

As the haycart lumbered out the farther arch, Lilia turned to the attendant, still busy with the unloading of the stage. He gave her a supercilious stare. "Yes?"

"You don't need any kitchen help, do you?"

"Not a dirty, clumsy wench like you." He waved her away with a peremptory gesture.

Never in her life had she been addressed in such a manner. She opened her mouth to scarify him. She thought of storming into the inn, locating the lout's superior, and demanding that he be whipped.

Then she saw herself with his eyes. She was not so transparently highborn as she had thought. Covered as she was with the dust of the road, she could hardly blame him.

I guess I wouldn't hire me either, she thought, and turned away. She could scarcely offer gold for a meal now—not safely. She brushed her skirt with her hands, smoothed out a wrinkle or two, patted her hair back in shape—all under his steady, critical regard. Her anger evaporated.

By the time she reached the gate she heard quick feet behind her. It was the arrogant slave. He thrust a packet at her.

"Here, girl. No one goes away from here hungry." His voice was kinder but still condescending.

Confounded, Lilia managed to shake her head. "I am no beggar."

"Not from me. A custom of the house. It is a duty we pay to the *genius stationia*—the spirit of the way stop."

"Thank you," Lilia said helplessly. She unwrapped the little package. A crusty piece of fresh wheaten bread, two small sausages, and a few olives. Gratefulness choked her.

He reached out and patted her arm and his smile was oddly comforting. He turned away to his duties.

Out on the road again, Lilia's step became brisk. Good-by, slave with the harsh words and the kind heart. On to find the legion!

She found it, before much longer, was apprehended, listened patiently to a tongue lashing from her nemesis, and was

marched, unrepentant, back to the taberna—all without seeing Tibullus.

The guard detailed as custodians were officered by a tough-featured quadranion. Neither he nor the four men under him wasted words during the return trip. The only sign of interest they showed in her was the merciful slowness with which they walked.

Once arrived at the inn, the quadranion called for the proprietor. Lilia could not hear the conversation. The two men talked in low voices. From time to time they looked at her with what seemed like amusement, mingled with a little discreet admiration.

The proprietor nodded. Money changed hands. The officer returned to Lilia.

"It is all settled," he said. "You will sleep here tonight and leave for Rome by the morning stage. Be wise, girl. Make the best of a bad situation. It is for your own good."

"Everybody thinks they know what is better for me than I do for myself."

"Don't feel too hardly against us. We like you. Most of us wish you could come along, but orders are orders." His voice fell to a whisper. "Confidentially, girl, I wish you had got into camp. I'll tell your husband you tried. Some of the other boys will want to know too. There was a lot of money bet on you today. I made fifty sesterces myself."

"Orders! Orders! I detest your orders. I am not in your army. I will not accept such orders."

"You were trying to join it. Never mind. Listen now, carefully. You will be guarded until you are placed on the stage. You will be kept under strict watch all the way. Your meals during the trip will be paid by the driver. It's all over now."

"Don't be too sure!"

The guard grinned and muttered under their breaths. One winked at Lilia behind the quadranion's back. "Good for you, kid."

She saw the words mouthed, without sound.

The quadranion turned to his men. "Detail—Attention."

Lilia pushed aside the detaining hand of the proprietor, ready

to deliver her to a pair of female servants. "Wait! Who is paying for all this care? The food, the room, the rheda passage?"

The quadranion looked at her in surprise. "Didn't you know? Why, Commander Manlius, of course. Who else? Come on, boys. Forward march."

Lilia called after them, "Lay your wagers the same way tomorrow."

He studied her with a twinkle in his eye and a warm smile. "By Jupiter! I think I will."

It was a clean, comfortable room on the third floor. It had a small bed, a table, and a stool. There was straw matting on the oiled planks, flowers in a window box and, in a niche, a small statuette of Fortuna with a cornucopia of fruits, wearing the headdress of Isis.

Lilia glanced frantically around after the door was barred behind her. She ran to the window which overlooked the wagon yard. Darkness was complete, but torches lit up the enclosure and she could see that there was no safe way down. No vines grew there, nor was there any stairway on that side of the inn.

She considered the bed coverings and gave up the idea. Even were she strong enough to tear them into strips and make a rope, it would not be long enough to reach.

The smoke of the torches blew east. The little statue of Fortuna was looking toward the east. And at this crossroads the Via Appia veered directly east, toward the mountains. All good signs!

She heard the bar lifted. The door opened and admitted a girl carrying a small tray of foods. A salad of cress and mallows; a hot dish of salt fish, mashed with eggs and cheese, and a pitcher of cold cider.

It looked and smelled good. The girl smiled in a friendly, hesitant way and set the tray down on the table.

"Are you the one who stopped here earlier looking for work?" she asked shyly.

Lilia nodded.

"You didn't really want work, did you? It was some sort of a trick? You are a lady?"

All of a sudden, Lilia's spirit broke. The courage and endur-

ance which had sustained her thus far seemed to seep away. This first intimation of a questioning concern from any girl who might understand her own point of view was just too much.

It all came out in a rush. The long frustration, the hasty marriage, the weary trip, the hopeless situation she was in because of her interception at the barracks.

"I could have found him at an open camp. I know I could. The barracks had a palisade around it and I was stopped at the gate."

The girl frowned. "The next stopping place is a camp. I know. I was born near Capua. It's just the other side, far enough out so the soldiers are no bother to the townspeople and near enough so they can come in on leave and spend their money."

"What good does that do me? I'll be sent back tomorrow and watched all the way. Maybe I'll never see Tibullus again!"

"Don't cry. Perhaps something will happen." She patted Lilia's bent back. "In a way, though, you're lucky."

"Lucky!"

"To be going back to Rome, I mean. I wish it was me. I left home a year ago and this is as near as I have been able to get. Is it as wonderful as the travelers say?"

Her voice was wistful and full of longing. "Can someone like me earn a dowry and marry well in Rome?"

Lilia studied her. "Anyone as pretty as you should not need much of a dowry. You could marry an artisan, or a stallkeeper, or a scribe. Do you have any money?"

The girl shook her head. "The pay is very small. I have sent some home and have saved only a hundred and thirteen sesterces in a year. The food is good, the work is easy, and the mistress never uses a whip, but we buy our own clothes and the Taberna Caediciae is run for the guests—not us."

Lilia looked at her steadily. "You are about my height. Your hair is dark like mine. Would you like to take my place on the stage tomorrow?" Lilia pulled out the little pouch and emptied the warm contents on the tray. The flashing gold was reflected in the wide eyes of the servant girl.

"You can have it all. The money, my ring—everything but my bulla."

She withdrew the necklace with its metal charms and golden



locket. "I have had this since I was a baby. I will not put it aside until I am really married and living with my husband, no matter how long it takes."

The girl looked with frightened eyes at the wealth scattered on the tray. "It is a fortune! Lady!"

Lilia thought suddenly of Commander Manlius' face and laughed. "It's not a fortune and it doesn't matter anyway. And Fortuna is facing east. Now listen."

Before sunrise the trumpets sang. The camp awoke and took up its many duties. While the men were eating, the rattle and thunder of the heavy traffic on the basaltic pavement of the nearby highway was increasing.

Commander Manlius looked up from his breakfast, to see the night stage from Capua, some twenty-five miles away, coming by at a slow trot. The horses were weary from their long trip down from the Apennine foothills.

He indicated it to Matho, who was eating with him.

"Our persistent little gadfly will soon be buzzing away from us. We shall be plagued by her no more." He fell to his meal with an improved appetite. The Master of Horse looked skeptical but made no comment.

"Tulliola! Where are you? Bring our guest down."

Lilia squeezed her new friend's trembling arm with a confidence she did not feel. "Don't stop or pause. Everything is going to be all right. Just go straight to the rheda."

She pulled her gray shawl far forward on the maid's head, so that her face could hardly be seen. "Hold it that way. Keep your head down as though you are crying."

"Oh, lady! I think I will be. I am so scared."

Lilia slipped an arm about her. She drew the maid's palla across her own hair. Dressed in the coarse gray homespun which she had accepted in exchange, barefoot and with face hidden, she did not believe she would be recognized if she did not speak to anyone who might know the other girl.

"Remember," she said urgently, "no one on the stage will know me. If the driver hasn't seen you before, there is no chance that he will say anything. Your fare is paid all the way to Rome."

He will be holding money for your meals and he will take care of you that far, even if you transfer to another rheda.

"All you have to do is to get away quickly when you arrive in the city, so that no one can hold you and deliver you to my father."

"And if someone does? If the driver does know me?"

"Then we shall both be weeping." Lilia's voice was grim but determined. "Come."

They went down the stair and side by side walked directly to the coach. It was laughably simple. The driver was talking to the proprietor, who pointed out his charge. The driver nodded.

Lilia helped the maid in and patted her shoulder in apparent sympathy. Tulliola hung her head as though in disconsolate resignation, took her seat, and squeezed herself, a tight little ball, into the far corner.

The other passengers took their places, the doors slammed. Up mounted the driver and the guard to their high seats, the horn blared, the whip cracked—and away they all went.

Lilia walked quickly back into the main room, through it, and into the kitchen, still holding her new shawl over her head. This and her hand hid most of her face. No one looked up or paid any attention to her.

She picked up a pitcher and went out the side door, into the courtyard, as though she were going to the well she had marked from her upstairs window. She did not stop there. When she was certain she was out of sight she dropped the pitcher on a pile of refuse and, still barefoot, began to run.

Almost at the same moment, only a few miles ahead, the long column of the Thirteenth had uncoiled itself. Cataphracts of the Sixth Ala; engines, baggage and supply wagons; rippling lines of marching men, cohort following cohort; Commander Manlius riding ahead in his customary place. Bringing up the rear, as always, the twenty recruits who had volunteered in Rome.

"Tibullus, straighten up. You make my back ache. Think of a poem to cheer us up. Sing a couple of verses. Get your mind off that girl. She's really gone back this time."

"Any money on that? Bet two sesterces, knife fighter. Oh, my poor legs!"

Tramp, tramp, tramp. The insistent drum marking time for the many feet. They struck the worn stones to its beat, following the gradually rising gradient which ran toward the mountains, through the Falernian district.

Here were far-reaching vineyards, heavy with luscious grapes, well-tended olive trees, small fields of ripening wheat—all overhung with scent on this dewy morning.

Through all this food in the raw, Lilia followed, again growing hungry and thirsty as the forenoon wore on. Her sore feet were poorly protected now, for she wore the flimsy dress sandals which she had retained when she exchanged clothes at the tavern.

Her legs were tired and aching also, but she was pleased to find when she rubbed them that there were new muscles which were becoming hard and firm.

Every hour she thought she could not be far behind. She felt that she must be holding her own, but as the day lengthened she discovered that the road contractors must have placed the mile-stones farther apart. She drank at springs; she tightened her belt; she continued to follow.

Now, she thought, I know what hunger really is. She was haunted by the remembrance of the lavish array she had seen in her hasty exit through the kitchen of the tavern: rabbits and pheasant being prepared for the dinner, rich pastries, bubbling pots of vegetables, the savory strings of garlic, onions, and peppers; all these made that tiny breakfast roll hours ago seem even smaller. The memory increased her sensation of imminent famine and collapse.

This was the suffering of the poor. She had missed one meal.

It was a long day's journey. Lilia had hoped that the legion might stop before it reached Capua, the second largest city in Italy. When the outlines of its buildings came dimly into sight and she saw no sign of the camp, she realized what the maid had told her was the truth.

The stopping places were deliberately arranged to be outside of cities or towns, unless they were in closely guarded barracks. Thus desertion was rendered almost impossible and unchal-

lenged entrance, to find Tibullus, might continue to remain difficult.

Near here, the slave revolt led by Spartacus had begun sixty-five years before. Here had commenced the long line of crucified men, spaced evenly for over a hundred and twenty miles toward Rome. Six thousand agonies, screaming injustice to the sky, the only survivors of forty thousand people whose only crime had been that they wanted the right and the freedom to go home.

There were still crosses erected on the road leading into the outskirts of the city. Lilia averted her eyes from them, though few were occupied by malefactors.

She hurried through the thickly settled slum section. It was late, the hour of the evening meal, and everywhere were the enticing smells of cooking. Lest she be noticed by some of the rough-appearing idlers, she did not dare stop but skirted the city through its edge. Walking rapidly as though upon an errand, she followed the highway and passed out into the lonely open fields again.

Beyond, between Capua and the small village of Calatia, she came upon the camp. The patrols were out in their steady pacing around the circumference of the quadrangle. Standifers were posted, as usual, at the four ends of the two streets which crossed through the center of the tent city.

It was dusk, but her light clothing made her plainly visible. At a safe distance, Lilia got her bearings, identified the tent of Tibullus and his companions, plucked up her courage, and started directly for it. She was positive that she was being watched by the nearest sentry as she neared the camp edge. He was looking directly at her all the way. It no longer seemed to matter.

At least they will have to feed me, she thought. Nothing else was so important—not even Tibullus.

As she came even closer, the sentry suddenly turned his back upon her and gazed intently in the opposite direction. He shaded his eyes from the torch and peered. Lilia had heard no sound to attract his absorbed interest, but she did not question her good friend Fortuna, who was doubtless responsible.

She skirted the back of the tent row, slipped like a wind-blown leaf through the entrance she sought. It was the right

tent. There were Antimon and Titus, who seized upon her with little delighted murmurs and chuckles, hugging her in friendly fashion and kissing her cheeks like brothers. Here was Longinus, with his brief preoccupied smile. How wonderful to come to a place where she was expected and wanted and welcome!

Here was her husband and here, a little later, was food. Home again, if only for one night.

Then, the happy hour with Tibullus, now as she had longed to find him, tender and affectionate. After that, Kervashe and Licinius came in, quiet as though they had feather feet, to whisper their admiration, to meet and marvel and praise; to make themselves known by name and express their sympathy for her ordeal and endurance.

Then others came. Some were old campaigners, but one of the new recruits, Proxillus, came late and came again a little before dawn, his trumpet under his arm. He brought a dark blanket with him, and Lilia, wrapped in it so no white showed, followed him trustingly into the wagon park.

Here she ensconced herself in the small nook which had been arranged for her among the bags of grain and lay there comfortably hidden away in a soft nest of blankets, covered by boards upon which were other bags of grain.

She lay there hidden, while camp was broken. When the wagons rolled, no one disturbed her in her hiding place. She dozed and daydreamed all through the next march, drinking sparingly from a leather wine bottle which had been thoughtfully provided, nibbling her way, with squirrel bites, through a little packet of toasted peas.

She had no other sustenance, but the thought of the miles unrolling behind her was enough. She heard the harsh, uninhibited man talk of the drivers, the cursing at the mules, the bustle of the multitudinous noises of travel. It all blended into a lullaby which sent her into a drowsy stupor.

Lilia did not know when they made camp that night. She slept so soundly that she was startled to find the covering protection had been removed and darkness had fallen.

A hand found and gripped her own. She felt the scar upon it which she had traced with her fingers upon the first frightening

night in the tent. It was Longinus, come to bring her back to the tent. "Dinner is ready."

So it went for a three-day journey through the mountains, where the Queen of Ways could no longer run straight without bridges and tunnels through the living rock. Sometimes there were cuts, thin cracks as though split by the shattering blows of Hercules' invincible club. At the top, the blue Samnian sky; at the bottom, the paved or natural surface of the road.

Here the long muttering echoes rolled upward from the pound of hobnailed boots, sliding metallic scratch of mule and horse hoofs, the grating rumble of the many wheels; here, careful to make no sound which might somehow be heard amid all this clamor, rode Lilia in the semidarkness of the wagon, with its closed leather canopy.

At night she was told the roll call of the peopled places which she had passed so easily: Caudium, Beneventum, Aeclanum, Aquilonia, Venusia; over and through the mountains, across hair-raising depths under stone bridges flung like arched aqueducts above abysses; downhill along the Adriatic flank of the Apennines into the fair, good land of Apulia.

Undiscovered, unhindered, unharmed, she rode until the third dawn.

*"Come, bring your pan.  
Come, bring your gourd.  
We'll give you all  
We can afford!"*

So, cheerfully, called the trumpet in the chill snow-fed wind of morning, for the distribution of five days' issuance of rations.

Lilia had but just settled herself into her nook when the flaps were thrown back, the wagon lurched to the weight of the men who climbed into it, and the bags over her hiding place were lifted away.

"Oho!" A strange face peered in. "Here's a little mouse in our grain." He reached down for her. Lilia made herself small.

"You fool!" Another gruff voice. "Cover her up, quick. We'll take another wagon. That's the girl they're all talking about!"

"What's going on in there? Get that grain out. What do you men think you are doing?"

"Nothing, Tribune. Broke open a bag, that's all."

"Let me see. Probably some of that musty, rotten stuff we loaded on in Rome. Well! Well! Looks pretty good to me. Let's see how the commander likes it."

Her chief antagonist did not appear to be as surprised as Lilia had expected. He gave her a resigned "What, again?" look, but made no audible comment until after the tribune had been dismissed.

He then motioned Lilia to be seated opposite him and rolled an orange across the table at her. "Golden apples of the Hesperides. Have you ever had one?"

She shook her head, mutely catching it without taking her eyes off his inscrutable face. She turned the fruit around and around in her hands. She was uncomfortably aware of her appearance. She wondered if her face was as dirty as she saw her hands to be. Did he notice her wrinkled clothes and straggly hair?

She felt her lips pucker involuntarily. She knew that, in spite of herself, she was about to cry.

Manlius took the orange, peeled it with his strong, nervous fingers, concentrating upon the small task as though absorbed in it above all other matters. He broke it into two juicy fragments and handed them back to her, still without speaking.

She ate the strange delicacy in a downcast mood. Finally he sighed. He said without rancor, "Dear, foolish, obstinate child. What am I to do with you?"

This startled Lilia. She was braced for scolding, threats, orders—anything but kindness. She gave him a furtive upward glance. He was studying her with a look which seemed almost friendly.

Was it possible that he might be willing to relent? Lilia took heart from the idea.

"A woman must go where her husband goes," she said slowly. She must make him understand that her determination was as unflinching as his.

"If you send me back again, I will escape as I did before and follow him while I still live—and if I must die in the effort, it will be somewhere along the road.

"A word from you could make us both happy. You choose to make us weep. That is your privilege and your power. We can

do nothing against it, but I tell you, General Varro, that Venus is stronger than Mars and I believe we have her favor."

Manlius lifted a quizzical eyebrow. The stern lines of his face did not appear quite so rigid. He put his hands up beside his temples, then ran them through his hair as though the action might encourage thought.

"My father is a banker and I have learned from him. Before that, he was a trader. He has often said that compromise is necessary to ratify any successful contract. As a merchant's daughter, I will make a bargain with you."

"Continue."

"So far, I have kept up with your men. If you will not send me back again, have me detained, or hinder me, I will follow without asking anything more of you.

"If I am unable to keep up or be with my husband when your ships are ready to sail, I will return home. On the other hand, if I have proved myself as good a soldier as your men in the march, I will have earned your permission to go with him as I must."

Manlius pondered. Her jaw was resolutely set. Her voice had gained an underlying ring of inflexibility which he had not noticed when they first met. These few days had created a firmness of character which he recognized in himself and which he could not help but admire. So, he thought, Eunice herself might have spoken.

He rendered his decision after slow thought and some mental qualifications.

"I agree to your bargain, but there are certain points upon which I shall insist. There will be no more riding in army wagons. You must march as do the men.

"You may accept rides from others, but for not more than five miles from any one traveler. You cannot engage passage to Brundisium on any public vehicle."

"I have no more money." Lilia told him briefly how it had been spent. Manlius looked astonished, but continued.

"How you are to accomplish what you plan is a mystery to me. We shall not feed you. You are only permitted to follow.

"If you can, by the favor of Venus, arrive at our port of embarkation, and walk up the gangplank before the ships sail, I will



accept you as a member of the expedition, to share our trials for good or ill.

"If you find us gone, that is the end of the compact. I must have your word that you will return to Rome and your parents. I shall send word to them by courier, within the hour, advising them of your whereabouts and what you are trying to do.

"If they reach you and take you back first, you must return without dispute. However, if you arrive and we have sailed, money will be left with the harbor master for your food and lodgings until they arrive—or you may use it for stage passage home. Does that seem fair to you?"

"Your terms are better than I hoped. I do agree."

Manlius held out his hand across the table. His face was solemn and unsmiling. Lilia slipped her small one into his, almost lost in his wide palm, and the bargain was sealed.

Now she felt timid again. Her defiance waned at this ending to their clash of wills. She felt uneasy now that she had won. Could it really be true?

"I am sorry you wasted your money on me. I would return it if I could."

The bleak visage across from her now lightened. He *is* nice, when he smiles! I could really like him—somewhere else. If Tibullus were just a little more like— She suddenly felt ashamed of her thoughts.

"It is not important. Come, let us breakfast together. It will be for the last time, I think, so let us be friends for a little while."

By the time they had finished eating, the legion was ready to move out. Lilia stood, as she had the first morning, between the commander and the Master of Horse. There was a difference, though. She was a little thinner, somewhat browned by the sun, not so well dressed, and she was not in tears.

She looked out over the moving men with as high a gaze as did the two officers. There was something in the attitude of the three which was similar and it was not long before the men detected it. It was almost as though they held equal rank.

Century by century, she saw the friendly smiles; row upon row, the lances rose and fell in salute and fists struck mailed breasts to set the overlapping lorica strips ajangle.

All at once a strong, resonant voice was lifted in song and a

spontaneous roar joined in to drown out the first singer, unidentifiable in the crowd. Lilia thrilled to the sound, knowing that it was for her, although she was unaware that this was the first time the men had sung on the march since leaving Rome.

*"My Lilia has raven hair.  
A face and form beyond compare.  
The perils of our life she'd dare,  
To starve upon a soldier's fare.  
Heigh-ho, Lilia!  
Little sister, Lilia!  
Stay with us, Lilia,  
Don't go away.  
She'd snatch away a dragon's hoard  
And split him as an apple's cored,  
With nothing but a soldier's sword,  
And wonder why she is adored.  
Darling Lilia!  
Our girl-friend is Lilia!  
We want you, Lilia!  
So stay—stay—stay!"*

Over and over again it was repeated, thundering down the column in a blasting volume of sound. When the march-past was done and Manlius had impassively accepted the salutes, Lilia had already left to follow beside Tibullus, marching alongside, three fast steps to two of his long, measured strides.

It was then that Matho nudged Manlius. "A little late with the salute, weren't they, General?" he slyly enquired.

Manlius looked him up and down with an expression of distaste.

"Our next three marches will be half again as long, each day." His tone was grim and dry. "Perhaps at the end of them, the men will no longer have so much breath for singing.

"As to the salute—I think we both know for whom it was meant."

They mounted their horses in silence and rode to take their places at the head of the column.

The dust rolled up, whitening horses, wagons, marching men and Lilia—already beginning to fall a little behind.

## QUINTUS AGAIN

As the dry, hot miles stretched down, out of the monotonously sloping foothills, the dust grew thicker and more choking. It was no longer the powdered limestone of the road cuttings. Now it changed to a pink deposit which the winds, blowing north out of Africa, had released to overlay the land. The sirocco, heated by the scorching oven of the Sahara, which at this time was undergoing the geological change of dehydration, was already wilting foliage, parching fields, and drying the springs of the Apulian littoral.

Now and again the army met flocks of sheep being driven north into the mountain pastures, pushed as rapidly as possible by shepherds who looked dejected and tired. They were burned black by the sun and wore cloths across their mouths and nostrils, the better to breathe.

It was the first time Lilia had ever seen red sheep and the thought seemed humorous, until the pleasurable feeling of being partially accepted wore off. She gamely kept up with the men for a long time. For a while she was even able to keep her place near Tibullus, for when the column rested, she continued walking and thus was able to catch up with his decima.

She watched him as long as she could, feeling proud that he was standing up so well to the hardships which he so resented.

How soon he had acquired the long military stride of the veterans! She did not know that, when he lagged behind in those first few days and ruined the alignment of his rank, the watchful centurion's vine-stick had fallen heavily on his back and shoulders.

She wished she could maintain that long distance-devouring gait. It was impossible. After a while she fell back to a point where she could no longer distinguish him from the others. Now

she struggled along beside the slingers. Their wild pipes no longer wailed, for the instruments were sacked to protect them from the infiltrating dust.

Everyone was now as red as though powdered with cinnabar. "We have all been promoted to be tribunes!" cried one coughing slinger. Lilia could hardly understand his thick island accent, but she answered with the same defiant gaiety:

"No, we are all foot cavalry now!"—referring to the bright crimson cloaks worn by Matho's horsemen.

The slingers also forged ahead out of sight. The dust grew thicker, raised now by the hoofs of the artillery mules and the carroballistae which they pulled. She did not breathe it long, for without the rest periods she had refused to take, she was growing more tired.

She looked wistfully at the wagons behind the engines, which soon overhauled and passed her. She must not ride again in one of those, she knew. Neither was she offered a ride, for all the wagoners had been so ordered. Many of them looked down from their high seats, calling out sympathetic words of encouragement.

The very last driver slowed, coaxing her to jump up behind. She would not, knowing that the man would be flogged for his kindness, should he be found out. He insisted, and she walked beside him, resting a hand on the side, lightly as she was able, aided in this way but shaking her head at his pleas.

Finally his wagon lagged conspicuously behind and the chief wagoner came rattling back in his light rig to gather in the stray.

While this last wagon was still in sight, she nerved herself to struggle along at the same rate. When it passed from view, her pace slackened and weariness settled down upon her.

Now she became more conscious of her discomfort. She felt the gritty dust in her clothing and between her teeth. Her eyes burned, her legs ached, and her hair felt dry and harsh. She knew that the blisters on her feet, partly healed during the three days of riding, had grown larger, had broken, and were being rasped raw. The pretty dress sandals had never been intended for travel such as this.

It was long past time to rest. She stopped at the next brook,

dried to a thready trickle winding among the dead and brittle reeds.

When she stepped thankfully into it, the water scarcely covered her insteps and the brick-colored silt rose in pink turbidity to hide her small feet. Lilia scooped out the deepest hole and waited. When the water had cleared, she drank and felt refreshed. Only then did she wash her face, shake most of the dust out of her long hair, and coil it into a tight knot.

Afterward she lay back on the bank, in the meager shade of a clump of dying willows, closed her eyes, and rested.

She did not intend to fall asleep, although it could not have been more than a few moments, judging by the sun, when she was wakened by rapid hoofbeats on the road.

A courier dashed by in the direction she was going, maintaining the customary headlong speed of government messengers between relay posts. This frightened her, for although Lilia knew that no message from the commander could have much more than started for Rome and her father, in this short time, there was always the possibility that he might have been so informed by either Julia or Chloris.

Perhaps her time of freedom, always measured narrowly, had already run out. Maybe the word had gone ahead to local civic authorities to look for and intercept her.

Her only comfort was that this section of the long journey was relatively unpeopled. The thought was not much cheer, for wherever there are people there is always food of some sort. It occurred to her now that she was very hungry.

No one on the road took notice of her. Everyone seemed too anxious to hurry along through this arid and inhospitable district to spare a glance at a dusty, tired slave girl trudging wearily through the afternoon heat. Slave girls did not need rides.

Lilia tightened her belt. The road ran straight for a great distance, now that it was no longer confined by the hindering foothills. A long way off, she could see a gang of men making repairs, at first only a dark mass, then a resolving of the groups into individuals as she drew nearer.

She had a resurgence of dry humor and muttered, "Haven't finished the road yet, Julia." With a flash of feminine care about

her appearance, she brushed down her tunica and shook her shawl free of dust before she passed through them.

She need not have bothered. No one whistled at her or spoke. The surveyor looked up and frowned as she crossed the road line he was marking by sighting along the crosspiece of his groma, a horizontal cross laid flat on an upright with a swivel bearing, and held level by plumb bobs dangling from each of the four ends.

Both he and the rodman seemed resentful that they were hindered by her in their work. She dodged among the men who were digging the ditches on either side and trimming out the brush beyond for a clear line of poles.

Apparently the road was to be widened. There were heaps of rubble, rough stones and flints laid out with mathematical spacing to go down first on the solid bed. In some sections, these had already been rammed down and the layer of smaller fist-size stones was being spread with more care.

As she went on she passed the groups spreading gravel over this foundation and, still farther, those who were fitting together the massive polygonal blocks which formed the surface of the highway and would still bear heavy traffic after two thousand years.

Everyone seemed too tired and disgusted with the heat to think about anything else but his work. No one seemed interested enough in her to pass the time of day.

At last, almost as though in answer to prayer, she saw what she had been looking for, without really knowing why she had been scanning the edge of the finished road. Here was another brook which passed through a conduit under the highway. There was a larger pool where the stream had widened and around it rushes were growing. She knew that the ends of these were edible.

With a little moan of thankfulness, she went down to the water and plucked them. About an inch on each shoot was crisp and nutty-flavored. They did not do much to satisfy, but they were something.

Then she found a treasure. Others had been here before her. Probably the road workers had eaten here, in the shade. At any rate, where it had been previously and carelessly flung by some

wasteful diner, she saw the heel of a dark loaf lying in the grass and a large onion, with only one bite taken out of it.

Lilia snatched them up, looking back at the road. No one had seen. No one would rob her. They were hers!

The onion had a thumbprint on it. She washed it off, took a deep drink, tore off a great bite of bread with her sharp, even teeth, and flavored the mouthful with a bite of onion.

How good it was! How foolish to leave behind such delicious food. Nothing in all her life had ever seemed so savory, so delightfully satisfying. It was not until she had eaten all and thriftily scraped up a few crumbs out of her lap, blotting them out of her palm, that it occurred to her how sickened by this Julia would have been.

Even Chloris, she thought ruefully, would have turned up her pretty little nose at such common fare. Suddenly she felt older and wiser than both of these. She shrugged. She knew that Fortuna had smiled upon her once more.

Twilight merged into dusk and then black night came to find her still on the road with no encampment yet in view or hearing.

There were alarm cocks which had been trained to crow at the approach of a stranger, geese who never seemed to sleep, and dogs—a lot more daunting after dark. She struggled on past many farmhouses. Surely it could not be much farther to the camp.

It was when she was seriously considering the possibility that she had somehow passed the bivouac in the darkness that she heard the rattle of light fast-moving wheels behind her and the oncoming of swift thudding hoofs.

Her reaction was slow. There was no time to dodge the high shape that came rushing up out of the dark. She tried to fling herself out of the way. She felt a violent but glancing blow from the shoulder of the surprised horse, who snorted and plunged.

Then she spun away, off balance, in a reeling whirl of stars and stones, hardly knowing which it was that pounded her so brutally.

She heard a shout, an exclamation of astonishment which started as a curse and remained unfinished. She felt strong arms

lift her into the carriage. "Why, it's a girl! Stand still, you jumpy four-footed son of Pegasus! What do you want to do—fly?"

Then, swimming up out of the daze, she realized that she had been placed in the narrow seat of a birotum, one of the fast, light vehicles hired and used by government officials in a hurry, the equivalent of the modern drive-it-yourself conveyances.

These whisked over the roads of the Empire, carrying a single rider and up to six hundred pounds of baggage, at the rate of fifty miles a day, having precedence over all but couriers and mail carts in the selection of horses.

Lilia could not see the face of the man who had almost run her down, but she knew he must be an important person. She was sure of it when he said, after first inquiring if she were hurt and being reassured, "Have you seen an army pass this way today?"

She knew that he must take her for a village girl and answered in as little resemblance as possible to her usual cultured diction, "Yes, Excellence. You must be close."

He seemed to detect something in these few words. He started and peered at her, but their faces were only vague white blurs in the dark.

Lilia's heart sank with dread. This must be a man sent by her father to take her back. Why else would he be looking for the legion? She knew, judging by past experience, that if the day's march had been so unusually lengthened for a purpose, it must be again that the camp would be situated at a distance from town or city.

Silvium had already been passed. Blera was next, according to the last milepost before darkness descended. There was nothing beyond of any size until Tarentum, on the seacoast, was reached.

Lilia doubted that the legion could have gone past Blera. How close they actually were to that small town she did not realize until the driver, who seemed to be able to see in the dark, suddenly pulled off the highway. The birotum bumped across rough ground, headed for a flickering pair of torches, and came to a lurching stop. There was a peremptory challenge.

She had intended to jump from the carriage before reaching the camp. She wanted to hide. How she would elude her father's



emissary the next morning could come later. Now it was too late.

The announcement of the driver dispelled her fears at once:

"The Quaestor Quintus Agrippa, from Hither Hispania, to see Legate Manlius Varro upon private business." His tone was haughty and demanding. The standifer, recognizing authority, snapped to rigid attention.

"Decurion of the guard!" he bellowed.

That officer came up at a run, followed by a small detail of men. He took in the situation at a glance and looked angry at the sight of Lilia's condition, in the light of the torches.

Lilia did not remember having seen this man before, but he evidently recognized her. He reached for her hands, while the driver alighted. A legionary took the horse by the bridle to lead him away.

"Kindly see to the girl," the quaestor negligently remarked. "My horse knocked her down in the dark. She may be injured."

"We will certainly do that!" the decurion gritted. "Yes, you may be sure we will take good care of her. We know her well."

He scowled. His voice was polite, but it had an undercurrent of menace. "And, Quaestor, regardless of your high rank, I sincerely trust, for your sake, we find that she has not been harmed."

Quintus looked mildly surprised but said nothing. Lilia was led away, half supported, half carried by the strong arm slipped about her waist. She leaned gratefully against the decurion and he suited his pace to her slow, limping steps.

A bright light burned in headquarters, long after mess had been finished. Quintus, satisfied and resting, leaned back in his folding chair and studied Manlius with a disgusted air. The commander seemed thoughtful but unconvinced. He passed the flagon.

"Regular army ration. Consulate Taurian. Hope you like it."

The quaestor lifted his cup and took a long drink. He knew at once that this had been a mistake. He made a wry face and coughed. Asperity in his voice betrayed his weariness.

"Before I become too hoarse, or this tanning fluid of yours withers my throat, let me try once more to make myself clear. Is

it really possible that you do not understand how you have been deceived?

"I tell you again, our Divine Emperor, Cousin to the Gods, Liar and Maniac Supreme, is afraid of you. He plans your death!

"Even before I left for Gades from Baetica, the orders had arrived at my office for expropriation of your estates in the name of Gaius Caesar Caligula. I found them there. It was fortunate that you freed your slaves.

"I had heard a few rumors that dishonor awaited you, from Commander Marius, of the Eighth. They worried me. I had leave coming and I took it.

"There was plenty of talk in Rome that you had been publicly reprimanded. I knew you had not been relieved of your command and could not understand why, until I judiciously placed a few hundred denarii where they would do the most good. Marvelous how wine and money oil tongues, isn't it?

"I learned some things from a friend or two who directed me to a tavern where the Praetorian Guards gather and there, by a roundabout way, from an eavesdropper who has since been slain rather mysteriously, I discovered the secret.

"Somehow Caligula discovered your ancestry—"

"It has never been a secret."

"Apparently it was to him or he had never thought much about it. But you know yourself that the last year or so has been bad in Rome. His excesses—his boys—and, above all, his extravagance have rendered his popularity less than when he came to the throne. He must regain it. Don't you see?

"If you are successful in your mission and return, he will still have you to reckon with. At this very moment he counts you dead. He knows well that your descent from the Divine Julius makes your claim to the throne better than his. Who but a madman—and I tell you, all his actions indicate oncoming insanity—would plan the death, in exile, of almost seven thousand men, to eliminate the one person who is a menace to his sacrilegious power?"

"That is the very reason that what you tell me seems so utterly incredible. My estates confiscated? My beautiful ancestral home in the possession of another? The tomb of my beloved Eunice now upon the lands of a stranger?

"I am forced to trust in my Emperor's sincerity. I must assume that this also is a part of the plan to deceive the Parthians about the real reason for the expedition. If descendants of the Lost Legion still live, it is the manifest duty of Rome to bring them back and repatriate them. I have not the slightest doubt that when this is done my estates will be returned to me and I shall live out the rest of my life in the only place I long to be.

"I have no political ambitions. My past actions have made that clear."

"Not to a madman. And patriot that I know you to be, single-heartedly devoted to maintaining the glory of Rome, I consider it your duty to give up this mad enterprise. It has been a hundred years since the legionaries were taken prisoner after the debacle at Carrhae. What—and whom—can you expect to find? Parthia has refused to acknowledge even that prisoners were taken! No ransom has ever been asked in reparation for the damage done by Crassus. Be patriot, yes, but not a fool! Turn and come back."

"I cannot. It is a great honor to be chosen for this mission. If descendants of these captives still languish in a foreign land and consider themselves Romans, they must be given the opportunity to return home. If it cannot be done by peaceful means, diplomatically—and I understand why Parthia is hesitant after so long to admit their existence—then it must be done by force. If we have to fight our way to them, we will do it. If, together, we must fight our way back to Rome, then let it so be.

"Quintus, if you will not admit the necessity, then consider the glory of the mission! New lands, new peoples. Perhaps even an end to this long struggle in the East. If we are successful and I am sure that we will be, then Parthia should dread its continuance."

"Glory!" Quintus sneered. "Since when has glory healed a wound? Did it ever render screams or moans on a battlefield more musical? Does glory warm the cold beds of the dead?"

"You cannot consider only yourself. If you lead your men to a useless death—and if there is a day of reckoning, which I do not believe—how will you answer to them when their shades cluster around you, asking, 'Why, Commander? For what purpose did I die? Was my life wasted? Did you throw it away?'"

Manlius looked already haunted. "Do you imagine for one moment that this is ever far from my thoughts? This is the curse I must lie under until my vow is complete, my mission is resolved—my orders obeyed to the utmost, or revoked.

"I am bound irrevocably—and my nights are sleepless and tortured."

Quintus' voice lowered. He laid his hand upon Manlius' and felt the tiny quiver of muscles held in restraint only by a powerful act of will. His heart went out to his old friend.

"I said, in Hispania, that I wondered if you—like all men—had a weakness. Now I know you have. It is one that neither you nor any other commander can afford to have. It is—sympathy!

"You are torn by it. No man can help you. I hope your gods can. Manlius—you are driven by strange dragons!

"Success in your eyes may not have the same appearance in the eyes of your legionaries. If your mission is successful at the cost of many lives, the shades may forgive you. If it fails . . . ?"

"If we fail"—Manlius' face was positively white—"then I have failed my Emperor, but I shall have done my best for my country and it is to my country that I owe my prime, and only, allegiance. My men will be answered in that way. I can say no more than that. I trust that it will be enough."

"You can serve your country best by returning now, giving up this mad insistence on maintaining a suicidal allegiance to a scheming cutthroat who plots your murder. Manlius, for the sake of those who love you, for the responsibility you must feel for your men, for the moral obligation you have to live for your country—your conscience must demand that it is your duty to take up arms to rid your country of a monster. You must seize the throne, seat yourself there, and rule the Empire with justice and in honor!"

"Then you consider that if Gaius Caligula rids himself of an imagined competitor, which I should never be, that act is murder? If I do the same, and plunge Italy into the horrors of another civil war—that act is justified by the expediency of self-preservation, under the nobler title of an altruistic patriotism? Is my life worth saving at such a cost?"

"Ah, no, old friend. If you had no other reason for your long

journey to find me, it has been for nothing. The country has been bled deeply enough by ambition and the lust for power.

"From the time of Hannibal to that of Marius and Sulla; from Spartacus and Sartorius to the struggle between my ancestor, Julius, and his adversary, Pompey; to the terrible years of the Triumvirate and the Egyptian Queen, too many men have died young, too many women have wept unconsolated, too many children have been unfathered. It shall not continue because of me.

"I must trust and believe. I shall maintain my promise and do what I vowed to do."

Quintus, with elbows on the table, rested his head in his hands and closed his eyes. His thoughts went back to a scene in the arena which had shaken him to the soul. He had gone to see Andronicus, the son of Manlius, fight.

The little boy whom he had loved; who had called him Uncle Quintus; who had ridden, whooping in delight, upon his back; and whom, as Ajax, he had seen dragged from the arena with hooks under his arms. To see that bright blood staining the sands was too much.

Suddenly, although for many years he had denied that he had any ideals, he had at last come face to face with himself. He must follow the legion. It must return. Manlius must be told.

Now, after what he had heard, he could not. Nor, he felt, could he himself return. The tug of old friendship was too strong. He must see this out to the end, continue to urge on the grounds of devotion to country less than personal reasons that Manlius recognize that he was being sacrificed uselessly.

This he would do. In a sense, he thought, he had prepared himself for this when he relinquished his office to go and appeal to his old friend. There was little reason for him to return alone.

He raised his head and looked into Manlius' eyes. Strange that his heart felt lighter now that he had come to a decision. He spoke.

"Then I am looking at a ghost! Ah, Manlius, your idealism will be the death of both of us. Do you have a spare tent and extra armor?"

"I shall be most pleased to have you with us. Now to bed. We rise early, for we are on forced march."

"I meant to ask you about that. Why the unusual haste? The extra mileage? Your orders do not demand this, do they?"

In a few words, Manlius outlined the situation. Quintus looked unbelieving, then began to laugh. "The joke? I doubt you will find it as hilarious as I do. I think I must have helped your little female nemesis to track you down. She is already in the camp! Probably asleep by now."

A strange expression flitted across Manlius' usually impassive features. Quintus could almost have sworn that it was one of relief. If so, it passed so rapidly that he could not be sure.

"Good—I mean, good gods! How can it be possible?"

## THE ROAD TO BRUNDISIUM

Dawn broke, cold and gray, heralded by the usual insistent trumpet. Its echoes were hurled back at the sleeping camp by the not far distant walls of Blera.

Smokes laggardly rose from damp cooking fires. Men shuddered into groaning wakefulness. They coughed and spat and swore, rubbing complaining muscles. The ten miles added to the usual march had taken toll, even from the veterans.

Tibullus awoke unwillingly. He looked at Lilia, still sleeping beside him, with disgust and revulsion. He felt that she was to blame for his present condition. If he had known just how true this actually was, he might have hated her. As it was, he only wondered why he had ever thought he loved her.

He felt himself cheated in his destroyed expectations of a wealthy wife, a wealthier father-in-law, a life of lazy ease. He ached. It was not to be borne that Lilia should lie in comfort while he was in mental and physical distress. He shook her roughly.

Even in her sleep, she winced as his fingers sank into the soft flesh of her arm. He saw the pain in her face without sympathy.

"Come, wife. Be a wife. Get me something to eat."

She opened her eyes, still drowsy, and smiled. She reached up to put her arms around his neck. He kissed her once, almost casually, without lingering, without affection, then thrust her aside.

The tent was coming down about their ears. The camp was in a bustle. Animals were being fed and watered, mules bawling their protest at the thin edge of the rising sun, dimly visible through cloud. Smoke hung low in the still air, but now an appetizing smell of porridge was mingled with it.

Lilia stretched luxuriously and crawled out from under the leather. Tent companion Titus, who was cook for the day, held

out a pair of bowls without mentioning that their rations were lessened by her participation. She took only a small amount, filled the other for her husband, and sat on the damp ground near the fire with him. They ate together hurriedly, watching the other three scrape the kettle clean.

The wheaten porridge had little pieces of sausage and onion stirred into it. It was hot and good. After Lilia had eaten, although sparingly, she felt warmed through and through. The wan sun had now cleared the horizon.

She leaned back against Tibullus and rested her head against his shoulder for an instant. There was no time for more.

Once again, a trumpet commanded. All around her the men scrambled to their feet, hastily choking down their last mouthfuls, finishing their wine, swilling out their dishes in the communal trough, shrugging into their packs, and finding their places in line.

Now, across the campground, the order of march took form. The trumpet called for the third and last time. The column rustled metallically into motion, leaving only the few wagons detailed to carry the mess tents of the officers, the cooking equipment within them, and the tubs and troughs. When these were loaded and the wagons had rolled out, the men who had been gigged for this day's fatigue duty hastily fell to shoveling earth over the various latrines.

After they had left, the campground lay clean and bare. There was no sign that the legion had spent the night upon it. By that time the cavalry was already clattering through the streets of Blera.

Rank upon rank, in the early morning, the Thirteenth, fed and presumably rested, marched through the little town, on the highroad which would carry it next to the important city of Tarentum.

As the milestones fell behind, so again, as on the day before, Lilia was gradually outdistanced. She tried to keep up without resting when the column paused, but earlier than the previous day weariness came upon her and she found this no longer possible.

She saw the backs move inexorably farther away at the end of the last cohort. She stumbled along, beside the pipers; the



Balearic slingers greeted her cheerfully but did not slow their machinelike trot in their soft, thick-soled shoes; the war engines crept massively by, drawn by their mules, team by dusty team.

She kept on, staggering in grim exhaustion. Then, out of the ruck of sweating animals and rumbling wheels, a man she knew ran out and grasped her arm, urgently tugging her into the procession.

"Hurry!" he gasped. "Quick! Follow me, before the wagon master sees us!" It was Lucas, the knife fighter.

In an instant she had been hauled out of sight of any officer who might have looked down the length of the march. The two dodged among the parade of catapults and carroballistae, which she had learned to call onagers and scorpions. Avoiding the wheels, they bobbed under the flaring dust-rimmed nostrils of the mules and came to one carroballista which was not covered by its tarred canvas. Licinius and dour Kervashe were waiting, looking nervously about.

A little nest had been made here with an oxhide, slung and fastened under the crossbow arm of the artillery piece. It was lined with a blanket and looked hardly large enough to accommodate a child. When Lilia was lifted and settled in it, she found that, with her knees drawn up, she could lie comfortably there.

She lay as though in a hammock. Lucas dropped a hard biscuit beside her and gave her his canteen. He patted her shoulder and grinned as between comrades who shared a secret.

She protested. "Lucas! I promised not to ride in an army wagon again!"

He laughed as he drew the concealing canvas over her. Her friends and a few others who had seen what happened looked as though they were all fellow conspirators and in sympathy.

"Whoever called this a wagon? Be quiet. Take a nap. No one will make you get out. No one will find you."

"Count the milestones then. I promised that I would not ride more than five miles with anybody."

"Stay hidden all day. Who will know but us?"

"I will know, Lucas. Thank you, Kervashe and Licinius. If I sleep, wake me."

They shrugged and shook heads in good-humored resignation.

"If you must be foolish. Rest now. Sleep if you can." The canvas brought peaceful darkness inside the nest.

Lilia lay on her side and closed her eyes. The oxhide took on the shape of her body and the thongs, which held it suspended, stretched a little with her weight, taking up the shock of the bumpy road and springless axle.

She swung gently to and fro as the procession rattled on.

She yawned, she sighed, and cradled thus, she heard the patter of the first drops of slow enduring rain upon the canvas.

"I must count the milestones," she thought drowsily. "I can't trust anyone to tell me."

She meant, in just another minute, to reach out her hand and lift a corner of the canvas, so that she could watch for the tall markers—then she thought that she had done so. She had not moved. The action had become part of her dream. She slept while the legion—horse, foot, artillery, and baggage train—slogged on at its patient, regular, mile-devouring pace, down the Queen of Ways toward the seaport of Tarentum.

Beyond Blera the highway paralleled the sea. The wind sliced in chill from the water. It was rough with waves. Lilia lay warm, oblivious to her surroundings, until the midday halt, when the cessation of movement woke her. She thought she had slept only a short while, but she felt cramped and realized an urgent need to leave her cozy nook.

She ate her biscuit in the dark and took a long pull at the canteen. She remembered the old woman at the wineshop. I must be becoming a soldier's woman. She smiled contentedly. This horrible sour wine is beginning to taste good.

She drank another swallow of it and this time felt the raw astringency bite into her throat. She coughed. The hammock rocked and the canvas was lifted. Lucas looked in.

"Lie still," he urged, but she could not. Necessity was stronger than desire. She threw back the canvas. "Has it been five miles?"

Lucas' grin was sly. "Something like that, one side or another."

"Then I must start walking again. Help me out."

She stood up and looked around. The scenery had changed while she slept. The rain had stopped and broken clouds scudded high over a rough section of coast. Against it, white-capped rollers were coming in, pursued by gusts of cold wind.

The column was getting ready to move. She drew her cloak

tightly about her, thankful for its warmth. She met the smiles of the men with the same camaraderie with which they were offered.

After hours of travel a happy numbness came to her feet. Late, almost at twilight, each time she came to a milestone she began to count. If she could reach the next stone in a thousand steps, then she was still matching a legionary's stride. She was encouraged, almost each time, to find that the distance was measured off by a count of about eleven hundred. She knew she could not have done this a week ago.

She went on, into the dark, all alone on the lonely road, for wheeled traffic had ceased. High on a hill ahead, the lights of a posthouse gleamed.

Lilia had a feeling that, by now, word might have gone ahead concerning her. She left the road and made a wide skirting through brambles and over a stone wall, until she left the danger spot behind.

When she came back to the Appian Way, with its worn and polished slabs of stone, it was easier to walk. She had fully acquired her night sight. Still, at the nearest milestone to the city she was approaching, a man came out from behind it and faced her. She could not make out his face. He was a sudden and ominous bulk in the dark. She gasped.

Her heart gave a great suffocating leap, then almost stopped. She heard a dear and well-known voice. "Lilia?" it asked, and in a moment she felt her wilting body supported in the familiar arms of her husband.

"Oh, Tibullus!" She clasped him tightly and covered his face with kisses. "You came to meet me! You waited for me! Oh, Tibullus, how I love you!"

This one moment was worth all the pain and fear of the day. It was the first time since Rome that she had felt the gentle consideration that she knew was a deep part of him.

"My centurion gave me leave to come and show you where we are, in barracks. The Tarentines don't want us to march through their city. Our route runs around Tarentum tomorrow. The barracks are only a little way off the road. It forks here, so we knew you would lose your way if I did not meet you."

Tibullus did not add that he had not volunteered to wait but

had been kicked out of his warm bed and told by the others not to come back without her. Neither did he think it necessary to mention that his centurion had told him that, if he did not come back with her, he, Ciscus, would personally see him flogged.

Drowsiness came over her while she was eating. She felt herself being laid gently down in a bunk. She did not know who covered her with a blanket. The long day was over.

Morning dawned bright and fair. Upon the broad parade ground which served the Tarentine barracks the Emperor's Own stood in formation, awaiting the order to move out. Again, as on the days which had begun the long march, there were three to review the line. However, it was not Lilia between Matho, the Master of Horse, and Manlius, the legate.

Quintus, who had turned in his equipage at the mutatio nearest Tarentum and settled his mileage bill with the posthouse keeper, was now nominally a tribune and on the payroll of the legion.

Lilia stood proudly beside Tibullus. She felt herself almost as experienced a legionary as her husband. She was a supernumerary, it was true, but one accepted by her fellow rankers.

She saw the scrutinizing gaze of the commander sweep down the alert column. She was close enough so that she saw the tiny hesitation in that look when it fell on her. Her back stiffened, her little chin went up—she met stare for stare. How really good-looking he was, when one came to understand him!

Was there the tiniest, humorous quirk about his lips? Was he thinking about her? She almost hoped so. Goodness, this was almost unfaithfulness! She should be thinking about Tibullus.

If he had smiled, it was so quickly gone that she could not be sure. The imperious head turned, observing, judging, until every man in the ranks had felt himself personally inspected and was, like Lilia, wondering how he had met that inspection.

"Men! This is the final and longest leg of our journey. The last two marches have tested and tired you. This day will tax you even more. The ships are waiting at Brundisium and we shall embark immediately upon arrival.

"The embarkation will continue throughout the night. We sail at dawn. I expect every legionary to be in his proper place at that time. There must be no lagging behind for any reason.

"You will be able to rest aboard ship. It will be a nice surprise for those weary feet."

Manlius smiled. He paused for the ripple of laughter, quickly checked, which swept down the line. He held up his hand.

"Men!" This time his eyes definitely met Lilia's and paused there. "You are splendid soldiers. I am proud of you."

Now over their heads roared the stentorian bellow of Tribune Quintus: "For-r-ward march! Trumpeter! Sound!"

The column tightened. Every iron-shod boot came down with a crash. The legion surged forward. With it, in perfect step, matching stride for stride, a little pair of worn-out dress sandals struck the ground. To Brundisium! To the ships!

"I am proud of you."

A warm glow quickened her heart.

Once around the borders of Tarentum, that large city, the detour bent back upon the highway. It turned its back upon the immense gulf which formed the instep of the Italian peninsula, to drive almost straight eastward across the heel of the boot.

When the first early five-minute stops came, Lilia was still where she should be and rested with the others. When the trumpet sounded and the whistles pierced the air, she got up from the grass with the same complaints as the men were making, though less profane.

As the day wore on, her euphoria ebbed. The sun grew hot as it approached its zenith. Men perspired under their heavy packs, the resting places seemed farther apart, and suddenly she became weary. It was impossible any longer to pretend that her feet were not again causing her extreme distress.

Now, instead of counting mileposts, she began to count stadia, but she could not remember whether there were eight or ten to the mile. For a while this was argued back and forth through the ranks, until the discussion wore itself out. By the time it was agreed that there were doubtless eight Greek stadia, but definitely ten Roman, to the thousand paces, but that it was totally unimportant and who cared—and who started this thing anyway?—Lilia had lagged far down the column, limping and becoming disheartened.

Their legs were thewed with iron rods. Hers were strung with red-hot wires!

The afternoon wore on. As before, she kept the tail of the column in sight as long as she could. She had been given and enjoyed a biscuit from the knife fighter's rations, but the effects of the rest and the food quickly wore away. The last of the rear guard disappeared in the dust of the long straight road.

There was a copse of trees not far from the highway. She felt that she must have shade and a few moments' rest. She went into the small grove and found it to be a circle of trees with an open spot in the center.

Here stood the base, or pedestal, of a statue which lay demolished as though by hammers, for the dark marble which had composed it was broken into small unrecognizable bits and fragments. It must have been attacked with fury.

The base had borne an inscription, so battered that the letters could not be identified. The one foot, which remained as part of the pedestal, had no toes. It was cloven like the hoof of a goat.

The quiet in the grove was unnatural. The hum of traffic on the road she had just left was shut out as though she had entered a closed room. No leaf rustled in this copse and the air was heavy with a scent of musk and frighteningly oppressive.

A lark flew across the meadow. As it neared the trees it made a wide circle and flew high around them. She had a feeling of being watched. Eyes were boring into her back.

It was an indescribably unpleasant sensation. She was being appraised like an animal. She was about to be used!

Lilia screamed and fled. She ran across the meadow, a wild haunted thing—oblivious of her sore feet, her weary legs, the oppressive heat.

Behind her, she felt a vibration following, though she heard nothing. It was no more than a tremble in the air all about her, almost like sardonic laughter. Fear spurred her on, until she fell gasping and sobbing by the side of the road.

She and Julia had enjoyed delicious thrills, listening to stories of fauns and satyrs who had met girls in lonely places. Half skeptical, half believing them, in the safety of their own homes and gardens they laughed at their momentary terrors. This was different.

Two farm girls, on their way home from market, stopped and helped her into their cart. She drew deep breaths, in gladness to

know that they were human. She sat between them, grateful to be crowded, comforted by their nearness, and told them what had occurred.

"You saw the Lord of the Wood?" one whispered, and looked back fearfully over her shoulder. Her sister made the sign of the horns and spat in the dust between her fingers.

"I saw nothing, but something saw me. I was afraid—so afraid."

"The cursed place of Sylvanus, the cloven-footed," said the first girl, still awe-struck. "I never heard of any girl before who entered that grove and saw or heard him and came out as she went in. You must have a powerful charm."

"Only my bulla," Lilia answered, "and the favor of Fortuna."

"If it was that which saved you, it must be blessed with prayer. You woke Pan from his sleep, in Pan's own grove, in Pan's most sacred hour of the hottest summer day! He will remember. He will enter the body of some evil man and meet and use you cruelly upon some dark and lonesome road."

Lilia laughed, and then shivered suddenly with fear.

As night approached, she began to be oppressed by an increasing uneasiness. Long ago she had been set down, with a warning.

"Beware the lonely roads," the sober-faced girls had called after her as they waved farewell. Now she was on one.

The road was straight and she could see a long way ahead. The country was flat, and even in the fields to either side there was nothing which seemed to present any danger.

Lilia looked behind. No one was following her. Traffic had thinned as it always did with the oncoming of night. The fear persisted. She kept on walking, watching for anything at all which might seem unusual.

Darkness became complete, but the sky was full of stars. By and by the full moon rose and lighted the road. There was little comfort in the pale illumination, for the radiance was eerie and encouraged frightening thoughts. She felt very much alone and small, under the distant, uncaring stars.

## EITEL THE HUN

Torches and cressets flared and sputtered along the piers and quays of Brundisium, sending flickering shadows into the dingy alleys of the waterfront.

The Thirteenth had arrived at the third hour of the night, hungry and disgusted with the long and arduous journey. This last day had been almost double the usual mileage and there was an undercurrent of revolt. The situation was considered entirely unnecessary.

Brundisium, as a terminal, offered no relief. Embarkation commenced at once. The ships, mostly square-sailers with high sterns and low bows, were, in general, vessels which had been pressed into service from a grain fleet.

Like others of their kind, they were rat-infested and carried Egyptian cats to keep down the pests. But rats often scampered unhindered over the straw pallets laid down in the holds for the accommodation of the soldiers.

The sailors, sleeping in their hammocks, were relatively secure. They wasted no sympathy upon the incoming landsmen, regarding them as encumbrances and a hindrance to the performance of their own duties. These duties they carried out with clockwork precision.

Under the watchful eye and scurrilous urging of the acid-tongued port praefect, enraged at being kept from his bed at this unreasonable hour, commissariat carts victualed the ships.

Two days' rations were parceled out to each century as it boarded, and the master waterman had already personally checked barrels and tanks. The long lines of slaves were disbanded by the time the legion marched up and were no longer in the way.

There was orderly bustle as, maniple by maniple, cohort after



cohort, the exhausted, out-of-temper legionaries found their allotted places. As each ship was laden and its complement checked and pronounced complete, the gangplanks were hauled in. The midship sections of the bulwarks, hinged for easier cargo handling, were next raised and secured.

Then hatches were lowered but not battened down. A *buccina*, or bull bugle, blared, signifying readiness to sail. A black ball rose to the end of the *artemon*, thus announcing that no more space was available for either human cargo or other freight.

Winches and cranes creaked and groaned. The gangs of longshoremen groaned in unison with them as they walked the capstan bars around. Mules and horses rose into the air on slings, kicking and thrashing, rolling their wild white-rimmed eyes at the laboring men below. They were lowered into the holds and stationed, where they fell to upon the hay and grain which had been provided.

There were a few regular army transports in the fleet. In these, both animals and men found better accommodations. The horses went in, on their own feet, through hinged middle sections of the ships' hulls. Here, also, the officers were given cabins, tiny but sufficient, to which they were well used, each fitted with a cot, a folding chair and desk attached to the wall, and a swinging lamp in gimbals.

An innovation, just coming into practice, was found by Manlius when he inspected his own cabin—a small window of heavy glass, with a protecting shutter. Otherwise his cubicle was like the others, except that it had a built-in couch in addition to the usual spartan furnishings.

He wasted no time there after locating his quarters but went up on deck to observe the embarkation. It continued without hitch.

Down the wide, curved perimeter of the harbor the dwindling column of waiting men inched on. The *buccinas* brayed, the signals rose, torches swung in circles to wave the companies on to the next vessel.

The last few gangs of slaves, which had been retained to help the artillerymen stow their engines aboard, were now linked to their carrying chain and, exhausted, driven to their pens.

Commander Manlius and Tribune Quintus stood on the quarter gallery in the sterncastle. With them was Taurus Capito, shipmaster of the fleet and captain of the flagship *Hercules*. He was well named, for he was a red-bearded, bull-throated giant of a man. Together they gazed down the line.

Out in the roadstead the long, racy warships which would convoy the fleet were riding at anchor, every moment becoming more definable as units distinguishable from the earlier mass.

Barely discernible, the eastern horizon showed a tinge of color from the false dawn. The darkness was lessening.

Captain Capito raised his leather trumpet. "Prepare to make sail!" he roared. The boatswain's whistle shrilled. Barefooted sailors ran to cast off lines, but before the order could be carried out Manlius laid a hand on the shipmaster's shoulder.

"Let the others leave if you will. We will stay here until the last. I must invoke Mercury and Neptune before sailing."

"Belay that order!" He turned to Manlius. "We should leave now, Commander. I have a shrine in my cabin to Jupiter. You can sacrifice there."

Manlius shook his head. "Mercury protects travelers. Neptune must not be affronted. You should know that, of all men, Captain."

He and Quintus walked to the rail. Tribune Mancinus followed, smiling grimly. The tribune had taken an immediate dislike to Captain Capito, being a somewhat dour man himself and despising noisy arrogance in anyone. His wry sense of humor was titillated by Capito's fury. Although not exceptionally religious, he could see the necessity of placating the gods and naturally a temple in the city—and a good sacrifice—would be more appropriate to this important expedition than a little incense and a couple of prayers in a tight ship's cabin.

He looked back and grinned hugely. Captain Capito had thrown his speaking trumpet to the deck and was dancing upon it, while the sailors quaked.

At the hour when Matho's red-cloaked troopers clattered into the edge of Brundisium at the head of the marching men, Lilia was still almost ten miles from the city. She was half dazed with exhaustion.

Her throat was aching with thirst when she saw a well-lit building some distance ahead, near the road. Sounds of revelry issued from it, loud singing, drunken voices, and once in a while, as she came nearer, an indignant squeal in a woman's voice. This was followed by laughter, as though what was happening was not really unwelcome.

The light from an open door streamed out on the highway. Above it hung the bush which marked the building as a taberna, but it was a wineshop of the lowest kind.

Maybe, she thought wearily, she could hide in the shadows and get a drink from the well in the yard. Through the door, as she crept up, she could see the tavernkeeper, who was serving from a jar tilted across a pouring block. He looked like a man who could keep order. He had a heavy truncheon stuck in his belt and a short-handled mallet lay within easy reach.

Four men, with rough clothing and red faces scarred and scraggly bearded, were dicing at a round table near the door. One had a black leather patch over an eye and was scowling at a hooded individual who held the dice. The others watched the hooded man intently, as did a group beyond, at the farther end of the wine room.

The dice went bouncing to the center of the table. The gamester thrust back the hood and leaned back, laughing.

"A Venus! By Hecate, another Venus, for the sixth time!" He swept the coins into his hand and clenched his fist upon them.

Lilia watched, unseen, too fascinated to draw away. The loser's mouth drew thin and cruel. He held the dice out in his palm and cast them scornfully before the men who sat at the table.

Lilia could not tell what was thrown and the hooded man did not seem to care. He had reached for his earthenware mug and was draining it, his head tilted back and his strong throat exposed. She saw the rage in all their faces; she saw the knives being stealthily drawn; she saw the vicious gleaming spike being aimed at the winner's throat—and involuntarily she screamed.

Then, for her very life, she ran. Out of the shouting and the din that filled the room, she heard the crash of a splintering door, a cry of pain, and heavy footsteps that came thudding down the highway after her in the dark.

She flung herself off the road into the open field and fell into a dry ditch, lying there with pounding heart that rose to choke her. The running feet of the man with the hood went past, onward into the night.

The moon was well down and cast a melancholy deceptive shimmer along the traffic-polished stones. Distantly she could still hear an angry murmur of voices, but no one came her way. She felt better. It seemed that there was to be no pursuit. Either the desperado she had accidentally aided represented too much of a menace to hunt down in the dark or they had mistaken his direction. She saw no one.

At last she became calm enough to get up and brush herself off.

One sandal flapped loosely on her foot. She tried to tighten the thong and it broke. She tried to tie it together and found the thong to be too short.

After taking a few awkward steps with only one sandal, Lilia gave up the useless effort, threw away the remaining one, and went on barefoot. Now that the excitement was over, she felt considerable pain. She knew her feet were bleeding, but there was no help for it.

Finally she tore strips from the edge of her tunic, bound her feet, and went on in this manner, finding a little ease.

Mile succeeded mile. Nothing moved on the highway. She might have been alone in a desolated land, but she knew she must be nearing Brundisium.

"The ships will sail at daybreak," Commander Varro had told her. "If you walk up the gangplank before then, you shall go with us. If you do not, then you must return home."

Nothing but grim determination drove her to endure. She was at the absolute end of her resources. One foot dragged past another. It seemed that she no longer had strength to lift them. She knew she must not stop. Then she saw, not far ahead, the six-foot monolith which marked the second mile out from the Brundisium stone—the three hundred and forty-fifth from Rome.

She shook her head defiantly at it. Beyond, the sky showed the first changes of approaching dawn. It did not seem possible that she could accomplish the distance in the time remaining.

As she drew even with the pillar, a dark, hulking figure sprang

out from behind it. It was not Tibullus this time. The slim possibility was gone. Pan's hour was upon her and she was lost.

She screamed once, pitifully, helplessly, and lay fainting in her attacker's arms. He caught her up by the knees and threw her over his shoulder like a child. He ran with her into the field away from the road, toward a tree-enshrouded ridge. Her hair streamed down, her head struck dizzily against his back.

Lilia cried and beat against him with her small fists. He only laughed. A grove of holm oak lay ahead. Into this shelter he pushed through a tangle of briars and low bushes and cast her roughly down upon her back. The faint light, pale and obscured as it was by branches, illuminated his face.

She thought him the ugliest and most terrible man she had ever seen in her life. The color of his skin was strange, although she did not know what it might be under the sun. She thought it almost yellow. There was no doubt about his features.

His nose had at one time been broken. It had healed askew and was almost flat. Perhaps from the same injury, the left corner of his mouth writhed upward in a sardonic snarl which was permanent and a scar, jagged and raised into a weal, ran down his cheek on that side. His hair was long and unkempt. It fell across his eyes, black as jet, hard as stones, and cruel in their calculating look. On his back lay his hood.

He must have heard her coming as he rested in the low brush beside the road.

Scrambling in terror, Lilia tried to push herself away with her elbows and heels dug into the ground. He placed a foot upon the edge of her tunic and held her there without effort.

"Please let me go," she panted. "I have no money. What do you want of me?"

He laughed. It was a full, rich sound, with a real sense of humor in it. "Not money. Oh no. Money? I have money. You!"

Then, all at once, he was down beside her and she was in his grasp a second time and she could do nothing but scream once, before his harsh kiss stopped her breath.

"At the inn," she gasped when he raised his head, "I was the one who screamed when they were about to kill you!" He froze, his face inches from her own. "I saved your life. I didn't mean

to, but I did— You know it. And now you catch me like this.” She was sobbing—frantic.

“Why, then it seems I owe you something, little Roman. When we are done, you may go your way— I will not kill you. Eitel always pays his debts.”

Lilia took no hope from this promise. In her middle-class, old-fashioned code, what he was about to do meant death. This man actually thought that by leaving her a ruined life he was doing her a kindness.

She could not tear free. She could only twist in his arms. Her cloak fell apart. His big hand ripped at her tunica. It and the under tunica tore wide open. Cold air rushed across her bared young breasts. She felt the little locket drop from the bent pin and fall between them.

She held it up against his face for him to see, pushing him away with her child’s strength. “My bulla! My fibula! They are both gold! Please! Oh, please!”

Great tears welled up from beneath her eyelids, squeezed tightly shut. She lay there, helpless, quivering and choking. She could do no more.

She knew he was looking down at her, but she felt him draw away. His hands, strangely gentle, pulled the torn fabric together and covered her from his sight. The thick fingers fumbled awkwardly. She thought they trembled as they drew the ragged edges together and closed them with the primitive safety pin.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, touching the locket which hung in place once more. He slipped his muscular arm beneath her back and raised her to a sitting position. His face was flushed and sober. He scowled. He looked undecided.

“That horse head. Is it a birthmark? Have you always had it?”

Lilia nodded mutely, not daring to speak. She tried to pull away and he released her. She was too weak from shock to rise.

“I thought—” he muttered, almost to himself. “But no, it cannot be! Yet, for a moment . . . Oh, Death! Oh, Hades! Damn Rome! Curse its bloody people. Destruction to its cruel gods! What have they made of me?”

He yanked her savagely to her feet. “Get out. Go away. Run, girl, run fast before I change my mind!”

He pushed her with all his strength. Lilia’s foot came down

upon a rolling stone. She fell heavily, her ankle twisted beneath her. She felt the tissues tear like wet paper. A blinding pain shot through her leg and she cried out. With it came the bitter realization that, although it seemed she was free, never now could she walk the remaining miles and reach the ships in time.

She buried her face in her hands and cried.

This time he was tender as a woman. He straightened out her twisted limbs. He pulled down her palla, rucked high when she fell, and covered her. He probed carefully at the rapidly swelling ankle, unwrapping the bandages around the foot to do so. They stuck to the raw surfaces of the sole and he removed them gently, exclaiming at the sight.

He wrapped the puffed flesh firmly and overlapped the ankle with the bloody strips which he took from the other foot. He inspected these blisters as well. His face was wrathful, but his anger did not seem to be at her. It was directed more inward, as though at his own somber thoughts.

His face, on the unscarred side, was not so ugly. The lines in it now seemed strong rather than cruel. Her breathing became calmer. He noticed this. For the first time she saw his smile. It came like sunshine and changed his countenance completely. His voice was vibrant with feeling.

"Poor slave! I did not know you were a runaway. I thought you were a Roman, or I would not have added to your troubles. I am opposed to all Romans.

"How you have been abused! Do not weep, maiden. You are still *intacta*. I will take you to a doctor."

Lilia tried her voice and was surprised that she could speak. At first it quavered and was halted by sobs. Then, as the futility of her disaster—the brutality of the fate which had brought her so close to her destination, only to fall at the very threshold of success after so much effort—came fully into her mind, the words tumbled out in a stream.

"I am not a slave." She told him quickly of her love for Tibullus, the promise of the commander, and now—the ships that would not wait—"Oh, Fortuna! They will not wait!"—for inexorable dawn which could not be held back was already pinkly flushing the eastern sky. And even while she was talking, she wondered if she was talking to a man who could understand or one,

as she had been warned, who might be under the control of Pan.

He heard it all without interrupting. When she had finished he had apparently made up his mind what to do with her. He reached out and caught her up from the ground. Misunderstanding, she cried out again and beat against his massive chest. But he only straightened up, lifting her lightly.

"Come into my arms in peace, little Roman. You shall never know fear of me again."

He went down the slope toward the highway in long steps, carrying her like a child. He was breathtakingly strong. Holding her lightly, striding easily along, he went on so toward Brundisium.

After a while she relaxed in his cradling clasp. The ankle, relieved of weight upon it, throbbed less. It was then that he commenced talking.

His breath and his words came easily, as though his strength made nothing of her weight. He spoke, almost in a murmur, as though he were talking to himself. His tone was reassuring and she no longer felt afraid. She lay as though in a dream and listened, while he brought them ever nearer to the sea. The rising sun gleamed upon them both.

"I am Eitel, of the Hunnish lands, which I have not yet seen. My father was Tannak, and he was Tandjou of the Tu-Kiu Horde. In Scythia, I would be a prince of the Huns, but my father was captured in battle by men of the Horde of Urtagh and sold to the Romans to be used as a slave.

"My mother was of a noble family of Ethiopia. She fell into the hands of enemies when a dynasty changed in that land and her uncle became Ras. So, as a young girl, she too was sold for Roman gold and brought into the same household as my father.

"The masters of my parents were a youthful pair of haughty patricians. Like all other Romans of their class, they regarded those beneath them as animals. Like an animal, my father was mated to females as a horse is used for stud. My mother was brought to him for service as a cow is brought to a bull, without consulting the desires or wishes of either.

"Their owners laughed at her tears. She thought he was ugly, though I am uglier, but my father took her with affection and refused all others after. He was scourged. He struck back and was



sold into the arena. I do not know if my mother ever knew how he died. She never told me.

"When I was small, I fought under the tables with dogs for my meat, while our masters laughed. That is why I look like this today, scarred by their bites. That is why no woman will ever look upon me without fear and disgust.

"Slaves love. They love each other. Though I was ugly, my mother loved me. Patrician masters think that unimportant. But these who owned me and my mother offered her my freedom if she would willingly take and test a poison which they hoped might be painless. They thought they might have to use it on themselves someday, for your insane Emperor who thinks he is a god is master of all men, and all lives and all property, he says, belong to him.

"I did not know about it. It was not painless. She died in torture and I am alive and cursed. Oh, my mother!

"I was given my freedom. Then they told me how I got it. I bowed and thanked them and I came back in the night and I burned their villa.

"I hope they were in it, but I do not know. Now I am trying to go east. Somehow I must get on a ship. I want to find my own people. I want to be a Hun. Someday I shall lead a horde against Rome."

Lilia laid her head lightly as a flower against his breast. He felt the waft of her breath against his face like the touch of a butterfly wing. "I am so sorry," she said.

The Hun was amazed, and his step faltered for a moment. He looked down at her. "I believe you, little Roman. I really think you are." His voice had an odd note in it.

His clasp felt briefly like a hug. They had entered the rim of the city. It was a full hour past sunrise and the smell of the sea was in the air. The long curve of the waterfront lay ahead.

Beyond the breakwater they could see a confused mass of shipping, some at anchor, some circling idly. One ship was still tied at the quay. The gangplank was down and at its foot guttering stubs of torches burned untended and useless in the growing daylight.

Lilia struggled in his arms. "Put me down," she said. "I must go there."

"Lie still. You cannot walk. I will carry you."

She shook her head. "I must walk up that gangplank by myself, or they will not take me. Set me down."

He placed her gently upright on the cobbles. She took a painful step. She swayed, but caught herself before he could steady her. He stood there a moment, watching her go toward the men who stared from the ship's rail.

Noiselessly, he followed behind, almost at arm's length. She did not hear him. She moved slowly, agonizingly, looking at the waiting gangplank as though, if she took her eyes away from it for a second, she would surely fall.

He walked in her tracks as she led the way. Step by limping step, across the cold salt-rimed stones, each one marked with little stains of red.

Manlius and Quintus had dawdled in the finding of the Temple of Neptune. At least, so thought Tribune Mancinus, who attended them at the regulation ten steps to the rear.

He thought that any logical man who had a little common sense would have either asked questions from a native citizen or searched along the central area of the harbor curve. Where else should a sea god's temple be?

Instead, they headed directly into the center of the city, casually chatting as though they had all the time in the world.

It was purely by accident that the officers stumbled upon the Temple of Mercury. At that, they might have gone by, absorbed in conversation, had not Mancinus called attention to the building.

Commander Manlius seemed positively provoked at the interruption. His thanks were perfunctory. Tribune Mancinus decided that he would not speak again unless he was definitely asked. His superior officers took an unconscionably long time in looking over the available animals.

Eventually Mancinus felt relieved. It seemed they had decided upon a rabbit whose markings appeared to be correct. Then, after an interminable colloquy among themselves, he saw them haggle over the price of a couple of matched pigeons and vanish inside the temple.

The augury took considerable time. When the two worshipers appeared, they were discussing the ambiguous state of the liver of one of the birds. They stood and argued about it before going on. Even then, Commander Manlius was so distracted that he surely would have headed the wrong way and gone deeper into the city, had not his friend turned him rather forcibly around and aimed him toward the waterfront.

Both glanced up at the risen sun. It did not seem to be with any sense of urgency. At the Temple of Neptune the proceedings went along with more alacrity. There was no trouble in finding a suitable lamb. The only hitch was in the price. It seemed to shock the officers. There was a certain amount of bickering.

Former Quaestor Quintus was overheard to remark that in Hither Hispania he could have purchased a fat bullock for about five sesterces more.

The priest in attendance tersely remarked that it was always the privilege of the highborn officers to journey back and get one. He further announced that, in that case, the fee for the slaughter and augury would naturally have to be increased, as the animal could not be personally guaranteed by him as acceptable to the god.

After this they raised no more objections, soon quitted the precincts of the temple, and were on their way back to the flagship, without, it appeared, any great hurry to arrive and exchange views with the captain.

Captain Capito pointedly turned his broad back upon them as they approached. He stamped into the chartroom. A drag team of slaves was standing by, waiting to haul, push, and warp the big ship away from the quay. The wind had changed as the shipman had predicted and was now unfavorable.

The slaves hooked on. Now a towboat, a sturdy low hulk powered by plenty of strong arms, was sliding up to seize hold at the end of the quay and haul the flagship out to join the waiting fleet, until it was able to tack into the wind.

The captain came out of the chartroom, looking typically furious. He said something caustic to the commander. Manlius shook his head. Taurus Capito went stamping away aft again, even further enraged. Now what was the problem?

Tribune Mancinus leaned upon the rail and looked, with little interest, at the bustle on the quay.

Then—out of an alley—he saw Lilia coming! Her face was smeared with dirt and tears. Her clothes were torn, her lips tight pressed, and she was barefoot. She came—and as she came, she staggered—and as she staggered, a huge stranger, who walked one step behind, reached out each time to steady, but never did.

There was a hum of excitement among the legionaries. Mancinus looked quickly to see how Commander Manlius and his friend were taking it. They watched her approach with inscrutable faces.

Lilia stumbled on the gangplank. She seized the guy rope with both hands and swung there, leaning on it as though she were about to faint. The man put out his hands to her. She turned to him and smiled, refusing his help.

Now Mancinus could see, beneath the dirt, how pale and drawn the girl's face was. Steadily she inched up the inclined plane and reached the rail. She stood upon the deck and faced the commander. Her gaze was as steady as his own.

"Legionary Lilia Metellus, sir. Requesting permission to board." Her voice was barely a whisper. Her eyelids flickered and closed. Without warning, she collapsed into Manlius' arms.

Tribune Mancinus sprang forward to take her. The big man who had followed—Mancinus thought he might be a longshoreman—was closer. He snatched her away, glaring at the officers.

He looked like a savage barbarian. The commander stepped back. The man growled, "No one but myself shall touch her. Tell me where to take her and do it quickly."

Commander Manlius signed to Quintus. "Show him to my cabin." Then he raised a finger at his aide.

"Tribune!"

"Sir?" Mancinus snapped to attention.

"Kindly convey my respects to the shipmaster and inform him that he may lift anchor at his earliest pleasure as our complement is now complete."

"Yes, sir!" The tribune's face beamed. He set off at a run. An almost imperceptible sigh of relief came from the legionaries who had crowded the deck.

The bull bugle blared. The boatswain's whistle shrilled. In

came the gangplank. The orders roared out through Captain Capito's new trumpet.

"Ready to cast off.

"Cast off by the bow. Jump to it, you lazy scum!

"Cast off by the stern. Smartly, now, smartly.

"Watch that paint, or I'll see you skinned!"

The slaves on the mole tugged in unison. "Ho! Oh! Ho!" The whips cracked. The big ship slid away from the quay without touching it, smoothly gliding out toward the towboat. The bow deck hand flung out his coiled hand line. In came the tug's hawser to be looped over a deck bollard.

The rowers dipped their oars into the water and surged against them. Now Mancinus heard the distant voice of the tow captain.

"Full ahead. Steady as she goes. Hortator—raise that beat!"

Like a giant water bug with a trophy, the towboat struggled against the massive resistance of the sluggish weight behind.

It followed. Now they had cleared the protection of the outer mole and its breakwater. The mainsail rose to match and overshadow the little patch of canvas on the artemon. The wind greeted it cheerfully, veering to belly it taut and plump. The shrouds sang in the wind as the bow plunged into the open sea.

Up now with the triangular topsail. Above it the signal flags broke out for the waiting fleet. The towboat swung away. The transports spread their white wings and the fleet began to move toward the east.

When will we come back from the end of the world? thought Mancinus. Shall we ever see Italy again?

Oh, Roma! Amor!



## II

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# ARMENIA





## THE GREEN SAILS

Under a mackerel sky the fleet swung out in echelon, the better to catch the slight following wind. At first the clumsy vessels made a good easting. By noon the wind shifted southerly and increased. They were then forced to tack, assuming greater distances apart to obtain sea room.

The sea made, as time went on. The tubby roundships wallowed into the troughs, sliding down deep angling slopes. Rising, they doggedly shook spray from blunt bows in streaming clouds of white spume. The waves marched against them in endless array.

The few biremes, which acted as protection for the convoy, fared better. These also were heavy though swift, but they had the advantage of oars to maintain steerageway. At this time, however, their single sail was quite enough.

The fleet sailed in column, the flagship *Hercules* at the head. As directions changed, it set a following course for the other vessels. All, in turn, beat up to windward in a long reach, fell away with a rush, making distance well, then clawed back again. The fleet inched toward the northeast in a series of swoops, heading for Dyrrachium across the broad sea road which separates the Adriatic from the Ionian Sea.

Below decks, work went on as usual among the legionary contingents. Equipment was checked, brass polished, leather freshly oiled. Weapon edges were touched up with whetstone and file. Food was the bright interval in miserable hours, but it was cold and unappetizing. There was little comfort to be found.

Rolling, tossing, pitching, the fleet made headway in a white welter of sea. Occasionally the bobbing sail of a wine ship hove into sight, to curtsy its flag and speedily pass on the way back from Illyricum to Italy, laden light and with the wind behind.

One of these hailed the *Hercules*: "Green sails off the islands! Look sharp!" In a moment it raced past, the distance lengthened and prevented further information.

Lilia slept most of the day in Manlius' cabin. She had been wakened once to eat and have her sore feet salved and bandaged. Tribune Mancinus had acted as medicus on this occasion. She asked what had become of Eitel and was told that he had been billeted with men who had instantly made a hero of him and were treating him well.

Provided that he did not get in the way of sailors, which most of the legionaries did, sooner or later, he had been allowed the run of the ship. They had taken an interest in him too, when they learned the whole story. Manlius, himself, had talked with him behind closed doors. No, Mancinus did not know what was discussed, but the fact that he was a Hun had been mentioned.

When she woke again, by herself, she found that the swelling in her ankle had gone down. She tried her weight gingerly upon it. It was not too painful. Her clothes had been washed and mended. She wondered who had put her to bed and done this. The commander? Maybe. She remembered that he had said he'd never had a daughter. It would have been nice to be daughter to Commander Manlius Varro. Too bad, she thought, that one cannot choose one's parents.

Well, anyway, it was he who had brought water, oil, and a strigil for bathing because, with eyes closed and pretending sleep, she had heard these things set down nearby and seen, through a tiny opening of eyelids, his back as the door closed.

She bathed, washed her hair—where in the world could he have located that little bottle of perfume?—and went out on the pitching deck. The air was clean and invigorating after the stuffy little cubicle. She stood by the rail and heard the bellowed warning. Manlius, who stood nearby, caught her questioning look.

"Pirates, probably. There are few left, since the nests were cleared out by Pompey. No real menace any more, as they were in his time. Scavengers mostly. Hit one ship and run with the loot. There are no big fleets now. Still, the shipmaster is taking no chances."

A string of flags had broken out at the masthead. The fast Liburnian galleys were running out sweeps and swinging to port

and starboard to take distance for patrol investigation of the horizon. They darted away like striding water bugs. The boar's heads, above the ram on each, rose and plunged like ramping beasts burying their snouts in the foam. The long spikes projecting beyond, to widen the breach the ram would make, pointed now at the reeling sky, then at the deeps as though the warships challenged alternately Tritons of the abyss below or floating enemies upon the surface of the sea.

In response to the flags, the biremes raced away from the convoy. The single mast and sail came down as they went, lowered for battle readiness.

"Why should pirate sails be green?" Lilia asked.

"The harder for you to see them, my dear. Sails, stays, shrouds, masts, and ships themselves—all green. Even though the sky is blue, green doesn't show up much against it."

No green sails approached and dusk came. The convoy bore on toward Illyricum under reduced speed as darkness fell. Riding lights twinkled up and down, doubled in number by dancing reflections. The distance between ships lengthened a little. There was a flattening of the waves with the lessening of the wind, to the great relief of the legionaries, who received warm food for the first time.

By sunrise Lilia was up and munching on bread and cheese. As she looked back from the stern of the flagship she could no longer see the ship which brought up the tail of the convoy, the one on which Tibullus must be.

He must be terribly worried about her. If only she had been early enough to go with him! How happy this sea voyage could have been.

It was not that she was not enjoying the trip. Her ankle felt much better. She had already found Eitel and thanked him. In daylight he did not seem so frightening.

What a miracle it was that the *Hercules* had been delayed in its sailing! How wonderful that she had found such a strange, strong friend in the giant Hun, to help her when she needed help the most. Truly, she was under the protection of Fortuna.

Lilia was forced to admit to herself, in all honesty, that she might not have reached the ships in time without him, nor, re-

Paulins came off arrow engines. Baskets of darts were set into place beside them, by panting ship boys. The heavy canvas curtains, which partially protected the decks from arrow fire, were unfurled and dropped as false bulwarks. Up went the boarding nets and behind them, on every ship, its contingent of marines stood at the ready with boarding pikes.

Smoke streamed up like dark pennons from every masthead where the iron baskets of live coals from the cook's galley stood ready and the kettles of fuming oil, bubbling pitch and tar were being hoisted as they attained the proper viciousness of heat.

Now the convoy lay in a long crescent across the sea as the smoke drove suddenly to the east. More than one aboard remembered the sibyl's prophecy and pointed up at it, while the ships, below that dark shroud, tacked with difficulty. The wide arc went staggering northward at the ready. Below decks, all was bustle.

The surgeon's tarpots smoked beside the neat heaps of bandage linen. The saws and knives gleamed in their loops, hanging beside the long mess tables cleared of dishes and waiting for grim burdens. Here was the mallet ready to bring blessed unconsciousness, the sand for the slippery floor, buckets for amputated limbs.

Now, on the warships, the corvus—that bridge between ships—swung up to lie against the foremast. Its spiked end waited like a clenched fist at the end of a doubled forearm, to slam down upon an enemy deck and bind the craft together.

The merchantmen carried no bridges. Instead, each raised a strong boom to its mast, which could be swung out over a pirate hatch or open rowers' pit. Hopefully, at the moment of collision and boarding, the faster but more fragile craft would be sunk by the dolphin suspended from the boom. The ponderous lead weight would crash through flimsy decks and might continue on through bottom planking, unless stopped by the framework or the keel.

Like racers at the Hippodrome, the green sails drove down upon the convoy. The pikemen clenched their pikes tighter. Dry throats and sweaty hands—wind in their faces tainted with acrid smoke—teeth clenched until jaw muscles ached. The smell of seething oil—the creaking of rigging—the silence of waiting—in

some the taste of fear, like vinegar flavored with brass. It would vanish at the moment of impact, but it was no less shameful now.

The sails slatted as they went about on another tack, the decks heeled in the opposite direction, blocks rattled, footings changed. High above, the dolphins swung in wide menacing circles. Beneath each, a man stood with bared knife ready to cut the ropes which held them.

Manlius came into the cabin. His face was grave. Lilia sprang to her feet from the pallet where she had been lying.

"What is happening? Is there anything I can do?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing now. Probably nothing later." He put his hands gently on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Everything possible is being done. You and I must wait on events."

"You also? I do not understand."

He smiled faintly. "Captain Capito has made it plain to me—in fact to the whole small contingent of the Thirteenth detailed to the *Hercules*—that we are to have no part in the defense of the ship.

"We are cargo only. If or when we are attacked we are to be observers, not participants, unless, of course, we are in imminent danger of being overrun.

"The *Hercules* is a navy vessel, not a transport. Neither I nor any of my officers has any authority here. On the transports, our men will be taking part. I wish I were with them now," he remarked wistfully.

"But I am a legionary now! I should be with the men!"

His voice became stern. He shook her slightly. "Do not argue. You have absolutely no part in this. When the attack begins, I will be on deck. I want you to remain in this cabin and, to make certain that you do, I will set your big friend outside. He will be under orders to see that you stay here where you will be safe—and he had better obey those orders! Now I must go. Remember what I have told you." Suddenly, on impulse, he held her close and kissed her hair. Then, in an instant, he was gone.

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## VORCO THE VOLSCIAN

As no attack came and the day wore on into evening, the line of transports shortened like a contracting serpent that feels the cold of night. With hooded lamps shining astern, vigilant lookouts in the high buckets, and in a state of wary readiness, the fleet followed the indicated course.

In the chartroom of the flagship Captain Capito leaned back in his armchair, cuddling a flagon in the crook of his elbow. He dealt out a drink, sparingly, all around.

"Obviously they are waiting for reinforcements," he said, eying first Manlius and then Quintus opposite him. "There are more ships tracking our course already than have been reported for the last twenty years. Those islands off the Dalmatian coast have always been a haven for pirates. There are wooded coves and narrow-mouthed bays and hidden inlets enough to hide all the shipping in the Adriatic.

"Most of the people on shore are wreckers, or would be if they got the chance. Every fisherman dreams of finding someone weaker than himself to rob.

"The whole district is a haven for runaway slaves and cutthroats. If the word has gone out through the islands to band against us, we may have more than we can handle before morning, even if we draw upon your troops as support, Commander."

"We should hardly remain idly below decks and permit your marines to do our fighting for us," Manlius replied. "I cannot imagine what they hope to gain. What can they think we have of value, enough to risk this combined effort against a convoy of over forty ships?"

"Suppose," said Quintus slowly—elbows on table, chin resting on his clasped hands, a thoughtful considering look on his face as he eyed the jealously hugged flagon—"that we imagine some



wily fellow, situated possibly in high places, whose best interests would be served by deliberately strewing false information about.

"If it were rumored that, instead of this being a military convoy, it was—I am only guessing of course—the flotilla which is conveying the Parthian ambassadors across the sea on their way back to Parthia, laden with rich gifts from Rome, and a treaty never intended to be kept, this would be an attractive bait, would it not?"

"But they are not with us." The captain frowned. "There is no treasure aboard. No profit to be gained. Nothing but hard knocks and no nobility to hold for ransom."

"I said—suppose. *We* know that. We must consider that the pirates do not. Very well. They gather. They bring down every ship they can. Every man on those islands is fisherman by day, pirate by night, and with courage for the venture. So they come down on us, not realizing our strength.

"We meet them and defeat them. The pirates are destroyed for a generation and there will be safety for shipping in the Adriatic again."

Captain Capito's eyes roved from one sober face to the other with slow unbelief. "And if the pirates are not destroyed? Who would profit by that?"

"I was told that this expedition was a mission of military importance. Who would have the temerity to imperil it by deliberately sending it into action against a pirate fleet? It would seem to me that the destruction of a few ships is hardly worth the risk of slowing, or wrecking, the purpose of the expedition. Whatever that may be?"

Manlius had no intention of satisfying the shipmaster's curiosity. Quintus spread his hands apart in the gesture which universally spells ignorant bewilderment. He rapped his empty mug on the table in emphasis.

"I can only assume that, if this be the true state of affairs, then it holds within it a double incentive. The decimation of the pirates may be only the lesser half of the plot.

"I advise you gentlemen, and especially you, Manlius, who may recall a former talk we had in private, to estimate in your own minds, without further help from me, such individuals who

might find an advantage in the death or deaths of ourselves—to look no further in the convoy for victims.”

Before Quintus could speak again, the high excited cry of the lookout hailed the deck to bring the group to their feet.

“Bireme to port! Coming in fast!” And on the very echo of the cry, a second voice: “Bireme to starboard under oars! About to ram! Hard aport, helmsman, hard aport!”

Captain Capito’s chair went over backward on the floor. The flagon rolled beside it as he burst out of the chartroom, to find the deck in a turmoil. Quintus thoughtfully retrieved it before following.

Slingers and archers had manned the bulwarks and were standing imperturbably at the ready. The leather-aproned ballistarii were cranking down the wicked, stubby arms of their mid-ship artillery.

The heavy arrow-engine at the bow was loaded and the engineer had his head down, sighting along its multiple grooves, as the *Hercules* swung heavily around to avoid taking the pirate ram on the port broadside.

Now, backing up the sharpshooters, the marines took their stance in a double line behind the boarding nets, while below decks oars ran out and struck the water, lending speed to the filled sails.

The pirate had almost no time to change course. Also under sail and oars, underestimating the speed of the *Hercules*, it approached with a bone in its teeth and a broad white wake behind. The distance between them shortened rapidly. As they approached on a collision course, the forward tormentum spat out its six short javelins at the attacker.

Lilia, jolted out of sleep in the comparative security of Manlius’ cabin heard the spank of the spring plank against the arm of the javelin thrower and distantly a cry of pain.

She could not know that one dart had found its mark in the flesh of the pirate helmsman, or that briefly the bow of the port bireme had fallen off from its course, until the steering oar was again manned and under control.

That brief instant had been enough. She felt the mighty surge of the rowers’ concerted effort below decks. Almost instinctively

she gripped the handhold on the wall above the bunk, when she heard the order come up to her, almost in a scream: "In oars! Stand by to ram!"

Despite her strong grasp, the bronze bracket was torn from her hands at the collision and she was hurled to the floor of the cabin. One dreadful, splintering crash that seemed to go on and on, accompanied by a fearful diapason of screaming that rose and fell through all the scale of agony. It was the awful symphony of torture from the rowers' deck, inside the pirate bireme, as the boar head of the *Hercules* went through the side. It slantingly widened the breach as the two crunched together, shattering both oars and helpless chained bodies within.

She put her hands over her ears, white with horror, but heard plainly from below: "Out oars! Back all!" She felt the rasping drag that vibrated through all the fabric of the *Hercules* as the ram was withdrawn. The weight of the already sinking pirate fell away from its temporary support, a torrent of water gushing like a salt river into its hold.

On the deck of the flagship, the men who had been thrown from their feet were picking themselves up. The lookout was gone, slung from his high perch to splatter upon the pirate deck. Archers and slingers sent one tearing volley across the bireme as it sank, into the thickly packed mass of scrambling pirates. Then the *Hercules* veered away from what was now no more than a hulk, completely out of control and almost awash.

By this maneuver the *Hercules* had gained distance upon the second pursuing bireme which, unable to ram according to plan, was not deterred by the sudden fate that had befallen its companion. The two ships drew apart, dueling with the rope and timber artillery.

The pirate got its tormenta to bear first, not having those charges knocked from ejector aprons as had the Roman ship at the time of impact. The waiting marines saw the heavy stones and clay balls filled with pebbles rise from the following ship to sail like darker shadows against the stars and majestically descend upon their own crowded deck.

Spray went up from one near miss. A fifty-pound chunk of jagged quartz punched through the half-furled sail above Quintus'

head. Without moving from his point of observation, he drained the flagon and tossed it over the side.

A severed stay twanged like a bowstring and lashed at the sailors in the rigging; a ball struck and ricocheted, its sharp-edged scraps of baked clay and loose stones striking hard, to slash a swath along the deck. Into this the ship boys ran, strewing sand upon the blood, dragging the worst wounded aside or down into the surgeon's bay.

The answering salvo from the *Hercules* was ragged. Captain Capito bellowed, "Is that the best you can do, you sea lice? I want fire pots in that hold! I'll have the next crew that misses shot out of its own tormentum!"

"Helmsman, bring that stern ballista to bear. Three points into the wind. Lively now, look to it!"

The orders went on. "Hortator, port oar banks idle. Starboard, double stroke. Fairly! Fairly! Steady as she goes. Both oar banks. Put your backs into it!"

The *Hercules* swung north, plowing through the wreckage of the sunken pirate, rolling the wrack under its iron-shod forefoot. Heads disappeared into the thrash of oar foam, not to rise again in the choppy wake. One survivor only seized the end of that clipped stay which trailed astern. He drew himself up into the anchor chains where he hung exhausted and unnoticed.

Above his head the stern ballista was all but ready for the cast. "Shorten sling! Three hundred yards! Wait for the rise! Shoot!"

The rope twister struck down the catch with his maul. Up went the arm which held the kettle of flaming oil, pitch, and sulphur. It struck against the padded crossbeam.

The kettle described a continuing arc and went curving on, a long-tailed hairy star, soaring through the sky. It traced a line of fire, marked by a dripping rain of lurid beads; it descended to fall upon the midship citadel of the pursuer and bathed the whole in a shower of liquid flame. The kettle bounced along the deck like a living demon, cleared the rail, and fell, hissing, into the sea, already lit redly along the wave crests from the burning ship.

Thick smoke rolled up in clouds. The tarred rigging blazed, fiery ladders outlined against the sky, from which men leapt

screaming. The sail shed burning shreds and scraps among the pirates, setting other fires on cloaks, tarpots, and in sheaves of javelins. They fought frantically against these blazing dangers, until the flaring shroud above fell to bury all.

Now the *Hercules* swung about to the attack and came plowing by under increased beat. Gasping slaves at the oars took the lash unmercifully, pulling their hearts out, coughing blood, seeing only streaks and flashes of light before their starting eyes. Incredibly, they maintained a powerful, regular stroke.

"Helmsman! Steer by the flames!" Into the choking smoke which obscured the sea.

The starboard battery of arrow-engines swept the pirate deck. The *Hercules* slid, with all its massive weight, along the enemy's side, crippling every oar in the exposed double bank—its own drawn in to safety at the last moment.

Capito roared with joy as they rushed by. He struck Quintus between the shoulders with his open hand. It was like a hammer blow. "Well, Spaniard! We'll drink to that one!"

A few grapnels lashed out from the burning vessel. The window in the cabin where Lilia was sheltered burst into a shower of glittering shards. A triple hook crashed through to bite deep into the sill.

Below, she sensed the measured beat of the oars. It continued to throb, but no longer in haste. The shouting was distant. Was the battle over? Lilia forced herself to go to the window and look out.

The attacker had veered away and the grapnel chains had parted. She pried loose the hooks from the square opening and let it fall into the sea. That was one thing she could do! It gave her a sense of participation. Over the jagged white splinters of the frame, the long line of the convoy could be seen, outlined by the window casing.

The fleet had been hit hard, in the center especially, and at both ends. Lilia could see burning ships, but she had no way of knowing if they were pirate or Roman. She could only be certain that none of those nearest had been locked together by corvi and she saw no fighting going on upon the decks.

Apparently the attackers had not attempted to take prizes but

had made a lightning strike before being beaten off without much loss or damage. They were now in a retreat as mysterious as the sudden onslaught had been.

It seemed that the main effort had been against the flagship, but to what end? Why give up so easily without pressing home the attack?

Other minds, with a keener sense of strategy, were asking the same question upon the main deck. Lilia was to be the first in a position to provide the answer.

Clinging with fingers and toes to the deep carvings was an almost naked man. Before she could scream, he swarmed in, easily and slithery as a serpent. He was tanned and supple. A hard palm shut off her breath and her beginning cry of fright.

"Be very quiet, my little lady." He marched her toward the door and softly dropped the bar in place. "I am seeking and would have words with a certain Commander Manlius Varro, to his and my own mutual advantage. Unless he has been killed already, he is on this ship—I know."

He gave her a devil-may-care grin which bared a set of flashing white teeth. "I am certain I can count upon your assistance. Therefore I will take it as a personal favor if you will kindly desist from any thought of screaming."

If Lilia had been asked to scream she would have found it quite impossible. She could hardly whisper when he carefully and slowly removed his hand. They studied each other.

"My name is Vorco. I am a Volscian." Lilia felt her knees beginning to give. He was armed with a knife, but it was sheathed.

As her heartbeat quieted and she breathed more easily, he released her. He waited for her to speak. He did not appear to consider himself in a desperate situation. This might have been a social call.

He lifted his hand and she shrank back, flattening herself away. Vorco made no attempt to touch her. The gesture was meant for reassurance.

Seeing that he came no nearer, her wobbly knees treacherously let her down on the bunk. She did not dare blink or turn away her wide-eyed stare. His grin grew wider as though he felt himself master of the situation. "Do you know this man?"

Lilia nodded.

"He is on this flagship. I want him here."

So did Lilia. Indeed, yes! The commander, Eitel, Tibullus—anybody!

"Will you help me?"

Would she? Oh, gladly, gladly! Her voice was a mouse squeak. She cleared her throat and weakly tried again.

"W-what do you want me to do?"

"I will unfasten the door. You will call anyone in earshot—without screaming, mind. We do not want a crowd in this little cabin, do we? And you will say that you have a message for the commander's ears alone. When he comes, you may go."

His eyes never wavered. The gaze was hypnotic. She nodded mutely. His hand darted out and seized her wrist, twisting and bringing her arm up and behind her back. She felt the prick of that knife in her side as she was forced toward the door.

"Use your imagination, girl! Now!"

He removed the bar and the door opened. He pushed her forward until she could see down the corridor—and looked straight into the angry face of Eitel, who stood there only inches away, with his finger on his lips, just out of sight of the armed man in the room.

"Call out, girl."

There was no one else in sight at the moment. Eitel nodded. She called loudly, as though whoever she called was far away:

"Seaman, will you take a message to Commander Varro?" Then, as though he had answered in a voice distant and inaudible:

"Of course it is important. Please come here."

The grip on her wrist relaxed. Only a trifle, but it was enough. She twisted like an eel. His wet hand, her sweaty wrist, separated. She was out into the corridor in a cat's wink and Eitel was inside the cabin instantly, to seize the pirate like a child, raise him and slam him almost senseless to the floor.

Lilia ran, screaming, down the corridor to the companionway. People were coming to meet her, coming fast, among them Tribune Quintus and behind him the man whom she was so glad to see—Commander Manlius, his face full of concern—for her!

She pointed back toward the cabin at the sounds of struggle and Eitel's savagely inhuman roar of triumph. She ran back with

them, to see the slim brown man helpless across the Hun's brawny thigh, his back bent like a bow, agony in his face and his spine about to snap.

She pushed through the onlookers and fell against Eitel, pummeling him with her small fists. "Don't! Don't kill him! The battle is over. It will be murder. Eitel—he didn't hurt me!"

Eitel stared. His eyes were bloodshot. It was as though he did not see or know her. She pulled at his hands, unable to loosen his fingers.

"Put him down. He wants to talk to the commander. He is my prisoner now."

The passion seeped slowly out of the giant's face. His iron-hard muscles relaxed. He stared at her with little understanding.

He glared about the room at those who watched, not daring to come closer to a man so near to insanity. His eyes fell upon the dagger, still clenched in the pirate's hand. Eitel snatched at it as though his rage must find some outlet and, with all his strength, drove it to the hilt in the stout planks of the floor.

The pirate rolled, fighting for breath, out of the death grip in which he had been held. His blurred vision took in the sight of Manlius' red battle cloak, the medals, the insignia.

His grin was a feeble imitation of what it had been, but it was still insouciant and unafraid.

"Commander Varro of the Thirteenth Legion, I suppose. I am Vorco the Volscian—at present, unattached. I have come a long way to meet you. I should like to enlist at your convenience. I think we have much in common, you and me!"

He turned his head toward Lilia. "I yield me captive to your will, clever trickster."

His voice failed, his eyes closed. Whatever he had to say to the commander would have to wait.



## A SOLDIER OF THE LEGION

The villa of Tullius Armentarius, Resident at Dyrrachium, was situated on a low hill overlooking the magnificent harbor and naval yards. The garden of the villa had been created with considerable effort. It lay upon a natural shelf which had a southerly exposure and took full advantage of its position sheltered from the cold northerly winds.

Seated here, where the disembarkation could be observed in its entirety, the Resident entertained his visitors in the shade of a large plantain tree. The sun drenched the garden with heat.

Hummingbirds hung on invisible wings, darting their needle beaks into the trumpets of the morning glory vines and now and then investigating a pot of honey on the table.

The Resident regarded his guests with benevolence. It was a joy to be with people who appreciated the gracious luxuries of life.

Manlius admired the rainproof cloak of fine goat hair which his host had laid aside. It looked like the royal purple—really a red, darker than the cavalry flaunted. “The very cloak of Caesar.”

“Not quite.” The Resident seemed pleased at the compliment. “It would be death to wear such. It is murex-dyed, but the minutest shade lighter.” They gazed out over the harbor.

Some units of the convoy still lay at anchor awaiting available dock space. Those worst damaged had been singled out for immediate attention and warped in by the slave drag teams. A few, already unladen, were in the yards being repaired.

The sounds of busy hammers and saws rose up to the garden, muted by distance to a drowsy buzz. The *Hercules* and a severely battered bireme, which had brought up the rear to arrive in a precariously sinking condition, had been beached. Near

them, the transports which carried the horses and mules were also high upon the sands.

Because Dyrrachium lacked sufficient drydock facilities for so many simultaneous unloadings, these transports were careened to expose the entry ports below the waterline. Now that the calking was removed, the closed watertight ports were opened and the animals led out.

At the same time, gangs of workmen scraped the hulls clean of barnacles. As the ports were closed, they were again recalked and the ships eased slowly upright, while the winches and windlasses clanked and the thick hemp cables unwound.

The troopers claimed their mounts, the wagons rumbled out of the cavernous holds, and the muleteers, as well pleased as their charges to turn their backs on the unstable water, harnessed up the beasts in as friendly and companionable a mood as they were ever likely to share.

The ships had berthed a little after daybreak and begun disgorging at once. They lay alongside the wharves, shackled to iron rings, ready for a quick casting off of lines. As century after century disembarked, unavoidably out of place, the legion gradually took form with a minimum of confusion.

"I cannot imagine," said Armentarius, "why you are unwilling to give up the pirate chief for crucifixion. I assure you that justice here is swift."

Manlius said, "I do not quite understand either. It is a curious situation. He is not exactly my prisoner. I find him interesting also. He seems a forthright man and I rather admire his courage. He does not fear death, I am certain, and he has asked to be permitted enlistment. I cannot explain my feelings, but I am inclined toward him."

The Resident did not press the point. "Well, if you are willing to accept such a man into your ranks, that is your privilege, Commander. I certainly don't want him! Do you intend remaining here tonight? If so, you are welcome to enjoy such entertainment as the villa can offer. I assure you it is ample."

His encompassing gesture took in the three officers. Matho sat up a little straighter and sank back with a wistful regret in his attitude, when Manlius answered with a shake of his head.

"I prefer to be well on the road by that time. With your excel-

lent facilities, we should be ready to march by midday, judging by what I see down there."

The legion formation was almost complete. The last few ships were lifting anchor in preparation to take their places in the berths being vacated for them. Commissariat carts from the harbor stores depot were replenishing the army wagons and marching rations were being issued directly from the former.

"Another fig, Commander? A sweet cake, then? Perhaps you gentlemen . . . ?"

Quintus held up a palm in protest and belched politely, although he unostentatiously helped himself to a little more wine for his stomach's sake. One must be careful of one's health. He allowed the savor to linger in his nostrils before rolling the delightful body of it over his tongue.

"At least you must try the baths of Villa Armentarius. I flatter myself that mine are equal to any of their size in Rome."

"I think we do have time for that." Manlius and Quintus rose. Matho, who was not often included in such meetings of state, slyly took a fistful of the rich confections and followed, nibbling them.

They passed through the atrium and out the other side of the villa. The baths were indeed luxurious, well furnished and served by skilled and attentive slaves. The soap was scented Egyptian, cast in the shape of grinning apes.

"The god Bes," said the Resident. "A pleasant sensation, is it not—to be cleansed by a god?"

Matho's eyes were following a well-formed girl bearing a steam-befogged ewer. He smiled and held out his goblet. She poured the chilled wine slowly, letting her gaze linger admiringly upon his corded arms and muscular chest.

"I can think of others even more pleasant," he said slyly. She smiled again.

Matho preened himself and unconsciously tensed his biceps under her regard. She set down the ewer, took a bone strigil, and began removing the perfumed oil from his back, resting her free hand upon his shoulder while she stroked.

"Try this spiced wine, hot and laced with raw eggs, Commander. An excellent aphrodisiac which I find most efficacious. May I recommend it to you?"

Manlius shook his head. "I regret that I must decline. I have no intention of herding my men out of the city wineshops in the morning, in the condition in which I am sure they would find themselves tonight.

"Tribune Quintus—Master of Horse—enjoy your wine promptly, I insist. There is little time remaining for pleasure."

Matho's stiffened muscles collapsed as though he had no further use for them.

Quintus sighed gustily. "Alas, old friend, you have a will of iron. Sometimes I think it has gone to your head also and altered it from flesh and bone. There will come a day when you will be sorry that you did not accept the simple pleasures which the gods have provided to make drab lives endurable to men."

"There is a time and place for all things," Manlius said succinctly. "This is the time to march and this is the place to march from. We thank you for your hospitality, sir.

"Come, Quintus, Matho. We must go."

They made their way down the hill in litters already provided and waiting in the courtyard. As they went, the Resident pointed out items of interest to Manlius, who reclined with him.

"This is a rich port. Much silk passes through here, though little of late since the trade routes have been cut. Profits have been reduced lamentably. We are doing well with shipments of valonia oak acorn cups. There is nothing better for tanning leather.

"We ship out dyewood, cheese, sheep, horses, and salted meats. Purpura is of good quality and always in demand. We gather some byssus—not so good as silk, of course, but the Greeks like it better. Being islanders, they discovered it first, you know.

"Dyrrachium was once a Greek city, back in those golden days of Magna Graecia they are so fond of talking about."

The legion was drawn up in a rough approximation of military formation. Largely, all units were in place. Centurions and harassed company clerks bustled about, checking quality of supplies being issued, amounts, shortages, and signing manifests.

Marching rations were still being slipped into packs by the latest comers as they arrived from their ships.

Some of the men sat. Some had taken the opportunity to lie in the shade. The nearby tavernkeepers were making the most of the windfall—their touts loudly praising the superiority of the local vintages over the army issue.

A lot of small coins changed hands. A good many waterfront girls went drifting casually through the formation, laughing, teasing, joking. They flirted, accepted a flattering pinch, gave a kiss, saucily arranging meetings for the night, in case there was some hitch in the plans of the mighty and the legion did, by some miracle, not march immediately.

Money changed hands here too, in exchange for addresses and keys, but only the young soldiers were so naïve. The veterans grunted with disgust and sent the deceitful baggages packing—they had served their apprenticeship in a hundred frontier towns and needed no further lessons in being cheated.

A group of aloof ladies of quality observed their more vocal sisters with what seemed envy. They fussed with their gauzy veils, letting them slip by accident and quickly hiding their faces with hennaed fingers, until only their kohl-darkened eyes were visible. They approached the rude, licentious foreign soldiery with caution, shrinking away if accosted—afterward giggling and whispering among themselves, pointing out this and that individual among the crowd, like spectators at a zoo.

Lilia, standing beside Tibullus, watched all this with interest. She found everything she saw exciting. She felt at ease and she was happy, knowing that she had been accepted at last.

In her immediate neighborhood the talk was not careless. No one looked at her as though she were a bridge girl. They knew who she was and that she was one of them. In case there might be someone not quite convinced, there was always the tight knot of her tent companions around her and the big Hun standing by.

Eitel was now tacitly accepted as a member of the expedition. As he understood horses, he became listed on the roster as a substitute wagoner, expected to make himself useful in many ways. Although he had several times been closeted with Manlius, actually he was considered of little importance except as a strong back and another willing pair of hands. His wants were few:

enough food to sustain his massive body, a ration of wine, a pair of blankets under a wagon, and some free time to watch over the girl whom apparently he had adopted—to the curiosity and suspicion of those who had known her earliest.

Of all these, only Tibullus seemed to be unconcerned. He stood beside Lilia, in a surly mood, waiting for Longinus to bring back the rations for their tent. Lilia hugged his arm and Tibullus suffered it with some embarrassment at the covert smiles of those who watched. He was not well liked.

When Longinus returned he was heavily laden. In addition to the food issue, he carried equipment for Lilia as well. A lorica, helmet and greaves, blanket, and a small amount of field equipment, including sling, a light bow and quiver of arrows.

She had already been given a stout pair of hobnailed boots while on the ship, leather breeches, and a kilt of regulation linen. Now, over her leather tunic just received, she slipped on the armor. It fitted neatly. She was surprised that it did not feel heavy. The lorica was so well balanced that it did not bind her overly much. Lilia's figure was yet little more than that of a boy.

However, she was noticed. She went into a wagon and changed. When she came out, she blushed at the admiring whistles that went up and ran to Tibullus, hanging her head. He laughed and gave her the helmet.

"Now you are a legionary."

"Probably be a cursed better one than you," growled Centurion Ciscus, who had taken in the proceedings. "Couldn't be worse. We'll find out tonight when we make camp. Here, girl, take this."

He held out his own worn dagger and belt. She tried to fit it around her slim waist without success. He snatched it away. "Not like that. Here! The balteus across your chest—so—on your left shoulder; the pugio hangs at your right hip—like a sword."

Ciscus held up her arm and felt of her muscles. He shook his head.

"When you get some hard lumps in there, I'll give you a sword and teach you how to use it. You might start a few days later than this fumble-fingered crew you are with, but that won't matter.

"You'll be at the head of the line before long, giving them les-

sons. Mars knows why I'm cursed with these dull-witted ditch-diggers. I don't. Must be for my sins. Just let me know if any of these six-fingered cook's helpers get out of line, amica. I'll set 'em straight. I like you. You're a little short on both ends, but real nice in between."

He swaggered off, proud and haughty. Behind him, the recruits looked at each other with solemn faces, until Lilia burst into an uncontrollable fit of the giggles. Ciscus was too far away to hear her, but not enough to miss the roar of laughter which she brought about.

His measured pace did not increase as he strode away. His back became a little straighter. No one who met him dared to chuckle at his glowering glare.

Suddenly a ripple of excitement ran down the line, which straightened and took military form. Those who had been taking their ease now hastily quit the shade, swallowed their last gulp of wine, pushed away the girls they were talking with, and became rigid statues in their proper places.

Manlius had entered the square with his officers and aide.

"Stand quiet!" The ranks relaxed. Lilia seized the opportunity to shrug on her pack. A few others did the same.

"Count off!" Cohort by cohort, century by century, names were checked off the company rolls.

"Lucius Sempronius Atticus!" "Here!"

"Gaius Longinus!" "Here!"

"Tibullus Paulus Metellus!" "Here!"

"Lilia Corinna Metellus!"

No answer. The decurion looked up, frowning. He scanned the roster.

"Lilia Corinna Metellus!" Someone punched her in the back.

"Here!" Lilia stammered. The decurion made a check mark. The roll call went on, but Lilia was unaware of it.

I am on the roster of the Thirteenth Legion, she reflected. It was stupefying. A soldier in the Emperor's Own! And on the roster!

Oh, Julia! Chloris! Ah, Father, Mother, what would you think if you could see me now?

Centurion Ciscus came back, walking with long, quick strides. Vorco was close behind. He was thrust among the recruits, to

find a place as though he had always been there. He favored Lilia with a dazzling display of white teeth. She smiled happily back.

"Take care of this pirate," growled Ciscus. "I may want to kill him myself, when I have more time."

"All present and accounted for."

The tablets and styluses were put away. The clerks and non-coms took their places. Commander Manlius mounted his horse. He lifted his hand and the trumpets blared.

A ragged cheer went up from the watchers. Somebody muttered sardonically, "Damned glad to get rid of us now they've got our money, aren't they?"

The band struck up a gay marching tune. The legion was on the road again.

All present and accounted for.



## LITTLE SISTER TO THE CAMP

The Via Egnatia, five hundred and forty miles long, was not quite two centuries old, but it had already seen much history.

It had originally been designed merely for getting across Greece, but political trends and military expediency were making it into the backbone of the Empire.

Along it, the armies of Caesar and Pompey had marched and countermarched. It passed the birthplace of Alexander the Great. Lucullus' legions had traveled it on the way to the conquest of Armenia and the frustrating of Parthian ambitions. Lucullus had died in the city of Apollonia, only one bead in the long string of cities which marked the route of armies.

Brutus and Cassius had fought upon the highway for the domination of Philippi; Neapolis, near that city, had been the base of Augustus, in his campaign to make himself Emperor, and had sheltered him before and after that battle. It was definitely a military road.

At one end it touched the Adriatic Sea—at the other, it reached the Black, known to many peoples as the Sea of Ravens, where moved the dread nomad tribes of the Sacae, whom the Greeks feared and called Scythians.

At the most southerly curve of this important highway to the wars of the world there lay the Bosphorus and that queen of the eastern marches, Byzantium, pride of Greece and the mightiest relic of her former glory; at the northern terminus, Dyrrachium.

At its usual measured route step, the legion swung freely along in the customary order of march. The air was warm and humid, freshened slightly by a weak breeze from the sea on their right as they moved out of the city.

On the level coastal plain they made good time and did not

rest until they reached the small town of Petra, six miles to the south, on higher ground. As she had done before, Lilia counted milestones. She was pleased to discover that, even laden as she was with her unaccustomed gear, she had no difficulty in keeping up with the rest. She felt that she too was becoming a seasoned veteran.

The ache had gone out of her calves. Her ankle was no longer swollen and her feet, while still tender, were comfortable in their wrappings inside her new army boots.

She was more accustomed to sandals and had a pair of these tucked into her pack as a reserve, but there was no opportunity to change until the relief break should come. When it did, she decided to go on as she was, for ahead loomed the foothills of the Acroceraunian Mountains through which they must pass.

She looked around while the column rested. She was familiar with most of the group who sat nearby, as she had been visited by them during the long trip.

Closest, of course, were the members of her own tent, rearranged and reduced now by one, to make a permanent place for her.

Tibullus, her husband. Longinus, the somber, moody man who had so alarmed her the first night she had slept near him, and who now seemed more unhappy than dangerous.

Counterbalancing the former centurion's surly reticence was the man everybody called the Farmer. He was well liked, always cheerful and helpful around the camp. He had moved in when Titus, the artist, and Antimon, the inventor, had been assigned to another tent so that these cronies could be together.

Galba the Farmer was a slow talker, enthusiastic only upon one subject—the land. He never tired of sampling bits of soil, crumbling it in his clumsy fingers, smelling it, tasting it, talking about it and the farm which would be his as a bonus when his service was done. Lilia supposed that he must know what would grow best in any given plot of earth he tested.

He was awkward with weapons and the despair of Centurion Ciscus, who called him a wood-butcher as the least of his criticisms.

The Farmer listened good-humoredly, nodding at each pause, brow furrowed with effort to understand. Then he would go

through the drill again, making the same errors in the same way, until Ciscus yanked at his own beard in disgust.

The next tent in the row, as one looked down the street of tents, sheltered the two friends who had been displaced by Lilia.

They had not minded the change. Antimon was an ingenious fellow with a sense of humor. He had made her a parting gift of a small pinwheel he had previously attached to his own helmet, since he saw her enthralled by it. It spun and buzzed in the wind like the whirring wings of a great bee. She did not dare to wear it but was delighted.

Titus promised to paint her picture when he could find the time.

The other members in this tent were Atticus and a wiry fellow who called himself Decius, who laughingly explained that he had previously belonged to a fire-fighting unit which had been accused of setting fires for money and refusing to put them out unless paid in advance.

"Always worked out fine," he said, "until another gang, clients of Crassus the Younger, tried to cut in. We had a terrible row to see which crew was going to put out the blaze. It lasted so long and we got so interested in fighting that the tenement burned flat, without anybody squirting a siphon or emptying a single bucket of water on the ashes.

"Sad thing! Took another building, too. Nobody got paid. Both of them belonged to old Claudius, the Emperor's uncle, or it wouldn't have mattered. These things happen all the time, you know.

"However, Claudius, the pumpkin head, raised such a stink about it, losing his rents and all that—no insurance, maybe—that both of the gangs went out of business. Some got caught and sent to the arena. I was scared—though I had always rather put out a fire than set one. I was fast on my feet and joined the army just in time!"

All in this tent were approximately the same age and got along well together.

The tent on the other side of Lilia's held Morgo, the Greek slave who had been created a freedman by the recruiting decurion shortly before the arrival of the City Cohort. He was a happy soldier, always whistling and humming on the journey,

bubbling over with joy at the thought that he would soon be passing through his homeland. Ciscus watched him with skepticism, seeing in him a potential deserter the nearer the legion came to Greek Epirus.

Kervashe, one of Morgo's tentmates, moody and quiet, was almost the Greek's opposite. He lived much within himself, laconic in speech, a precisionist in his duties. His time was spent mainly in the upkeep of his equipment or lying with hands clasped behind his head, gazing off into space, apparently lost in meditation.

If Lilia tried to engage him in conversation he would answer courteously but offered nothing to keep it going. He sought no friends.

There were others, whom Lilia liked, who were no longer neighbors. Proxillus was one, the handsome black-haired boy with the trumpet of his own, old, dented, but bright with polish. After his basic training, he had been attached to the cavalry and now rode instead of walking.

Lucas, the knife fighter—gangster, alley lurker, young and vicious—that good friend, because of his quickness had been made rope twister and striker in one of the carroballista crews. It was his particular scorpion in which the nest had been made for her hiding place, at the risk of discovery and punishment.

Lucas slept now with the crew of his artillery piece. Lilia did not see him often, but his advancement pleased her very much.

She did not know where one recruit had gone. She searched in vain for the eager face of Domitius, the young water carrier, so proud of his new outfit. She was not told that he was dead, lost overboard in the seabattle. Neither was she told that she carried his sandals in her pack, so soft and comfortable because they had been well broken in on that march down the spine of Italy, from Rome to Brundisium.

Vorco, the Etruscan pirate, now filled the place of Domitius. He marched with the others, carried a heavy pack as they did, but was not yet entrusted with an issue of arms.

Beside him at night, Centurion Ciscus spread his blankets. He was watchful guardian and scourge of all these recruits, his craggy face softening only when he glanced at Lilia, which was frequently, when he thought himself unobserved.

Lilia did not feel herself favored. When she did catch one of the centurion's sidelong looks, it was only to wonder what infraction of the rules he would be most apt to find her committing.

She had begun to think of herself as a soldier and a clumsy one at that. She dreaded the oncoming of night. She knew it was then that the recruits received the training which could not be given during the march.

Would it be swordplay? Drill? Oh, not for a while! Not with that lance the others were carrying! Just to look at the long sharp blade made the inner wall of her stomach try to curl up against her backbone. How could she ever bring herself to learn to throw that dangerous thing at anyone?

Well, maybe it would be too heavy to throw—she wasn't quite sure she could lift it.

The whistles shrilled. Up now and into line again. The pack was heavier than it had been before she sat down. She judged the descent of the sun with the knowing look that she had lately learned. Three short hours more. Then there would be food and sleep.

Must keep up with the boys that long. Mustn't disgrace the tent. No falling back today. All right for camp followers, shameful for a legionary.

There was another problem besides that of weariness. At the various rest periods of five minutes to the hour, men fell out to relieve themselves. Sometimes there was cover and sometimes none.

Lilia, at these stops, averted her eyes. She was still young enough to be embarrassed and she began to worry. How should she cope with the situation when it became necessary to do so?

Owing to the superior continence of women, the problem did not arise soon. When it did—there was a thick growth of bush available. She was surprised at first, when she emerged, to find herself completely ignored.

Knowing her comrades well by this time, she expected some unwelcome, though kindly and harmless, teasing. Nothing was said. Looking around for the reason, she saw that Eitel had alighted from his wagon and come up. He was gazing pointedly at some distant clouds, casually unconcerned, swinging his twelve-foot mule whip.

Then the whistles sounded, the ranks closed in, and the legion marched on.

With them, still keeping pace with a great effort, marched Lilia, matching their mile-devouring stride, smiling a little to herself. Now she began to feel something of the spirit which bound these men of many classes and origins into a force so terrible and strong.

She knew she had been accepted as a comrade, but only dimly had she realized how deep that feeling of comradeship ran. Here was a kinship, a dependency one upon the other, far exceeding that of family. She felt now that she need never fear these men.

She was confident that the menace of the whip had been quite unnecessary, that no remarks would have been passed. She glowed.

How nice it was to have six thousand friends!

So they passed on together, down the Roman road in a foreign, conquered land—cavalry, artillery, wagons, and the indomitable legion in all its pride and strength.

The legate, bound by his sense of duty; the seasoned officers and the dusty ranks of the *milites gregarii*—the “booted ones”—all the short, the tall, the veterans and the recruits, the gray-beards and the lame; here trotted the fierce, spiked-collared war dogs, huge Molossian hounds with blunt muzzles and heads as large as buckets; here padded the soft-slippered slingers and the light-armed archers; here marched the gently reared girl and her petulant young husband, with their tent companions and friends—all marching on the noble quest of rescue of the Lost Legion—and the big Hun, no idealist, never very far away, should she need protection.

And as they passed, with iron-shod feet making the ground tremble, little creatures fell quiet, under the stones, in the bushes, deep within their dens—their lives momentarily altered by the passing of the legion.

Like the Via Appia, the Egnatian Way had campsites and barracks conveniently arranged for overnight use by military units. Owing to the late start, the Thirteenth swung into camp early, near the small town of Clodiana. Consequently, Centurion Ciscus took advantage of the extra hour. He lost no time in gath-

ering his awkward squad together for a brief drill and one of his usual lectures.

For the first time Lilia was included. It was as bad as she had feared. Ciscus cast a severe glance at her as his gaze swept along the line. "Attention!" he thundered, slapping his vine-stick along his thigh.

"Recruit Metellus, stand to arms." Lilia looked puzzled.

"Advance one step. Face me. Head erect, back straight, belly in, chest well out."

Someone tittered. It sounded like Tibullus. You wait, Tibullus! Her face flamed, but she stood rigid, staring straight ahead.

"Thumbs along the seam of the breeches, recruit. Silence in the ranks. If I hear another sound, that man will do a full night of sentry duty!"

There was a breathless quiet. The centurion stepped forward, minutely adjusted the angle of Lilia's bow, which she still carried across her back, pulled the dagger at her hip a quarter of an inch into place, took two steps backward, and surveyed his labors with evident satisfaction.

"That is how a soldier ought to look. One day in the ranks and this recruit is a lesson to all of you. By Jupiter and Mars, you will look as good if I decide to let you live long enough."

He shook his vine-stick meaningfully, making it swish through the air. "There is a wagonful of these for me to wear out. Stand quiet!" All relaxed their rigid posture. "Recruit Metellus, unsling your bow."

With some effort and without offered help, Lilia managed to string the light bow. It was a short bow with a sinew backing, such as used by the auxiliaries in other legions, and carried only as a supplementary weapon by the Thirteenth. In comparison with their sixty-pounders, this of Lilia's had less than a thirty-pound pull. Even so, it was difficult for her to draw.

She fitted an arrow to the string, holding it in the primary release, as she had been accustomed to do at home, for she and Julia had practiced a little with archery and been taught the Greek manner of it by Chloris, who was an expert.

However, she soon learned that this was not the army way of doing things. Centurion Ciscus looked horrified.

"Not between your thumb and forefinger. You want to let it

fly, not see it fall on the ground choked to death. Here. Like this. Pay attention. I only show a recruit once. I don't do favors for anybody.

"First three fingers around the string. Arrow between first and second fingers. No! Not like that!" He struck his brow with his fist in despair. Lilia had dropped the arrow on the ground.

Ciscus reached for the bow. Lilia was too quick for him. She bent, picked up the arrow in mortified haste, and had it on the cord in a single motion.

Fury at her clumsiness, doubled by anger at being thus singled out before the men, gave her strength that she did not know she possessed. Instead of drawing the arrow back to her breast, as she had done with the other girls in play, she raised the bow, somehow got the feathers back against her right ear, sighted along the arrow at a lance stuck erect in the ground, about thirty feet away, and let fly, breathing a prayer to Fortuna as she did so.

The goddess favored her again. The arrow whistled through the air and struck, thrilling, into the upright shaft of the lance.

Lilia calmly shouldered the bow, stuck her thumb in her cross-belt in as nonchalant a manner as she had seen others do, and saluted. "Satisfactory, sir?"

Ciscus closed his mouth like a trap. He mutely nodded her back into place in the ranks. Then he turned on the gaping recruits.

"When you can do that you will be soldiers," he roared. "Unslung bows, all."

When I can do it again, Lilia silently reflected, I will be an older soldier than I ever expect to be.

For some time practice went on. They shot at butts, at clouts, at marks. A few even shot at the lance, but no arrow struck it. As though Ciscus surmised more than he admitted, Lilia was not asked to shoot at any target a second time.

He used her as an example and a comparison. He criticized the others to their detriment and unhappiness. They shot singly. They shot in series and in volleys.

"Aim high when you shoot, rather than low. When the enemy comes at you, you will be trying to kill him, not frighten him



away. A low arrow hits the dirt—a high one may kill in the second rank.

“Enough for now. Shoulder bows. Uncoil slings.”

Ciscus motioned a Balearican to take over. He was a short, squat fellow with powerful arms and shoulders. He carried a slim dagger and a light round shield. For some time he had stood as an interested onlooker.

“This is the man who will be your instructor.”

“I am Atro Behouin, Slinger First Class,” he said in a mild pleasant voice. A ribbon sling dangled from his right hand and he drew it through his belt, where another was wrapped around his loins. A third served him as headband.

“Some of you know me, but I see two new faces.” He indicated Vorco and Lilia. “These soldiers will have to be initiated as you were.”

A ripple of amusement ran through the line of recruits. Some nudged each other, knowing what was to come.

“I will explain the use of the sling to the newcomers. It is a simple weapon. Most deadly. It consists of two cords of equal length, one with a loop, the other without. The sling we shall use tonight has a pouch and we shall use stones, as we are striving mainly for distance, not accuracy. In war”—speaking directly to Lilia—“you would hurl stones indiscriminately into a crowd of enemies.”

“Now, for precision marksmanship, an experienced slinger would use this sling.”

He unwound the one he wore upon his head. “As you see, this is made from short leather thongs and has no pouch. The missile is a leaden bullet, oval and pointed at both ends. It is called a glans, or acorn, and is grooved to hold the thong.”

Behouin gave one bullet to her and another to Vorco. Lilia noticed that hers was inscribed with the motto “Take this!” and when she exchanged to examine Vorco’s, which was larger than hers and heavier, saw that it too bore a warning: “Desist!” cast into it, from the mold.

“The first one weighs three ounces—again for distance. The second one, an Attic pound, for close work as for stopping a charge. It can crack the frontlet of a horse and drop him at fifty

paces. It is used with this sling, called a funda, which you see I wear around my waist.

"The long one, looped, you can wear as a belt. It will always be handy. This third and last has a range better than the bow and arrow and is quite lethal up to five hundred paces. We sometimes use these in sieges—hurling iron bullets, heated red hot. This tin strip slips on the thong to protect it from burning.

"Now, the pouch sling we are about to use is very good with a smooth stone which you can find for yourselves in almost any brook. You should always carry an ample supply in your kit. Lead is expensive. It is also a smart idea to carry a double handful of small pebbles.

"Use three or four in the pouch at one time for game hunting. You can knock over a rabbit or a bird, once in a while, for your stewpot. If you get too many, I'll take one any time."

The men laughed and Lilia's tension lightened.

"Now, recruits. The loop goes over the second finger of the right hand, the plain end between the thumb and forefinger.

"Hold your shield up—left elbow a little beyond the line of your body—lower—you must be able to see over it, girl.

"If you were one of us Balearicans, you wouldn't have this armor. We never wear it. The loose skirt of your tunic would be thrown over your left forearm, as I do mine, to form a pocket and you could carry about a score of these brook pebbles without losing them. That way, they are easy to get at. If you have to run, you would hold your shield tight against your body to keep the pocket closed.

"The stone goes in the pouch so—" He looked about for a target. "Yonder tree, the nest and the twig that holds the nest. Observe."

The sling whirled in a blur around his head. It hummed and whined as it gathered speed. The stone whirred away with great violence and accuracy, almost invisible to Lilia. She heard the loose end crack like a whip when it was released. The nest flew from the crotch which held it.

Before it struck the ground, a second stone was on the way to sever the twig from its supporting branch and send it whirling through the air.

"That is how it should be done," said Behouin. "That is what

you must strive to learn. Had the bird flown from the nest, I could have picked her out of the air. Were it a large bird, say a raven, I could have clipped off her head without injuring the body."

It was not a boast but a calm statement of fact—so offered and so received.

"I do not expect this from you. We of the isles are trained thus from childhood. It will be sufficient if your first shots hit the tree. As time goes on, you will do much better and surprise yourselves.

"It is all a matter of timing the release and nothing can teach you that but long hours of practice. Now, shall we begin?"

He beckoned to Vorco, who stepped to the mark and accepted the proffered sling and stones. The Etruscan selected one with care, fitted it into the pouch, and sent it buzzing through the leaves without effort. Another and another followed, approximately in the same area, betraying some familiarity with the weapon.

"Excellent!" Behouin beamed. "When I am through with you, you will be able to strike any part of the human body at will.

"Girl, let me see what you can do."

This was the moment Lilia dreaded. She had never had a sling in her hands in her life. Frantically she tried to remember what the instructor had said. There was just too much. She could not even recollect how to hold the thongs.

Behouin fixed them for her, placed a stone in the pouch, and backed away. All Lilia could recall was that the sling must be whirled around a few times and the stone would come out and hit something. Not the instructor! Not one of the men, she hoped.

She whirled the stone faithfully. The sling gathered speed. It hummed—that sounded about right, anyway. Why was the group scattering? Why was everybody running? Cowards!

She let go, feeling proud that she remembered how to do it—the stone went—where? Not into the tree, that was certain.

She stood bewildered. Behouin yelled and leaped at her, striking her heavily, knocking her down and away, and the stone plunked on the ground—upon the spot where she had just been standing.

All the men were laughing—even Tibullus. All right for you, Tibullus—let's see how good you are when your turn comes—I can laugh as loud as you can!

"Like this," said the instructor, patiently fixing another stone. "Remove your bow. Swing the thongs laterally. Around your head, not in an up-and-down circle.

"Look straight at what you want to hit and, when you cast, let your hand point at the target. Never mind those buffoons. Two weeks ago there wasn't one of them that could hit the ground from the top of a pine tree. Now, try it again."

Lilia gritted her teeth. Around her head, was it? Around and around and around. The thong let go with a satisfying crack. The stone whistled into the body of the tree and thumped against the trunk. How do you like that one, Tibullus?

The Balearican clapped her on the shoulder. It was like an accolade. Lilia felt a little taller than she had before. Learning to be a soldier was not going to be so hard as she had thought.

This was fun. It was just a matter of getting the knack of doing things. If they would just stick to one thing at a time! Obviously that was not the army way, either.

Now Behouin picked up four parcels, wrapped in thin leather, tied with dangling cords. He went over to a low-hanging branch and tied the parcels there to dangle. He came back to Vorco and Lilia.

"Two for each of you. This is your food for tonight. Sausage in one, bread in the other. You will hurl until you strike your parcel and you will then take it down. If you hit both you will eat well. It may be that you will have bread and no meat, or meat and no bread. If you strike nothing, you will eat nothing tonight.

"You had best try hard and not waste time. It will soon be dark."

He gave each a sling and a supply of stones and marked the places where they were to stand—a scratch on the ground thirty feet from the tree. Then he led the remainder of the group away, to a safer spot for their own, more advanced evening drill.

Vorco and Lilia began to throw, with greater precision as it grew darker. Hunger lent interest to their competition. Vorco scored first, striking the bread and a little later his meat.

He sat munching, offering advice, while Lilia grimly continued

hurling until her arm ached—the stones shooting off at all angles and only occasionally striking the tree.

Then, when it was almost too dark to see, suddenly it became easy. The thong was released when it should have been. The stone hit the very branch and set the parcels swinging. The next missile, by sheer accident Lilia knew, struck her package of sausage.

Vorco kindly untied it for her and brought it back to the firing point. Behouin, at a distance, applauded. Vorco surreptitiously gave her a handful of small pebbles.

"Use them all," he whispered. "He'll never know the difference."

"I would," said Lilia, pleased with her first success, angry at the time it had taken. Confidence encouraged her aim. In three more shots with single stones, she hit the bread at last and had her supper.

Still eating, the two strolled over and watched the marksmanship of the others, talking together like comrades of long standing.

"Do you still consider me your prisoner?" he asked.

She laughed and squeezed his arm. "A good friend, Vorco. I have many friends here. One of the best."

"As high in your estimation as the commander?"

She shook her head. "No one can be that high. First I hated him. Then I was sorry for him—I guess I still am—he seems so lonely. I know he grieves for his dead wife. He only told me once about his son, who cares little for him, I think. I have heard rumors that he did not want to take command of this expedition.

"He has many troubles. Yet he has time to think of me. Vorco, did you know he held up the sailing of the *Hercules* until I could get there? Do you realize what that means? The whole fleet had to wait for the flagship, because it was waiting for me!

"No, I don't hate him any more. I think—maybe—I don't really know—Vorco, can a woman love more than one man?"

Horried, she clapped her fingers to her lips and hurried on a few steps ahead of him. He caught up with her but did not answer. He was revising his opinion of Commander Manlius Varro.

They took up positions again while they ate, but as spectators. The advanced group now shot for distance; they shot for marks;

they shot for height as Lilia had accidentally done, but with the purpose, as Behouin explained, of dropping stones on the heads of an enemy, not upon one's own or that of a friend.

Not until it was quite dark were all permitted to stop practice and return to camp. Then Lilia thankfully entered the tent to groan a little in private and massage her aching arm.

This unusual day, however, was not quite over.

Even after the status of Lilia in the legion had been so definitely resolved, there was still one man not completely convinced. His name was Pandarus, derived perhaps as a nickname because of his former occupation, which in Spain had been that of a procurer.

He had a quick mind for detecting an advantage and an open hand for a sesterce. He had learned that these often marched together.

Pandarus came sidling into the tent, winking knowingly to the men and smiling slyly at Lilia in a repugnant, oily manner which he fancied to be ingratiating. He bobbed and bowed, raising a hand as though beauty blinded his eyes.

"How lovely you are!" he exclaimed. He glanced around at the seated men. "How I admire your good fortune, comrades.

"Ah, if only such a treasure had come to my tent for protection. How overjoyed I should have been! How fondly I should have treated you. How you would have been overwhelmed with riches!

"Possibly it is not too late? Would it not be well to seek the shadow of an understanding person who knows how to express the proper appreciation of such a jewel?"

He turned his back upon them and addressed himself more directly to Lilia.

"If I could have had the managing of you in Rome, delightful lady, I could have made the fortune of us both. Even here—"

He bent to whisper in her ear, stroking her shoulders with an investigating hand. Lilia was too stupefied to protest, but she shrank back as far as the tent wall would allow. She looked helplessly at Tibullus.

Pandarus said, "If you will come with me now, or let me know when you will be free, I can call upon you later. The senior centurion of the Third Cohort wants a woman. He is a splendid

man, openhanded, a free spender. You would be pleased with him and he with you. Will you be available soon?"

The situation dawned finally upon Tibullus, whose slow wits had been taken by surprise. The others had been watching him to see what he would do, then glancing from one to another, their faces like thunderclouds.

Tibullus said, in a weak voice which quavered. "Sir, you are talking to my wife."

Pandarus gave him a skeptical look and turned back to Lilia. Tibullus touched his shoulder and Pandarus swept the timorous hand aside in sublime disregard, reaching for his knife. He spat out a scurrilous word and Tibullus paled and retreated.

Almost casually, Galba the Farmer seized Pandarus' wrist with unexpected quickness and strength. He wrung it. The knife fell. All in the tent heard the cracking of tendons sliding across slender bones.

"Can't allow such language about my sister!"

Longinus grabbed the moaning man by the neck, swung him around, and headed him for the entrance. "Or my niece!" he said, and released the pimp, so Vorco, who was visiting, could get in a hard kick. "Or my cousin!"

Pandarus shot through the opening and met Eitel face to face. The loud words had sounded clearly through the thin leather walls.

Other men were hurrying up from neighboring tents.

"You must be her father then, dog face!" Pandarus snarled.

Eitel looked at him as he might regard filth, before delivering one terrific blow to the belly and another to Pandarus' face, as he reeled, doubled over in agony. Then he looked down at the unconscious man.

"No! Only her dog." And walked away.

After that there were no more misunderstandings.

## “I AM NO ASSASSIN!”

When Vorco left Lilia and her companions he did not go at once to his bed. He stood outside for a moment of indecision. It was by this time quite dark, but the streets of the camp were marked by the usual widely separated cressets.

He glanced at his tent, then turned his back upon it and walked quickly away, as though he feared he might change his mind. He went directly to the commander's quarters, made himself known to the sentry posted there, and asked for admittance.

Manlius and Quintus were relaxing over a game of backgammon when Vorco was allowed to enter, followed by the sentry, who was obviously tense with suspicion. Manlius nodded to the legionary.

“Maintain post.”

The sentry's gaze shifted pointedly to the dagger of the former pirate. “Sir?” he expostulated.

Vorco's white teeth gleamed. He drew the weapon, an eating utensil only, and laid it on the game board between the players without comment.

Manlius smiled. “You may resume post, sentry. We shall not need you.” The sentry saluted and withdrew. Manlius said, “You have chosen your own time for coming, recruit. I expected you sooner. And now?”

Vorco hesitated. “You expected me? Then you must have suspected also that I have something to tell you.”

“My friend, the tribune, speaks of little else. I do not believe that you have anything to say that he has not first said.

“Do you wish to inform me that you knew of the legion's date of sailing? That you were promised wealth—honors—if I were killed?”



Vorco looked amazed. Manlius stood up. It was a quick, impatient movement.

“Come, man, I am not a fool. You bear the scars of a prisoner. Not many escape from the dungeons of the Carcer Tullianum. None if they have been scheduled for the arena.

“Who made the promise? What were you promised? Amnesty? Your life? I know the thrust was aimed mainly at the flagship. Who wants to see me dead?”

Quintus’ mouth opened. Manlius raised a restraining hand.

“I know what you would say. Let him speak. No harm shall come to you, Etruscan. Speak freely.”

“In Rome, I would have been a slave. I would have been killed like an animal, perhaps by an animal. I had been treated like a wild beast. Fed upon filth.” Vorco’s voice shook with passion. His slight frame tensed.

“All my life I have supported those who suffer under the whips of Rome, all those who tremble before her arrogance and pride.

“Yes! I was offered freedom for myself if I brought about your death. I told that man then that I was no assassin. I came against you in war to earn that freedom.

“You took me captive—and you trusted me. On board ship I heard only good things about you. Today I talked with the girl you defended. The concession that you made in her behalf has touched me deeply. I have learned to care for and respect her. I have come to admire you.

“I say to you, as I did to that man—I am no assassin. I am a soldier as much as you.”

Manlius picked up the dagger. It was slender and sharp. He weighed it in his hand. He held it out and drew his own. Quintus half rose in his seat. Manlius motioned him back.

“Will you meet me hand to hand and so earn your reward? Believe me, life is not so precious that I dread to risk it or shall much regret its loss.” He sighed. “Sometimes I think that river of Lethe is nothing more than a lovely brook, with meadows of asphodel just beyond. I would gladly wander there, could I step lightfoot across those waters.

“Pick up your dagger, pirate. No one shall interfere or punish you should the contest go against me. The tribune will be our

witness and our judge. He shall, by my warrant, see that you are set free and unharmed to go where you will."

Vorco's face was convulsed. "I did not know that there was a Roman in all the world such as you," he muttered. "I told you I would take service with you, but it was for my own ends. Now I tell you again and without reservation. I am your man, Commander, until you send me away.

"Being your man, I tell you now, beware of Caligula. It was he who sent me at you and it was the Resident at Dyrrachium, his creature, who helped me gather and organize the pirate fleet. It was he who gave me the time of your sailing. If it had not been for your protection of me, he would have killed me, or sent me back to Rome in chains.

"I have no doubt, and neither must you, that now that this strike has failed they will try again. Be on your guard. Your mission, if it depends upon the good will and favor of your Emperor, is doomed!"

He flung out of the tent. Quintus and Manlius looked at each other. Manlius sat heavily down, scattering the pieces on the board.

Quintus said, "Now you know who and how—and I have told you why.

"Turn back. Go no farther. We will seize those ships by force, attack the Residency, and take the Resident prisoner and force him to confess. Forget your fears of a civil war.

"Caesar had men who loved and worshiped him, as you, his descendant, are looked upon by yours. It would be no more than an easy march to victory. In the name of the restored Republic, there is no man among your veterans who would hang back. If you wish more—The Emperor's Own! What a rallying cry!"

Manlius tapped his fingers against the letters on his dagger hilt. "S.P.Q.R. *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. Government property, as I am, Quintus. My allegiance is to that slogan. Not to any Emperor, but to the Senate and the people of Rome.

"I vowed to reach, succor, and aid those yet living who may consider themselves members of the Lost Legion. Nothing, particularly personal ambition, shall stop me but my own death."

"And if this is a lie? If there is no Lost Legion? Not even if it means the deaths of your own legion?"

"We know by the reports of those who escaped into Armenia, after Crassus was defeated, that ten thousand prisoners were taken by Parthia. They never came home. It has always been assumed that they were placed as a buffer between Parthian lands and those who wished to invade them. We must also assume that they survived, took native wives, and had children who may or may not have been brought up in the principles of Rome.

"Caesar confirmed this. I must believe that there he spoke truth, until I am forced to believe otherwise. Believe me, I shall glean information wherever I can, to make certain. I have questioned the Hun, but although he has given me much valuable information, he knows nothing of this."

"So be it. You are a fool, but I would not have you any other way. Without your integrity, you would not be you. Perhaps you are right. What is life that man should cling to it so lovingly?"

Quintus quitted the tent without expecting to be detained.

Manlius sat in deep thought, his head in his hands. The long journey to Parthia—what confirmation of the Lost Legion's existing descendants could he hope to find before reaching that country?

If nothing—then thousands of useless wasteful miles lay ahead. If true, he had always known that his chances of success were slight, even when he had believed that his mission was valid.

Now, if there had been treachery even before he started, what treacheries must he guard against on this long journey?

Inevitably, there would be others. He sighed. There had been enough evil for this day. It was time to dismiss it from his mind. Tomorrow there would be other problems, there always were.

He sought his bed, but it was a long time before he could relax and, when he finally slept, his dreams gave him no comfort.

As usual, camp was dismantled early. Lilia was becoming accustomed to the routine and was able to do her share without prompting. Each of the tent occupants took turns on successive days in preparing the hasty breakfast of porridge. Sometimes all pooled their rations for the evening meal, sharing everything equally with the exception of salt.

Salt was too precious to use carelessly. Each seasoned his own

food according to taste and the amount remaining in his pouch. To waste it was too much like eating money.

Upon this day, two concessions were made without display, both of which delighted Lilia. One was a strip of canvas with which to partition off the nook in the tent where she and Tibullus slept. It came out of stores and was handed to her by Centurion Ciscus.

She would have thanked him, but he said, "Not from me. I do no favors for anybody. Never done a favor in my life and don't want any myself."

He strode off before she could ask who had been so thoughtful. When she saw Vorco later, in the line of march, and noticed that he was equipped with a full set of arms, she suspected that the occurrences were somehow connected.

Like opening and closing calipers, the powerful legs of the legion measured off the distance along the Egnatian Way. As the miles were covered and the days passed, Lilia grew stronger and her pack seemed lighter. A little of her plumpness disappeared.

She became bronzed, thinner in the face, and her bare arms darkened with golden tan. Her calf and thigh muscles did not ache as they had once done. Her feet were calloused and hard.

Now she walked with a free swing which caught many an admiring eye. No one, by hint or envious word, betrayed directly that she was regarded by them as the lovely woman which she was becoming, her adolescent lines being fined down by the constant marching in all weathers.

During the first days she had ridden for a few miles in one of the wagons whenever she became tired. It was tacitly recognized, without being mentioned, that she could do this when she chose.

As time went on, these hours grew less. Lilia did not wish to be accepted on other terms than those the others lived by. If she was to be a soldier's wife, there was more to it than learning to enjoy a soldier's wine. There were duties. She performed them. There were hardships. She withstood them. There were pleasures. She relished them.

So, in the end, she was accepted partially according to the code of Ciscus. She asked no favors. She did offer such whenever she could. She mended a rent, she patched a hole, she salved a

blister, she gave her bright smiles freely—and she became loved.

If there had been a woman for every man, the legion would have thought little of any of them. If there had been bawdy camp followers available, as in other armies, there would have been quarreling and fighting and wantonness. Here there was only one, a precious treasure, to guard and protect and look upon with affection instead of desire.

One man said to another, as he marched, expressing the unspoken feeling of many, "Pluto take me if I understand myself! She's the first woman I ever saw that I wanted to do something for, instead of something to." His mate nodded wisely, in perfect agreement.

Their opinion of Tibullus was far different. Lilia, still blinded by love, saw nothing in him that was not wonderful. Out of tenderness, no one spoke to her of him in any way that might rip away the glamour with which she had invested her man.

The hammering heels pounded the highway day by day, week by week. Rabbits fled. Foxes crouched and hid. Ravens rose, screeching in anger. They drew sparks from the basalt blocks along the Genessus River, where the road had been hewn into the sheer cliffsides of the Acroceraunian and Candavian mountains. They bit into the gravel track which ran through the rough highlands of Macedonia, where the fierce levies of Alexander had been nurtured. Now, all this wild country was held helpless and tamed by the fist of Rome.

The marching men came to the sea and saw its glimmer and breathed the salt, exhilarating air of Thessalonica; they crossed the three-fingered peninsula of the Chalcidiceans and reached the shore once more, this time to follow the coastline along and through all of the plain that stretched before them.

If the Via Egnatia had been stood on edge, as elsewhere built it could well have been, for most of it was, in fact, a wall of fitted stone laid on its side, this wall would have barred off Greece from Europe and perhaps have stopped the migration from that despoiled and conquered country.

Wherever the legionaries of the Thirteenth looked, they saw the desolation which similar legions had caused before them in the name of glory and conquest. Whole tracts of land were deserted.

At a period when other provinces of the Empire were rich and prosperous, Greece was impoverished. The technicians, the engineers, the scholars and artists were gone; many were enslaved, more had departed to enrich other lands with their knowledge.

The whole country seemed hungry. It was known to its discouraged people as "the burnt ground." There was little meat and the peasants survived upon the coarsest of grains and the poorest of wines, for the quality exports enriched the absentee landlords of Rome. Magna Graecia—Great Greece—had come upon most evil days.

Still the Egnatian Way meandered on into the East. Over it, from one encampment to another, the legion passed. From them, the smokes of their cooking fires pointed the way eastward, as had been ominously predicted by the warning sibyl. This occurred so often that, even to the most obtuse of those who remembered her, it seemed far more than coincidence.

Some murmured. Already they were distant from Rome and their journey had scarcely begun. Rumor pinpointed their destination as inconceivably far away.

So, as they marched out of Macedonia and into Thrace on their way to the terminal at Byzantium, they found mile upon parched mile. There were arid plains, high windy mountains, cold rivers without bridges, which must be forded. There were malaria-breeding marshes; gales from the sea to chill men's bones in the gray mists of morning.

Always there were the fitted blocks of stone underfoot which marked the power of Rome but which wore out boots while they pointed the way of travel.

Finally the highway veered south toward the Bosphorus and the weary men saw the glittering golden domes, the mighty walls, the stately buildings in the distance which marked Byzantium as a redoubtable bastion of the Empire and the gateway to Asia.

## RELIGION—AND ROSES

Byzantium was no longer the small town which Byzas, son of Neptune, founded some seven hundred years before. It had grown and was growing, despite the attacks from north and east by the wandering nations. Gauls, Avars, Sacae—all had tried their strength against the city walls. All had been hurled back whence they came.

Neither Philip II, nor Alexander, called the Great, had stultified its growth. It remained, even now under Rome's harsh grip, a thriving city through which was funneled the wealth that passed between East and West.

The legion came toward its goal by way of the shore of the dolphin-torn Sea of Propontis. It tramped through a double range of rocky hills clothed in dwarf oak and juniper. There was much pleasant greenery, bracken, broom and bay trees. The breeze bathed them with aromatic odors. The water was clear, as though the many boats floated upon liquid air.

Galleys and warships patrolled that sea with a constant vigil, for there was a continual coming and going of merchant vessels through the waterway where once the Argonauts had sailed in search of treasure.

Now that treasure lay in the commerce carried by the many ships from which Byzantium took its toll and from whom Rome in her turn exacted tribute—for the ancient free city had become little more than a colony of Rome.

There was wonder here, displayed to the red-rimmed eyes of the weary men. On land, the magnificent buildings, growing more huge with every milestone left behind. On the sea, gaily painted Dalmatian barks; caiques of antiquated design from the Greek archipelago; feluccas from the East. They skimmed lightly as broad-winged birds, up through the Hellespont, so nar-

row that it had been bridged by that strong swimmer, Leander, driven by desire for Hero, priestess of Aphrodite.

The cool water in view tantalized the parched throats of the marchers. They plodded on, seeing the city ahead as a bright oasis of wineshops in a desert of thirst.

Some, who had been there before, spoke of the delights to be found, and of unspeakable pleasures to be purchased elsewhere only in the depraved city of Sybaris or deep within the purlieus of the decadent East. Here were dancing girls to rival those of Gades; here were wines which rendered a man blissfully drunk were he to no more than kiss the welcoming mouth of the waiting jar.

The legion clanked into the city along the avenue which led through the market quarter. The warm, humid, spice-laden air was heady and made the senses reel.

Open sacks of pepper from the Indies awaited inspection; alabaster chests of ambergris stood ready for the perfumers, the contents and containers equally valuable. Here was Laodicean spikenard in bunches; cinnamon and aloes; musk from Tibetan deer; incense, myrrh, and balsam. All these lent their mite to the magic fragrance which hung like an enchantment over the lovely city, so favored by Neptune.

Yet, though the metropolis seemed prosperous, the people did not appear to be happy. The splendid edifices, the obvious plenty, the busy trade were not enough to furnish contentment.

The men of the Thirteenth had no feeling of welcome as they defiled toward the barracks where they would be stationed. Rome policed Byzantium. Police, as everywhere, are not loved and cannot be ignored although they must be accepted.

To the Byzantines, the incoming troops were only an addition to the two legions quartered within the city, ostensibly to keep order—actually to put down unrest and maintain the status quo.

Manlius, Quintus, and Matho were hospitably received at the governor's palace. M. Gaius Aurelius, Procurator for Southern Thrace, maintained an establishment of utmost luxury, which was, he hoped, to become a permanent seat. To that desirable



end, he walked a narrow edge and had no intention of mingling unnecessarily in local politics.

Instructions about his reception of the officers of the Thirteenth had long ago been forwarded to him. Supplies were waiting, arrangements made for their entertainment, and accommodations established for themselves and their command.

There was also recent mail, which, by cart, fast runners, and ship, had reached Byzantium ahead of the marching men. From Rome to Brundisium, six days, Brundisium to Byzantium in seventeen more.

Manlius broke the double seals on the laces of the leather pouch addressed to him, withdrew the second pouch, and did the same with that. He took out the enclosed wood-covered wax tablet, cut the sealed tapes, and opened the two halves. He read rapidly, then studied the letter with care. His face betrayed no inkling of its contents to his interested officers.

When he had finished, he closed the tablet and retied it thoughtfully. He re-examined the seals. They were deeply impressed with the imperial emblem. Apparently they had not been tampered with. He sat a moment in undisturbed musing, then sighed.

"It appears, gentlemen, that our journey is to have a diversion. There is unrest in Jerusalem. We have been ordered to Syria, in support of the troops already engaged there.

"The Fifth Legion, Macedonia, has preceded us. The Tenth Fretensis should be moving up from Egypt by now.

"I had hoped, Hegemon, that we might enjoy your hospitality for a few days, so that my men might recuperate. It seems that we must move on in some haste."

Procurator Aurelius graciously acknowledged the honorific with a slight inclination of the head. "At your own pleasure, Commander. I regret the urgency, but courtesy must give way to necessity. Your orders coincide with mine.

"All preparations are in readiness for transfer of the troops. May I suggest that a short delay for relaxation would in no way alter the eventual result in that cockpit of revolutionaries?

"As you know, Judea is, and always will be, in a chronic state of unrest."

Manlius looked at Quintus and Matho. There were weary lines

in the faces of both. Neither offered to influence his decision, but it was as though sunlight had come into the room when he said:

"One day then. We will be able to move the faster for the stay."

The procurator clapped his hands. His major-domo entered, bowing. "All is ready, Master."

"Shall we dine, gentlemen?"

The refectory of the palace was open to the gentle breeze and looked out through a sun-drenched portico upon the busy traffic of the Golden Horn.

Here moved a constant parade of shipping. The luxury yachts of the Byzantine nobility cruised lazily, as though life were a continual holiday. They pleased the sight with gay paint of vermillion and gold, seen at a distance over a kaleidoscopic pattern of golden roofs, interspersed with the greenery of trees.

These were summer palaces, glittering among cypresses and arbors of flowered vines. Beyond them, heavy black monoxyla, manned by surly, suspicious traders from the Chersonese, thrust pompously through the peaked sails of the fishing fleet.

Protecting all, a few long chelandia, the fast, dangerous patrol boats of the Byzantine marine flotillas, herded traffic into the proper channels. Their menace was no more than nominal, as they were suffered to exist by the Byzantine legate only because they were so conspicuously outnumbered by the units of the Roman navy—lying at anchor, but always ready to sail.

The governor and his guests dined with little formality, gazing out at the ever shifting panorama spread before them. It was not an epicurean meal, nor was it by any standard frugal.

A roast fowl was served—Quintus thought it might be peahen, but as it was not served in its feathers, curiosity impelled him to inquire. It turned out to be bustard, its peculiar, delicate flavor enhanced by the stuffing of sugared almonds and pistachio nuts.

There was freshly baked bread, still hot, sprinkled with sesame seeds and glazed. Fruit of many kinds followed, and exquisite wines, some with flavors strange to the Westerners, which turned Quintus' eyes as glassy as the surface of the pastry.

At length the surfeited diners came to an end of their appreciation. Matho studied his half-eaten pomegranate, picked at it with distaste, and laid it down. He pushed away his plate.

Quintus regarded the remainder of the wine in his silver chased goblet with an unusual lack of interest. Manlius and his host were already finished and deep in conversation.

"Frankly, Commander," said Aurelius, "I feel that it would be well for you to consider carefully the implications of your mission to Serica.

"I have been instructed to aid you in every way possible and, from private sources, informed that there is an ominous undercurrent of interest in your expedition, of which you may be unaware.

"Would it not be wise, now that you have received orders that supersede your previous instructions, to take full advantage of them and, once in Jerusalem, to remain there in garrison as long as possible for your own safety and that of your men?"

"Surely you must realize, Governor," Manlius said, "that this emergency can be nothing more than temporary, and in no way conflicts with the general purpose of the expedition.

"It is a minor hindrance, I admit. A few added miles, some extra days of travel—perhaps a skirmish or two with some ill-armed rebels, nothing more."

"I submit, Commander, in all respect to your loyalty to the throne, that duty does not insist upon mass suicide, upon which you seem determined. I believe that this insurrection may indirectly be termed an intervention of the gods to turn you from certain destruction.

"It is precisely these extra miles of travel, this turning aside, the time to pause and search your soul in regard to this matter, which concern me deeply. I am no fatalist, nor do I believe that destiny directs a man to inexorable doom.

"We have choices. There is always an alternative. I believe that you face one now."

"I have definite and precise orders. I have accepted them. I cannot ignore or deviate from them at the price of honor."

Procurator Aurelius leaned back in his high-backed chair with every evidence of bewilderment.

"Possibly you think my sense of honor inelastic. I assure you, Commander, that I am fully as conscious of my duty as you. Asia Minor, through which you must pass, is a hotbed of intrigue. Your very presence there is enough to set off disturbances. Ar-

menia is in a constant state of unrest and resentment against Rome.

"Now that the country has been partitioned and in effect Parthia's boundaries have moved westward, the thought that Parthia will permit interference where she controls is ridiculous in the extreme. She sits firmly across the Silk Road."

"I am interested in discovering another possible route for that road. Is there such a possibility?"

The procurator shrugged. "Perhaps, by by-passing Parthia to the north, a route might be found practical through Bactria. However, Bactria now is only an appendage of Parthia, as I understand that the Princess Enine—directly in line for the throne—is to all purposes a hostage of Parthia. She seems likely to remain so and is probably under pressure to consolidate the union with that country by some marriage to a Parthian prince. I should give up that idea if I were you and I know of no other sensible route."

"What of Armenia? Have you any recent news?"

"Armenia needs a king. There are two contenders for the throne: Iskander and Tigranes, brothers of equal age, between whom there is no love. Because they are twins, the country is split in divided favor of the claims of these youths.

"Ever since General Lucullus subdued those wild mountaineers, Romans are hated in Armenia and never more than at present, when the selection of a new king is imminent.

"Civil war impends. Parthia is naturally interested in the outcome, especially so as there is much resentment against Rome.

"The Armenians want complete independence. If the wrong boy becomes king, whatever the nation gains in the coming struggle will soon be lost. Tigranes Exadaris is known to be favored by Parthia. And he is the older of the brothers by a few moments and so has a superior right to the title.

"It will be a hurly-burly that I wouldn't want to get caught up in. You are heading into it. If you hurry and don't take too long in Jerusalem, you should arrive in Armenia about the time that snow closes the mountain passes and traps you there—at the right time to get yourself and your command slaughtered in a civil war! You should pass through Armenia without loss of time. It is the shortest route you can take to Serica."

"I believe you, but I have no choice—I must obey orders."

"You are determined? Seriously, Commander, consider. If I were you, I should sacrifice frequently to my lares. Beg their intercession with whatever powerful gods may favor you, that if you must go to Jerusalem they keep you there indefinitely and safe. The situation in Rome may change at any time.

"Have you heard that His Sublime Divinity has created a new consul—Incitatus, his horse?"

Quintus grinned, without comment. Manlius unhappily smoothed back his graying hair. He felt age and indecision descending coldly upon him. Matho grunted ironically, "Probably a better politician than a good many of the human ones."

"So Caesar said. More amenable anyway. I understand that the senators did agree to support an expedition to the British Channel as a preliminary to an invasion of the isles. It did not sail.

"There was a storm, so His Divinity declared war on Neptune, his brother, who frustrated him. After the storm ended, the legions were put to work gathering shells as evidence of the great conquest. Then all returned to Rome, where a triumph was held in Caligula's honor.

"This is laughable, but it is serious too. I should not wish to be quoted, Commander, or influence you with my private thoughts, but does it not occur to you that, in the event of an accession of a new Emperor, your orders might not remain permanently valid?"

"The closer you might be to Rome—say Jerusalem, for example—the easier and quicker it would be to return to Rome?"

Manlius did not reply immediately. Quintus looked at him without much hope and sipped his wine. It seemed as useless to try to swerve his friend's determination as it had always been before. Matho, apparently unconcerned either way, had recovered his appetite and attacked another pomegranate with zest.

"Nothing you have said, Governor, can be permitted to alter my decision. I shall put out of my mind all that you have told us, for I realize that you speak with the best of intentions, however misguided each of us believes the other to be. Nothing that has been said here shall go farther than this room." Quintus and Matho nodded without enthusiasm.

"I shall remember that your words were well meant and that only. We do thank you. Had I not given my word . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

"Come, my friends, we must go."

Aurelius caught the attention of Quintus, who hung back after the others. "Can you make him see reason? Perhaps if I had spoken more plainly?"

"It would have made no difference. He is a man of strong principle. Too strong for his own good. In a hurricane he feels called upon to play the role of captain."

The procurator watched them down the path along the windy terrace and into the street where their litters waited. Leaves rustled and branches swayed. The skies were darkening in the east.

He knew an omen when he saw one. There would be a gale, sudden and violent. "Hurricanes create high waves," he muttered, and turned back into the refectory, to watch in shelter the little craft hastening into harbor before the approaching storm.

Payday! Always an event for jubilation in the ranks. Never was it more happily received than here. To be turned loose in Byzantium with liberty for the day and pay in the pouch was an experience not to be soon forgotten by the recruits.

It began in different ways. Atticus, the patrician, took his small pile of coins and counted them with disgust.

"What an army!" he complained. "Deductions. Fines. More deductions! A denarius a day, they say? Pluto take me if I ever see it. Fifteen denarii, three sesterces, two *as*, that's the lot.

"No, here's a clipped quinarius, discounted about two *as* with somebody's snips—may he spend it in the halls of Hecatel

"Three months ago I would have thrown the whole heap away because the coins are dirty. Why, a man can't even get drunk on this!"

Tibullus agreed. This was his first pay also and he had expected a hundred denarii for the three months, not realizing that actually not that much time had elapsed for the recruits, but deductions would not be taken out in proportion to time served and money earned. He began to cast up accounts on the tablet he always carried to jot down random thoughts.

The deductions made his face lengthen. Bedding, four denarii. Food, thirty-two. Boots and straps accounted for five more. The list went sadly on.

Out of the first pay period for the year, eight denarii were subtracted for the annual camp dinner and twenty-four for clothing. These would continue without change throughout the other pay periods, except that two denarii extra would come out of the second for membership in the compulsory burial club, instead of the dinner deduction, and fifty-five denarii would go for clothing in the third settlement of accounts.

In addition Tibullus calculated that, since he must also meet his share toward tent equipment, replace broken or lost weapons, and bribe Ciscus, his centurion, if he wanted to be considered an immune and excused from occasional fatigue duty, his chances of living luxuriously were exceptionally poor.

He counted his few coins. They were slightly fewer than those of Atticus. He decided at once that, although he was expected to deposit most of them in the Army Savings Bank to accumulate, there were better places to leave them. With that idea in mind, he set out to see what the city had to offer.

Farmer Galba received his tiny salary with satisfaction, putting away his little ration of salt and most of his money. It was not a fortune, but it was more than he had ever had of his own and he had no intention of wasting either item of his wealth.

He clapped Tibullus on the shoulder. His laugh was rich and hearty. "Cheer up, lad! Nothing comes out of the fourth quarterly pay. Sixty-five denarii and no deductions. Think of that!"

He walked along with Tibullus and Lilia. Morgo came up, with Kervashe, lost in private thoughts as usual, hardly acknowledging the presence of the other recruits. They caught up with Licinius, who smiled and offered them some of his figs, and Atticus, who was holding a perfumed cloth to his patrician nostrils and scrutinizing the Byzantines with his customary hauteur.

The little group of friends looked over the goods in the vaulted bazaars. Here it was cool, deep-shadowed against the sun which fades colors, dries fruits, sucks the essence from perfumes, and curls fine leather. These nooks held exotic treasures and shopkeepers with eyes as keen and predatory as those of lurking spiders.

The sightseers strolled on, sampling greasy delicacies and sticky lumps of pressed dates. There were silks and brocades and gauze from Gaza. Lilia wistfully touched and admired but did not buy.

She had coins in her pouch, subject to the same deductions as the others. The paymaster—signifer of the Thousand Cohort—had received strict orders from Manlius himself to count her enlistment from the day she had left Rome. She looked at copper pans and kettles that she would not have spared a second glance at home. Now they appealed to her equally as strongly as did the dress materials. She judged them for weight and quality and was about to give the hawker his price without question. The Farmer intervened.

With spirited haggling, much shouting, horrible insults, and waving of arms in despair on both sides, Galba finally purchased a kettle for her at two thirds the sum originally asked.

"I am a merchant's daughter," Lilia ruefully remarked, "but it seems that I can still take a lesson in trading."

"It will come," consoled the Farmer. "Poverty is a great sharpener of the wits. You must think poor if you are to save your money. A sesterce is dirt to a rich man, but the size of a wagon wheel to a beggar. It is as sad to be one as the other."

Everywhere were crowds of people, sauntering for pleasure, shopping, passing in and out of the temples, which catered to all faiths and classes.

There were Greeks in scant chitons and chlamydes of feather-weight linen or silk; tall bearded men from Pontus who wore furs in disregard of the sultry heat, with a hand always resting on their stubby, wide-bladed dirks; Jewish merchants in caftans drawn tight over their money pouches; Parthian nobles who swaggered arrogantly, eying the legionaries in contemptuous scorn.

Yonder stood Khazars, hairy and tangle-bearded, their tall black hats of shorn lamb heavy on their heads; Negro slaves displaying their muscles to prospective buyers; Circassian beauties in golden chains which would be included in the purchase price when they stood upon the block.

Barbarians everywhere, gawking at the high towers and the painted walls, secretly estimating their strength and searching



for weaknesses; everywhere also the squads of legion police who looked with interest and fraternal hostility at the newcomers of the Thirteenth, checking their passes and remarking critically upon their worn equipment.

The group ignored their comments, carefully avoiding the taking or giving of offense. They entered a Temple of Mithras to escape from the heat and the press of bodies around them. Here it was cool and quiet. Here one could meditate and collect one's thoughts. It seemed, and was meant to be, an island of peace.

There was little to see, for the actual Mithraeum or place of worship was, as in all such temples, situated underground. Where they were was little more than the antechamber to the mysteries below.

The chamber had a rounded apse at the west end, where stood a noble figure of the god in his aspect as Protector of Truth.

They read the credo, high on the wall above his head, in golden letters: *HOMINIBUS VAGIS VITUM*. Lilia felt uneasy there, in this place for men. But remembering that she too was a soldier, she read it for the Farmer, who had no learning—*TO BRING LIFE TO WANDERING MEN*—and felt a renewed kinship with her companions.

Mithras looked down upon the visitants with a benignant expression. His right hand was outstretched in welcome. She had as much right to be there as they.

Some Greek stonecutter had created this image as a painstaking work of love, for although Mithras wore the conventional Phrygian cap, his robes hung in symmetrical catenary curves which no Eastern sculptor could duplicate.

The majestic figure was not complete, for his feet were not visible, being hidden within the rough uncut rock which formed the pedestal. Longinus broke his usual taciturnity and explained that Mithras had emerged from nourishing Mother Earth to do battle with all malevolent demons and forces which would threaten the helpless human creatures who were destined to people the world.

He had brought light into darkness and light lived in the temple. It shone from so many angles, directed by mirrors against the statue, that no shadows of the god were visible upon the

walls or floor. There was inspiration here for the soul and only the most obtuse and insensate could fail to be impressed.

Longinus ended his discourse in a tone of fleeting doubt.

"This is what I believed for many years. Now I am not so sure. A man I met—if he was a man . . ." He did not finish but muttered as though to himself, "Perhaps he carried a brighter light."

He turned his back upon the group, hastily quitted the temple, and they saw him no more until they returned to the barracks.

There were two among the visitors who were overwhelmed. Morgo, at Lilia's side, sank to his knees in reverence and lifted his face, transfigured by the effulgence reflected from the countenance of the god. His lips moved in silent prayer.

The others did not kneel, but their voices were subdued in involuntary respect. Whatever their private beliefs, this was a holy shrine.

"I wish I had my paints and brushes. What an inspiring subject for an artist!" Titus said.

Lilia had often observed him, bent over his sketches, during the rest periods on the march and at free moments from duty in camp. Now she asked, "How does it happen that an artist has become a soldier? I would have thought that Rome held more promise."

"Not for me. My name was against me. My full name is Titus Aemilius Attius."

Lilia's face betrayed no understanding. He smiled.

"I thought everyone knew that name. My father is Publius Attius. He operates a factory for pottery at Puteoli, near Naples, you know. All cheap stuff, made to sell, no real quality, but it is shipped all over the world, even India.

"He wanted me to take over the works. I couldn't. I like beautiful things—bright colors, excellent statuary, exquisite glass, fine wines and conversation, books—pretty girls . . ." His smile was engaging and Lilia could not help but smile back in understanding.

"Can you see me with my hands dirty with clay? Splashed all over with gray slip? My clothes full of burned holes from sparks from the kilns and cinders blurring my eyes so that I cannot any

longer see loveliness in the world? There would have been only shipping lists, account books, and money piling up.

"Is that the proper future for a man? Not for me.

"I told my father I would be a limner. He laughed in scorn and said when I was tired of starving to come home and he would feed me, for he knew I would never make a sesterce with my paints.

"I will, though. I will bring home gold by the sack and set it down on his desk for him to see, or I will never go home."

A priest came out of the sanctuary behind the god. "Have you come to worship? Are you initiates?" He approached the group and bowed.

He raised an admonitory finger at Lilia. "You intrude, woman. The Temple of Mithras is for men only. He is the soldier's god."

"I am a soldier. A legionary of the Thirteenth. See?" Lilia displayed her shoulder chain. "The Emperor's Own!"

The priest shook his head. "That is of no importance. I can make no exceptions. You are a woman. I cannot permit you or an uninitiate to enter the temple for worship. As a legionary, not a camp follower, you are entitled to wait here, but not to attend the mysteries.

"Who among you are so privileged?"

Three of the newcomers—old soldiers and strangers to the group of which Lilia was a member—stepped forward. "I am a Runner of the Sun." "I a Lion." "Only a Raven, but I am studying for the degree of Occult."

"You may follow me below, then—Heliodromus, Leo, and Corax."

He turned to go. Morgo, now on his feet, spoke up then, shyly but reverently. "Father, I wish to become an initiate. Is it possible today?"

The priest looked into his earnest face. "There will be a slaying of the bull on the third day from now. Can you be present for rebirth at that time?"

The hope went out of the boyish face. "Alas. We march day after tomorrow. I have never had a chance before. There were—obstacles."

"The road to the Light of the World is long and thorny," the

priest agreed. "Keep the faith in your heart, my son. Be patient. The dawn will come for you as it must for all the world."

He turned and led the way. The initiates followed him to the stairs leading down to the sanctuary. The antechamber was so quiet that those who remained could distinctly hear the whispering of his robes and the despairing sigh of the despairing candidate.

"The pit to walk through, under the carcass, has probably already been dug." Morgo's voice was somber. "Three days and the sacred blood will drip. Three days. I could have been re-born! My slavery would have been washed away forever!

"Only three days more and I would be a Crow. When will such an opportunity come again?"

Those who were left of the group went out again into the bustle of the city. The recruits returned to the barracks by a route which led them past the shipyards and wharves of the Golden Horn. A dhow was coming in, trimming its lateen sail to take advantage of a whisper of breeze. They watched the skillful docking with admiration as it slid noiselessly into port. The rhythmical creak and thud of a fifty-oared penteconter came to them over the refuse-littered water. The high-prowed warship moved majestically by at half power.

They would have enjoyed a longer stay, but here were idle sailors, hot-eyed dock workers, and a scurvy riffraff of all sorts who showed their resentment of strolling Roman soldiers in many ways. It was not a place to pause long. They did not take much pleasure in the walk.

It seemed quite homelike to the recruits to be back in the familiar surroundings of the barracks. Throughout the Empire, these were standardized, varying only in the materials used as locally available. This one was half-timbered and cut stone.

As a camp was laid out in an orderly and uniform pattern and a Roman city could be recognized anywhere by its conventional design of street planning, the placement of the forum, temples, and stadiums, so even less departure from standardization could be permitted in a barracks. Legions came and went, using them for overnight accommodation on their way to far places. It was necessary that, wherever they stopped, there must be as little confusion as possible. Lilia did cause a small amount of this

by her mere presence. However, privacy was created for herself and Tibullus in a greater degree than in camp. Here, the sections of their tent had been raised to form the walls of a tiny room which they enjoyed to themselves.

Mail had been received in the barracks, as it had at the governor's palace, and already been distributed. There were letters waiting for Lilia. One was from Julia, with an enclosure from Chloris which brought tears of joy to her eyes.

My Beloved Mistress:

If you ever receive this, know that by the mercy of the gods and because of the bounty of the one whom I love more than all others—except, now, my dear husband—I am free!

Oh, Lilia, my precious one—my sweet sister—you are my very heart.

With the money you left me, I bought my freedom and brought a dowry to Tryphon. We are married—yes, like you, we are happy—and we have a little wineshop near the Aemilian Bridge.

We pray to our lares daily for your health and your protection. We sacrificed a cock and the priest read an augur for you. He said that your journey will have dangers, but you will come to no harm and will know great happiness in your life.

I shudder to think of you in danger. Dear mistress, I think of you so often. Shall we ever meet again?

Tryphon and I wish you well. All our thoughts are with you.

Vale.

Julia's letter was typically Julia:

I wish we could sit down and talk together. Such a wonderful thing has happened and it is all because of you, darling Lilia!

When I came home alone there was the most horrible scene. I pretended to be astonished that you were not there before me and *really* I was, you know. I could not guess what had gone wrong with your plans. I wonder even now.

Of course I had to tell them *everything*! Your parents and mine were talking for hours and hours and I was locked in my room and once I thought I would be whipped! I *steeled* myself. I gritted my teeth.

I said to myself, If Mucius Scaevola could burn his own hand off for the sake of honor, I can take a whipping for the sake of my dear friend! My only friend!

Oh, Lilia, I *do* miss you!

Then I thought of the dreadful scars—those awful marks on

my back. My husband—when I get one—would think I had been a slave!

I cried. I kicked my feet. I pounded the pillow and howled!

Then Father said that I must be punished by being exiled from Rome—just at the height of the season, too! You should have heard me wail then! I didn't want to go—I wouldn't go—and all the time I was laughing inside. Oh, joy! Oh, gladness!

Anywhere out of this dull, stupid, hot, smelly city. Somewhere nice, anywhere new, I thought, where there are boys and men I never have seen before.

Father asked if I wanted to go back to Auntie's and I pretended to be delighted! I knew he wouldn't send me there if he thought I would enjoy it. He is so easy to fool, Lilia, that it is almost cruel to deceive him.

So I am being sent, instead, to Cousin Drusilla's—Mother's side of the family, you remember—to that delightful resort at Altinum, up near the Brenner Pass, where just everybody that is anybody at all goes nowadays.

Darling! Just to be *seen* there is something to talk about for weeks and weeks—and I will be there for a whole year!

I cried. I had to. I was afraid Father would change his mind and I was *terrified*! Oh, Lilia, I have heard so much about Altinum. I am so excited!

They say that a lot of rich Goths go there to take the waters. Of course, they are *barbarians*, but they are so big! They have huge muscles and are hairy—all over, I hear. It will be such fun to tame one.

I will be married when I come home. I know I will. What a shock that will be to Father! I can hardly wait to surprise him!

I went to see Chloris and she was happy for me. She is a good girl and does not try to act above her station. I like her better than I did when she was your slave. Really, Lilia, you must be careful not to give a slave advantages like that again. They think that they are as good as people in the end.

It was fortunate that she bought her freedom and could not be touched, or I think your father would have had her killed—he was so angry. As it is now, all is well with both of us and you need not be concerned about us.

By the way, I hope you and Tibullus are well. Hurry home and see us as soon as you can. I will want to show you my Goth. I will not have his hair or beard trimmed until you see him.

Vale.

Oh, a funny bit of news lately in this dull city! Our Divine Caesar has found a new way to torment the Senate. He has invented a thunder machine. When the talk gets too boring and

the old men drone on and on, he has a slave work the machine and it roars so they can't be heard over the noise.

He sits there staring at them, with his chin on his fist, nodding his head as though he was listening and saying, "Yes, Jupiter. I hear you. I will have their heads for you, Father Jupiter!"

Did you ever hear anything so funny?

Lilia chuckled with delight during the reading of Julia's letter. Tibullus rocked back and forth on his heels, enjoying it also. His smile faded as he studied Lilia's face while she read and reread the final missive.

It was no more than a short note, without salutation or signature, in the familiar script which Lilia well knew to be that of her father.

She held it in fingers which trembled, studying each word, as though something hidden could be revealed behind the curt and decisive statement:

From this day forward, we have no daughter.

The tablet dropped to the floor from her nerveless hand. She buried her face in her arms and sobbed. Tibullus picked it up and read the stern statement. It sealed forever his hopes of easy riches and fame. His face became bleak and harsh.

He seized Lilia by the hair and turned her head toward him.

"This is all your fault! If you had done as I told you, your father would have bought me out of the army. Mine will never do anything for me. He is ashamed of me. You were my only hope! We would be in Rome now, in a fine house of our own, with money and slaves.

"I would have an honored place.

"You must have your own way. See what it has brought us now! I will go to my death in some desert and you will be nothing more than a camp follower!"

He stood glaring at her. She could not speak. She stared at him in tear-wet dismay. His hand flashed out and cracked against her cheek.

This was a Tibullus she had never seen before. She was so unprepared for the blow that she could not sob. Her hand went slowly to her reddening cheek, her eyes never leaving him.

Tibullus could not stand the silent reproach in them. With a convulsive gasp, he stormed out of the door. Away! Anywhere,

to drink himself senseless and forget, while in the barrack room Lilia lay face down, shoulders shaking, her body quivering with deep, choking sobs, inaudible to any but herself.

Unknown to either, the harsh scolding had not gone unnoticed. Eitel, in his more distant quarter at the farther end of the barrack, had been working absorbedly upon an idea which had occurred to him. He had begged a broken dagger blade from the arms room, had the armorer punch holes in the large end, and was braiding the snapper of his mule whip into them, when he heard the loud complaining whine of Tibullus.

Eitel raised his head. He saw the leather hangings of the little private room thrust violently aside. Tibullus dashed blindly out. The giant was too far away to know the cause of the quarrel.

He coiled his whip methodically and hung it on a peg over his bunk. He tightened his belt and approached the alcove where Lilia lay grieving on her pallet. He gently separated the tent sections until he could peep in, unobserved. His face grew stonily grim at what he saw. The mark of separated fingers stood out in clear detail on her white face. Her eyes were closed.

Eitel made no sound. He let the hangings fall softly together and went out of the barracks in the direction which Tibullus had taken, without haste. The hot sunshine bathed him, rising in waves from the pavement. It steamed in his nostrils like the humidity of a jungle forest, doing nothing to calm his simmering temper.

He stalked on toward the waterfront, a hunting animal at the prowl. There were many taverns and much noise within them. There was laughter, arguments friendly or fierce, the crash of broken pots, the squeal of excited tavern drabs, and everywhere the clack of dice.

Along the street there hung heavy the sour smell of spilled wine, stale grease, and the rancid smoke of frying fish. The little shops displayed knives, brass knuckles, weighted clubs, dice which only a fool or an expert gambler would dare use, and gaudy souvenirs intended to appeal to a drunken sailor with money hot in his pouch.

Even in daylight men slunk furtively through the more crooked alleys where hard-mouthed women wore painted, professional smiles. Eitel looked into many a dubious lurking place,



called inns only by courtesy. Byzantium, or at least this sector, was definitely a sailor's town.

Pimps and runners extolled to him the peculiar pleasures to be found inside the squalid haunts, in terms which admitted of no misunderstanding. He paid them no attention.

He peered into the semidark, scanning the faces which met his contemptuous scrutiny with defiant calculating looks. There were those who looked nervously away. There were some who let a hand rest casually on a dagger until he was gone. A few even rose slightly, crouching from their benches, and set down their mugs, then thought better of what they planned and subsided under his tigerish, unwinking stare.

After he left each one of these places a high buzz of excited conversation rose. It had been hushed while he was there.

At length Eitel found what he had been seeking. He strode into the depths of the taberna and pounced upon his victim. A smirking harpy, who had been sitting on Tibullus' lap, cooing into his ear and busy with her hands, shot into a corner with a solid thump. Her yell startled passers-by in the street.

Eitel's ham fist closed on the nape of his quarry. Leaving a wake of overset benches and broken jugs, squalling women and cursing drunks, the big Hun made toward the outer air. The heels of Tibullus dragged helplessly through broken crockery and spilled lees of cheap wine.

A burly tavern bouncer stood grinning in Eitel's path. He did not pause or turn aside. With outstretched fingers, he shot a straight lancelike dart at the eyes of the Byzantine, who shrieked like a woman, dropped his club, and went staggering back with hands covering his bleeding face. There was no other hindrance and no one followed.

Eitel dragged Tibullus across the street, through refuse and animal droppings, until he came to the edge of the water. He raised his prey at arm's length and regarded it with disgust.

"Pah! You stink!" he grunted, and dropped Tibullus off the edge of the wharf. When the garbage-strewn head came up, coughing and sputtering, Eitel reached out a helping hand—to plunge it under again.

This time Tibullus did not come up so soon. When he did, he was limp. His eyes were closed. Eitel laid him down on the

wharf, with head hanging over the edge. Water poured out of Tibullus' mouth. He gasped and retched.

When he could speak, Eitel, who had squatted beside him, waiting, picked him up and shook him like a rat, slapping his face from side to side. Tibullus rocked to and fro without offering any resistance.

"I saw her come to you on bleeding feet," Eitel growled. "It was not done so you can treat her as you have, nor for her to ever see you like this in such a place."

"What do we matter to you?"

"You are nothing. I am less than nothing. She has a destiny you could never understand. There will be no more of this, ever. Will there? Speak!"

"No! Never. Whatever you say!" Tibullus coughed up more dirty harbor water.

Eitel waited. Tibullus said nothing. He did not dare to look up. He remained as he was, on all fours, staring down into the greasy refuse floating underneath him. He was very sick.

Those scornful eyes burned into his back, scarifying his very soul. His own face stared up at him. Superimposed upon it he saw the face of the drab he had been petting. He threw up and turned from that sight. Eitel was gone.

A little group on the street was watching. Tibullus got up and staggered away, bent over, his hands on his belly. His eyes burned with the salt water—or was it tears born of sudden self-recognition?

No one followed him as he reeled down the street, hardly conscious of his surroundings. He leaned against a wall of one of the little niches which passed for shops in this section of the port. It was a place of more refinement than most of the others and a better class of goods was on display.

The proprietor, a small rusty-bearded Syrian wearing a striped robe and black skullcap, came out, rubbing his hands together. He scrutinized his prospective customer with shrewd eyes. Appearances did not always indicate an empty purse.

"Something for the soldier? A pretty bangle to buy favor from a pretty lady? A bit of amber on a golden chain? Much in favor—much in desire these days! Hard to come by.

"Perhaps some glass beads from Egypt? Very old. Very rare.

Stolen from the neck of a princess, buried young. No one else has ever worn them. Guaranteed to me personally by the thief."

Tibullus looked at him with small comprehension. The voice droned. His eyes were still blurred. He pointed at random.

"That—how much?"

"Ah! A person of discernment. Your judgment is unerring. The finest treasure of all my wondrous wares." The Syrian hastily seized up a small bottle of heavy glass, slyly brushed off a thick overlay of dust, and gave it a quick polish on his sleeve.

He held it out on display. His voice was hushed and reverent.

"Attar of roses. Once owned by the enchantress Mythris. She was laid to eternal rest in a rose-embroidered mantle in a tomb filled with rose petals. Her favorite perfume . . ."

His voice fell to a whisper and he gazed about, cautiously. "If these riffraff suspected its value, they would slit our throats to possess it. The vial holds only one drop, but that worth five times its weight in gold. It is a sure specific to win back love, a certain charm to keep love—the ineffable essence of sixty thousand despoiled roses concentrated into a single liquid jewel."

"The price? What is it?"

The proprietor raised his hands in writhing horror at the sordid question. "It is beyond price, young sir! Nobles have tried to purchase this from me in vain. A talent of silver could not persuade me to part with it to an unworthy person who might use its magic properties to a selfish end.

"Nay, do not be hasty"—as Tibullus turned to go—"I have preserved it, cherished it, for just such a day, for just such a brave warrior as yourself—for a man who has a need and a lovely lady to please.

"The cost? A mere trifle to such as you. Merely, whatever you at the moment possess—out of the kindness of my heart—because I have a fondness for lovers."

Tibullus emptied out his pouch into the Syrian's eager palm. The man groaned. "Surely my kind heart and tender sympathies will bring my children to curse me for their hunger. Only twelve denarii? The gods witness that my father would tear out his beard in the shame of having a fool for a son!

"Yet I have given my word and I am an honorable man. Here.

Quickly. Take it and begone before I repent. Alas! That I awoke this day, to lie sleepless in remorse tonight!"

He turned and went into his niche, like a retreating spider, biting at a suspiciously light coin as he went.

Tibullus hurried back to the barracks with a lighter heart. His steps slowed as he entered. Eitel saw him come in but lowered his own head, betraying no sign of what had happened between them.

Tibullus approached the enclosure and parted the curtains without noise. Lilia was asleep, her head on her arm. He could see that tears had dried on her cheeks. His heart went out to her in repentance.

He bent and kissed her, with a sudden honest impulse of tender affection. She opened her eyes and put her arms around his neck. "Forgive me, Lilia?"

"Oh, Tibullus, I am so sorry. I know I did wrong. Can you ever forgive *me*? Why, Tibullus, you are all wet! You will take a fever. You must have a dry tunic."

He kissed her again and disengaged. "It is nothing, darling. I fell into the bay. I am all right. Here. I brought you a present."

She took his hands and held them on her bosom.

"Oh, thank you! It is beautiful. It smells so nice! Oh, Tibullus, you are so good to me. I do love you." She put her head on his shoulder.

"I love you too, Lilia."

For the moment he believed what he said.

Eitel looked on, distantly keeping his own counsel. He stalked through the camp with an arrogance which hid his deeper feelings. It was not suited to his tenuous status in the legion or to his former one as a slave. He swaggered and growled as though he strode to meet trouble.

His burning gaze softened only when it fell upon Lilia. When he sat his wagon on the march, he constantly stared ahead in her direction. When he had leisure, he was generally within call, his long muleteer's whip coiled ready on his shoulder. He wore it as though it were part of him, sometimes flicking out the sharp steel point on the tip with unerring accuracy at a fly, a chip, or a blowing leaf.

He seldom missed. When he walked by her tent, it often

dragged behind him like a deadly following serpent, alert and anxious to lash out.

Many marked his evident devotion, which Lilia alone did not seem to see. They noticed the seeking of her smile, which he would return by a hasty averting of his eyes and a hurrying of his pace without answer in kind. No one remarked upon this within his hearing.

His size, his heavily muscled torso, his fierce scowl—all these stopped men from laughing at Eitel—usually the first time, never more than once.

He kept to himself and did not speak with Lilia often. When he did, she noticed that he almost never called her “Little Roman” now. It was a name which he held private in his heart, with such other tender things as he cherished in memory. They were very few.

## SAUL THE TENTMAKER

Across the Bosphorus—cattle crossing, ancient route of the Bronze Age drovers—lay the city of Chalcedon, rival to Byzantium, already superseded in size and magnificence and called by the Byzantines the City of Lights.

Between these two metropoli ferries ran, wide barges for heavy wagons and companies of troops, rafts with pontoons, especially built for horses and other heavy animals, and many other lighter craft.

During most of the following day, under the critical eye of their officers, the Thirteenth was ferried across without mishap. It took form again and went into camp that night in Asia, a short distance from Chalcedon.

Here began the network of highways which covered Anatolia like a web, leading out of it, south and westerly, into Egypt or on into Africa. North and easterly, the roads ran toward the Black Sea, Armenia, and the Parthian Marches—that debatable frontier, never quite defined.

Here, now that the journey was resumed, began the evening drills. Again the recruits sweated through their training. Now they had the additional burden, in common with most of the legion, of learning the language which would prove useful throughout a far-flung area.

The colloquial Greek Koine, the lingua franca of the Greco-Roman world, was universally understood and used by traders, politicians, soldiers, and citizens of the colonies.

Lilia learned its intricacies as she continued her physical training with the others. She was never able to repeat her success with the bow but became proficient enough with it and the sling to satisfy Ciscus and receive his grudging approval.

Her strength increased. Happy because of the new and tender

attentiveness constantly shown her by Tibullus, she was encouraged to strive ever harder in all her studies. She found that she had a natural aptitude for languages.

In her free time she made herself familiar with the various arms of the service and was welcomed everywhere. She constantly added to her long list of acquaintances and friends. Lucas came over occasionally from the artillery park, if he had no other duties. He instructed her and a few others in the finer points of hurling knives and the dirtier methods of hand-to-hand fighting with his favorite weapon.

At the same time he proudly displayed what he was learning during artillery practice. Lilia, listening to his brags, also became knowing, able to speak learnedly of trajectory and distance, of siegecraft and tactics, of torsion engines and beam-arm missile throwers.

She learned why no man stands behind the onager when it is used by watching the catapult kick its base high, like the heels of the wild ass for which it is named. She saw the fireballs soar, leaving their trails of thick black smoke. She heard the fire lances, the phalarica, rip the sky, gleaming like deadly comets as they raced toward their targets.

She shivered in dread of their eager power to hurt, although she thrilled with pride in the invincibility of the legion—her legion! She clenched her small fists, feeling that she shared in their might.

Jolly Probus entertained her with quaint and curious tales of his father, who it appeared was a man of many parts and qualities. His stories were unbelievable but funny, and he never mentioned again that his parent had been a poet, so she knew that he had made up that yarn on the moment, merely to trick Tibullus into signing the articles.

She was no longer angry and once she said, "Probus, if all these stories are true, your father must be about a hundred and eighty years old!"

Probus only grinned.

Kervashe, who had been little more than an acquaintance because of his reserve, revealed something of his hidden character in an odd way.

She had never known him well, although she had occasionally

shared his company with that of others, seeing that they were close neighbors in the tent city of the camp. His appearance, by itself, was daunting. His thick shaggy uncombed hair and large unkempt mustache gave him a sinister look which discouraged conversation.

His unsociable attitude and solitary mood did not induce her to go out of her way to establish a close friendship, although she had noticed early that when she passed by he always followed her with his eyes. Many did that, but most had a pleasant word and a hearty smile for her, or a joke to tell.

She wondered if he was shy and tried, at first, to draw him out. He answered only in monosyllables and appeared lost in his own dark thoughts. One day he came out of his somber reveries in an odd manner.

The Keeper of the Hounds was exercising his fierce Molossian war dogs near the lower end of the camp, when one huge and savage monster, named Cerberus, set up a doleful howling. He spun around in circles, snapping at the ground and licking his paw.

When the Keeper tried to discover the cause of this, Cerberus snapped at him and no command or threat would quiet the beast.

The men gathered around at a safe distance, giving advice and making suggestions. By now the dog was in great pain and flecked with foam. Unwillingly, the Keeper prepared to put Cerberus out of his misery. Before this could happen, Lilia impulsively went into the circle. She approached the tortured animal, speaking softly and comfortingly to him.

His howls ceased. He laid his great bucket-shaped head down between his splay feet and watched her come close. There was madness in his wild stare of pain. Lilia touched him without showing fear. She rubbed gently between his ears, smoothing out the wrinkles on his furrowed forehead, stroking the scars in his loose skin and massaging with knowing fingers along his heavy jowls.

Cerberus made no attempt to attack her. Lilia's voice was soft and gently soothing. The deep, warning rumble in his throat became a low gurgle of pleasure.

She slowly slid her soft hand down his foreleg. Past shoulder



and knee joint to ankle. She went on petting with her other hand and murmuring in low tones. The foot was larger than the palm which lifted it. Now she could see the trouble.

Blood ran down through her fingers and he quivered at the touch, growling like a distant mutter of thunder. She ignored the warning.

The dogs had been leaping, at command, at the throat of a dummy in body armor. Cerberus had evidently caught his foot on a jagged bit of steel projecting from the damaged lorica and torn a ragged slash across the pad, which was now filled with coarse dirt. In addition, the dewclaw was torn almost off and was hanging loose.

The Keeper of the Hounds peered at the wound from a distance, for whenever anyone moved in the surrounding group Cerberus lifted his head and fixed him immovably with a feral glare.

"He will have to be destroyed. He will always be lame."

Lilia gave him an indignant look and turned her back on the Keeper. "A rag. Some wine." She held out her hand behind her for the articles, continuing to hold the foot. The dog remained peaceful.

She wet the cloth as she had seen the doctor do, poured some of the stinging liquid into the raw wound, and began gently to clean out the dirt. Cerberus howled but did not pull away. Instead, his massive jaws closed on her wrist so gently that his fangs depressed but did not break the skin. The grip would not have cracked an eggshell, much less harm her slender bones.

At that moment she felt a hot breath on the back of her neck. She knew that another dog, equally huge and dangerous, was standing directly behind her, ready to snap, and growling. Cerberus knew it too.

Lilia did not turn around but kept on with her ministrations, while Cerberus rolled his eyes up to watch the other Molossian. He looked over her shoulder while she worked and the threat in his deep answering growl was not for Lilia. No one spoke or moved while she finished cleaning the cut, pressed the damaged claw into place, and bound it firmly.

The great jaws relaxed. Cerberus winced when she wet the cloth with more wine, but did not threaten again. He stared into

her face. Suddenly his long tongue shot out and licked her cheek. She put her arms around his neck, circled with a heavy spiked collar, and hugged him.

A long sigh of relief was clearly audible from the gathered men. She felt another huge head bump gently against her shoulder from behind. It forced its muzzle up into her armpit. Now the Keeper of the Hounds came up and held the head there for a few seconds, grasped Cerberus by the collar, and did the same for him.

The two dogs fawned upon her, laughing as only dogs can, their bodies wagging furiously, for they had no tails. They pressed against her and she was hard put to it to stand against their weight, fending them off and caressing them at the same time.

"This is Irax, his mate," said the Keeper. "They know you now and will never forget you. They have your scent in their nostrils and it will remain there all their lives."

Lilia turned to go. A tight knot of men were gathered around a prone figure. Kervashe Mirkanian, the morose and solitary Armenian, who had held a drawn bow on the dogs all this time, had fainted.

In the days following, as the legion went southward through Anatolia, Lilia gradually drew Kervashe out of his silence. She learned to know his ways and moods; his abrupt way of breaking off a conversation and walking away without a word of farewell; his strange, withdrawn, brooding manner; his habitual rubbing of a jagged lightning streak of scar across his forehead, as though the pain was deeper than his fingers could reach. This habit bothered Lilia. It seemed that there was something she should remember.

He became a regular member around the campfire where the Koine lessons were being held. It was on one of these nights that Kervashe unburdened himself. It was quiet. Only the intermittent calling of a hoopoe broke the silence, until he began to speak.

"I remember how my mother missed the song of the hoopoe. It was the one thing she regretted she could never hear in Italy,

she said. I never heard it at all until I came here and yet I think I always knew how it would sound."

"It is a lonely bird, I should think," said Galba. "I never hear an answer. It seems to be seeking and never finding."

"I too seek and one day I shall find. When I do, my heart will be lighter and I shall not care if my life comes to an end."

Titus said, "Life does not come to an end because a journey is finished. This finding of yours should mean a beginning."

"Not for me." Kervashe looked moodily into the surrounding wood. The hoopoe called. There was no answer.

"The end of this journey can end only in a death, or there will be no end. I have come this weary way and many more miles yet, for one purpose only—to find a woman against whom I have a grievance.

"She lives in Tigranocerta, in Armenia. Every time my mother spoke of her, she cried. I remember that well, although I was small. I will never forget that name, I think, and how my mother wept at the hearing of it.

"It must have been a beautiful city, before you Romans besieged and wrecked it. It has been well said that you make a desert and call it—peace!"

There was a long silence. One by one, the stars appeared in the darkening sky. Lying back on the warm ground, the little group of friends looked up at the constellations taking form.

The Heavenly Crown glittered above. They saw the Great Circling Bear and the neighboring Dragon. Bright shone Hesperus, Taurus, Bootes, and that mighty hunter, Orion, with Sirius, his dog, following in eternal faithfulness.

Sweetly pure as the notes of a golden bell, a trumpet sang under the starlight:

*"Seek your rest.*

*Sleep is best.*

*Pales the moon.*

*Dawn comes soon*

*Sleep well! Sleep well!"*

"I loved my mother. I did not know her very long, for I lost her when I was small."

Lilia listened inattentively. She lay beside Tibullus, their

fingers intertwined, lost in happiness that they were near each other, feeling closer in these hours than upon the long marches.

"I went out into the street to play. It was Rome and the day of a festival—the Lupercalia, I think, for there were immense crowds and people running. I was pushed here and there, caught in the throng. I must have gone far from home. Everything around was unfamiliar. I recollect that I was crying because I was hungry.

"A man found me and carried me. I was fed and I slept in his house. The next day I was sold by him, to grow up as a slave in the household of Modica Rubrius, in the Caelian district. She was a hard mistress, but just, and I did not fare badly.

"I remembered that I was Armenian. I had often heard my mother say so. Whenever I could, I used to go over to the Armenian colony, thinking, hoping that I might find my mother there. I never did, but then I heard that other word often. 'Tigranocerta! Tigranocerta!' The same name that my mother mentioned whenever she spoke of home—"

His voice gritted, "Home! The home that my grandmother drove her away from because she loved and married a Roman soldier! My grandmother! That woman who said that she would stay there, unforgiving, until my mother came back and begged her forgiveness! So many times my mother cried when she told me about that.

"Of course she had no way of ever getting there.

"I do not remember my father. If he was a soldier, he was probably killed in some battle. If he ever came home, he never found me. When Modica Rubrius died, I was a man. In her will she had granted freedom to all her slaves, but after fifteen years, who could find a lost mother in Rome?

"My grandmother must have driven my mother away with curses, into exile and pregnant, to become a wanderer and worse. How could any woman do that to a daughter who loved her?

"And because we went to Rome, my mother and I lost each other and I spent fifteen years in slavery!

"All I know of my grandmother is that she lives in Tigrano-

certa, if she is still alive. And if she is alive, she has lived too long!

"That is why I joined the legion. All legions sometime are apt to go to Armenia. When we do, I will desert if I have to, just to find her—find her and destroy her, for my mother's sake and my own!"

The savage intensity of feeling in his risen voice admitted of no comment. The pleasant rapport of the group was shattered.

Silently, they separated and returned to their hot tents. The lonely hoopoe mourned unheeded through the night.

The legion continued to march southward through Anatolia, opulent acquisition to the Empire by force of arms. It passed through history.

Behind them now lay Smyrna, where once blind Homer lived and sang, too far west for Quintus to visit—to his regret. They did journey through Libyssa and saw the monument, beside the road, which held down the ashes of Hannibal, beneath a ton of stone raised by his enemies to make certain that "hated old man" should never rise again to the anxiety of Rome.

Here Matho, conscious of his heritage, stood with doffed helmet and bowed head. He offered a prayer to Tanit and to Baal, the ancient gods of Carthage. Many another scarred cavalryman stood at his back, doing honor to their ancestors before they clattered on.

The highway, in excellent condition, for it had been constructed only fifty years previously, veered as directly as possible to Ancyra, once the capital of the conquered Phrygians. The country roundabout was becoming tedious for travel and the legion rested here, before going up into the rugged and fiercely mountainous area to the south of the city.

Manlius and Quintus visited the baths and the huge temple to Augustus, where, on tablets, was carved the *Res Gestae*, the complete account of Augustus' life and deeds.

When it entered the mountains, the legion suffered more arduous trials. The central plateau of Anatolia is a tortured land of snow-covered peaks, through which no engineer could plot a straight road, nor workers maintain it without unremitting labor.

The days are hot, the nights cold. Alternate thawing and freez-

ing heaved the pavement blocks askew and continual freshets from flooded streams undermined them. Travel was an ordeal for animals and wagons. It was not much better for the footsloggers. Rest periods were frequent and a day's mileage was shorter.

When the legion came thankfully out of the higher mountains, with stubbed toes, broken wheels, sore-footed horses and mules, there was a general tenseness of tempers. Through the lake district, progress became easier. There was need of good roads and haste upon them, for no one knew what the situation might now be in Jerusalem.

Politics, always fluid there, might have already turned for the worse. In several forced marches through the still mountainous but more rolling country, they entered upon the Via Sebaste at last. The Greeks and Syrians had named the highway so. The Romans called it the Via Augustus, both names meaning the same.

It led to Antioch, where again they tramped beside the sea, southward ever, cooled by winds which lessened the oppressive humidity. They passed through the Daphne Gate, over the impressive four-arched bridge, as well built as any in Rome, left the Orontes River and the city behind them, and went on through a lovely, fertile land toward Palestine.

The land was well tilled. Green mists of pistachio leaves and pomegranate trees in blossom lined the highway. The farmers looked prosperous. Galba sighed, wistfully estimating what he would plant, if he were only one of them.

Licinius, who marched close by, looked over. "Good soil, Farmer," he said. "When our service is over, let's come here and take up land?"

Galba nodded. "And bring my mother and my brother. Gods, how I miss them both!"

As upon other well-traveled main highways, there was much traffic, wheeled and afoot. Postcarts dashed by, always in urgent haste, the driver marked by his leather Mercury cap, minus the wings. Heavy wine wagons, behind their slow, patient oxen, pulled over to let the marching men go by. The legionaries held out their empty canteens, both to them and whenever they saw a wagon being unladen at one of the many tabernas. It was a futile gesture.

It was almost like the Via Appia, Lilia thought, to see so many posthouses and mansiones again.

There were some differences. Here she saw her first camels, haughty, cynical-looking animals who sneered at the dusty passers-by. They curled scornful lips as the caravans went by in long strings, laden with bales. They looked to her as though they hated men and served them only for their own private reasons.

The country seemed peaceful. It did not change as they neared Jerusalem. If there was rebellion it had either been quelled or had not extended so far north as they yet were. However, it was clearly a conquered land. Here again, Rome ruled by the sword and was not loved.

At night the stationarii were doubled. There was no more wandering away from the camp to lie under the stars and listen to the hoopoe. Instead the tired men sweltered in their close tents, listening to the hourly call from sentry to sentry, and tempers grew short.

"That Ciscus! Every time I stop working long enough to catch my breath, he breaks out in a cold sweat!"

"I made him a gift last night. He sleeps in my tent, you know. A big fat louse was taking a walk on my blanket. 'Here,' says I, 'come with me, little friend.' I picks him up by the back of the neck and drops him into Ciscus' beard. Now I know where to look for a louse if I ever want one."

"These filthy khans are full of hungry crawlers. 'Pharaoh's lice,' the natives call them. Been sharpening their teeth on camels for centuries. No wonder they like a nice tender Roman leg to chew on."

"Better than camping outside of the khans, though. Every time the tents go up the other fellows get soft grass under their blankets. What do I get? A sharp rock or a thornbush."

These khans were not campgrounds but large courts or enclosures. Inside them, nomads camped with all their flocks and herds behind the protection of four walls.

There was not space enough for the whole legion, but those within felt favored in having a flat surface of well-packed hard ground. Caravans already there were unceremoniously turned out; the legionaries scraped the dirt clean and slept, or listened to the restless camels, dispossessed, snuffle and moan in the dark.

Nearby, the officers patronized the combination inn and trading post which catered to travelers. It was usually a three-story building made of brick or mud, with clay-daubed walls. Always in the forecourt was the inevitable oven, always busy, sending forth thick black smoke to choke the customers. However, the food was consistently good and the smoke did drive away the clouds of flies—when the wind was right.

There was mutton in broth, seasoned with wild leeks and cracked black pepper; beans with onions; meat soup flavored with cayenne pepper and garlic; and puddings with honey: honey cakes and flat, hot bread, dripping with honey—all washed down with honey-sweetened date wine.

Quintus was in his element. The sloe-eyed damsels domiciled on the third floor, who catered to the wants of travelers in more ways than one; the deceptive potency of the date wine, with which he had been unfamiliar; the semitropical air; all these combined to bring an Indian summer of youthfulness to his spirit.

His eyes became hollow. His weight increased. From such meals, after being entertained with belly dancers of great agility and apparent bonelessness, but of no great beauty, all the officers staggered away, belching happily. They thus added their bit to the constant uproar of dissatisfied, complaining animals and the noise of their gambling masters which went on throughout the night.

If anyone slept at the inn, it was only because he was stone deaf.

It was a relief to all when they saw ahead the walls of Damascus. The legion tramped through the city along the highway which slashed Damascus in twain. Along the Vicus Rectus, the Street called Straight, the iron-studded boots, the rumbling wheels, the clip-clop of hoofs told the inhabitants, in no uncertain terms, that the power of Rome was passing through. The governor, apprised days before, had given orders that no resistance should be made.

One mile long, one hundred feet wide, the street cut a swath across the city. Under the stone arches, into the byways, chariots and horsemen, burdened donkeys and crowds of pedestrians



made way for the Thirteenth, with its proud, defiant golden Eagle, pushing them back and leading the way.

The marching men made a brave sight. They passed as on parade, with fluttering pennons and company standards all displayed in full color and polished bronze. The pipers blew themselves red-faced. The drums stuttered. The tubas coughed.

This was a show of force meant to impress and intimidate a possibly unfriendly populace. Following the death of the Emperor Tiberius, Aretas, King of Arabia, had taken the opportunity to seize the city and set a governor over it.

Even though Damascus could no longer be considered a part of the Empire, Manlius was pleased to notice that the Romans appeared to be welcome.

Trade went on normally. The eyes of the people met those of the soldiers straight and clear. No one scowled.

Quintus sneered. "A sesterce doesn't care what hand holds it, or whose head is on it." Manlius only smiled, his gaze fixed upward toward balconies and roofs, where anything might fall.

They tramped on through the city. The street was lined with columns and overspread with arches. There were fountains and vines and green enclosures like little parks. Everywhere could be heard the sounds of busy life.

Here resounded the clang of anvils, for Damascus steel was famous; the tapping hammers of the coppersmiths and the thud of the goldbeaters' mallets; the tinkle of tiny careful tools piercing silver plaques into fantastic, intricate fretwork.

From the balconies, Persian carpets and fine brocades hung on display, absorbing the smells and dust of the street, laying down a patina of age on the rich materials. The dust fell impartially upon the passers-by and the fine furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl. It dulled the brasswork in the bazaars and hid the polish on the helmets of the legion.

The Thirteenth passed on, to tuck of drum, out of the southern gate. It took the road to Jerusalem, leaving behind a city whose folk had not seemed to care that they had come and gone. A few mileposts beyond, the legion made camp in an open field.

After Manlius had supped alone, he was relaxing quietly with a chapter of the *Iliad*, his favorite book, when he was interrupted by his aide, Tribune Mancinus.

"A man to see you, sir. He says he is in danger of his life. He begs shelter for the night and permission to travel on with the legion for a few days for protection. He says he is a Roman citizen."

Manlius looked up, frowning, marking his place with a finger on the scroll.

"Permit him to enter. Let him be brief."

The fugitive who entered was slight in build but tended toward corpulence. His face was fleshy and he had the nose of a Hittite. He looked tired and his clothes were dusty but of good quality. His reddish hair was sparse and it was evident that, despite his youth, it would not be many years before he was bald.

He met Manlius' eyes with a straight, direct look. There was power behind it and in his bearing. Manlius thought he had never seen a man in whom there was more promise of an uncompromising, though still not fully developed, character.

The visitor inspected Manlius as thoroughly before speaking. He seemed pleased with what he saw. He bowed slightly, with no hint of subservience.

"My name is Saul, Commander," he said in a pleasing, resonant voice. "If you will allow me to travel with you to Jerusalem, I can earn my way. I can weave, mend and repair canvas. I am a tentmaker by trade. I am a Roman citizen, of the city of Tarsus."

## THE UNKNOWN GOD

Manlius studied his visitor. There was something likable and forthright about the man. He did not seem to be an escaped slave seeking sanctuary, nor did his manner indicate that he was a criminal in flight from the law.

A blood feud, then? Such affairs were common in Judea, but there were cities and temples set aside in which to seek shelter from the enraged relatives of a ravished woman or a murdered man.

Manlius remarked bluntly, "You claim to be in danger. I cannot go against the law of the land to help you. Explain."

Saul hesitated, choosing his words with care. "It may be difficult for you to understand, Commander. Are you familiar with the situation here? The political and religious problems are inextricably intertwined. At the moment, I am involved with both.

"Frankly, I have made powerful enemies and I am at a loss to know what to do. Perhaps if I began at the beginning?"

"Pray do, but briefly if possible." Manlius reluctantly laid aside his book and motioned to a folding chair. Saul sank gratefully into it. "You say you are a Roman citizen and yet a Jew?"

"I was born in Tarsus, no mean city. My father was a Roman citizen and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. He was, at one time, a soldier. Perhaps I should be, for I do have a violent nature. Perhaps you have noticed my red hair?"

"Both my parents were Pharisees—myself also. The elite, you know, very strict—snobbish. I think that has been knocked out of me lately, I thank my Lord."

"Who is your lord?"

"Jesus of Nazareth, who is called the Christ."

"I have heard some talk of the man. A rebel against authority,

who would make himself a king of the Jews—a revolutionary. Dead, isn't he? I heard that he had been crucified."

"Crucified, but not dead. I can testify to that."

Manlius would have interrupted. Saul lifted a hand. "Let me tell my story in my own way, I pray you, Commander. It will not take so long.

"My parents were Israelites, of course, and I was brought up in my ancestral religion, but I was always of a questioning nature.

"There are temples of gods and goddesses on every side in Tarsus, and—"

"As there should be," interjected Manlius, "in every city of the Empire."

Quintus came in, cast a look around, and sat down, seeing that Manlius was occupied. He helped himself to wine and listened without interrupting. "And," continued Saul, refusing the proffered jug, "there are many Stoic and Cynic philosophers who constantly preach on the street corners and in the market places.

"I was a good student and I liked to sharpen my wits against theirs. When disciples of Jesus came there to preach and exhort, I thought they were spreading heresy. There was much outcry against them and, my Lord forgive me, I not only joined in persecuting them but I went out of my way to find and accept authority from the Sanhedrin—the council of elders in Jerusalem—to arrest and bring those men to justice as heretics and criminals.

"I had gone to Jerusalem, at that time, to study the faith of my fathers. I was most intolerant."

Saul bowed his head. "In a sense, I helped to kill a good man. Then I thought it was my duty. Now I know it was murder.

"There was a youth called Stephen, a handsome boy, a Hellenist and very outspoken. When he stood trial, the listening crowd thought that he blasphemed. It is sweaty work stoning a man to death and many took off their cloaks and laid them in a pile."

Saul's voice broke. Manlius and Quintus listened attentively.

"I was there. They asked me to guard their cloaks, so I did not throw any stone, but I did nothing to hinder. Indeed, I rejoiced that a criminal was to be punished.

"Stephen was a brave man. He did not try to run. He lay

down, after praying, among the falling stones and it was as though he went gently and peacefully to sleep.

"At the moment, what I had seen meant nothing. I set out for Damascus, to help apprehend other men—evil, as I thought—to be imprisoned, maybe stoned.

"The sun beat down on that road like flame. The very ground beneath the feet of the company I traveled in burned. Of a sudden I saw a blinding light in the sky. Others saw it too. I fell to the ground, blinded by the light. I heard a voice meant only for me."

His voice was almost inaudible. Manlius and Quintus strained to catch the faint words. Whatever had occurred, it was clear that, to this man, it had been an experience never to be forgotten.

"The voice said, 'I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest. Saul, why persecutest thou me?'

"Since then, I have been a Follower of the Way. I regained my sight. I am now a fugitive from the men I thought were my friends, for my soul, my honor, and my devotion I have offered to the service of my Lord."

Manlius looked at Quintus, who said nothing. "This is not a Roman problem, but if you are a Roman citizen, as you say, you are entitled to our protection. If we help you, where do you intend to go?"

Saul's answer was hesitant. "I am not sure. I need time to think. I would study and learn and plan my life, if I am to be a true disciple of my Lord.

"I believe I can find sanctuary among the Nabataeans, in the rock-carven city of Petra, where all faiths are welcome, and I can gather strength.

"A new king, Malichus II, has taken a lovely girl to be his queen. People say he can refuse Shagilath nothing she desires and she is in sympathy with the Jews. A little colony is already there. No one will know me there by reputation, for I will change my name."

"To what?"

"My father called me Paulus."

"Ah, yes. Little fellow. Truly you are not of an imposing height." Quintus laughed. It was not his usual mockery, but Saul

was not acquainted with him. He drew himself up, indignantly.

"Neither is a spark large. Still it can bring about a great blaze!"

"No offense was meant," Manlius hastily remarked.

"Then none is taken. May I travel with you for security? You will find me capable and skilled. I shall be no burden to you."

"If you wish. You shall be our guest."

"Not that way. I cannot accept charity. I can labor with my hands. They have always ministered to my necessities. He who will not work should not eat."

"I wish all my men felt as you do in that respect." Manlius' tone was rueful. "If you can make that opinion popular, you'll have paid your way twice over."

"Tribune! Find this man a place to sleep and see that he has food. Take him to the supply officer. Have him shown such tents and wagon tops as need repair. And—gather up a few who can learn from him. Give them needles and twine. He can teach as well."

Time proved Saul no braggart. As the legion plodded south, it left snow-covered Mount Hermon behind. More than one tired marcher cast longing eyes backward at its coolness and pure waters. The heat was terrific and only the nights were bearable.

Tempers grew short, but Saul was a man of good cheer. He worked long hours and was always in pleasant spirits. With those who had been detailed to work with him, he was patient and painstaking—the best of teachers, always ready with a word of encouragement or a little story to speed the time.

Others gathered around to listen. They came from various parts of the camp.

His flying fingers did not stop or hesitate as he talked. One night Quintus, who had paused briefly to listen, came to Manlius and said, "Have you heard what our guest has been telling the men?"

"No, I have not."

"Then I think you should. It might interest you. He speaks of this new prophet. Man, king, or god, or all of them combined, according to the tentmaker, he does seem to have had a great effect upon the people he dwelt among."

park forge and stopped to watch the bright firefly sparks flick around his busy hammer. Lucas looked up and grinned. He held up a red-hot cestus in his tongs.

"Hey, amica, look at this!" He dipped the weapon in the water tank and slipped his fingers into the loops of the rough iron. He made a fist and pretended to strike Tibullus, who paled.

"See? S.P.Q.R. On the knuckles. Anybody that gets this in the mush will think the whole army hit him. I'll stamp him Roman property, whatever he was before!"

"Are we really going into Armenia?" Lilia asked Eitel on the third day of waiting.

"I think so, little Roman. I hear something mysterious is building up over the border. Messengers are coming in and out of the fort all hours of the day and night. We're getting ready to move somewhere soon."

Kervashe, who was standing close, said, in a voice which chilled Lilia, "Thank all the gods there are! I am on the road to Tigranocerta!"

The harsh voice of Centurion Ciscus broke in. "You, there—" He pointed at Kervashe. "Into ranks. Drill is not over."

His unpleasant roar seemed to fill the camp. "Armenian! Suppose you are behind the Eagle and the aquilifer falls—what is your duty?"

Kervashe stiffened. "I take the Eagle. I am not permitted to die until I can hand the Eagle to someone who will carry it forward and is likely to survive."

"Correct. Good man. You have learned well. Remember that, all of you. In any battle, you may have the honor to die for the Eagle. Your death is not important. The Eagle must always go forward.

"Another thing. It may become necessary for you to improvise. You have learned that your shield can be a deadly weapon. You know how to use a sling. Some of you are very good with a bow." He gave Lilia one of his rare smiles. "Here is, perhaps, the most dangerous weapon in the world, next to the sword." He held up a headless lance. "Simple, isn't it? Nothing but a long useless stick, you think? Look again. It is not. You find them everywhere on a battlefield and dead men right beside them who died because they never thought of using a stick as a weapon."

Ciscus caught it up by the middle. "Now it is a quarterstaff. You can strike with either end as you choose. It will crack a skull. Let your hands slip down to one end and you have a six-foot club that will break a neck, knock an armored man flat before he can reach you with his sword, or punch his face in with the splintered end.

"You can sweep a trooper out of his saddle or trip a horse with it. You can make an empty circle around you, twelve feet across, and give a friend time to get up when he is downed. It is a good weapon, more protection to you than a live friend. Trust it and use it. And now let's practice it. . . ."

Couriers continued to come and go. On the fifth day the Thirteenth broke camp. All unnecessary equipment was removed from the packs and loaded into the wagons. Stripped as lightly as possible to greatest mobility and war strength, the legion crossed over the border—out of the *limes*-protected territory and into the debatable strip of foothills which formed the avenue to the northern highlands.

They passed villages of houses where people lived like troglodytes, their dwellings half buried in the ground, against the severe colds and deep frosts of winter. There were sharp peaks and high precipices; tiny terraced gardens and blanket-sized meadows, perched precariously on the sides of mountains crowned by fortified market towns. There were swift and turbulent rivers. Everywhere, foaming waterfalls tumbled in white ribbons from the heights. Everywhere, also, people watched the march from a distance.

Not far from the border, the legion outriders at point were met by a host of horsemen, waiting under banners, gleaming with steel. The young Prince Iskander, who had been looking forward anxiously to this moment, spurred forward to meet them at a gallop.

He shouted and waved his bright neck scarf of yellow and scarlet. When the Armenians recognized him, a great roar of welcome went up to the snow-covered escarpments and they surged toward him in a mad, undisciplined rush, screaming slogans of their clans and shouting, "Iskander! Iskander! Death to Tigranes!"



He was joyously overwhelmed by them and lost to sight in their midst.

There was no immediate action. As if the enemy were nonexistent, or allowing them to drive deeper toward the capital city of Artaxata with the object of cutting the allies off from retreat, the march met no hindrance during the first two days.

New partisans swelled the ranks of Iskander. More horse, many footmen; easily the ten thousand the pretender had promised would flock to his banner and more to come, Manlius hoped. Then, on the third day, the influx suddenly dried up to a trickle.

It was a bad sign. The locality had been intimidated, quite probably by a strong force of the enemy in the neighborhood. In response, Manlius halted the legion at the western edge of a long valley. "Far enough," he said to Iskander. "Let us choose our battlefield while we may." He was not surprised to find that Iskander, in spite of his illustrious name, was no military genius. The young prince was infatuated with one idea only—that of seeing his brother lie dead before him.

He chafed that they had stopped, and wanted to plunge on, evidently with the idea that his honor required him to ride Tigranes down, and when he scowled, the whole Armenian host scowled with him. At last Manlius, in the midst of directing preparations for attack, was compelled to speak plainly.

"A king must know his own resources," he said. "If you cannot see the value of a secured pass at your back, rock outcroppings for concealment, and a wide plain before you on which your enemy's every contingent is visible for miles, no matter what direction they come from, then you can surely see the value of trusting us to be aware of them. Rome has, after all, won a number of its wars in recent years. Armenia has not."

The prince paled but recovered himself quickly. "You are right. In this one matter at least," he said coldly, "Roman advisers can be useful." He wheeled his horse away. Quintus was gritting his teeth but Manlius gave him a brief smile.

"Kings also have to learn to save face. That usually is even more important than winning battles."

Work went on without interruption. Upon strategic points, concealed sentinels watched the valley in all its length. Patrols of

light cavalry scoured the plain to great distances both north and south. They were ready to fire beacons at a moment's notice, before falling back upon the camp. Only to the north did any movement become visible and that after a ten-day wait, during which, as Iskander predicted, there had been some desertions. From these deserters, however, Manlius was pleased to note that no information had leaked out to the enemy.

On the tenth day, early in the morning, a pillar of black smoke rose in the foothills. It stained the sky, drifting toward the east.

Shortly after the firing of the beacon, the mounted patrol dashed in, hotly pursued for a little distance by the advance scouts of a large host which spread slowly into the upper end of the valley.

Iskander looked alarmed. "I had no idea Tigranes could amass so many adherents. We should have struck him before he gathered an array like this. One charge and he will ride over us like an avalanche."

"I trust that is his plan," said Manlius grimly. "Kindly place yourself at the head of your men, Prince. This is your war and you must bear the brunt of the attack if you wish to be given the glory. Prepare now for the ordeal of your coming kingship."

There was a brief pause in the advance. The ranks thickened and milled about in some disorder. Then the van stiffened.

Proxillus, the trumpeter recruit, felt queasy. He watched the light-armed horse massing itself behind the heavy lancers. He wondered how any man could avoid all of those sharp points—or even one for that matter, if the man who held the lance was really in earnest.

He swallowed, stared straight ahead, and clutched his trumpet, waiting for the signal to send Matho's troopers racing against Tigranes' attenuated wings.

Manlius was sure that the wings represented no real plan. It appeared that Tigranes' strategy was extremely simple, depending mainly on force of numbers.

The whole host surged forward in a slow movement, at first scarcely more than a walk.

"They are saving their horses," said Quintus, who stood at Manlius' side as they peered through the rows of tents which

had been set up before the spiked agger and the deep ditch dug behind it.

Manlius nodded. "They mean to hit us hard."

The walk changed to a trot, to a jogging canter. The host poured across the valley. Long before it should have done so, its pace forced by impetuous glory seekers, the entire mass of horsemen burst into a thundering gallop.

A heavy hand fell on Lilia's shoulder and pulled her out of rank. "Up on the firing platform, legionary. Your bow will be of more use than your sword."

She was indignant at being taken away from Tibullus and being thus singled out, but she knew better than to disobey Centurion Ciscus and took her place with the archers where she would not now be called into action unless the camp was overrun.

The rumble of the charge roared ahead of the advance. Riding elbow to elbow, a hurly-burly of horsemen came down the valley looking straight ahead.

"Now!" breathed Manlius. "Now! Engineers, where are you? Now!"

The wild torrent of thundering flesh, bone, and steel poured point-blank upon the waiting ranks drawn up before the tents. Iskander's men no longer waited to be overwhelmed. As the oncoming forest of lances dropped level for the shattering impact, their target disappeared.

It dissolved among the rows of tents. The soldiers of Iskander slashed right and left at the tent ropes as they retreated through the staggered line of canvas. It billowed and fell, but not flat upon the ground. It lay in little hillocks and ridges; it projected upward, hiding concealed and savagely pointed stakes.

Upon these the drumming crowd of lancers, cheering, yelling, joyously flung itself, astride wind-blown, heaving, exhausted steeds in mad pursuit of the men they could see running away before them to the shelter of the Roman camp—now for the first time clearly visible to the attackers in its formidable strength.

Upon these hidden stakes the charge broke, in one long scream of agony from impaled horses. Men were hurled far over the heads of their animals. The horses struggled to be free, among the smashed bodies of their thrown riders, kicking out

with flailing hoofs, clubbing their masters to death as they tried to crawl out of the turmoil.

Down into the confusion slanted the arrow flights, volley after volley from the palisade, where Lilia with the others stood and drew bow, sobbing with the horror of it as she shot, but sending arrows with her utmost accuracy, to bring quick death as her only mercy to suffering men.

Now! Proxillus added his trumpet blast to the symphony and the troopers burst out of hiding to slam into both sides of the column.

## THE BROKEN SWORD

Those uninjured riders in the first line who had been fortunate enough to pass unharmed through the spaces between the tents were unable to stop. Pushed on by the mass of the rush behind, they poured like a cataract into the open ditch, no longer bracketed by the portable bridges across which the decoy forces had retired.

The continuing press of lancers drew up in dismay. A squirming mass filled the ditch level to its top. As they did so, thus presenting a motionless target, the palisade, at which they were staring across the ditch, suddenly collapsed and fell flat.

This disclosed a solid row of *carroballistae*, from which immediately flew a volley of heavy javelins into the midst of the attackers, cutting them down in rows. The few survivors were thus thrown back upon the next line, which rushed forward in their turn, causing a helpless disorder. The men of Tigranes' swirled about, pushing in all directions, advancing and retreating, unable to reform before a second discharge from the reloaded scorpions was received, and constantly under a dropping fall of arrows from the archers.

The charge had devolved into inaction and blind panic. Now into the inextricable tangle of dying cavalry came the bombardment from the heavy *ballistae*. Huge boulders, soaring high to fall and crush beneath their ponderous weight all that they fell upon; then sacks of pebbles from the onagers.

These burst in mid-air and drove down like shrapnel, emptying saddles in the immobilized troops, sending already wounded horses into a murderous frenzy in their hopeless efforts to escape.

Still the following ranks continued to arrive, plowing on into the range of slaughter, impelled by useless bravery or sheer ina-

bility to hold back. Thus the heavy cavalry of Tigranes was decimated; thus the first ranks of the light armed were destroyed before they could come to a plunging halt.

Trumpets of the King's squadrons, crying like mourning bronze-throated harpies, sent the tale of disaster back across the field. The trumpeters choked as they blew. The flower of the army no longer existed, but there was yet the huge infantry force to be reckoned with and it was on the way.

Hasten! Hasten! the trumpets wailed. They called, they urged, they commanded. They screamed for vengeance.

To meet the infantry, the Thirteenth advanced out of camp in force—across the ditch, through the line of stake-ripped tents—to battle, in its grim array, the main strength of Tigranes.

The legion moved like marionettes, in fixed positions. First the youngest, known as the principes, most eager—the quickest to strike, the ablest to take a blow and recover, the shock troops.

Backing them, the second line, the hastati, bearing longer spears, upon which the enemy would be received if the front lines were pressed back.

Behind these, the older veterans kept the third line, marching close together, the rear rank of the triarii, meant to be moved in only to support the others at need.

Lilia, from her high vantage point, saw them pass—out of the gates, leaving her and the other archers behind. There they went, Tibullus staring straight ahead, his face white, looking as though he scarcely realized where he was; Vorco, moving with careless supple grace, close beside him. Vorco gave her a flash of white teeth as he went by. He looks as though he were going to the games, she thought. He enjoys this!

Centurion Ciscus, a hulking statue of steel. He saw her, too, and grinned and was gone. Longinus, Atticus, the Farmer, that ill-assorted trio, side by side. Galba holds his spear like a pitchfork—I hope he doesn't hurt himself with it! Can't watch them, must keep shooting—this is what it means to be a legionary!

Oh, my boys—my husband—my friends! Shoot, Lilia, shoot! Maybe more of them will come back if I keep on shooting!

"Hoil Hoil!" She saw the Keeper of the Hounds wave his arm in wide sweeps, gesturing to the unchained dogs of war. They raced away, huge snarling beasts, ravening and eager, their throats protected by thick leather collars studded with sharp

spikes, charging into battle, twenty of them in all. She could not pick out Cerberus and Irax, but she knew they were there—her gentle friendly pets, transformed into savage demons.

Shoot, Lilia! She dropped her bow, her eyes so full of tears that she could not see a target. It did not matter. All along the firing step, the archers laid down their bows with her. The battle had swung away, out of their range.

The onagers continued to operate while it was possible for the engineers to avoid hitting their own men. Kicking up their heels at every discharge, hurling their stones, they were protected by their own contingents of slingers and archers.

Then the Thirteenth bore in, punching like a giant's fist into the swirling melee. The sweating engine handlers no longer dared to shoot. They seized bows and sought individual targets.

There seemed to be little organized resistance to the legion. Fighting as a unit, it met a huddle of wild, undisciplined men who fought viciously enough but without decisive plan or competent leadership. It gave way and scattered to either side.

Down upon this disorder, out of the mountain defiles where until now they had remained hidden, came the rush of Iskander's horse, with the young prince at the head. It struck like a thunderbolt against the reformed cavalry of Tigranes, still powerful enough to constitute a menace to the legion, should that be charged upon in the open plain.

The two cavalry forces swept away like leaves in a hurricane. They were almost equally matched in strength. They circled for position, clashed briefly, drew apart, and collided again, leaving a scattering of dead animals, unhorsed riders, and limp bodies. Still in bloody contact, the cavalry swept like a storm round about the circumference of the battlefield while within it the legion fought, coming suddenly upon an upthrust of rock, a peninsula jutting out from the mountain mass, recoiling to retain formation, swinging aside. In doing so, in the confusion, it lost a minute fragment, an individual unimportant until then, named Tibullus.

He found himself jammed into a crack in a heap of rocks, horribly frightened and alone, except for the man whom he had always regarded as his nemesis, Centurion Ciscus.

Down upon this isolated, poorly matched pair came a howling knot of red-eyed mountain men, shouting, "Tigranes! Tigranes!"

For an instant events were almost indescribable. Tibullus struck out blindly. He heard a man yell in pain. A great weight fell upon him and bore him down. He shrieked and struggled out from under his assailant. He thought the man was trying to rise and aimed a mighty blow at his head. It missed and his sword struck a stone, breaking the blade off about four inches from the hilt.

A streak of fire seemed to shoot up his arm, paralyzing it. Tibullus still clung to the useless weapon. His stunned vision took in the sight of another man stumbling toward him. He did not know that it was Ciscus, severely wounded, and that the other attackers were dead, slain by the centurion.

Tibullus saw only an enemy approaching to kill him. He shrieked like a woman, threw the broken sword aimlessly toward the oncoming menace, without waiting to see whether or not the missile took effect. Then he turned and ran for his life back to the camp where the way was clear. There would be protection. There, Lilia, not involved in this horrible struggle, would surely be waiting to offer him sympathy and comfort.

He thought he heard a feeble call for help behind him. He did not pause or wonder who it could have been. After a few panting moments the anguished cry slipped from his memory and all he could think of was his own terror.

Moments later, to this same spot staggered young Iskander, unhorsed in the whirl of cavalry, hard pressed and alone. He was beset on both sides by two foot soldiers and armed only with a lance he had retrieved from under his dead charger when it fell.

The prince ran one of his antagonists through the body. The butt twisted from his slippery hand, leaving him defenseless. The other man laughed and ran at him. Iskander desperately sought a stone, a stick—any weapon at all in this extremity.

His enemy raised his arm to strike. Iskander dodged. His back struck against the rocks, shutting off retreat. The next blow would be the last one, the end to ambition and to life itself.

His hand fell upon cold steel. He shouted triumphantly, seized the hilt so fortunately presented, and slammed it into the grinning bearded face before him.



It was not until the man was dead that he saw most of the blade was gone. He did not care. He raised the remnant in pledge to the sky.

"Behold, O Gods! This broken sword shall be the emblem of my house. Blessed be the brave soldier who carried this blade! He shall be regarded with honor from this day forward. My prayers shall recall him to my heart forever."

Iskander thrust the precious relic into his belt. He ran out from the rocks to catch a riderless horse, rearm himself, call a friend to him, gather a group of riders, surround himself with a hundred adherents, and ride on in confidence and glory to make himself King—with the broken sword a coward had thrown away.

Centurion Ciscus came to himself in darkness. At first he thought it was night, then he saw, far above, a pale oval and knew that he lay at the bottom of a declivity.

He was in severe pain. His back and right leg hurt. He gasped when he breathed and felt certain that ribs were cracked, possibly broken. When he called out, his voice sounded weak, even in his own ears, strangely hollow and deadened by the rock around him. It was muffled by the depth below ground at which he lay.

Blood caked his neck and shoulder. His exploratory fingers found a deep wound on his head which felt dry and roughly edged with matted hair. He had lost his helmet.

Ciscus rolled away from the pain in his side and something snapped beneath him. It had a brittle sound. He felt for it and pushed away a splintered piece of bone.

He had seen enough skeletons in his time to know at once that this was the thighbone of a man. It was desiccated and powdery under his fingers. Someone before him had fallen and died here.

Fear came to him. Had the man died because of the tumble or had he been trapped? Ciscus staggered to his feet and steadied himself against the wall. It stretched up, straight and smooth, far as his hands could reach. Leaning against it for support, he stumbled over the rough floor through a tangle of bones which crunched beneath his nail-studded boots.

In moments he knew the worst. He was a prisoner in the bottom of a pit which had no exit, except from its mouth above.

Now that his senses had cleared a little, he had a vague recollection of the fall he had survived.

Ciscus forced himself to think calmly. He remembered stumbling toward a pile of rock during the battle. He had fallen toward it, he thought, reaching out as he did so. Then emptiness under his hand. He must have lurched between two boulders that almost touched each other. There had been a sliding sensation. He had rolled before he actually fell, as though down a chute. Then the impact, unconsciousness, and the awakening.

It was a natural trap. Others had fallen into it before him and had found no escape. Ciscus had never refused to face reality. He did not do so now. His sword was gone, but he had his dagger. He need not die of hunger or of thirst. He had no expectation that he would ever be found.

To make absolutely certain that he was correct in his evaluation of his predicament, he made the circuit of his prison once more. He explored around the edge and across its diameter, this time on his hands and knees. He breathed heavily, feeling the edges of at least one broken rib grating together.

There were many relics. The bones pulverized under his weight like chalk. They were nameless, pathetically mute testimonials to his fears. His hand fell upon a piece of metal.

He turned it over and over, not understanding at first what it was. Then recognition of it came to him. A hunter's knife! It was worn almost to nothing. It might have lain there for a hundred years, but it had not rusted away—there was no dampness under his hands. Then why the thinness, the deterioration? How?

Ciscus stood up, feeling every inch of the wall with a renewed and frantic hope. Almost above the spot where the imprisoned hunter had dropped his useless fragment for the last time, a niche existed in the hard stone, waist high and deep enough for a hand- or foothold.

Above it, at about the height of his eyes, he felt another of equal depth. He forgot his pain. He put his foot in the first niche, gripped his fingers into the second, and raised himself up. Now he felt a third hole, still higher, but not so far that he could not reach it easily.

He hauled himself higher yet. His other foot was in the second hole, his groping fingers still seeking. They found only a shallow

scratch in the stone, not deep enough for a handhold, not deep enough to be of any use.

His strength failed and he dropped to the floor, his head swimming and the illusion of darting lights in his eyes. He cursed weakly. The disappointment seemed almost more than he could bear.

Several times he raised the sharp edge of his own dagger to his throat. Once he depressed the skin over his heart with the point. He could not bring himself to drive it home.

Later he felt for the artery which throbbed in his arm, hard and rubbery under the blade. Each time he stopped before the act was irrevocable.

He did not know when he slept, or for how long. When he awoke he knew with certainty what he was going to do and why he had not used the dagger. He was weaker, but not too weak to climb.

When he reached the little scratch, he began to stab at the living rock, digging out tiny particles and once in a while a chip. He could not hang thus very long and he worked furiously against time. When he dropped, he groaned. He climbed again and again, clinging tenaciously to his hold, pecking, chipping, and feeling the niche grow deeper.

When the slim dagger finally broke and fell tinkling to the bottom of the pit, Ciscus knew that his ordeal was near its end. With his last scrap of strength, he held on a few seconds longer; long enough to satisfy himself that the handhold he had made was as good, as deep, as dependable as the ones that the unknown men imprisoned before him had dug.

He sat with his back against the wall, smiling to himself. There would be other captives; there would be other steps; the one that he, Centurion Ciscus, Tenth Cohort, Thirteenth Legion, had dug would enable the next man, whoever he might be, to make his step just that much higher.

Someday there would be no more steps to dig. He was thinking of this, still smiling, when darkness came upon him for the last time.

It was a three-day journey from the scene of the victory to Artaxata, now King Iskander's capital city.

A campground was given Manlius, outside the city walls. It was immediately occupied and made fit to withstand an attack if diplomatic measures failed.

When there was no more to do, an honor guard of a hundred cataphracts was assembled by grim Matho. Groomed in their best, they escorted Manlius and Tribune Quintus to the gates of the city. Here they were met by an Armenian officer and a small, gaily bedecked unit of armed riders, to lead the way to the new King.

The cavalcade clattered into Artaxata through wide-open gates, along streets lined with solemn, silent citizens. Flags were out and there was a sense that a short celebration had come and gone. There was no feeling of welcome in the air for the victorious Roman allies inside the walls of this mountain citadel.

Matho leaned toward Manlius. "Say the word, Commander. Shall we go on or turn back? We may have to fight our way out."

Manlius looked neither right nor left. His lips scarcely moved. "We are interlopers here. The people look on us with resentment. For all they know, we may be the spearhead of an invasion in force. We must trust to the honor of the King. He has given his word."

Quintus sneered. "The word of an Eastern potentate? It is as changeable as the wind."

"Show no indecision. We are Romans. Ride on, but be aware."

Only Manlius and Quintus, as his aide for the day, were permitted to enter the inner precincts of the palace, where King Iskander was to graciously receive them and fulfill his promise. The troopers dismounted to stand by their horses in the courtyard. Matho became interested in the equipment of the Armenian guards who sat their mounts, watching the Romans and the Spanish cavalry—as sentinels? As guards over prisoners? They had their feet planted firmly in iron loops hung from their saddles by leather straps. Matho had never seen stirrups before, nor did he know that they were a comparatively recent innovation out of the East, but he recognized the advantage to a lancer of having a firm seat in the saddle. He made a mental note to get his smiths and farriers busy, as soon as he got back to camp—if he ever did.

An hour dragged by. The troopers stood and sweated. They tried to look relaxed, but under the steady watchfulness of the waiting Armenian horsemen their apparent ease was no more than a pose.

Matho sent the low-voiced word down the line. It passed casually from one to another. "Pick your man. If we are attacked or an alarm is sounded in the palace—kill him.

"Rescue the commander."

Within, the two officers sat at table. They nibbled, without relish, at cheese, pears, and apples and partook ritually of bread and salt. It was not until then that Manlius, knowing the importance of this last morsel of food, actually felt safe. Eyes on the back of his head had raised the hair on his neck. His ears had been questing for the slither of a drawn sword.

Now, for the first time, he believed that it was safe to relax. Quintus sat moodily, munching upon an apple. There had been no entertainment, no dancers. They had not even been offered wine. Lost in his own thoughts, he paid little attention to what Iskander was saying. To come all this way for business alone was a waste of time.

Manlius felt likewise, though not for the same reasons. He, too, hardly realized the audience was coming to an abrupt end.

"I am aware," said the young King, "that the tension between Parthia and Rome is now and will remain constant. I do not expect it to end until one of the two empires is destroyed. I realize that we of the Van exist only as a buffer state separating these two powers and by mutual sufferance. It is unfortunate that my beloved country is in the position of being little more than a road between, and a battleground for, such strong and incompatible peoples with territorial ambitions.

"Our lineage is better and of longer standing than that of either of you upstarts. Therefore, to retain our pride and our integrity, I must insist that we be treated as an independent folk, vassal to neither.

"We shall remain neutral in your quarrels unless we are attacked, in which case we shall defend ourselves while we still live. We will neither help nor hinder you in your passage through our land when you march on.

"I made a bargain with you and I shall keep it. You shall have your winter quarters as I promised. You shall have the city I offered you and food for your subsistence, but for the winter months only. When the melting snows have freed the passes you must leave. I give you farewell."

Iskander rose smoothly to his feet as an indication that the audience had ended. The two Romans, taken by surprise, did likewise, but clumsily, as their legs had gone numb through prolonged squatting.

The next day, back at the camp, wagons arrived with the promised supplies. With them rode an emissary from the court, with identifying papers in Greek, for at that time the Armenians had no written language of their own.

Manlius received him with courtesy. Camp was immediately broken and the journey began. Finally their guide drew rein at the side of Manlius and Matho.

He pointed down into a deep valley. There stood a city of impressive size. They could see a temple, a theater of white marble, and many lesser buildings. A stream divided the city, crossed far upstream by an aqueduct with high, narrow arches. From a gap in this a waterfall poured to feed the stream.

There was a wall at either end of the valley. Both had been broken down in several places and the gateways to them held no gates. No smoke rose from any building in the city, except one of the smallest, evidently a private home.

Kervashe, from his place in the ranks, peered down. His face lit up with unholy gladness. "Tigranocerta!" he whispered to himself. "O benevolent Gods of Justice! You have heard my prayers. How good you have been to me!"

"We part here," said the guide. "This is your city, Romans. You bandits should remember it well. Others of your ilk have been here before.

"If you are not satisfied with the accommodations, blame the previous tenants. They left the place in poor condition!" He rode off, laughing.

The column moved on, down the paved road which led from the hills into the empty city.

# III

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## PARTHIA





## INCIDENT AT OSTIA

Clotho awoke with a start. She looked at her still sleeping sisters. She studied the design.

"It is time," she muttered to herself, picked up a new shuttle, depressed the bar of her loom, and sent another thread flashing through the web.

The Ostian waterfront was a bustle of pushing, swearing men, braying donkeys, loaded mule carts rattling over the flagstoned streets, rumbling hollowly as they streamed out on the quay.

A war galley from Gades lay close in, the stench of the rowers' pit rising on the shoreward breeze. It was being sluiced down by the slaves, hauling buckets of sea water from overside. The pumps poured the diluted filth of the long passage back into the harbor to be dipped up again.

Somewhat tempering the drifting miasma, an aromatic blend of spices sifted into it from a rakish, lateen-canvased Tripolitan rover. It had discharged its cargo and was taking on wine and olive oil in heavy amphorae. Carts converged on this craft, which was already low in the water.

A man in coarse linen and worn leather, carrying a heavy sack and wearing a red Phrygian cap, jumped down from one of these. He nimbly threaded his way through the long close line of sweating, almost naked longshoremen till he reached the crowded gangplank. Here he turned and looked anxiously back along the quay.

He started to wave to the carter, then dropped his hand and leaped over the low bulwark. His quick glance had caught the gleam of armor at the far end of the line of shipping.

He was a big man, with the straight back of a soldier, but the supercargo, who gripped his biceps, was bigger.

"Here now—steady. Where d'you think you're going?"

His eyes narrowed. He numbed the sailor's wrist with a sharp, chopping blow from the edge of his calloused hand.

"Don't reach for anything you can't handle. Where's the shipman?"

The other slid his grip up the loaded stock of his whip but did nothing with it.

"What do you want of him?"

"Passage."

The supercargo looked him up and down and spat contemptuously into the water. "Can you pay?"

"I'll discuss that with your captain."

The lading had slowed at the interruption. It jerked forward again as the whip licked out at the nearest longshoreman. He hopped, stumbled, and dropped his amphora. The rich red wine covered the deck.

"You ham-handed son of a farmer!" Everybody jumped. "Sweet suffering Bacchus. Can't I take my eyes off you for a minute, Genba? Give that man five lashes and scratch him off the roll. Get that long-legged plow pusher off my ship."

"He wants passage, Rais Amouli."

The black-bearded, swarthy shipman picked up his turban from the deck where he had flung it. He stared speculatively at the prospective passenger.

"Got any money?"

The other jingled a fat, soft leather pouch. The sound brought a smile to the dour face.

"Come below. We'll talk about it."

The man with the Phrygian cap looked back. A half maniple of city legionaries were marching down the quay, glancing right and left as they came, inspecting carts, questioning sailors, occasionally boarding a ship.

He hurried after the shipman, who was already slouched in a creaking reed chair. His head barely cleared the overhead in the low-roofed cabin.

"What's your destination, Captain?"

"Where did you want to go?"

"Any Eastern port would do—Tyre? Sidon?"

"Heading for Babylon, eh? What's in the sack?"

The other did not reply.

"Maybe Jerusalem?"

The silent man turned toward the gangway.

"Now. Now. Don't be hasty. As it happens, you're in luck. We're bound east within the hour. We touch at Syracuse, then we're off direct to Tyre. We feed good—wine at every meal, the best, none of your slops—meat twice a week, garum to go with it—and we can outrun any pirates we meet. Ten gold staters and we sail together."

"Three."

"By the teeth of my grandam! For eight you would eat free, after Syracuse. Yet, because you have a strong sword arm to use for us if we are attacked, eight it is."

"Four, silver, I could pay."

"Now I truly love a shrewd bargainer! For six you shall sail with us and no questions asked. Maybe the port authorities might pay that to keep you here and I could save my wine. They are checking over the line now. Hey, Genba!"

Gold pieces clinked down on the table. Two—four—five. He put the bag inside his shirt. "That and no more." He looked the shipman steadily in the eye.

Then his own eyes glazed and rolled upward. He collapsed to the floor. Genba stood over him, swinging the heavy whip handle idly by its thong.

Rais Amouli grunted sourly. He reached down and slid his hand into the unconscious man's shirt. He tossed the pouch, hefting the pleasant weight of it. His expression did not change as he unlocked an ironbound chest and tossed the pouch almost carelessly into it.

"The sack, Genba? Armor? Deserter, eh? I thought so. Well, we have a passenger. Make him comfortable in the cubby behind the oil rack."

"The patrol is soon here. There may be a reward for him."

"Let us not be greedy, man. We are men of honor, surely? A bargain is a bargain. He has paid his passage. If it prove not enough, no doubt he will be happy to take a turn at the oars."

One glass later, the ship sailed—south, for Alexandria.

## WINTER QUARTERS

"Parade—attention! Prepare to be dismissed. Dismissed! Trumpeter—sound!"

With these formal military phrases, after the legion had marched into Tigranocerta, been reviewed in the broad square market place which was the forum of the empty city, and stood inspection, the days of movement came to an end.

Backbreaking labor to make the city habitable now began. At first it seemed an immense task, but there were many hands.

Shelter was the first consideration. Already there was snow in the high passes. The peaks of most of the mountains wore white mantles which daily extended lower. At night the wind that rolled down was chill. Soon it would howl in the daytime also, under a pale sun which would bring no warmth.

Although from a distance the city had seemed only scarred by time and the hand of man, upon closer examination the damage was discovered to be more severe.

Quintus, on the first inspection, could not understand the reason. "It looks," he said, puzzled, "as though it had been deliberately demolished."

Manlius said, "Cohort Commander Germanus told me a little about this place. It seems that there is more than one city of this name.

"There have been several kings by the name of Tigranes. This was the first Tigranocerta. Another, still peopled, is much larger and situated on a branch of the Tigris.

"Both were sacked by Lucullus, during the war with Pontus, and this one was never rebuilt. I do not know why it was abandoned. It looks as though it has been used as a quarry. A lot of the cut stone is missing."

"Probably to build other houses in some hill village, or to use in maintenance of works like those."

Quintus pointed upward. They were watching the repairing of the aqueduct. Far below its high soaring arches, the clearing of the rubble and drift which years of neglect had allowed to gather had well uncovered the streets of the city. Now the stream no longer coursed as it would but had diminished to a trickle and awaited diversion into the repaired trough, to feed fountains and cisterns.

A gang of legionaries were reroofing one of the less dilapidated houses with a thatch of reeds. It was the last of the row to be rendered habitable. Other crews were salvaging what unbroken tiles could be found, for a better group of dwellings.

Three days had passed.

Kervashe straightened his aching back and looked over Licinius' shoulder, across the city. Smokes rose everywhere. It was difficult for him to determine which one was the one he had marked in his mind when the legion entered.

"What are you looking for, Kervashe?"

"There may be someone here that I want to call on, but I am in no great hurry. Later. If it is who I think it can be, I can wait to see her. I have waited years already!"

"Her?" Licinius grinned. "You know a girl here? Kervashe, old friend, maybe two?"

The Armenian whirled upon him. His mouth opened as though he were about to set teeth in Licinius' body. The old story of man-wolves flashed through Licinius' mind. He felt horror. Then Kervashe bent to his labors and the two men worked side by side without speaking.

Antimon had discovered a chamber, hurriedly sealed off when the city was abandoned. It contained a large store of copper tubing and unworked sheets of the soft, ruddy metal.

With these, always the tinkerer, and continually finding work for his skillful fingers and active mind, he constructed toys in his spare time.

Remembering books he had read and pictures he had seen of Hero's aeolipile, he tried his ingenuity on something similar. It

turned out to be a little wheel that turned merrily, driven by a jet of steam from a small boiler.

He studied out some practical use for it but could think of none.

Decius—the former fire fighter—had given him the idea of making some of the siphons which those gangs used in Rome. These were actually large squirt guns that would send a stream of water arching over the roof of a house.

More than once he and Decius had soaked friends, and lost a few, from a safe point fifty feet away. At the moment Antimon had come up with another idea. It was an ambitious project. It was being kept entirely secret and his remaining friends feared for the worst.

Lilia had discovered a new friend—an old woman—the only inhabitant of Tigranocerta. It was from her house, of course, that the smoke had been seen from the hills.

She was delighted to find another woman in residence, aged though she was. They stood side by side in the frigidarium of the long disused baths, waiting. Somebody yelled, "Here it comes!" and they heard the gurgling onrush of water through the buried earthenware pipes. The aqueduct was again delivering water to the city.

A plug of leaves and sticks came first, then a dirty following flood of mud splattered on the face of Neptune, looking up at them from the mosaic bottom of the large pool. When the influx ran clear, the flow was diverted into the tepidarium, the first tank drained, scrubbed clean, and made ready for refilling.

Now that the excitement was over, Lilia and the old woman, who had introduced herself to the Roman girl by the name of Vardavar, walked out into the street.

Detritus no longer littered this section, but the two moved slowly, for Lilia's companion supported herself by a crutch, as one leg was withered and drawn up.

She said wryly, "The bad leg is lazy, the good one is impatient, but they take me wherever I want to go."

Lilia hugged her arm. "Don't try to hurry. I have nothing to do for another hour. Let's walk on the other side. It will be warmer in the sun."

park forge and stopped to watch the bright firefly sparks flick around his busy hammer. Lucas looked up and grinned. He held up a red-hot cestus in his tongs.

"Hey, amica, look at this!" He dipped the weapon in the water tank and slipped his fingers into the loops of the rough iron. He made a fist and pretended to strike Tibullus, who paled.

"See? S.P.Q.R. On the knuckles. Anybody that gets this in the mush will think the whole army hit him. I'll stamp him Roman property, whatever he was before!"

"Are we really going into Armenia?" Lilia asked Eitel on the third day of waiting.

"I think so, little Roman. I hear something mysterious is building up over the border. Messengers are coming in and out of the fort all hours of the day and night. We're getting ready to move somewhere soon."

Kervashe, who was standing close, said, in a voice which chilled Lilia, "Thank all the gods there are! I am on the road to Tigranocerta!"

The harsh voice of Centurion Ciscus broke in. "You, there—" He pointed at Kervashe. "Into ranks. Drill is not over."

His unpleasant roar seemed to fill the camp. "Armenian! Suppose you are behind the Eagle and the aquilifer falls—what is your duty?"

Kervashe stiffened. "I take the Eagle. I am not permitted to die until I can hand the Eagle to someone who will carry it forward and is likely to survive."

"Correct. Good man. You have learned well. Remember that, all of you. In any battle, you may have the honor to die for the Eagle. Your death is not important. The Eagle must always go forward.

"Another thing. It may become necessary for you to improvise. You have learned that your shield can be a deadly weapon. You know how to use a sling. Some of you are very good with a bow." He gave Lilia one of his rare smiles. "Here is, perhaps, the most dangerous weapon in the world, next to the sword." He held up a headless lance. "Simple, isn't it? Nothing but a long useless stick, you think? Look again. It is not. You find them everywhere on a battlefield and dead men right beside them who died because they never thought of using a stick as a weapon."

Ciscus caught it up by the middle. "Now it is a quarterstaff. You can strike with either end as you choose. It will crack a skull. Let your hands slip down to one end and you have a six-foot club that will break a neck, knock an armored man flat before he can reach you with his sword, or punch his face in with the splintered end.

"You can sweep a trooper out of his saddle or trip a horse with it. You can make an empty circle around you, twelve feet across, and give a friend time to get up when he is downed. It is a good weapon, more protection to you than a live friend. Trust it and use it. And now let's practice it. . . ."

Couriers continued to come and go. On the fifth day the Thirteenth broke camp. All unnecessary equipment was removed from the packs and loaded into the wagons. Stripped as lightly as possible to greatest mobility and war strength, the legion crossed over the border—out of the *limes*-protected territory and into the debatable strip of foothills which formed the avenue to the northern highlands.

They passed villages of houses where people lived like troglodytes, their dwellings half buried in the ground, against the severe colds and deep frosts of winter. There were sharp peaks and high precipices; tiny terraced gardens and blanket-sized meadows, perched precariously on the sides of mountains crowned by fortified market towns. There were swift and turbulent rivers. Everywhere, foaming waterfalls tumbled in white ribbons from the heights. Everywhere, also, people watched the march from a distance.

Not far from the border, the legion outriders at point were met by a host of horsemen, waiting under banners, gleaming with steel. The young Prince Iskander, who had been looking forward anxiously to this moment, spurred forward to meet them at a gallop.

He shouted and waved his bright neck scarf of yellow and scarlet. When the Armenians recognized him, a great roar of welcome went up to the snow-covered escarpments and they surged toward him in a mad, undisciplined rush, screaming slogans of their clans and shouting, "Iskander! Iskander! Death to Tigranes!"



He was joyously overwhelmed by them and lost to sight in their midst.

There was no immediate action. As if the enemy were nonexistent, or allowing them to drive deeper toward the capital city of Artaxata with the object of cutting the allies off from retreat, the march met no hindrance during the first two days.

New partisans swelled the ranks of Iskander. More horse, many footmen; easily the ten thousand the pretender had promised would flock to his banner and more to come, Manlius hoped. Then, on the third day, the influx suddenly dried up to a trickle.

It was a bad sign. The locality had been intimidated, quite probably by a strong force of the enemy in the neighborhood. In response, Manlius halted the legion at the western edge of a long valley. "Far enough," he said to Iskander. "Let us choose our battlefield while we may." He was not surprised to find that Iskander, in spite of his illustrious name, was no military genius. The young prince was infatuated with one idea only—that of seeing his brother lie dead before him.

He chafed that they had stopped, and wanted to plunge on, evidently with the idea that his honor required him to ride Tigranes down, and when he scowled, the whole Armenian host scowled with him. At last Manlius, in the midst of directing preparations for attack, was compelled to speak plainly.

"A king must know his own resources," he said. "If you cannot see the value of a secured pass at your back, rock outcroppings for concealment, and a wide plain before you on which your enemy's every contingent is visible for miles, no matter what direction they come from, then you can surely see the value of trusting us to be aware of them. Rome has, after all, won a number of its wars in recent years. Armenia has not."

The prince paled but recovered himself quickly. "You are right. In this one matter at least," he said coldly, "Roman advisers can be useful." He wheeled his horse away. Quintus was gritting his teeth but Manlius gave him a brief smile.

"Kings also have to learn to save face. That usually is even more important than winning battles."

Work went on without interruption. Upon strategic points, concealed sentinels watched the valley in all its length. Patrols of

light cavalry scoured the plain to great distances both north and south. They were ready to fire beacons at a moment's notice, before falling back upon the camp. Only to the north did any movement become visible and that after a ten-day wait, during which, as Iskander predicted, there had been some desertions. From these deserters, however, Manlius was pleased to note that no information had leaked out to the enemy.

On the tenth day, early in the morning, a pillar of black smoke rose in the foothills. It stained the sky, drifting toward the east.

Shortly after the firing of the beacon, the mounted patrol dashed in, hotly pursued for a little distance by the advance scouts of a large host which spread slowly into the upper end of the valley.

Iskander looked alarmed. "I had no idea Tigranes could amass so many adherents. We should have struck him before he gathered an array like this. One charge and he will ride over us like an avalanche."

"I trust that is his plan," said Manlius grimly. "Kindly place yourself at the head of your men, Prince. This is your war and you must bear the brunt of the attack if you wish to be given the glory. Prepare now for the ordeal of your coming kingship."

There was a brief pause in the advance. The ranks thickened and milled about in some disorder. Then the van stiffened.

Proxillus, the trumpeter recruit, felt queasy. He watched the light-armed horse massing itself behind the heavy lancers. He wondered how any man could avoid all of those sharp points—or even one for that matter, if the man who held the lance was really in earnest.

He swallowed, stared straight ahead, and clutched his trumpet, waiting for the signal to send Matho's troopers racing against Tigranes' attenuated wings.

Manlius was sure that the wings represented no real plan. It appeared that Tigranes' strategy was extremely simple, depending mainly on force of numbers.

The whole host surged forward in a slow movement, at first scarcely more than a walk.

"They are saving their horses," said Quintus, who stood at Manlius' side as they peered through the rows of tents which

had been set up before the spiked agger and the deep ditch dug behind it.

Manlius nodded. "They mean to hit us hard."

The walk changed to a trot, to a jogging canter. The host poured across the valley. Long before it should have done so, its pace forced by impetuous glory seekers, the entire mass of horsemen burst into a thundering gallop.

A heavy hand fell on Lilia's shoulder and pulled her out of rank. "Up on the firing platform, legionary. Your bow will be of more use than your sword."

She was indignant at being taken away from Tibullus and being thus singled out, but she knew better than to disobey Centurion Ciscus and took her place with the archers where she would not now be called into action unless the camp was overrun.

The rumble of the charge roared ahead of the advance. Riding elbow to elbow, a hurly-burly of horsemen came down the valley looking straight ahead.

"Now!" breathed Manlius. "Now! Engineers, where are you? Now!"

The wild torrent of thundering flesh, bone, and steel poured point-blank upon the waiting ranks drawn up before the tents. Iskander's men no longer waited to be overwhelmed. As the oncoming forest of lances dropped level for the shattering impact, their target disappeared.

It dissolved among the rows of tents. The soldiers of Iskander slashed right and left at the tent ropes as they retreated through the staggered line of canvas. It billowed and fell, but not flat upon the ground. It lay in little hillocks and ridges; it projected upward, hiding concealed and savagely pointed stakes.

Upon these the drumming crowd of lancers, cheering, yelling, joyously flung itself, astride wind-blown, heaving, exhausted steeds in mad pursuit of the men they could see running away before them to the shelter of the Roman camp—now for the first time clearly visible to the attackers in its formidable strength.

Upon these hidden stakes the charge broke, in one long scream of agony from impaled horses. Men were hurled far over the heads of their animals. The horses struggled to be free, among the smashed bodies of their thrown riders, kicking out

with flailing hoofs, clubbing their masters to death as they tried to crawl out of the turmoil.

Down into the confusion slanted the arrow flights, volley after volley from the palisade, where Lilia with the others stood and drew bow, sobbing with the horror of it as she shot, but sending arrows with her utmost accuracy, to bring quick death as her only mercy to suffering men.

Now! Proxillus added his trumpet blast to the symphony and the troopers burst out of hiding to slam into both sides of the column.

## THE BROKEN SWORD

Those uninjured riders in the first line who had been fortunate enough to pass unharmed through the spaces between the tents were unable to stop. Pushed on by the mass of the rush behind, they poured like a cataract into the open ditch, no longer bracketed by the portable bridges across which the decoy forces had retired.

The continuing press of lancers drew up in dismay. A squirming mass filled the ditch level to its top. As they did so, thus presenting a motionless target, the palisade, at which they were staring across the ditch, suddenly collapsed and fell flat.

This disclosed a solid row of carroballistae, from which immediately flew a volley of heavy javelins into the midst of the attackers, cutting them down in rows. The few survivors were thus thrown back upon the next line, which rushed forward in their turn, causing a helpless disorder. The men of Tigranes' swirled about, pushing in all directions, advancing and retreating, unable to reform before a second discharge from the reloaded scorpions was received, and constantly under a dropping fall of arrows from the archers.

The charge had devolved into inaction and blind panic. Now into the inextricable tangle of dying cavalry came the bombardment from the heavy ballistae. Huge boulders, soaring high to fall and crush beneath their ponderous weight all that they fell upon; then sacks of pebbles from the onagers.

These burst in mid-air and drove down like shrapnel, emptying saddles in the immobilized troops, sending already wounded horses into a murderous frenzy in their hopeless efforts to escape.

Still the following ranks continued to arrive, plowing on into the range of slaughter, impelled by useless bravery or sheer ina-

bility to hold back. Thus the heavy cavalry of Tigranes was decimated; thus the first ranks of the light armed were destroyed before they could come to a plunging halt.

Trumpets of the King's squadrons, crying like mourning bronze-throated harpies, sent the tale of disaster back across the field. The trumpeters choked as they blew. The flower of the army no longer existed, but there was yet the huge infantry force to be reckoned with and it was on the way.

Hasten! Hasten! the trumpets wailed. They called, they urged, they commanded. They screamed for vengeance.

To meet the infantry, the Thirteenth advanced out of camp in force—across the ditch, through the line of stake-ripped tents—to battle, in its grim array, the main strength of Tigranes.

The legion moved like marionettes, in fixed positions. First the youngest, known as the principes, most eager—the quickest to strike, the ablest to take a blow and recover, the shock troops.

Backing them, the second line, the hastati, bearing longer spears, upon which the enemy would be received if the front lines were pressed back.

Behind these, the older veterans kept the third line, marching close together, the rear rank of the triarii, meant to be moved in only to support the others at need.

Lilia, from her high vantage point, saw them pass—out of the gates, leaving her and the other archers behind. There they went, Tibullus staring straight ahead, his face white, looking as though he scarcely realized where he was; Vorco, moving with careless supple grace, close beside him. Vorco gave her a flash of white teeth as he went by. He looks as though he were going to the games, she thought. He enjoys this!

Centurion Ciscus, a hulking statue of steel. He saw her, too, and grinned and was gone. Longinus, Atticus, the Farmer, that ill-assorted trio, side by side. Galba holds his spear like a pitchfork—I hope he doesn't hurt himself with it! Can't watch them, must keep shooting—this is what it means to be a legionary!

Oh, my boys—my husband—my friends! Shoot, Lilia, shoot! Maybe more of them will come back if I keep on shooting!

"Hoil Hoil" She saw the Keeper of the Hounds wave his arm in wide sweeps, gesturing to the unchained dogs of war. They raced away, huge snarling beasts, ravening and eager, their throats protected by thick leather collars studded with sharp

spikes, charging into battle, twenty of them in all. She could not pick out Cerberus and Irax, but she knew they were there—her gentle friendly pets, transformed into savage demons.

Shoot, Lilia! She dropped her bow, her eyes so full of tears that she could not see a target. It did not matter. All along the firing step, the archers laid down their bows with her. The battle had swung away, out of their range.

The onagers continued to operate while it was possible for the engineers to avoid hitting their own men. Kicking up their heels at every discharge, hurling their stones, they were protected by their own contingents of slingers and archers.

Then the Thirteenth bore in, punching like a giant's fist into the swirling melee. The sweating engine handlers no longer dared to shoot. They seized bows and sought individual targets.

There seemed to be little organized resistance to the legion. Fighting as a unit, it met a huddle of wild, undisciplined men who fought viciously enough but without decisive plan or competent leadership. It gave way and scattered to either side.

Down upon this disorder, out of the mountain defiles where until now they had remained hidden, came the rush of Iskander's horse, with the young prince at the head. It struck like a thunderbolt against the reformed cavalry of Tigranes, still powerful enough to constitute a menace to the legion, should that be charged upon in the open plain.

The two cavalry forces swept away like leaves in a hurricane. They were almost equally matched in strength. They circled for position, clashed briefly, drew apart, and collided again, leaving a scattering of dead animals, unhorsed riders, and limp bodies. Still in bloody contact, the cavalry swept like a storm round about the circumference of the battlefield while within it the legion fought, coming suddenly upon an upthrust of rock, a peninsula jutting out from the mountain mass, recoiling to retain formation, swinging aside. In doing so, in the confusion, it lost a minute fragment, an individual unimportant until then, named Tibullus.

He found himself jammed into a crack in a heap of rocks, horribly frightened and alone, except for the man whom he had always regarded as his nemesis, Centurion Ciscus.

Down upon this isolated, poorly matched pair came a howling knot of red-eyed mountain men, shouting, "Tigranes! Tigranes!"

For an instant events were almost indescribable. Tibullus struck out blindly. He heard a man yell in pain. A great weight fell upon him and bore him down. He shrieked and struggled out from under his assailant. He thought the man was trying to rise and aimed a mighty blow at his head. It missed and his sword struck a stone, breaking the blade off about four inches from the hilt.

A streak of fire seemed to shoot up his arm, paralyzing it. Tibullus still clung to the useless weapon. His stunned vision took in the sight of another man stumbling toward him. He did not know that it was Ciscus, severely wounded, and that the other attackers were dead, slain by the centurion.

Tibullus saw only an enemy approaching to kill him. He shrieked like a woman, threw the broken sword aimlessly toward the oncoming menace, without waiting to see whether or not the missile took effect. Then he turned and ran for his life back to the camp where the way was clear. There would be protection. There, Lilia, not involved in this horrible struggle, would surely be waiting to offer him sympathy and comfort.

He thought he heard a feeble call for help behind him. He did not pause or wonder who it could have been. After a few panting moments the anguished cry slipped from his memory and all he could think of was his own terror.

Moments later, to this same spot staggered young Iskander, unhorsed in the whirl of cavalry, hard pressed and alone. He was beset on both sides by two foot soldiers and armed only with a lance he had retrieved from under his dead charger when it fell.

The prince ran one of his antagonists through the body. The butt twisted from his slippery hand, leaving him defenseless. The other man laughed and ran at him. Iskander desperately sought a stone, a stick—any weapon at all in this extremity.

His enemy raised his arm to strike. Iskander dodged. His back struck against the rocks, shutting off retreat. The next blow would be the last one, the end to ambition and to life itself.

His hand fell upon cold steel. He shouted triumphantly, seized the hilt so fortunately presented, and slammed it into the grinning bearded face before him.



It was not until the man was dead that he saw most of the blade was gone. He did not care. He raised the remnant in pledge to the sky.

"Behold, O Gods! This broken sword shall be the emblem of my house. Blessed be the brave soldier who carried this blade! He shall be regarded with honor from this day forward. My prayers shall recall him to my heart forever."

Iskander thrust the precious relic into his belt. He ran out from the rocks to catch a riderless horse, rearm himself, call a friend to him, gather a group of riders, surround himself with a hundred adherents, and ride on in confidence and glory to make himself King—with the broken sword a coward had thrown away.

Centurion Ciscus came to himself in darkness. At first he thought it was night, then he saw, far above, a pale oval and knew that he lay at the bottom of a declivity.

He was in severe pain. His back and right leg hurt. He gasped when he breathed and felt certain that ribs were cracked, possibly broken. When he called out, his voice sounded weak, even in his own ears, strangely hollow and deadened by the rock around him. It was muffled by the depth below ground at which he lay.

Blood caked his neck and shoulder. His exploratory fingers found a deep wound on his head which felt dry and roughly edged with matted hair. He had lost his helmet.

Ciscus rolled away from the pain in his side and something snapped beneath him. It had a brittle sound. He felt for it and pushed away a splintered piece of bone.

He had seen enough skeletons in his time to know at once that this was the thighbone of a man. It was desiccated and powdery under his fingers. Someone before him had fallen and died here.

Fear came to him. Had the man died because of the tumble or had he been trapped? Ciscus staggered to his feet and steadied himself against the wall. It stretched up, straight and smooth, far as his hands could reach. Leaning against it for support, he stumbled over the rough floor through a tangle of bones which crunched beneath his nail-studded boots.

In moments he knew the worst. He was a prisoner in the bottom of a pit which had no exit, except from its mouth above.

Now that his senses had cleared a little, he had a vague recollection of the fall he had survived.

Ciscus forced himself to think calmly. He remembered stumbling toward a pile of rock during the battle. He had fallen toward it, he thought, reaching out as he did so. Then emptiness under his hand. He must have lurched between two boulders that almost touched each other. There had been a sliding sensation. He had rolled before he actually fell, as though down a chute. Then the impact, unconsciousness, and the awakening.

It was a natural trap. Others had fallen into it before him and had found no escape. Ciscus had never refused to face reality. He did not do so now. His sword was gone, but he had his dagger. He need not die of hunger or of thirst. He had no expectation that he would ever be found.

To make absolutely certain that he was correct in his evaluation of his predicament, he made the circuit of his prison once more. He explored around the edge and across its diameter, this time on his hands and knees. He breathed heavily, feeling the edges of at least one broken rib grating together.

There were many relics. The bones pulverized under his weight like chalk. They were nameless, pathetically mute testimonials to his fears. His hand fell upon a piece of metal.

He turned it over and over, not understanding at first what it was. Then recognition of it came to him. A hunter's knife! It was worn almost to nothing. It might have lain there for a hundred years, but it had not rusted away—there was no dampness under his hands. Then why the thinness, the deterioration? How?

Ciscus stood up, feeling every inch of the wall with a renewed and frantic hope. Almost above the spot where the imprisoned hunter had dropped his useless fragment for the last time, a niche existed in the hard stone, waist high and deep enough for a hand- or foothold.

Above it, at about the height of his eyes, he felt another of equal depth. He forgot his pain. He put his foot in the first niche, gripped his fingers into the second, and raised himself up. Now he felt a third hole, still higher, but not so far that he could not reach it easily.

He hauled himself higher yet. His other foot was in the second hole, his groping fingers still seeking. They found only a shallow

scratch in the stone, not deep enough for a handhold, not deep enough to be of any use.

His strength failed and he dropped to the floor, his head swimming and the illusion of darting lights in his eyes. He cursed weakly. The disappointment seemed almost more than he could bear.

Several times he raised the sharp edge of his own dagger to his throat. Once he depressed the skin over his heart with the point. He could not bring himself to drive it home.

Later he felt for the artery which throbbed in his arm, hard and rubbery under the blade. Each time he stopped before the act was irrevocable.

He did not know when he slept, or for how long. When he awoke he knew with certainty what he was going to do and why he had not used the dagger. He was weaker, but not too weak to climb.

When he reached the little scratch, he began to stab at the living rock, digging out tiny particles and once in a while a chip. He could not hang thus very long and he worked furiously against time. When he dropped, he groaned. He climbed again and again, clinging tenaciously to his hold, pecking, chipping, and feeling the niche grow deeper.

When the slim dagger finally broke and fell tinkling to the bottom of the pit, Ciscus knew that his ordeal was near its end. With his last scrap of strength, he held on a few seconds longer; long enough to satisfy himself that the handhold he had made was as good, as deep, as dependable as the ones that the unknown men imprisoned before him had dug.

He sat with his back against the wall, smiling to himself. There would be other captives; there would be other steps; the one that he, Centurion Ciscus, Tenth Cohort, Thirteenth Legion, had dug would enable the next man, whoever he might be, to make his step just that much higher.

Someday there would be no more steps to dig. He was thinking of this, still smiling, when darkness came upon him for the last time.

It was a three-day journey from the scene of the victory to Artaxata, now King Iskander's capital city.

A campground was given Manlius, outside the city walls. It was immediately occupied and made fit to withstand an attack if diplomatic measures failed.

When there was no more to do, an honor guard of a hundred cataphracts was assembled by grim Matho. Groomed in their best, they escorted Manlius and Tribune Quintus to the gates of the city. Here they were met by an Armenian officer and a small, gaily bedecked unit of armed riders, to lead the way to the new King.

The cavalcade clattered into Artaxata through wide-open gates, along streets lined with solemn, silent citizens. Flags were out and there was a sense that a short celebration had come and gone. There was no feeling of welcome in the air for the victorious Roman allies inside the walls of this mountain citadel.

Matho leaned toward Manlius. "Say the word, Commander. Shall we go on or turn back? We may have to fight our way out."

Manlius looked neither right nor left. His lips scarcely moved. "We are interlopers here. The people look on us with resentment. For all they know, we may be the spearhead of an invasion in force. We must trust to the honor of the King. He has given his word."

Quintus sneered. "The word of an Eastern potentate? It is as changeable as the wind."

"Show no indecision. We are Romans. Ride on, but be aware."

Only Manlius and Quintus, as his aide for the day, were permitted to enter the inner precincts of the palace, where King Iskander was to graciously receive them and fulfill his promise. The troopers dismounted to stand by their horses in the courtyard. Matho became interested in the equipment of the Armenian guards who sat their mounts, watching the Romans and the Spanish cavalry—as sentinels? As guards over prisoners? They had their feet planted firmly in iron loops hung from their saddles by leather straps. Matho had never seen stirrups before, nor did he know that they were a comparatively recent innovation out of the East, but he recognized the advantage to a lancer of having a firm seat in the saddle. He made a mental note to get his smiths and farriers busy, as soon as he got back to camp—if he ever did.

An hour dragged by. The troopers stood and sweated. They tried to look relaxed, but under the steady watchfulness of the waiting Armenian horsemen their apparent ease was no more than a pose.

Matho sent the low-voiced word down the line. It passed casually from one to another. "Pick your man. If we are attacked or an alarm is sounded in the palace—kill him.

"Rescue the commander."

Within, the two officers sat at table. They nibbled, without relish, at cheese, pears, and apples and partook ritually of bread and salt. It was not until then that Manlius, knowing the importance of this last morsel of food, actually felt safe. Eyes on the back of his head had raised the hair on his neck. His ears had been questing for the slither of a drawn sword.

Now, for the first time, he believed that it was safe to relax. Quintus sat moodily, munching upon an apple. There had been no entertainment, no dancers. They had not even been offered wine. Lost in his own thoughts, he paid little attention to what Iskander was saying. To come all this way for business alone was a waste of time.

Manlius felt likewise, though not for the same reasons. He, too, hardly realized the audience was coming to an abrupt end.

"I am aware," said the young King, "that the tension between Parthia and Rome is now and will remain constant. I do not expect it to end until one of the two empires is destroyed. I realize that we of the Van exist only as a buffer state separating these two powers and by mutual sufferance. It is unfortunate that my beloved country is in the position of being little more than a road between, and a battleground for, such strong and incompatible peoples with territorial ambitions.

"Our lineage is better and of longer standing than that of either of you upstarts. Therefore, to retain our pride and our integrity, I must insist that we be treated as an independent folk, vassal to neither.

"We shall remain neutral in your quarrels unless we are attacked, in which case we shall defend ourselves while we still live. We will neither help nor hinder you in your passage through our land when you march on.

"I made a bargain with you and I shall keep it. You shall have your winter quarters as I promised. You shall have the city I offered you and food for your subsistence, but for the winter months only. When the melting snows have freed the passes you must leave. I give you farewell."

Iskander rose smoothly to his feet as an indication that the audience had ended. The two Romans, taken by surprise, did likewise, but clumsily, as their legs had gone numb through prolonged squatting.

The next day, back at the camp, wagons arrived with the promised supplies. With them rode an emissary from the court, with identifying papers in Greek, for at that time the Armenians had no written language of their own.

Manlius received him with courtesy. Camp was immediately broken and the journey began. Finally their guide drew rein at the side of Manlius and Matho.

He pointed down into a deep valley. There stood a city of impressive size. They could see a temple, a theater of white marble, and many lesser buildings. A stream divided the city, crossed far upstream by an aqueduct with high, narrow arches. From a gap in this a waterfall poured to feed the stream.

There was a wall at either end of the valley. Both had been broken down in several places and the gateways to them held no gates. No smoke rose from any building in the city, except one of the smallest, evidently a private home.

Kervashe, from his place in the ranks, peered down. His face lit up with unholy gladness. "Tigranocerta!" he whispered to himself. "O benevolent Gods of Justice! You have heard my prayers. How good you have been to me!"

"We part here," said the guide. "This is your city, Romans. You bandits should remember it well. Others of your ilk have been here before."

"If you are not satisfied with the accommodations, blame the previous tenants. They left the place in poor condition!" He rode off, laughing.

The column moved on, down the paved road which led from the hills into the empty city.

III

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PARTHIA





## INCIDENT AT OSTIA

Clotho awoke with a start. She looked at her still sleeping sisters. She studied the design.

"It is time," she muttered to herself, picked up a new shuttle, depressed the bar of her loom, and sent another thread flashing through the web.

The Ostian waterfront was a bustle of pushing, swearing men, braying donkeys, loaded mule carts rattling over the flagstoned streets, rumbling hollowly as they streamed out on the quay.

A war galley from Gades lay close in, the stench of the rowers' pit rising on the shoreward breeze. It was being sluiced down by the slaves, hauling buckets of sea water from overside. The pumps poured the diluted filth of the long passage back into the harbor to be dipped up again.

Somewhat tempering the drifting miasma, an aromatic blend of spices sifted into it from a rakish, lateen-canvased Tripolitan rover. It had discharged its cargo and was taking on wine and olive oil in heavy amphorae. Carts converged on this craft, which was already low in the water.

A man in coarse linen and worn leather, carrying a heavy sack and wearing a red Phrygian cap, jumped down from one of these. He nimbly threaded his way through the long close line of sweating, almost naked longshoremen till he reached the crowded gangplank. Here he turned and looked anxiously back along the quay.

He started to wave to the carter, then dropped his hand and leaped over the low bulwark. His quick glance had caught the gleam of armor at the far end of the line of shipping.

He was a big man, with the straight back of a soldier, but the supercargo, who gripped his biceps, was bigger.

"Here now—steady. Where d'you think you're going?"

His eyes narrowed. He numbed the sailor's wrist with a sharp, chopping blow from the edge of his calloused hand.

"Don't reach for anything you can't handle. Where's the shipman?"

The other slid his grip up the loaded stock of his whip but did nothing with it.

"What do you want of him?"

"Passage."

The supercargo looked him up and down and spat contemptuously into the water. "Can you pay?"

"I'll discuss that with your captain."

The lading had slowed at the interruption. It jerked forward again as the whip licked out at the nearest longshoreman. He hopped, stumbled, and dropped his amphora. The rich red wine covered the deck.

"You ham-handed son of a farmer!" Everybody jumped. "Sweet suffering Bacchus. Can't I take my eyes off you for a minute, Genba? Give that man five lashes and scratch him off the roll. Get that long-legged plow pusher off my ship."

"He wants passage, Rais Amouli."

The black-bearded, swarthy shipman picked up his turban from the deck where he had flung it. He stared speculatively at the prospective passenger.

"Got any money?"

The other jingled a fat, soft leather pouch. The sound brought a smile to the dour face.

"Come below. We'll talk about it."

The man with the Phrygian cap looked back. A half manipule of city legionaries were marching down the quay, glancing right and left as they came, inspecting carts, questioning sailors, occasionally boarding a ship.

He hurried after the shipman, who was already slouched in a creaking reed chair. His head barely cleared the overhead in the low-roofed cabin.

"What's your destination, Captain?"

"Where did you want to go?"

"Any Eastern port would do—Tyre? Sidon?"

"Heading for Babylon, eh? What's in the sack?"

The other did not reply.

"Maybe Jerusalem?"

The silent man turned toward the gangway.

"Now. Now. Don't be hasty. As it happens, you're in luck. We're bound east within the hour. We touch at Syracuse, then we're off direct to Tyre. We feed good—wine at every meal, the best, none of your slops—meat twice a week, garum to go with it—and we can outrun any pirates we meet. Ten gold staters and we sail together."

"Three."

"By the teeth of my grandam! For eight you would eat free, after Syracuse. Yet, because you have a strong sword arm to use for us if we are attacked, eight it is."

"Four, silver, I could pay."

"Now I truly love a shrewd bargainer! For six you shall sail with us and no questions asked. Maybe the port authorities might pay that to keep you here and I could save my wine. They are checking over the line now. Hey, Genbal"

Gold pieces clinked down on the table. Two—four—five. He put the bag inside his shirt. "That and no more." He looked the shipman steadily in the eye.

Then his own eyes glazed and rolled upward. He collapsed to the floor. Genba stood over him, swinging the heavy whip handle idly by its thong.

Rais Amouli grunted sourly. He reached down and slid his hand into the unconscious man's shirt. He tossed the pouch, hefting the pleasant weight of it. His expression did not change as he unlocked an ironbound chest and tossed the pouch almost carelessly into it.

"The sack, Genba? Armor? Deserter, eh? I thought so. Well, we have a passenger. Make him comfortable in the cubby behind the oil rack."

"The patrol is soon here. There may be a reward for him."

"Let us not be greedy, man. We are men of honor, surely? A bargain is a bargain. He has paid his passage. If it prove not enough, no doubt he will be happy to take a turn at the oars."

One glass later, the ship sailed—south, for Alexandria.

## WINTER QUARTERS

"Parade—attention! Prepare to be dismissed. Dismissed! Trumpeter—sound!"

With these formal military phrases, after the legion had marched into Tigranocerta, been reviewed in the broad square market place which was the forum of the empty city, and stood inspection, the days of movement came to an end.

Backbreaking labor to make the city habitable now began. At first it seemed an immense task, but there were many hands.

Shelter was the first consideration. Already there was snow in the high passes. The peaks of most of the mountains wore white mantles which daily extended lower. At night the wind that rolled down was chill. Soon it would howl in the daytime also, under a pale sun which would bring no warmth.

Although from a distance the city had seemed only scarred by time and the hand of man, upon closer examination the damage was discovered to be more severe.

Quintus, on the first inspection, could not understand the reason. "It looks," he said, puzzled, "as though it had been deliberately demolished."

Manlius said, "Cohort Commander Germanus told me a little about this place. It seems that there is more than one city of this name.

"There have been several kings by the name of Tigranes. This was the first Tigranocerta. Another, still peopled, is much larger and situated on a branch of the Tigris.

"Both were sacked by Lucullus, during the war with Pontus, and this one was never rebuilt. I do not know why it was abandoned. It looks as though it has been used as a quarry. A lot of the cut stone is missing."

"Probably to build other houses in some hill village, or to use in maintenance of works like those."

Quintus pointed upward. They were watching the repairing of the aqueduct. Far below its high soaring arches, the clearing of the rubble and drift which years of neglect had allowed to gather had well uncovered the streets of the city. Now the stream no longer coursed as it would but had diminished to a trickle and awaited diversion into the repaired trough, to feed fountains and cisterns.

A gang of legionaries were reroofing one of the less dilapidated houses with a thatch of reeds. It was the last of the row to be rendered habitable. Other crews were salvaging what unbroken tiles could be found, for a better group of dwellings.

Three days had passed.

Kervashe straightened his aching back and looked over Licinius' shoulder, across the city. Smokes rose everywhere. It was difficult for him to determine which one was the one he had marked in his mind when the legion entered.

"What are you looking for, Kervashe?"

"There may be someone here that I want to call on, but I am in no great hurry. Later. If it is who I think it can be, I can wait to see her. I have waited years already!"

"Her?" Licinius grinned. "You know a girl here? Kervashe, old friend, maybe two?"

The Armenian whirled upon him. His mouth opened as though he were about to set teeth in Licinius' body. The old story of man-wolves flashed through Licinius' mind. He felt horror. Then Kervashe bent to his labors and the two men worked side by side without speaking.

Antimon had discovered a chamber, hurriedly sealed off when the city was abandoned. It contained a large store of copper tubing and unworked sheets of the soft, ruddy metal.

With these, always the tinkerer, and continually finding work for his skillful fingers and active mind, he constructed toys in his spare time.

Remembering books he had read and pictures he had seen of Hero's aeolipile, he tried his ingenuity on something similar. It

turned out to be a little wheel that turned merrily, driven by a jet of steam from a small boiler.

He studied out some practical use for it but could think of none.

Decius—the former fire fighter—had given him the idea of making some of the siphons which those gangs used in Rome. These were actually large squirt guns that would send a stream of water arching over the roof of a house.

More than once he and Decius had soaked friends, and lost a few, from a safe point fifty feet away. At the moment Antimon had come up with another idea. It was an ambitious project. It was being kept entirely secret and his remaining friends feared for the worst.

Lilia had discovered a new friend—an old woman—the only inhabitant of Tigranocerta. It was from her house, of course, that the smoke had been seen from the hills.

She was delighted to find another woman in residence, aged though she was. They stood side by side in the frigidarium of the long disused baths, waiting. Somebody yelled, "Here it comes!" and they heard the gurgling onrush of water through the buried earthenware pipes. The aqueduct was again delivering water to the city.

A plug of leaves and sticks came first, then a dirty following flood of mud splattered on the face of Neptune, looking up at them from the mosaic bottom of the large pool. When the influx ran clear, the flow was diverted into the tepidarium, the first tank drained, scrubbed clean, and made ready for refilling.

Now that the excitement was over, Lilia and the old woman, who had introduced herself to the Roman girl by the name of Vardavar, walked out into the street.

Detritus no longer littered this section, but the two moved slowly, for Lilia's companion supported herself by a crutch, as one leg was withered and drawn up.

She said wryly, "The bad leg is lazy, the good one is impatient, but they take me wherever I want to go."

Lilia hugged her arm. "Don't try to hurry. I have nothing to do for another hour. Let's walk on the other side. It will be warmer in the sun."

They crossed the street with care. Wagons were bringing in firewood. By tomorrow fires would be burning, the hypocausts would be in operation; there would be warm and hot baths and a steam room. Lilia was envious of the men. She knew it would be impossible to have privacy here.

She did not realize how soon that problem would be solved. Already women were drifting toward Tigranocerta, homeless ones, adventurous ones, curious ones. Quintus was, even then, smiling into a pert face, lifting his glass, and coming to an understanding with his companion. There would be a women's day at the baths.

All unknowing, Lilia walked on with her new friend. The old woman stopped, pointed, and said, "Look. The last of the roses. I thought they were all gone."

On a southern wall, shielded from the wind in an alcove which kept the warmth deep in the stone, a climbing vine held one hardy flower. Lilia reached up and plucked it for Vardavar. She sniffed its perfume with lingering pleasure.

"The very last of the year. I always loved them. Vardavar means 'Bearer of Roses.' Did you know that?" Lilia shook her head.

"We had a lot of them in our garden, my daughter and I. She liked them too. It seems so long ago." She dropped into a reminiscent reverie.

"Anaitis, we named her, after the goddess, you know—the goddess of love—because she was lovely. Rome held the land then and this was a thriving city. Then the wars came and we all went up into the hills. There was so much fighting everywhere.

"The Parthians came murdering and robbing and pushed the Romans out. People starved or turned bandit. Those were terrible days. My husband was killed fighting the Parthians."

Vardavar pointed at a heap of stone. Lilia thought she had never seen such a look of sorrow in any face.

"It was over there, near the Temple of Vahagn. I always thought it could have been in no better place—just where the war god could see what a valorous warrior he was and take his soul when he fell. I only regretted that I had no son to avenge him.

"Part of the city was destroyed in the battle. When the

Romans came back again, as they always do and always will, more of the buildings were ruined. There were fires and big stones flying through the air and walls that crashed down. The smoke and the dust—and the screaming of the hurt people!”

Vardavar shuddered. Lilia squeezed her arm in sympathy.

“Don’t. Don’t think about it. It was long ago.”

The old woman shook her head. “It is all like yesterday. We came back to live here for a while. It was a mistake. The Romans did not stay. My Anaitis went away when they left. She left me all alone, to go with a Roman soldier.

“I have never seen her since, but I know she will come back. I have waited here for years. She will come. She will come back to me someday and I will be waiting. I must stay. Where else would she ever know to look for me?

“There will be a day when he has grown tired of her and she will come home. I cannot die until then.”

They walked on in silence. A little nagging thought was nudging Lilia’s memory. It was just out of reach. Something was trying to be remembered.

After they parted, Lilia returned to her duties in the barracks which the temple had become. She did not think again of the old woman until mealtime.

Still in the same group, her tent companions lived and occupied themselves together. Since the disappearance of Ciscus, Longinus had been promoted to that vacant place as centurion in view of his long experience.

The advancement seemed to have sweetened Longinus’ glum disposition. Lilia had noticed a change in him for the better, ever since they had left Jerusalem. It was as though some inner burden had been eased from his spirit, although he still had long moody silences.

Longinus no longer seemed to bear a murderous grudge against the commander. He seldom spoke of killing him, as he had sometimes done when wine loosened his tongue and he sat mumbling and brooding over his wrongs.

In fact the centurion had been closeted privately with Commander Manlius on the journey from Jerusalem to Tigranocerta. Once Lilia was startled to see them standing together, chatting



and smiling like old friends. She was pleased, for she liked both men.

Longinus was easier to talk with now. She mentioned the old woman's story, merely making an addition to the general conversation in so doing.

Kervashe, in the nearby group, stopped eating and listened. "It is time," he muttered. "I can wait no longer."

He buckled on his sword and went out in haste, leaving the others staring after him. In moments Kervashe was at the old woman's house. The door was open and he flung in, sword in hand.

"Are you Vardavar? Prepare yourself. Today you die!"

His voice was a snarl. He stared blindly into the semidarkness, seeing only an open fireplace and flames, above which a kettle bubbled. Near it, what he had taken to be a heap of rags straightened painfully from its crumpled position, stood up, and faced him.

"Everyone dies. Why must I do so today?" Her voice was low and pleasant. There was no sound of fear in it, of this armed, fiercely bearded stranger in Roman leather.

"If you are Vardavar, you should know. I am Kervashe. I go by my mother's name. She was Anaitis Mirkanian, whom you drove into exile with curses. One moment to pray her forgiveness. Then you die."

He had advanced toward her into the room. He seized her shoulder roughly. It seemed no more than thin bones in his crushing grip. So weak, so frail!

Vardavar straightened indignantly, almost forgetting her crutch. Her eyes blazed.

With a strength that amazed him, she struck his hand away, dropping her crutch as she did so. She swayed but did not fall, standing with pride and courage before him.

"You think I could have driven her away? Do you believe any mother could be so unfeeling? She was your mother, boy, but she was my child.

"For twenty years I have waited alone for the return of my daughter, who was all my life.

"Yes, we parted, but I did not send her away. It was she who left me, helpless and injured, to go with her Roman lover. An Ar-

menian girl, who loved her enemy more than she did her own mother!

"Do you see how I stand, boy? Crippled? This leg only a painful weight to drag around? A Roman stone did that. An Armenian daughter kissed and comforted a Roman soldier—perhaps the very one who shot that stone from his catapult inside the city, to strike down her mother."

Kervashe's sword point slowly dropped to the floor. He stood, undecided, listening. He did not interrupt. She could see unbelief in his attitude.

"I was bitter then. Months and months of pain. Should I not have been? I cursed her when she left, for her heartlessness, but I forgave her since then—so long ago. I, too, knew what love was once. In those days nothing mattered but love. I know now that I would have done the same. I forgave her, loving and wanting her.

"Is she dead, boy? I had hoped for a son, a brave warrior who would fight like a hero, as every Armenian should, to rid our country of the Roman and Parthian scum who tramp over it. When I knew I had borne a girl, I prayed that her son would be that warrior."

She laughed shortly. There was no mirth in it. He could see her plainly now and the look that scathed him put him on the defensive.

"Before me, what do I see? A bearded youth in Roman uniform, who comes against his native land with Roman steel in his hand—not to fight for the freedom of his country—not to kill invaders— No!

"This one comes—a coward—to fight an old woman!

"I never expected to live forever. I only hoped to see a grandson, to know that he was free and fine and strong, to see him as a warrior—to feel my heart burst with pride in him.

"Then I would not have feared death. I do not fear it now. A grandson who would slay a woman is not a grandson of whom to be proud. Come. Break me with your strong hands, before I die of shame. As you see, I cannot, nor would I, run.

"Here is the heart that longed for you. I will stand for your knife."

Kervashe had rehearsed many times, in his mind, what he

would do upon this day of retribution. But—this unexpected turn of events? This wisp of a woman?

He sheathed his sword. He could hardly see her in his rage and frustration. His fist, raised to strike, opened, but he could not entirely hold back the blow. Before the slap reached her face it became a push. She stumbled and fell upon her fallen crutch.

"You lying old hag!" he yelled, and flung himself in a frenzy out of the house.

None too soon was the dilapidated city rendered livable. The gray days had begun.

Lilia woke one morning to look out upon a white world. A wolf wind was howling down from the heights and a scurry of snow hid the houses that stood opposite, across the broad forum. There was nothing cheery about the sight, except the many smokes which rose only to be whipped away in a flat drift and lost in the blizzard. Yet these spoke of food and warmth and her hearth was cold and she was hungry.

She hastily dressed. She looked fondly at Tibullus, still sleeping, tucked the heavy army blanket around his shoulders in a motherly way, and set out to borrow fire.

She returned with her trenching shovel, carrying a scoop of live coals covered with ashes and held down with a thin piece of wood to keep them from blowing away. With her dagger she made shavings and laid them on the coals waiting in the fireplace. She blew with puffed cheeks, until a little baby flame rose, dancing joyously eager from one splinter to another.

"You are hungry too, aren't you?" Now, little pieces of bark and chips were carefully laid, to feed the growing infant. The fire leaped as it grew, throwing out a delightful warmth, crackling happily, as though it talked to itself. Lilia leaned back on her heels, feeling pride in her accomplishment. She was truly a soldier's wife.

She peered out into the storm. The hide which covered the narrow window hole almost whipped from her hand. Snow blew in as she made the thongs fast, but she had seen all she needed to know. Over at the Subsistence Building, rations were being issued. Even though assembly had not yet been blown, a queue was forming.

She looked wistfully at the cheerful fire. The warm room was comfortable now. She wrapped her legs hastily, grabbed up a basket, dropped in a pannikin for meal if there was any, and went out in the snow. Other women, for there were many now, were doing the same.

Lilia hoped there might be meat. One never knew lately what supplies would be available. It was only certain that they would be scant. The young King had promised much, but so far he dealt out with a niggard hand, now that he was secure in his seat at the capital.

The line inched forward in the cold. The snow whirled and grew deeper, filling in the tracks behind it. Feet shuffled and stamped out a path. The line grew longer and longer behind Lilia.

Oh, joy! There was meat. She could see the butchers wielding cleavers and hear the dull chid, chid of chopping on the blocks. Maybe it would be mule, instead of horse. Mule meat was fatter and not so stringy, even if it did taste a little like rotted pork.

A trumpet blew reveille. Lilia started. For a moment she thought it was a legion trumpet. Then she realized happily that it was from the troopers' quarters. The summons to duty would not sound for the Tenth Cohort for another hour. A squadron must be going out on patrol.

She thanked Fortuna that she was not one of "Matho's Orphans." It would have been nice, on the journey, to be able to save her poor feet, but not now.

As though he had guessed her thought, the man ahead in line turned and grinned at her. "Poor devils!" he said. "That cavalry trumpeter must have a fat lip all the time. His trumpet never gets a chance to cool off."

"It ought to, today." Lilia laughed and drew her cloak tighter.

"Well, reveille at the fifth hour—then breakfast. Stable call an hour later, whether they have time to eat or not. Fatigue call at seven, sick call at half past, and boots and saddles for mounted drill at eight."

"In this weather?"

"Verily! What's the weather got to do with army routine? They might get soft if they sit around for ten minutes. If it is too bad,

they'll be cleaning weapons, caring for saddles and equipment, and having class instruction in barracks and stables.

"Whenever Matho feels like it, he'll send them out in any weather that the cavalry can move in, for a practice march. You know, some of the boys think that a cavalryman has it easy—too easy—but not me. I'll walk any time.

"That trumpet blows recall at a little before twelve, then again for dinner, and for all sorts of drills from one to half after three! Keeps a man busy just turning over the glass for him. Then they can all sit down and count their aches and pains until the fourth hour, when they get up and grab shovels and currycombs for stables. That trumpet again!

"Retreat at five. Hurry, hurry, because supper call will blow in thirty minutes. Nothing much to do after that but polish brass, mend girths, oil leather, and gripe until tattoo at nine and taps at ten.

"Then that lucky trumpeter puts salve on his lip and goes to sleep, if he can, with his trumpet in his hand, just in case some officer might think of something interesting in the night.

"Today might be a little different. Probably all be out clearing the parade ground for mounted drill. Us too, maybe."

Lilia felt that she was coming down with a bad case of the horrors. Fortunately for her peace of mind, her turn came to receive rations and her good luck drove the dismal prospect of being outdoors longer completely out of her thoughts.

She ran back as fast as she could push through the deep snow with her numb feet. "Tibullus! Look! Buffalo steak! And stew tomorrow. And more coming! A lot of meat still in the wagons. Oh, Tibullus!"

Tibullus scowled. "Must you burst in like that? I was trying to think of a rhyme and now it is gone forever." He pulled the blanket tighter around himself.

"Well, hurry up and get something cooked. I'll have to get up pretty soon. Don't just stand around. Put some wood on the fire, it's cold in here. What took you so long, anyway?"

"Yes, Tibullus. At once. Porridge will be ready soon, then some steak. Oh, Tibullus, aren't we lucky?" She kissed him fondly. He grunted and rolled over in bed, waiting for the fire to blaze up.

True to the legionary's glum prediction, the Ninth and Tenth Cohorts were turned out to clear the parade ground shortly after breakfast. Tibullus sulkily drew a large shovel from equipment and marched off with the rest.

Lilia, excused from this duty, made her way to the hospital. This was becoming her regular post, even more often now that they were in garrison than when upon the march.

She shook the snow from her cloak and hung it on a peg. She greeted the man at the desk cheerily. He smiled back and followed her with his eyes as she went frisking off light-footedly to find the senior medicus, then turned back to his work feeling better. It might be a good day to be up and around, after all.

If the surgeon was pleased to see her, he hid it well. He gestured toward a table where her friend the artist was sitting, nursing a discolored foot. "Get a pail of hot water, will you? Put some salt in it for him."

Lilia was concerned at once. "Titus! What happened? Are you all right? Let me see."

He grinned ruefully. "My own foolishness. Just stupid. Yesterday I was up at the dam with a gang of surveyors from the Engineer Corps. I was holding the rod for one who was sighting through his groma. He kept saying, 'Back up. A little more. More yet.' I backed up. Backed right up to the edge of the dam and fell off it."

"Titus!"

"Oh, it isn't so bad. Just a ripped pair of breeches and a sprained ankle. Could have been a lot worse. I might have hurt my wrist or broken some fingers. Then I couldn't have painted that picture of you I promised."

"You might have been killed. Stupid!" She patted his bandage fondly.

"Just what I said when I crawled out of the aqueduct. Jupiter, that water was cold."

"This is nice and hot. There, your scratches are taken care of. Stick your foot in here. Let it soak and by and by I'll bind that up for you, too. What were the surveyors doing, anyway?"

"Just measuring the flow of water and trying to estimate how much we can depend on for the baths. They don't need to worry. There is enough for twice the number of people we've got."

The chief of surveyors had already delivered a somewhat more precise report to Manlius.

"It is an excellent reservoir, sir. The dam is constructed with a stone core well above the normal waterline, filled with rammed earth and reinforced with riprap. It measures nine hundred feet wide and two hundred and fifty feet thick at the base. The spillway is mortared granite blocks and it looks as though it has a layer of slate between the core and the riprap to hold the earth filling.

"The spillway shows some wear and ought to be repaired, but we won't be here next year. The repairs do not seem to be urgent. The lake is about three miles long and mostly one mile wide. The fishing should be very good. We sounded it in several places and found an average depth of a hundred feet."

"Plenty of water then?"

"Use all we want, sir. A veritable ocean of fresh water up there in the hills just waiting for us. All the fall we need.

"It's about four hundred feet above us. No wonder the natives built the city here. The aqueducts and canal length altogether measure less than ten miles."

"Splendid. Make out a written report and I will sign it."

By the time Titus was able to get around without a limp, he had used a considerable amount of his spare time in painting. He particularly basked in the praise of Lilia and Vardavar. He watched their animated faces bent over his work. He noticed how the light from the fire struck up against the old Armenian's face from beneath. It pointed up every deep line of character, every expression accentuated by flickering shadow or spurting flame.

"I should like to paint your portrait if I might have your permission," Titus said.

Vardavar at first demurred, then gave in at Lilia's insistence. "Though I cannot understand why you want a picture of an old shriveled woman like me."

Walking back with Lilia, he said, "I want to make a portrait of her as she is now, proud, independent, unconquered by time. She has that eagle look. I hope to preserve it—then maybe another, as she probably looked when she was young. I think I can

take away those wrinkles and let you see her so. It will be an interesting experience to sponge away those years."

"Do you think she was pretty?"

"We will find out. The soul that I think I see shining through must have been beautiful."

"Souls ought to be," said Lilia, in a somber mood. "They all start that way."

The two walked on in silence and parted at the barrack door.

For days the snow descended, softly closing in the passes. It clung to the peaks, covering them with a massive blanket and rounding their jagged contours. In the still quiet of the night, when the cold was most severe and the frost crystals bit deep into the lungs of the stationarii walking their posts in misery, they could hear the distant, sharp boom of the ice cracking on the lake.

Listening, the legion heard the sound which always followed the jar caused by the racing fissure as it streaked up the long body of water—the deeper rumble of the avalanche, indefinitely sustained, shaken loose by winter's cannonading, to add its tons of snow to the reservoir high above the city, in the hills.

Regardless of the weather, the promised supplies continued to come in. The quality was not always of the best, but once delivery had begun it was ample and regular.

Manlius, never one to leave anything to chance, saw to it that the gates of the city, heavy and well repaired, were always free to swing and that the forum-parade ground was always clear.

Drill went on without ceasing, whatever the weather, and despite the fact that great drifts filled in the city elsewhere and tunnels gave access to the buildings in it.

The men, moving in a fog of their own breath, marched and countermarched with numb feet, practicing the art of arms with fumbling hands that dropped swords they could not feel.

They complained, they swore, they cursed the lot of a legionary, but they remained healthy and occupied—which was the whole idea of their commander.

Along with the supply sleds and pack trains, women and girls continued to drift in, because of hunger, poverty, or the hard-



ships of the winter which bore down upon their mountain villages.

Manlius was no stranger to the needs of men. He did not order these newcomers driven away, although they caused a sizable and growing addition to the number who must be fed. He merely saw to it that they were advised that the legion would move on when springtime came, nor did he listen to the chiding of Quintus, who could not understand his old friend's reluctance to avail himself of the pleasures which rendered life endurable to the former quaestor.

Manlius only smiled, refused to argue, and slept alone. Sometimes Lilia called to chat. A bright and happy interlude for both.

Somehow, as though King Iskander had taken the contingency into account, or kept himself informed of the growing population of Tigranocerta, there was always enough food.

The alliances continued to form, although both parties knew that they could not be permanent. There was singing and drinking and loud talk in the sector where those of dubious repute entertained freely; there were even a few children who had come with their refugee mothers and found comfort with new, temporary fathers. In the summer there would be many more.

Out of the tunnels they peeked, bright-eyed scurrying fur-clad elves on the parade ground. They ran and played and laughed as though trouble and hunger would never come again and the grim men softened as they watched and dreamed of home.

Warm and sheltered from the wind, beneath the warren of tunnels which now gave entry to the upper stories of the buried buildings, the life of the city went on throughout the winter.

The legionaries drilled; the cataphracts paraded with red cloaks flying in the harsh blasts. Their spurs and harness jingled and their spirited mounts tossed foam from their lips as they mumbled their frosty bits. The trumpeters warmed their mouth-pieces, lest their lips stick to the cold metal. So life went on.

Atticus, the surly patrician, still muttered of desertion. Eitel tended his mules, practiced with his whip, worked on a new breastplate he was making of heavy leather, with a large metal boss in the center, surrounded by sunrays, or kept his muscles strong by swinging a mace which he alone could wield lightly.

Vorco, now a fully trusted man, was no longer considered a recruit. He had become Eitel's inseparable friend.

The pair stood near the smithy and watched Lilia cross the open parade, bundled to the ears, her curls flying loose. It was women's day at the baths. She waved happily to them and danced on with a spring in her step, red-cheeked and gay, oblivious of the weather—a child of the wind and snow.

Vorco watched her out of sight. He sighed. "What a pity that we must grow old."

Eitel still looked in the direction Lilia had gone. He said, "I have no wish for death, but when it comes I would not have it vain. It should be with purpose."

"What is there worth dying for?"

Eitel said nothing for a long moment. His eyes were fixed as though he could not bear to turn away. "If it must be and nothing else will serve, I would die for her."

Lilia spent considerable time in Titus' quarters. She helped him grind pigments and blend them with oil. She raked the fires for likely scraps of charcoal.

Titus was always scribbling, sketching, comparing one effort with another. He seemed an utter perfectionist, striving always for the ultimate and never satisfied.

One day she came in and, silently chiding him for the litter, began to set the place to rights.

Here was her own face, done only as an impression, but recognizable. She folded it carefully and put it away for Tibullus to see.

Here were sketches of the camp, a picture of a pretty little girl—she set those aside. They were worth saving, she thought.

She picked up another, done on a smooth white piece of wood. It was simple and the lines were pure. She was about to discard it, then took a second look. There was a vague familiarity about it. Where had she seen that face before?

Then it came to her. It was a study of Vardavar, before Titus added the wrinkles and lines in her face. Had he really intended to? Was he trying to do what he had suggested he might?

Whatever he had had in mind, he had done something most unusual. Something most unexpected. From the planed white

surface of the wooden plaque, the old Armenian woman looked back at her—not as she was, but as she used to be.

Titus had indeed seen behind the wrinkles to the soul. The fine contours of Vardavar's face were still there, but the creases and tiny lines were gone and with them years of suffering, worry, and privation. He had not made her young, but she was no longer old. Looking upon her thus, Lilia knew now what it was that had bothered her when they first spoke together.

The face was familiar. She had seen it before upon a terrible day of anguished parting—the face of the woman who had given her comfort and wine to drink and courage to follow Tibullus those many weary miles.

“A woman must go where her husband goes,” she had said to Lilia, out of her own precious days of knowledge. Anaitis, the daughter of Vardavar! Oh, gods! Kervashe! He came all this way hoping to find and kill his grandmother! Has he changed his mind? Is he waiting?

And now Lilia knew what she must do with this knowledge. Kervashe must be told if he and Vardavar were ever to be happy together.

## “MY WARRIOR!”

The days imperceptibly lengthened. When the sun struck down into the valley in which Tigranocerta lay, icicles formed upon the eaves and dripped into the high snowbanks. These began to shrink and grow less deep.

Winter was by no means over. There were other storms, but none of great fierceness. There was always some warmth to follow. It melted away the new coatings which were left on the parade.

Hard with constant exercise and exposure, the legion anticipated the clearing of the passes to renew its journey.

Now they were assured of safe passage through Armenia, the women counted the days which remained before the inevitable parting. They waited, with varying degrees of resignation, to be left behind.

Even Quintus was often silent. His dark-haired girl clung to his arm when they walked the parade, now dotted with puddles from the melting snow. Together they saw their reflections in the water and did not meet the eyes of those they met.

Long since—when she had first seen the sketch, in fact—Lilia had gone to Kervashe and told him what she knew concerning Anaitis, his mother.

“You don’t know what it has been to have hated someone so long. How I have hated that old woman! And then, when the time came to do what I had planned, I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. She was so old—so little and so weak. I was ashamed of myself for my own weakness.

“I have felt that I was wrong all the while. Still—she admitted that she cursed my mother. I loved my mother, Lilia. I could forgive her the cursing, I think. People say harsh things when they

are angry—I have done it myself—but to drive my poor mother away.”

“She was not driven away, Kervashe. She went because she could not help herself.”

“Maybe. That is what my grandmother said. Perhaps she lies!”

Lilia’s voice was low and tender. She laid a comforting hand upon his arm. He let it remain there.

“If you were a woman and you loved someone, you would know how it is. I did the same thing for Tibullus and I am not sorry. A woman must always follow her husband. She told me that. If she hadn’t, I might not be here. It is for the sake of love, for the sake of honor, that women do such things.

“She told me of the good years, how she loved you, how she searched for you. She talked of your father. She said, ‘When I saw him there on parade, the wind stirring his scarlet plume—so proud, so strong, so straight—the sun gleaming on his burnished armor, I knew that he had only to say, “Come!” and I would follow him without a blessing, wherever the roads of the world might lead. With him, I think, I have trod them all.’

“I have something to show you, Kervashe.”

Lilia took out the sketch from under her cloak. He took it, still unbelieving. “My mother! Did she give you this?”

“No. It is not your mother. Titus drew the picture, looking at your grandmother for a model. Does it look that much like your mother to you—as you remember her?”

“Exactly. It *is* my mother. It couldn’t be anyone else.”

“It is Vardavar—your grandmother. I know. Think, now, on your mother’s life with your father. She went where she wanted to go. She chose her life. She was not forced to go or driven away.

“He never deserted her. She was happy with him. Their life together must have been very good—but how lonely your grandmother’s life became! Think about that, too, Kervashe.”

He went in without knocking and stood there, huge in the doorway, staring, holding the picture. Vardavar struggled to her feet and faced him, leaning heavily on her crutch. He held out his hand. She took the picture and placed it on the mantel.

Neither spoke. After a moment which seemed to stretch out into eternity, Kervashe sat down beside the fire and stared into it.

"Are you hungry?" Vardavar timidly ventured. Kervashe shook his head without answering. When she limped to a shelf, came back with a small bowl, and filled it for him with a ladle of soup, he ate.

There was no other communication between them. They sat quietly together for a little while, looking not at each other but into the fire as though they could find a common ground in the scenes formed by the glowing coals.

If they saw the same things or discovered any answers to their mutual problem it was not apparent. Kervashe got up as though his legs were made of wood. His face revealed nothing of his thoughts. At the door he turned.

"Thank you," he said. It was the first time he had spoken to her since he had come to stand in her house with sword in hand.

When he left there were tears in her eyes, but they were tears of joy.

After that he went there often. They sat beside the fire in a silent communion, not morosely but in a soft mood which seemed peaceful and soothing to both. These troubled spirits were coming slowly to a satisfactory understanding.

Time, however, was running out.

The drifts became little piles of ice. The snow line climbed higher up the peaks. The runways between the houses were exposed now and the parade was wet only by the rains of spring. Drill did not cease.

Now the trees which grew inside the city were budding and the roar of the river, which paralleled the city walls, sounded louder in the quiet of the night. Fed by the overflow of the lake and the hundreds of rills, freshets, and mountain streams that poured down from the melting snowcaps, the river rose over its banks, fringed only by paper-thin ice.

A party of engineers went up to examine the condition of the dam and came back with sober faces. They were closeted with Manlius for a long time. Afterward it was noticed that the work of making ready to move out went on with increased industry.

Titus said, “There is still thick ice on the reservoir, but the water is rising. Some of the ice has broken away part of the spillway where mortar had fallen out between the blocks and let the stonework slide. We blocked the spillway and repaired it, but not very well. The engineers are afraid to leave the planks there, because the level would rise too much.

“There is a lot of pressure against the upper rim. They say there is no real danger, unless we get too much rain or a warm wind, before the snow in the hills is all gone.”

Lilia felt, after hearing this, that she lay under a threat over which she had no control. Nervously listening to the torrent in the dark, she prayed and trusted to the mercy of the gods and the wisdom of Commander Manlius, upon which she and all those who knew him well had come so constantly to depend.

One of the lowest passes became clear enough so that wagons could roll through it. Down from Artaxata came the final requirement to fulfill the bargain between Commander Manlius and King Iskander.

Everybody likes a parade and this was a gaudy affair. Work in the camp came to a dead stop. A sentry in the high watchtower shouted down, “The water wagons are coming!” and the gates opened wide to let them in.

Lilia and Tibullus found themselves squeezed between Kervashe on the one side and Antimon, the Greek inventor who liked to play with steam, on the other.

First came the armed convoy which always accompanied a food shipment. There were hungry men in the hills. If a man is hungry for one day, he will beg—two and he will steal—while on the third he is likely to kill.

Then the food itself. Wagons of grain, meat on the hoof—a bull, half a dozen scrawny cows, quite a large flock of sheep, and a few goats.

In the murmur which greeted this welcome sight, Lilia heard Morgo’s clear voice rise. She knew it well.

“Look at that lovely bull! What a chance to hold an initiation for Mithras. All he means to those rascal butchers is two hundredweight of meat.”

His complaint was drowned as the beautiful new wagons rolled through the gates, for they were greeted uproariously.

"Who cares for dry marches now? Me for one of those, or I'll never crack whip over a lazy mule again: The King has really laid himself out for us this time."

King Iskander had indeed completed his agreement to the letter and in style. Each tank wagon was drawn by a six-mule team, matched pairs, glossy black, plump with good feeding and well groomed. Little bells jingled on their harness and their heads were crowned with nodding red plumes.

Red also were the large and massive wheels, expensively rimmed with heavy iron. The wide, deep bodies were sky blue and all fittings, including chains and traces, were black.

The ten wagons were built to a uniform scale. Manlius estimated an approximate empty weight of two tons overall and a probable capacity of seventy-five hundred pounds, or between nine hundred and a thousand gallons each.

With this extra supply added to their usual store for ordinary requirements, he thought, no desert on the route should be more than an inconvenience. No need to load the wagons now. Just enough water in each to keep the pitched seams closed.

There was certainly water enough around. Too much, if anything. As though to punctuate his musing, the roar of the river took on an imperceptibly deeper tone. It was still rising.

Antimon nudged Tibullus. He pointed at one of the wagons.

"Those Armenian smiths and wainwrights may be good, but the coopers didn't do so well. Look at those spigots."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Wood. All of them wood. I could make better ones myself with some of those copper tubes I found under the baths. I'll ask the Old Man to let me refit the wagons with copper."

Now all the lower passes leading down to the plain were clear. The last supplies rolled in and with them a message from the King that there would be no more, for spring had arrived.

There was a counting of days. To many, Tigranocerta had come to be a second home. There were tearful preparations to say good-bys. Women, who knew they could not follow, wept in the night. Soldiers, who had formed attachments without con-



sidering the eventual cost, went about their duties with grim faces. Children, too precocious for their years, looked forward with resignation to the hunger they had not known for months in this winter haven. There was even a small cemetery which would be hard to leave behind.

Only with Quintus and his winter love was there a parting without sorrow. They had come together, knowing each what the other was. One morning he woke to find her gone. He shrugged.

There would be others for her. He hoped it would be the same for him.

Up in the hills there was a secret gathering of men. They carried picks and levers and iron bars. They made plans, also, for the early departure of the legion, but in their own time and in their own way.

They had ropes and barrows and surveying instruments, like those who had come there in the autumn to study the strength of the dam. These, however, came in the night, and worked only to destroy. Their uniforms were Parthian, but though they spoke only Koine among themselves, their accents were Roman.

Purely by accident a small group of engineers went up on a routine visit, early one morning, when a warm rain was falling, to discover why the level of the river had suddenly dropped. They never reached the lake.

From a distant point, the clink of iron upon stone reached them clearly in the thin mountain air. They moved forward cautiously, off the path, pushing into a thicket of brush where they could spy without being seen.

The plank flashboards had been replaced in their slots above the spillway. No water was coming down. The reservoir was rising rapidly and wind was sending a spatter of spray along the top of the dam. Soon rills would pour over in many places if the planks were not removed.

Even if they were, it might already be too late. Once attrition began, the increased torrent of impounded water would swiftly eat into the exposed earth beneath. The many little streams would undermine the riprap. They would gnaw at the hidden core, weakening the whole apron of the dam. Against this crum-

bling obstruction, four and a half billion gallons of water, twenty million tons of pressure, were concentrated in one deadly, overwhelming thrust.

Tigranocerta lay, unknowing, directly in its path.

The engineers looked at each other with horror. Faces were gray with fright and the common knowledge of impending disaster. They had come mounted, but they were seriously outnumbered and armed only with light hunting bows, on the chance that some game might be routed out. There was nothing they could do to stop these men.

As they watched, a ponderous slab of rock was pried loose from the spillway. It tumbled down the face of the dam, a hundred-foot fall into the stream. A spurtle of water and mud shot out into the air from the place where it had been. It was no larger than a finger, then rapidly as thick as a man's arm. The Parthians, if such they were, continued their hurried labors.

The engineers had seen enough. They backed carefully out of the thicket, hastened to where the horses were secured, turned them on the trail, and started at a mad gallop for the city.

The snows above would now send down streams, growing in size. The lake would rise even faster. Should there be an avalanche into the lake waters, which was quite possible at any time, nothing more would be necessary. The resultant wave would finish the destruction already begun.

The engineers spurred their horses. They plied their quirts. The ten-mile journey was a steep down gradient. The sight of rising waters, when they pounded along close to the river, did nothing to encourage them. There was mud in it and it was rapidly becoming turbulent. When they entered Tigranocerta, their horses whistling and heaving beneath them with sides streaked with bloody foam from the raking steel, they dashed up the streets, separating in all directions.

"Out! Out for your lives! The dam is breaking!"

Luckily, while they had been away, preparations were already far advanced for evacuation. Most of the wagons had been loaded or were in process of so being.

Manlius had, for once, taken the advice of Quintus, who had long dreaded the threat of rising water. Lately he had talked of little else. Secretly impressed, Manlius ordered a general assem-

bly, earlier than he had intended, though he could not forbear to poke a little gentle fun at his gloomy friend. He suspected that Quintus missed his pert companion more than he admitted.

“You calamity howler!” said Manlius. “You Cassandra! Always preaching disaster. Always finding excuses to turn back. Always croaking like a raven before a storm.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?”

“Cassandra was right.”

Manlius went away with a maggot gnawing at his brain. It continued to nibble. With some anger at himself for allowing Quintus to unnerve him, yet with an indefinable sense of doom approaching, he called for his trumpeter and had the legion assemble in marching order, with full equipment.

It was standing to, engines being disassembled and laden, artillery drawn up ready to roll, and the tank wagons and baggage train preparing to follow, when the engineers raced in with their deadly news.

Instantly there was organized turmoil in the streets. The teamsters whipped up their horses and mules, regardless of their proper place in line. There was no time to quibble over precedence. That could be straightened out on high ground.

As though the gods loved the Thirteenth, high ground was available not far away. The road from the hills had come down into Tigranocerta. Upon it, upward to those hills again, the legion—horse, foot, rolling stock, and ponderous engines—moved out, intact, in the driving rain.

Following as stragglers, knowing this was good-by, and lamenting its unexpectedness, the women and children so abruptly bereaved streamed along beside the marching men. There was weeping, a holding out of hands for a last embrace, a coming together for one more kiss and a renewal of promises that each couple knew could not be kept.

“He loved me and left me.” The old, old story—always painful, always new. Manlius looked back, checking the evacuation. Yes—Tibullus’ wife marched close. He breathed easier, seeing her understanding answering smile. He felt a lift in his heart.

Below them all, the river roared in fury. It overflowed its old channel and sent a film of tawny-colored water into the streets.

In it now were tossing tree trunks and stumps ripped from the caving banks farther up the stream.

Boulders rolled like dice in the flood, their rumble adding to the uproar which rose to the ears of the onlookers. Above all the nearer sounds, menacing as they were, there came a drone, a sonorous note from far upstream, which no one could mistake.

The sound of an approaching cataract, pushing a mass of detritus before it, pressing against the sides of the valley, rushing like a spring tide upon the doomed city.

It was at that breathless moment of waiting that Lilia heard a madman's howl in the ranks behind her. Kervashe, leaping down over the edge of the mountainside in great bounds, regardless of danger, sliding down precipitous inclines, abandoned shield and weapons strewing the track behind him.

He let himself roll, bunched into a ball; he jumped insane distances; he fell; he ran knee deep in water. He plunged into the roaring river and was lost to sight.

He came up, battered, bleeding, on the other side, in the flooded street and still alive. A wave cast him disdainfully against a crumbling building. He seized its corner, his fingers trailing as he was swept along. He caught and held to a crack. He stood again, fighting hard to keep his feet.

Now he was in the shallows and moving faster, toward a certain house where the watchers could see what he had seen. Vardavar, somehow left behind, by some unknown reserve of strength had been able to climb to the roof of her house. It was already surrounded by a boiling, brownish-yellow flood of churning water.

The line of dirty foam rose fast along the walls. The parade ground was hidden completely and logs were floating there. A scud of froth whipped down the street from branches of trees caught between the arches of the aqueduct, which crossed the valley at the upper end of the city. Trash of all sorts struck into this barricade, filling in the interstices. It held back the water temporarily, like a beaver dam.

The approaching roar of the oncoming deluge came closer. It drowned thought. It seemed that the very fabric of the hills vibrated to its rush.

Through all this terror of mounting surf and sound, Kervashe

moved single-mindedly, his purpose to reach the house his desire was set upon. He disappeared in a whirl of debris. An involuntary groan swept through the ranks. He was up again, shaking his head dizzily to clear it.

A stump tossed its long arms and floated away downstream from where he had been struck down. Then he passed through the small opening that the risen river had left in the doorway of Vardavar's house and went in, out of sight of the onlookers on the heights.

The strong current shook the house. Farther upstream, others had already collapsed. The submerged masonry caused rapids to form. Against the aqueduct, the water rose higher yet.

A cheer went up. There were two figures on the roof. Kervashe held the old woman in his arms. She appeared to be pleading with him. It was easy to guess that she was begging that he leave her and swim while it was still possible for him to do so. They could see him shake his head and try to drag her to the edge of the roof.

She pulled away once and he had her tightly clasped again. Now she did not resist, nor did he urge her further. Down the valley, charging at the aqueduct, was coming a white, tossing bore of water, studded with black, outjutting, splintered chunks of timber and stone, feathered with jagged waving roots and branches.

It was a moving wall, a precipice—it was racing annihilation itself. There were only seconds before it would strike the aqueduct. Nothing could hold it back.

Kervashe held her tight. He swung her around so that she could not see Death racing at them.

Vardavar's voice was not loud, but his ears were sharpened to hear every breath. He would have known what she said in this suspended moment if it had been in a whisper.

“Can you forgive me?”

The water was above the level of the rooftop. It swirled about their ankles, but the house still stood. The aqueduct was tilting. Over her shoulder he could see it sway toward the city, toppling, about to release the impounded flood behind.

“Ah, little mother of my mother, let there be no talk of forgiveness between us, unless we both forgive!”

He held her painfully tight. To her it was a loving clasp. Her eyes were fixed upon the Temple of Vahagn, where her husband had been slain.

“Kiss me, my warrior,” she breathed—and the wave rolled over them both.

## INTERLUDE

During the winter a message had come up by slow stages from the Roman ambassador in residence at Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital. A right of passage was being considered by Artabanus, the aged Parthian King.

It was suggested that an embassy would meet the Romans to discuss the matter at the medial point of the confluence of the river Zab and the Tigris. There was no large city here and thus small danger of friction between the legion and any great amount of the touchy populace.

A temporary grant, bearing the seal of Artabanus III, had been issued to this halfway place only. Presumably the embassy was already on its way up from Ctesiphon.

So, observing a tight vigilance, the Thirteenth came safely through the foothills and forests and rolled across the Parthian frontier, where they had not expected to be able to go.

They marched southeasterly toward the meeting place, one hundred and fifty miles away. Following the Adiabene Mountains toward the pass where Alexander had broken the Persian strength at Arbela, they came close to the stream which was part of the longest tributary of the Tigris.

The legion was now well within the boundaries of mighty Parthia—possibly, said Quintus, a trap out of which they could not break.

Here lay Nisibis—an important link in the chain of cities which safeguarded the Silk Route. Manlius had expected to be received pleasantly and was surprised to find its gates barred against him. No supplies were available, by means of either diplomacy or coin.

Manlius and Quintus discussed the situation. Quintus suggested that the people must be on the verge of declaring this

strong frontier fortress a free city, aloof from the quarrels of the three powers, Rome, Parthia, and Armenia. Manlius doubted this but put the legion on a three-quarter ration.

The march went on smoothly and without incident. As it continued they came through a network of small rivers and creeks, all of which emptied into and increased the flow of the Tigris until it resulted in a navigable stream. Here they saw, for the first time, reed boats and the round wicker craft covered with water buffalo hide, which floated on the river like large bowls. From these the fishermen plied their art.

On land they traveled through a country of rounded mounds, grown over with vegetation, brush, and small trees. There were waving reeds which obscured outlines seemingly arranged in regular order as though artificially created by man instead of nature.

The villagers could tell nothing of the meaning of the mounds. They smiled, shrugged, and flashed their expressive eyes. "The gods and the giants fought here and buried their dead. Buy my eggs, lady soldier? Buy my fruit?" So Lilia and the rest marched across the forgotten ruins of ancient Nineveh and no ghosts hindered them.



## NEWS FROM HOME

The triangle of land where the Zab meets the Tigris bore no resemblance to its appearance of a week before. Villagers had been turned out of their mud huts and those squalid hovels leveled. Fields of grain were trampled flat or burned. In their places stood magnificent tents floored with heavily piled rugs and hung with silken draperies.

Rose water perfumed the pavilion of Valens, the Roman ambassador who had come up under the escort of Surena Pacorus, trusted field marshal of the armies, the Surena's wife, and their combined retinues.

Long years of good living at the capital had taught Ambassador Valens to appreciate the joys of a sybarite. The present situation angered and revolted him. In his opinion, this meeting with the legion could easily deteriorate unless delicately handled. Should there be a clash of wills, should there be too great a difference of opinion between the Surena, representative of Artabanus, and Manlius Varro, commander of the Thirteenth Legion, the uneasy peace which now existed between Rome and Parthia might quite abruptly come to an end.

This would inevitably result in the loss of the luxuries to which Ambassador Valens had become so fondly accustomed, possibly even his own life, which he valued more. At best he would become a hostage, a precarious status. The persons of mediators were by no means sacrosanct to rulers of empires.

Fully aware of these uncomfortable prospects, he had no intention of favoring Varro's interests above his own. He awaited the arrival of the Thirteenth with little enthusiasm.

A large expanse of ground had been cleared and made ready for the accommodation of the legion. Into this the column

marched at a quick trot, paced by the tuck of a single drum, before the scrutinizing eyes of the assembled Parthians.

While they watched, the routine of setting up camp went on as though there were no critical observers, nor did Manlius neglect the usual precautions of defensive ditch, with scarp and counterscarp, and agger, a rampart well spiked with the sharp stakes that were part of the legion's standard equipment.

Not until all was completely functional did Manlius condescend to receive visitors. Even then, it was with the attitude of an autocrat, conscious of his own strength and position, honoring an equal with his hospitality.

The amenities were no more than perfunctory courtesies at this first meeting. Since headquarters would not be large enough to accommodate the number of distinguished callers, the officers' mess tent had been made ready. It was furnished with spartan simplicity. Long tables, benches, wines from Manlius' own supply, and platters with small, sweet cakes—no more.

The ambassador's shrewd glance took in the arrangements as he was ushered in. The display was ample but not lavish; expressive of Roman might and contempt for formality. It set the tone for the coming colloquies, as though Manlius had said outright, "Let us face each other, knowing what we are, without evasions and with plain speech."

Manlius rose from his seat at the head of the table. As host, he did not go to meet his compatriot, bowing as to an equal, although, politically speaking, he was outranked.

If the ambassador was annoyed by the lack of courtesy he did not show it. He advanced the length of the tent and made himself known.

"I am Gaius Aemilius Valens, ambassador to His Parthian Majesty. I bear his official welcome to his territories, an offer of hospitality, and a guarantee of his protection."

He handed Manlius a scroll, tightly banded and ornate with dangling seals. Manlius received it without breaking the seals and laid it upon the table. He turned his gaze upon the couple at Valens' side.

The ambassador, a little flustered at being treated with scant courtesy, introduced them.

"The Surena Pacorus and the Lady Roxana. The Chief Surena

is at present occupied with state affairs, during a temporary indisposition of the King of Kings, Great and Illustrious Brother to the Sun and Moon, Mighty Arsaces, Artabanus III. The field marshal has full authority to speak with his voice and sign all agreements and treaties."

Manlius smiled for the first time, in greeting. A tiny gesture brought the staff officers to their feet. They bowed deeply, in open admiration of the Surena's lady. She colored faintly and returned their bow with a slight but gracious inclination of her head.

Her grave gray eyes, however, were fixed intently upon Manlius as though she recognized something in him that she feared.

Pacorus had a frank, open countenance in which there seemed to be no obvious guile. As though he wished to make it clear that his intentions were peaceable and that he trusted implicitly in his high station for protection and in the honor of his host, the Surena had come entirely unarmed, except for a small jeweled dress dagger.

His face was clean shaven, as befitted his youth, although the nobles who attended him, now gathered about the lower tables, displayed spade beards and elegant curving mustaches.

The men wore their hair arranged in curls, rather like bunches of grapes, one beside either temple, puffing out under tall steeple-crowned hats edged in fur. Their tunics were stiff with embroidery in gold and silver thread. All the nobility, ladies as well as men, were resplendent in embroidered trousers, baggy, and with drooping parallel pleats, differing only in weight of material, for those of the rainbow-garbed ladies were diaphanous.

As the evening air was chill, cloaks had been worn, with an overall diamond pattern picked out in gold. These were of heavy white wool, trimmed with sable and marten. When they were laid aside, the effect was overawing to the more simply garbed Romans.

Quintus eyed one of the most gorgeous and muttered, not so low that Manlius could ignore him, "What a lovely dream of a man he is! I wish that I was a woman, so I could kiss him."

Manlius quieted him with a stern look and turned his attention to the Lady Roxana, offering her wine and sweetmeats. She gave him a dazzling smile and accepted one of the smallest of the

cakes, nibbling it with tiny pearl teeth so daintily that she dropped no crumbs.

She sat beside her husband, watching him with such adoration that it was plain to the Roman officers that the two had not been long wed. Occasionally she exchanged words with her lady in waiting, an equally exquisite Bactrian girl with a sweet expression, who was introduced as Enine, affianced to one of the sons of Artabanus.

Manlius suspected that this might be for political reasons. He knew that Bactria was a province of the Parthian Empire, held within it, originally by conquest, and now by ties which were becoming more strained. Should Enine, princess in her own right, Valens whispered, marry the Parthian prince, those ties could be strengthened permanently. Manlius thought she looked sad.

He raised his glass to her and she favored him with a faint smile. After that he caught her watching him when she thought herself unobserved.

The ladies did not presume to join in the conversation. The Romans heard the low voice of the Lady Roxana only twice that evening—when she acknowledged the introduction of the officers personally and when she made her adieus, before leaving, her hand resting lightly upon the Surena's arm.

More was unnecessary. The assembled staff came under her spell with no more than the use of that small amount of charm. They regretted the lack of opportunities for fraternization. If these fair Parthians were typical of the women of the land, there should be no cause for war.

The meeting consisted of generalities, carefully skirting any touchy issues. The weather was mentioned; the tedium of travel; the difficulties of supply. The political situation was not discussed. Both groups parted amicably—on the surface, at least, good friends.

Business of another sort came upon the following day, when it was Surena Pacorus' turn to hold court in his splendid pavilion, on his own ground, in the Parthian encampment.

He and his lady sat side by side on twin high seats, almost like regal thrones. The Surenad Roxana wore a towering, double-peaked headdress which seemed too heavy for her childlike

body. She was covered from her jeweled neck to her sandaled feet with a long, almost transparent robe of blue silk.

Two necklaces of turquoise and silver were almost hidden by her partly open cloak of state, hasped only at her neck with a golden dragon pin with ruby eyes. One necklace was short. The other reached lower, with a topaz pendant lying on the navel.

She fingered these nervously, as though she drew comfort from the smooth stones. It was the only action which betrayed her unease, as the conference became tense and strained.

The Surena's garb was unchanged. He looked older in the light of day. No one would have mistaken him for less than what he was—a noble of a high-ranking and ancient family, which held its own traditions, born to rule and born to lead. He wasted no time in coming to the point.

"I am advised," he said with a nod to Ambassador Valens, "that you are upon a mission authorized by your government, with whom we are presently at peace, to journey through and beyond our boundaries. What is your business in the East?"

"That I am not at liberty to divulge," said Manlius, somewhat taken aback at the abruptness of the question. "I can only say that it is not detrimental to the interests of Parthia."

"I am inclined to doubt, Commander. Not that I question your sincerity," Pacorus hastened to add, "but in my opinion, and I can assure you in this my King would concur, any excursion of an armed force through my country, regardless of size or nationality, would, at this time, be looked upon as little less than invasion.

"You may not be aware that the mighty Artabanus, upon whom be peace, is in lamentably poor health. It can hardly be described as a 'temporary indisposition.' As a matter of fact, the probable succession is now being discussed. It might even take place while we are still here."

"I am deeply concerned to hear of His Majesty's infirmity. I do fail to see what bearing it has upon my mission. Surely our prompt passage through his dominions cannot affect Parthia's internal problems."

The Surena's placid visage retained its mask of good humor, but his voice took on a tiny edge which was not lost upon the Romans.

"A little over a century ago, Commander Varro, a compatriot of yours named Crassus came knocking at our borders with a somewhat similar request.

"He claimed that his only interest was the subjection of certain Greek cities to which Rome held title, desiring their tribute and their fealty. After this had been accomplished, he advanced into Parthia with a force of eight legions. This invasion was for his own private gain and not with the sanction of Rome.

"I am certain you know what happened to that armed gang of treasure hunters. I should be most unhappy to find our pleasant acquaintance abruptly terminated. It would grieve me in the extreme to find it necessary to authorize that molten gold should be poured into your mouth as it was with Crassus. I should also dislike to see your body flayed and your skin stuffed with hay and paraded as a trophy through the streets of Ctesiphon.

"Such a deplorable incident would undoubtedly prove conclusive to the disturbed constitution of my aged King."

"I also," Manlius replied, "should dislike such an unfortunate and improbable contingency. It is fortunate that there is absolutely no reason why it should ever arise to the sorrow of us all.

"I can only say that, in my opinion, Crassus was a fool and in all humility and respect to your ruler and his just suspicions, that not all Romans are so grasping, or so easily overwhelmed.

"Should it become necessary to put our separate strengths to a test of arms, the contest might have a different ending. Let us hope that we can settle our differences amicably like men of good will and common sense.

"All I require is a temporary right of passage. While I regret that I am unable to make plain what I seek, I can say that it is for the purpose of exploration and not for loot. It is more for the reasons of advancing knowledge than any other."

The Surena laughed. "I find this difficult to believe, knowing Romans as I do. Any knowledge they have ever gained has been diverted to the furtherance of extending their borders and enslaving neighboring peoples."

Roxana, who had been fingering her pendant with a trembling hand, touched his arm. He leaned his head toward her to catch her whisper.

"My lady is somewhat oppressed by the heat, it seems. I must

beg your indulgence, sirs. We shall speak of these matters again tomorrow."

A ruse? Manlius wondered. Or did she—and they—truly fear him?

Pacorus stood up as a signal that the discussions had come to an end. Manlius and his officers reluctantly left the pavilion.

In Valens' tent the ambassador reopened the question from his own point of view.

"I beg you to consider, Commander Varro, the utter futility of persisting further in this mad venture. The Parthian is an ambitious man, impetuous in thought and action, possessed of small patience. He has never been defeated in battle. The force at his immediate command is equal to yours and he can call up levies in a matter of days which would overrun us.

"I feel that his instructions from His Majesty are elastic. Inside those boundaries, he is quite free to act as he pleases. There is not the slightest doubt of his extreme patriotism. He will act in the best interests of his own country, as he sees them. If he can advance his own interests by doing so, he will not hesitate an instant.

"This is not a matter to dismiss without serious thought. You run the risk of plunging the two empires once again into a long and continued struggle."

"I am under definite orders from the Emperor," Manlius replied. "They are quite specific in their terms and I have given my oath. It is impossible for me to deviate from them in the slightest degree.

"Furthermore, I believe that we have already been under attack. If there must be war, the first blow has been struck—a coward's blow—by the Parthians."

"How so?" Valens looked surprised. Manlius briefly outlined the events in Armenia, describing the flood so narrowly escaped and his suspicions concerning the mysterious destroyers of the dam.

"Those men were seen weakening the spillway. They wore Parthian garb."

"Believe me, I have heard nothing of this. I am sure the Surena is equally ignorant. He has contacts, spies if you will,

who would have advised him of such a despicable action. What he knows, I know. We have few secrets from one another.

"I have been told that you had problems also in Dyrrachium and Jerusalem and on the way here?"

Manlius ignored the remark, although Quintus looked up quickly. He wore his twisted grin.

Manlius said, "What if the field marshal had personally authorized it? Would you have known then?"

The ambassador was aghast at the thought. "Impossible! He would be incapable of plotting such a deed. Ambitious as he is, Surena Pacorus is an honorable man.

"Should it come to a test of arms, he would meet you face to face. He would scorn to take a mean advantage. The knife in the back is not his way.

"For example, when the old king dies, which cannot be long now, many will look to the throne. The chief contenders will be the sons of his first wife. One is Gotarzes, a violent man of harsh and cruel temper, to whom Princess Enine of Bactria is pledged; the other is Vardanes, a decent fellow, who would make a good King.

"Vardanes and Pacorus are dear friends. Their wives are sisters and naturally the Surena favors Vardanes. Yet I am confident that, should Gotarzes be selected by the Council of Satraps, Pacorus would set aside his personal feelings and support him, even should Vardanes be put to death by his brother.

"It is quite likely that this may occur. If it does, there will be no civil war of the Surena's instigation, no matter how much he may mourn his kinsman by marriage. With him, love of country comes first."

"With me also. I have given my oath and I cannot break it. I must go on to the end, peacefully or by force of arms, wherever that may be."

"And your men? Will you lead them blindly to slaughter, because of a foolish oath, carelessly given? What purpose will that serve?"

"They are Romans. I am a Roman. You also, Ambassador Valens, are Roman. If you have not been advised of the purpose of my mission, it must be that you are considered too close to the Parthians. You, of all men, should understand that Romans do



not give oaths carelessly. Or have I been away in Spain too long?"

The ambassador flushed. "I only meant that, in view of the coming invasion of Britain, it would seem impolitic and dangerous to antagonize Parthia at this time. Why fight on two fronts? One enemy at a time is surely enough, particularly with the plebeian unrest in the city and the tremendous expense of keeping them quiet, with the grain dole and the games."

"We have not had recent news from home. I had not heard that an invasion of Britain was imminent."

"Oh yes. Quite. It has been well planned. We're going to get those arrogant Celts this time. The ships are all gathered.

"Four legions are going. The Ninth Hispana, Aulus Plautius' old command, the Second Augusta from Strasburg, and the Fourteenth Gemina out of Mainz. The Twentieth Valeria Victrix has already reached the Channel, by forced march up from Cologne, and is waiting for the others to join it at Boulogne.

"I understand that the Sixth Victrix will be sent in later as supporting troops and possibly will remain there as a permanent garrison unit after the pacification of the islands."

"I have a brother—centurion in the Sixth." Manlius looked thoughtful. "So the bull comes out of Sarmatia"—referring to the shield insignia—"to go into that land of fog, with the goat, the boar, and the wheel and star.

"Well, he always hoped for swift advancement. Maybe this will be his opportunity. But—this will leave Germania relatively unoccupied. How about replacements?"

"Another reason why you should consider returning. Your legion could be useful in Italy. The Tenth Gemina is moving back into the *limes* to protect Strasburg. The Thirteenth Gemina is being shunted over to take the place of the Sixth in Sarmatia—"

"One moment." Quintus sharply interrupted. "This is the Thirteenth. There is no Thirteenth Gemina."

Ambassador Valens got up and went to his bookshelves. He drew out a scroll and unrolled it. He ran his finger down a long list, indicated a section, and laid the scroll in front of the bewildered officers.

"The Military Roster, gentlemen. It would seem that you have been too long out of touch with events."

"But there is no other Thirteenth. This is the only Thirteenth—the Emperor's Own!"

Manlius took the scroll from Quintus and scanned it carefully.

"It would appear that the ambassador is correct, Tribune Quintus. The Emperor's Own is no longer listed."

"Then that means we are without official sanction. I expected something all along, but not this. Do they think we are all dead? Have we been abandoned? Forgotten? What of your insane mission now?"

"You must make up your mind to turn back, Manlius. We must return, if for nothing more than to demand an explanation of this ridiculous bureaucratic error."

"Your tribune gives you good advice, Commander," said Valens. "I beseech you to follow it. I can guarantee you supplies and safe conduct out of the country. Both Surenas will be delighted to see you go. Tension will relax, all over the country."

"Your lives will no longer be in danger. I will personally authorize your course of action."

Manlius held out his open hand to the ambassador. Valens looked at it, puzzled.

"My letters of recall, Ambassador. I cannot turn back without them."

"I have none such, nor any other message for you." Valens' voice was slow, heavily fraught with the knowledge of Manlius' unalterable decision.

"Then my original orders still hold. We must go on."

Quintus looked resigned. There was irony in his voice. "Then we are all aimless wanderers. For what, old friend? Shall we be the excuse to plunge all Asia into a blood bath, so that our lunatic emperor may be called Parthicus?"

Now it was the ambassador's turn to show astonishment.

"To what Emperor are you referring? Have you really been so disconnected from the world in those barbaric mountains?"

The air in the tent was heavy with silence. At length Valens emptied his money pouch on the table. He pushed a few coins toward his startled guests. "The latest issue, if you need proof. See the weak chin, the bulging forehead, the date? Claudius is Emperor now. Caligula is dead! Now do you understand that no word given him can possibly bind you?"

The faces of all but Manlius brightened. The ambassador leaned back in his chair, satisfied with the sensation he had created. His pleasure was short-lived.

Manlius shook his head. His lips were set. His face showed an obdurate determination which would admit of no further discussion.

"We shall go on, with or without supplies, with or without your sanction or Parthia's.

"If it must be that we die on Parthian soil, it will not be of my seeking, but our faces will be toward the East where we were ordered to go and where I gave my sacred word that we would go."

Looking upon Manlius and his staff as they left, for one proud moment Valens felt himself a Roman of the old times. Not an equivocal diplomat, not a soft-muscled sybarite to whom pleasure and rank were of principal importance, not a devious and venal planner for personal aggrandizement—but a fighting man of the dead Republic.

It could not last. Even while his face contorted with self-contempt, knowing what he was, the Surena came in from the antechamber where he had been listening.

He looked at Valens. It was a commiserating, understanding look and it did not soothe the ambassador.

"You heard it all?" he muttered.

Pacorus nodded. "A worthy opponent. You did well. Do not reproach yourself for failure. No man could do more against such an antagonist.

"There is still hope of turning him aside. Perhaps a woman can do better. Soft arms can be more binding than iron chains and a net of perfumed hair may be stronger than a web of steel."

## TEMPTATION IN PARADISE

Surena Pacorus returned to his own pavilion in a thoughtful mood. His young wife sat listening pensively to the harmonies which Enine was bringing from a Babylonian seven-stringed lyre. The soft notes and the low voice which accompanied them were delicately soothing to his disturbed spirit as he approached.

He entered unobserved and stood for a moment watching and admiring the absorbed pair. As always, the beauty of Roxana struck him to the heart.

Who can improve upon perfection? he thought. I would not wish her changed in any way. Yet the Princess Enine is equally comely—what a pity that she is heir to such a reluctant province as Bactria.

The two girls were opposites not only in appearance but in their characters. Where Roxana was dark of hair, Enine's was light in color and lifted to every little waft of wind like golden spider web. Her eyes were cornflower blue, her skin fair, and her lips full and sweet.

Roxana's mouth betrayed her. There was a little of the tiger cat, he thought. It showed when she was crossed. He knew that he and his wife were well mated in spirit. Lovely as she was, Enine was too pliable, too affectionate, too easy to hurt.

He must take the risk now of bringing her a hurt. There was no other way. The princess knew that as well as he did. She was prepared and it had been her own will. The time had come.

Roxana looked up and smiled. She rose from her cushions and came to him, moving with exquisite grace into his arms. Enine lifted the plectrum from the strings and laid down the lyre. Her whole attitude was a mute question. To look at the Surena was to receive the answer.

"The ambassador and I have failed. Now it is your turn. Are you still willing to try?"

She nodded. It was with an effort. "If there is no other way."

"Are you afraid?"

"I saw him at the conference. He has a stern mouth, but he does not seem cruel. I studied him well. I think he might be gentle with women. Perhaps he will be kind." Enine's lips trembled and she looked down.

"It is for Parthia."

"I know." A touch of resentment was in her almost inaudible voice. A faint flush stained her translucent skin, from her throat to her cheeks. "If it were not a new thing . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

Roxana left her husband and went to the other girl, holding her comfortingly, protectively.

"It is not necessary, darling. It is too much to ask. Pacorus, there must be something else that we can do? Money, perhaps?"

"We have tried threats. We have tried reasonable persuasion. We have appealed to his patriotism. He is inflexible. Money would be the smallest inducement. We knew better than to mention any insinuation of a bribe."

He looked at Enine without speaking. She disengaged herself from Roxana's clinging clasp with resolution.

"I will go."

"You did not say if you were afraid. I would not have you know fear or shame."

She looked at him then with a straight, honest gaze. "Yes, I am afraid. But I am more afraid of Gotarzes."

Field Marshal Pacorus crossed the room and took her soft hand in his. "You are braver than many a man, Lady Enine. For Parthia, then."

She opened a tortoise-shell-paneled door in a small ivory-topped tabouret and removed a decanter of wine. Roxana held out the lyre. There was a mist in her eyes. "Your chelys," was all she said, but there was a wealth of suppressed emotion in the two words.

Enine took the instrument and slung the silken carrying cord over her shoulder. She drew a light cloak about herself and

hooded her hair. It concealed her expression and her face. She seemed small and childlike when she turned for one long, terrified instant at the entrance to look back at the safe haven behind her.

Her voice was indistinct, muffled by the hood, but they heard her clearly. There was a sob in it.

"For Bactria," she said, and went out of the tent.

Manlius sat alone in his quarters. His meditations were dark and his spirit depressed more than he would have been willing to admit, even to Quintus.

Long ago he had come to suspect that there were other reasons for this expedition than those that Caligula had chosen to expound.

That the most cogent was his own elimination as a possible competitor for the throne had not, nor would ever, become a fixation in his mind. He had always, by temperament, been unwilling to believe another person less honorable than himself. The deliberate sending of a full legion of soldiers, so priceless to the Empire, to probable destruction merely for the assured death of one man was inconceivable.

Yet the same expendability of that same number of men for the purpose of finding an excuse for the resumption of a war already almost a century old he could understand. It might even be considered a sound military expedient.

It remained only to discover a sensible reason for such a deliberate provocation of a powerful enemy. He could find none, except, as Quintus, the perpetual cynic, was fond of remarking, that Gaius Caesar had been mad.

If so, did this insanity and this death actually release himself, Manlius Varro, commander of the Thirteenth, legate of Rome, from his given word—his iron sense of probity? What of the people who had sent that despairing plea for help, concealed in a bale of silk, out of the hidden depths of mysterious Asia? Did he have the right to turn back? What then of their repatriation? What of the Eagle that he had vowed should return to Rome?

He felt more alone than at any moment in his life. Of what use is it to a man to establish through years of trial a philosophy of

life, a supporting integrity of soul, if it can be shaken by indecision in the night?

He had no doubt of the advice he would receive from Quintus. It would be nothing new. Perhaps it would be valid in the light of his own suspicions. Perhaps, after all, he should order the return.

Manlius sighed heavily. There was no one to help him tonight except the gods. Guidance then. Half ashamed of his action in seeking an omen by a superstitious appeal, he reached for his Virgil, to open it at random and read whatever his eyes fell upon.

By mistake, because the two were so close together, he picked up another book instead. When he looked at the passage his finger had touched while his eyes were closed, he found that the gods had not failed him.

Clearly as the voice of a guiding mentor, Socrates spoke to him from the page:

"A man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chances of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether, in doing anything, he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or a bad."

It was as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He breathed deeply, feeling doubt and indecision fall away. It was at that instant that his sentry challenged Enine, who came, hooded and afraid, seeking audience and bringing gifts.

Looking out through the open tent flap, for the night was warm, Manlius saw only the indistinct form of a cloaked woman. He thought at first that it was Lilia, stopping by on her way back from the hospital as she sometimes did. He bade the sentry admit her. His heart leapt with joy.

It was not until the visitor pushed back her cowl and he saw her spider-silken hair that he realized his mistake. He recognized Enine at once and, puzzled at her coming, rose from his chair and stood waiting until she should make her errand known.

Enine saw the stern visage which had so fascinated her with its strength at the conference. The craggy features, the graying hair, the lancelike erectness of his carriage, as though it would

be difficult for him to relax and unbend—all these were as she had noticed them at a distance.

Now that she was at arm's length from him and helpless in the dread Roman camp, she sought desperately for some reassurance.

When she had been instructed in what she must do, she had been told not to try to shine in conversation or appear too intelligent. She was not to adopt a mysterious attitude, unless she was certain he was a talkative person who might reveal some secret plans.

This the commander was definitely not. The silence lengthened nervously for both.

It had been emphasized that she was not to trust appearances in judging his friendly or hostile attitude, but she could not help noticing tiny crinkles about his wise eyes that bespoke an innate good humor. There was also a tiny quirk at the corner of his otherwise severe mouth. It softened his expression.

Wouldn't he ever speak? Was he a boor who did not know the polite and meaningless courtesies of welcome? The thought made her angry and gave her courage. She could stand as straight as he—if she had to.

"I am Enine, lady in waiting to the Surenad Roxana, pending my marriage to Prince Gotarzes of Parthia." Her voice faltered. She went on with determination. "I am a princess of Bactria. I bring you a gift of wine from the Surena and have been asked to give you pleasure with my music."

"It is a kind and gracious thought, Princess. You honor me with your presence." Manlius eyed her shrewdly. It seemed an unusual incident. He was not well enough informed about Parthian customs to know whether or not such an obvious invitation to dalliance was as candid as it appeared. He had no intention of acquiescing.

The girl was frightened of him. That he could plainly see. Her face was pale and she had steeled herself for this meeting—so much was evident. She held her cloak tightly about her with one delicate hand, as though she was afraid to release its clasp.

She held out a decanter of wine in the other. The silver and turquoise-mounted receptacle was in itself an object of great



price. Manlius took a step toward her to accept the gift and heard her little sharp intake of breath as he came closer.

She stood where she was and met his eyes fairly. Whatever she was—spy, pleasure girl, or the princess she claimed to be—she had courage, even though she had not come of her own will.

“Lady,” he said, “I pray you do not be alarmed. Whatever you may have been told of us Roman savages, none of us in all our long history has ever eaten little girls—at least not raw. I beseech you, be at your ease.”

Enine looked at him, wide-eyed, mouth open just enough to show an edge of straight, even teeth. Suddenly she began to laugh—a pure, musical cadence, rippling and merry, although in it there was a tinge of hysteria.

Manlius gently took her elbow and guided her into a chair. He poured out a cup of his own wine and gave it into her hand.

“We will drink together. Falernian for you, your wine for me. Then you shall play for me, if you wish, and leave when you desire. I require nothing more of you, now or at any other time.”

She sipped the wine. The color which had drained from her cheeks when he advanced upon her now returned. She was even lovelier than before. Again he thought of Lilia, and of Eunice. This girl tilted her head the way Lilia did. More than that, she smiled with Eunice’s heartbreakingly sweet smile. He would not have believed that three women, so different, could be so alike.

As though she had come to a resolve, Enine unhooked the high collar of her cloak. She shrugged it off her bare shoulders. It fell away to hang over the chair back. She laid the lyre across her lap and struck a few uncertain tinkling notes, to make sure it was in tune.

Her head was bent attentively over the strings. The plectrum brought forth sweet breves, quavers, and glissandi which in themselves were harmonious without creating a recognizable melody.

She seemed fascinated by her work. She did not look up and Manlius had an opportunity to study her without causing embarrassment.

He admired her light, gauzy garment of pale blue. It seemed no more than colored air. Her limbs beneath lent it a rosy tint

which blended harmoniously into the sheer fabric. Manlius had the thought that the revealing gown, slashed delicately at thigh and calf to show a purled flimsy under tunica, had been created by a dressmaker who was out to make a fortune by skimping on material.

He was forced to admit that Enine, noblewoman or impostor, was the one woman he had ever seen who could wear such a dress with dignity.

She felt his observing gaze, looked up, and smiled. If she still considered herself defenseless and alone, it did not show.

The lyre was tuned to her satisfaction. She touched her lips to the rim of her silver cup and their eyes met across it.

"You do not drink?" She made as though to set down her wine and he raised his cup hastily. It smelled of rose water and tasted like a blend of spring flowers and spice. It left a savor on the tongue which lingered. He could not guess the ingredients.

Manlius tasted it speculatively again and drank half the contents of the cup at a single draft. As a warm glow began in the pit of his stomach, he felt all his senses becoming heightened to a peak of perception totally foreign to anything in his past experience.

There was a nimbus of rainbow around the lamp flame, like the moondog seen when the still air is filled with frost crystals.

When his visitor set down her cup, he heard not only the clear, definite note of an elfin bell but the whisper of the compressed fibers, and felt the vibration in the wood of the table top.

The colors in the halo of light rippled and shuddered. It was like looking at the undulations of drowsy sound made visible. Manlius was fascinated. He sat rapturously watching the waves of shimmering opalescence ebb and flow.

They spread out. They impinged upon the plain furnishings of the tent and edged them all with magic. He ran his finger around the worn lip of his cup. It thrummed beneath his touch.

He picked it up. The luxurious feeling of the cool metal under his fingers brought about a tactile sensation which was exquisite in quality and seemed indefinitely prolonged. There was a richness in the feel of silver which he had never known existed.

He drained the cup and dreamily held it out to be refilled.

"With your permission, my lord." The Lady Enine—Eunice?—

Lilia?—rose and every motion was poetry and perfection. She walked to the tent entrance. Manlius heard the grains of sand beneath her feet move together and sing like piezocrystals; nay, more—for behind her he saw a line of small footprints marked about with a lambent glow. They faded slowly.

He watched and looked upon a dream come alive. "It has been so long," he murmured. She looked back and smiled. He saw her loosen the tent thongs and drop the flap to shut out the world.

The simple act held such enchanting charm and grace that it brought moisture to his eyes. The rustle of leather against leather was a muted blend of mellow sordine harmony. It was orchestrated by the airy rise and fall of her aureole of hair and the complementing breath of sound caused by the friction of her gauzy robes against her soft skin.

All this he heard, saw, or sensed. He had no way of knowing which. She poured out more wine from her decanter into his cup.

Looking only at her, he heard the gush of liquid and the breaking bubbles, as if it were a fountain flow which went on and on through a long extended moment of time. He drank again.

Enine stroked the strings of the lyre with the tortoise-shell plectrum. Both throbbed. She muted the sound of the chord to suit his enhanced sense of hearing. Almost under her breath she began to sing, her lovely eyes fixed tenderly upon him.

Manlius felt himself ensorcelled. Very deep, somewhere in his submerged consciousness, he knew that this fascinating bewitchment must come to a moment of reckoning, the price of which might be too great to pay.

He thrust the thought down. He buried it. He listened.

Afterward he could remember no words of what she said, or sang, or chanted. He listened and he was in bliss; he understood that she was pleading with him to do something, to give up something, to renounce a vow he had made. He could not remember what it was. He did not know if what he heard was framed in words or mind spoke quietly to mind.

He only knew that he must make no promises. He did not.

He sipped nectar burdened with nepenthe. He listened and

the Lady Enine brought wonder into his life which would remain throughout the rest of his days.

"I am a princess of Bactria." He saw a golden plain, which must be her home. Every grass blade of it was edged effulgently with living color. Across it moved sylphs of radiant beauty, mounted nobly upon steeds out of mythology.

It was as though she had said, "I am a peri come to you out of paradise—" for with the words, even while the prolonged notes she had created still hung, visibly throbbing, in the humming air, she leaned across the little table and kissed him.

Her soft hair surrounded his face, her perfumed breath was a waft of air across a field of asphodel; her lips upon his brought an electric thrill of ecstasy.

He reached out to touch her, but he moved with the slowness of a dream. He found only the cup, newly refilled, pressed into his seeking hand. He drank.

With each drop he found his sensations exalted. He knew that he was not drunk; he was aware that he was experiencing no normal felicities, yet the knowledge was of no importance.

Nothing mattered but the ineffably attenuated moment, which if it ended would bring about world's end at the same instant. It must not end. Nothing must change, although she was beseeching change which would inevitably bring about a culmination to bliss and a return to bleak reality. He fought against it.

A great weight lay upon his tongue. This slowed his speech but not his thought. She understood and was happy. He offered her wine from his cup. She hesitated, then drank with him, turning the cup to touch the rim where his lips had rested.

He knew what she had been saying or singing, although the music had ceased. He knew when he was being taken to his cot and being relieved of his leather and metal. He felt the fabric of his blanket upon his skin. He was aware that he was not alone, for immediately after the light went out he felt her velvet softness against the length of him.

"You shall never wed Gotarzes," he whispered huskily, seeing before him in the darkness of the tent a fierce and cruel countenance, as though he and Enine were so closely one that he looked outward through the eyes of her mind. "You are mine and mine alone."

"Always and forever thine. Never to Gotarzes now, dear lord of me! Will you give up your mad obsession and dwell with me in Bactria?"

The thought was infinitely desirable. Longing permeated his every fiber. It was in his soul to agree. The very slowness of his tongue prevented his saying so. Up from unguessable depths rose another thought. He had given a word from which he had not been, and now could never be, given release. He was bound by it until death.

In this shadowy limbo in which he floated, he had no way of knowing whether he told Eunice—Enine?—Lilia?—at once wife, lover, princess, and peri—this sad fact in actual words or whether heart spoke to heart in this long section of existence torn out of eternity.

He thought he said, and the words were desolation in the midst of delight:

"Jupiter made me a Roman soldier."

He knew the answer came, but how he did not know.

"And I, thy handmaiden, would have made thee a king."

He felt lips upon his, warm, sweet, most tenderly affectionate—forgiving and resigned.

"It does not matter, my lord. Let us forget our responsibilities and our obligations. Nothing matters now. Nothing but this."

Then bliss and the timelessness of the long night, knowing that the return of youth had slain the loneliness which had so long been his.

The trumpets of morning shattered the dream but not the memory. Only the empty decanter upon the table, still haunted by the fragrance out of paradise, lingered to prove that something of dreams never quite passes away but tinges life with unforgettable reality while it lasts.

Manlius' head was clear. When he had eaten, he went to the Surena's pavilion and asked to see the Surenad Roxana's lady in waiting.

He was not surprised to find that she was no longer in attendance, or to be found anywhere inside the Parthian camp. It seemed the logical ending to such a mystical incident.

Spirit princesses always disappear when dreams die and morning comes.

He could not be certain how much was reality and how much illusion, in those enchanted hours of the night.

But he was confirmed in his unshakable certainty that now, even more than before, life had no greater inducements to offer in order to divert him from his duty to rescue the Lost Legion and to maintain his promise to his Emperor and to Rome.

In a way, it was a relief to find that his integrity could not be destroyed by drugs and that a word, once given, was still binding. It renewed his faith in the immutable order of things.

He was never to learn, nor would it have altered his determination had he known, that the Lady Enine, princess in Bactria and lonely queen to be, although there were those who found her infinitely desirable, would henceforth remain unwedded to any man, true to her memory of a stranger.

## THE YELLOW MEN

Unknown to Manlius, during the latter hours of the next night a messenger to the Parthians rode in on a stumbling and dying horse.

He demanded immediate audience with the Surena and collapsed with exhaustion on the carpeted floor of the tent, even while lamps were being lit. Wine was hastily brought and he gasped out his message.

Surena Pacorus, roused from sleep, called an instant assembly of his officers. Lights flared throughout the Parthian camp and, seeing this, stationarii alerted the Roman fortalice.

At once the Thirteenth Legion assumed a state of arms. Engines were manned, slingers and archers lined the firing steps even as Manlius came out of his tent.

He was pleased to see that Matho's cataphracts were drawn up in readiness to maneuver on the plain and angry that the word had got to Matho apparently moments before he himself was awakened.

Manlius made a mental note to find the identity of the one who had done this. Tribune Mancinus came up. A Parthian officer, his face drawn by anxiety, followed him. "A messenger from the Surena, sir. He requests your immediate attendance upon him regarding a matter of the utmost urgency, sir."

"Quintus, you are in command. Tribune, my horse. Aides, follow me." The troop, ready for battle if must be, clattered out of the gate.

The Parthian camp was alive. Methodical haste was everywhere apparent as the Romans rode in. Sharp glances met theirs, but it seemed without obvious enmity. Tents were being struck and wagons loaded. These were hardly signs that the Surena was

planning an attack. Rather a withdrawal, Manlius thought, as the troop drew up before the conference pavilion.

He motioned to his following that he would enter alone and was admitted—in full armor, as a Roman soldier should be in the presence of enemies whom he has found unworthy of trust.

The Surena rose and extended his hand. Manlius hesitated, then took it and was offered the seat which previously had been occupied by the Surenad. This honor somewhat mollified his seething anger. He repressed what he had intended to say and waited for Pacorus to open the proceedings.

“Ambassador Valens and I have taken council together and we have come to a median ground which I hope will be satisfactory to all of us.

“Critical developments in Ctesiphon have placed me in the unfortunate position of making hasty decisions, pending the outcome of the struggle for accession to the throne of Parthia. These decisions cannot be postponed. News has arrived that my King has been called to his ancestors.”

There was a moment of tense silence. The assembly bowed their heads.

Manlius said, “May I express my condolences? Without knowing your King personally, I believe I can judge his greatness by the quality of the officers which he selected. I sympathize with your loss.”

The atmosphere lightened appreciably. The Surena said, “I thank you. I trust that you also realize that this places me in an unenviable position. As temporary military governor of this province, I must immediately decide whether to declare for Gotarzes, who has seized the throne, or for his brother Vardanes, who is residing with his family, three hundred and fifty miles away from the court.

“Messages are coming in almost hourly by couriers. My latest information is that Vardanes has been invited by the Megistanes, our body of advisory nobles, to quit his retirement and oust Gotarzes. It seems that Gotarzes has already murdered his half brother, another Artabanus, together with that unfortunate’s wife and son, to eliminate any possible contender. This has set most of the nobles against Gotarzes. They consider him likely to be-



come a ruthless tyrant. He has given many evidences of his harsh nature and cruel temper in the past.

"I have only two choices, Commander Varro, and I must act quickly. It is impossible for me to remain neutral. I must declare for Vardanes and march at once to effect a junction with his forces, or I must send my signed oath of allegiance to the usurper and accept his instructions. There is little doubt that he will immediately order me to attack you. You are a possible threat to himself as an ally to Vardanes, to whom I am inclined for the good of the Empire.

"That brings me to a second dilemma. I have discussed the matter thoroughly with my officers and we are agreed that it would not be feasible to join Vardanes and leave you and your men to march at will through Parthian territory. Your mere presence in disaffected provinces would, no doubt, bring about an extension of what we hope to contain as a mere palace revolution into a weakening and prolonged civil strife.

"This would be most undesirable, with Armenia undecided, Roman power hanging upon our western borders, the fierce Sacae ready to raid down from the north at any time, and unrest all along the marches of India.

"Either I must now accept the responsibility of granting you right of passage to the East upon acceptance of your word of honor that you will go no farther than the city to which I will send your legion into residence—or I must ask you to return to your camp and consider ourselves in an instant state of war!"

He paused. Manlius considered. The choice seemed clear.

"Where is this city in which you wish to intern us?"

The Surena snapped his fingers imperatively and a map was brought at once. He laid it across his knees.

"Here is the citadel city of Jaxikarta. It is a walled place, very strong, built upon the slopes of a mountain. It lies near Mount Labus, in the Hecatompylos Range. The small province of Hyrcania is to the north and forms the northern bastion of my country. You will be safe there from any local disturbances which may arise. For one thing, your mere presence in the city will act as a deterrent to any uprisings and keep the district quiet. There should be no trouble in Hyrcania, for the inhabitants will be advised that we are allies.

"More important to you, Commander, I would have you observe that, if you accept my offer, you will arrive at Jaxikarta having traversed in safety the greater portion of your journey through Parthia. You will have been supplied at our expense with provisions, unhindered, and with guides whom I will supply.

"You should realize that, if you accept, there are definite limitations upon your movements. The route indicated must be followed without reservation or deviations of any kind."

He waited for the answer. Manlius brooded, turning over the terms in his mind. Ambassador Valens watched him anxiously, nodding whenever he could catch Manlius' eye.

Manlius did not like to give assent. But it seemed the only thing to do. Could he trust the Surena? Obviously Valens thought that he could. Manlius, not as schooled in devious diplomacy as the ambassador, was more inclined to look deeper than the words and judge probable actions by the character of his opponents.

There had been too many efforts to bind him or influence his decisions. He had been threatened. His patriotism had been held in question. He had been abandoned by his own country.

Only the night before he had been drugged and received what had amounted to a bribe, although he had been offered not money but a throne.

He suspected that the Parthian field marshall felt certain that, as the Thirteenth was no longer counted as an integral part of the Roman army—for Manlius did not doubt that Valens had so informed him—it could be slaughtered without risk of causing an open break with Rome.

If the Parthians should discover that the purpose of his mission was not mere exploration but, doubly pronged, to open a new silk route which would by-pass their trade centers and also to rescue and bring back the descendants of the survivors of Carrhae!

Perhaps they did know. In that case, either new King would adopt the same policy of eliminating the legion. He could not stay here, indefinitely fortified upon an open plain, or risk battle now without severe, possibly crippling losses.

The certainty of crossing most of northern Parthia unimpeded

was too good to refuse. Jaxikarta sounded like a safe sanctuary.

"Can you estimate how long it may be before we shall be permitted to move on?"

Pacorus shook his head. "Unfortunately, I have no way of knowing this at present. I am confident that Vardanes will win the contest. If this province accepts him as our lord, I can merely promise that, if and when he does win, I will use my influence, which I can state without vanity is not small, to induce him to permit you to continue your journey.

"That is all I can pledge you. Even that, of course, is entirely subject to the orders of my King. You must understand that in making your decision. It is the chance you must take."

"You make conditions which I believe to be fair. I will make you one in return.

"You seem to be torn between loyalty to Gotarzes as a king in being and loyalty to the best interest of your country, in the person of his brother. Declare yourself definitely to me now for Vardanes and I accept your offer.

"We will go to Jaxikarta and leave you free to join Vardanes. I understand your difficulty and respect you for it. I should dislike to meet such an honorable man as yourself in battle and have his death upon my conscience. I must have your promise."

The Surena laughed shortly, but he did not seem offended, although some of the nobles looked ugly and fingered their weapons.

"So be it then. The issue as you outline it remains in doubt, but the demand mates with our decision. I do so declare. Let us hope we may never find it necessary to put our strengths to the test."

The words were those he had used before. Manlius pondered them as he returned to the camp. Was it so recently? It seemed much longer.

He had risked war. He had experienced love which he had thought never to know again. He had fenced with words and he hoped he had won more than a mere concession.

All this in a little more than twenty-four hours. He straightened in the saddle. His feet sat firm in Matho's new stirrups. He was encouraged by the sense of security they gave him.

If he were a lancer once more, he felt certain that he could drive the point home with greater force and precision than ever.

He felt as though years had fallen away. It would not do for the men to see him riding back with sagging shoulders. He touched his stallion with the spur. Not much—not enough to break pace from a trot into a canter—just enough to liven the beast and ride in with a flourish as a *young* commander should, to instill confidence in the hearts of his command.

There was confidence. It showed in the gripping.

More rocky roads, more mountains, more miles! Curse the dust! Damn the cavalry! Why can't it ever travel behind us?

"Wish these boots were solid iron. Hobnails don't last."

So the mountain ranges and rivers advanced to meet them, throughout the long days of march. Northward through the pass at Arbela, where the rocks remembered Greek and Persian battle cries; easterly through Media Atropatene, skirting the edge of the Great Salt Desert, dire enemy to armies; week upon week of arduous travel, but without other trouble, unusual sickness, or dread events.

The guides never failed. Sometimes wells were far apart, but there was always enough water. They were always there. They were always found. The new water wagons never became quite empty before another supply was available. Manlius began to feel that his faith in the word of the Surena was justified.

The wells could easily have been poisoned. There were numerous narrow passes and defiles fit for ambush. Food could have been buried, fields laid waste, supplies withheld. None of these dangers occurred.

The legion came up through Rhagiana and was well received by the inhabitants, who had been apprized of its approach and were ready with wagonloads of grain.

The magnificent and ancient city of Rhages, capital of the province, gave them welcome with flags and a banquet and a holiday. Here Manlius received news that there was bitter war in the south, where Gotarzes and Vardanes, almost equally matched in strength, were fighting for the throne.

There was no immediate information as to the fortunes of the young field marshal. However, Manlius had heard earlier that he

had taken his command to Vardanes, as he had promised, and was now committed in his allegiance there.

The north was quiet. Nobody here was looking for trouble. Rhages had seen far too much of that in the past and found long ago that one king was much like another, whatever his name or ancestry. It was a good place to rest for a little while. The horrors of the Niphars and the Zagros ranges lay behind the legion.

The Elburz was more to be dreaded and it was yet to come. Barring off the littoral of the Caspian Sea, where the guides said traveling would be easier, the tremendous Elburz Range thrusts up to the clouds, ragged waves of jagged rock exploding toward heaven, a remarkable barrier full of menace to man and beast.

As though the massif in itself were not enough to hinder travel, the mountains send down an intimidating spur to cut the slender ten-mile-wide strip of greenery which flanks the range, otherwise permitting travel from west to east and offering food for caravans.

This spur advances directly south into the Great Desert. It would bar movement entirely were it not pierced by the pass known as the Caspian Gates.

Syria and Parthia had long contested ownership of this pass, nor had Parthia been able to extend its territory to the west and protect Rhagiana until it was safely in her hands. To guard it, Rhages had been made into a fortified city.

It was a prosperous place. Here was funneled the treasure of two empires, from both of which Parthia as intermediary took toll. In the marts of Rhages the visitors saw the familiar amphorae of Greek and Roman wines. The mingled smells of olive oil, Spanish leather, and Damascus steel made all the men homesick.

Jostling the Western produce, fine carpetry transported north from Syria hung in the bazaars; porcelain ware, thin as parchment and almost as translucent, rang like a bell to the touch, and elegant lacquer and jade teased wistful fancies and slim purses.

The sightseers looked upon ivory worked into complicated carvings which tortured the eye, and for the first time saw silk in quantity, handled as carelessly as Egyptian cotton.

Here were the caravanserais which catered to the travelers who transported the treasures. Wagons and two-wheeled carts

crowded the courtyards. Wagoners, herders, packers, and cameleers bawled and shouted, fought, drank, loved, and paid their moieties into the coffers of the sharp-eyed tax collectors of Rhages.

The men of the Thirteenth contributed as well. There were black eyes and hangovers, bloody noses and slit skins, clawed faces and empty pouches to show, when they bragged about their good times in the dark. The medici patched up the wounds and back went the legionaries to enjoy themselves again.

Lilia was kept busy in the hospital tent. She was rapidly acquiring an education she had never asked for or expected to receive. A plump legionary whom she liked, mainly because he was one of the few who had not had all his fat stewed out of him by the trip and she could not imagine how it had been possible, looked ruefully over his shoulder at her.

He was lying on his face having a jagged wound in his upper thigh sewed up. The young surgeon lifted his mallet suggestively.

"Lie still," he commanded, "or I'll put you to sleep."

"Your needle hurts worse than that camel's teeth! Why don't you take a half hour and put a point on it? In the name of the Dog, get something besides a blunt piece of wire, will you?"

Lilia went around in front so he could look directly at her and not see what was happening.

"The Dog, you said? Are you a Greek? I never thought a Greek would willingly strike a blow for Rome."

The stout fellow winced as the medicus took another stitch. "Wish I hadn't. How should I know I would be eaten alive by a man-eating camel?"

"How did it happen?"

"Oh, there's a greasy chap with a shifty eye hanging about. He rents camels by the hourglass. He coaxed a few of us into hiring one apiece and having a race."

"Who won?"

"I don't know. I never got started. When I sat down, my camel grunted, turned his head and looked at me, and spat in my face. Then he took a sample bite—to see if I was tender enough, I suppose. I got off then, while he was still chewing and smacking his lips, and I came over here.

"If this butcher don't sew my leg to my foot, I'm going back and cut me a steak!"

"Another twitch like that one will do it," said the surgeon, casually tapping his mallet in warning on the back of the legionary's skull. He gritted his teeth and subsided.

Later, Lilia and Tibullus walked over to the caravanserai and asked for the cameleer. He looked them over with a speculative eye. All around him, camels and dromedaries bubbled and groaned, leering at the newcomers with contempt and their customary insolence.

Tibullus looked at the swaying necks as he would at so many rearing cobras, but Lilia pulled away from him and made her way warily through the herd of strange beasts.

"May I ride one of your camels?"

"Ya, bint."

She looked puzzled. He scratched under his turban. White teeth gleamed in his dark face. In atrocious Koine, he said:

"Yes, small girl child who plays to be soldier—a nice ride, very cheap."

He gestured expansively at the herd. "Very strong. Very soft saddle. Very fast. Which one, please?"

"Very hungry too?"

The cameleer considered this, slightly bewildered. Then he laughed and punched her in the shoulder with a stubby finger.

"Ah, joke! You make fun, yes? You know fat man?" He opened and shut his mouth, snapping his jaws together. Tibullus looked horrified. Lilia would not let him urge her away.

"Soldier too heavy. Brother to a barrel. Camel knows. Camel very smart. Will carry what he will carry—no more. One—two?"—looking from one to the other and holding up fingers.

"One," said Tibullus loudly, backing away. Lilia curled her lip at him and pointed resolutely at a white camel nearby.

"That one. Two sesterces." She shook them out, emptying her pouch.

The cameleer moaned as though he had been struck. He clutched his turban with both hands. "My pearl! My treasure! My Bishareen! By the beard of my father—no one but myself rides her."

His sly glance through his fingers judged the effect he was creating. It was slight.

Lilia said firmly, "No bargaining. No more money. I am a merchant's daughter."

He thrust out a lip, then suddenly capitulated. His hands shot into the air.

"Do each other honor! Coosh! Coosh! Jewel of my heart."

The white camel knelt, complaining. Lilia settled herself in the saddle. She had hardly time to realize that the saddle was indeed very soft, and even less to wonder how those long yellow teeth would feel embedded in her own thigh, before she was hurled violently forward, then back, as Bishareen unfolded herself without warning.

The camel set off with the dark man at her head, progressing around the compound along a beaten track. Lilia swayed this way and that. She felt herself becoming seasick. She wished she had known earlier that camels move one corner at a time. She was not able to lean one way before she was swung in the other.

Then she began to feel at ease and enjoy the ride. She relaxed her grip on the saddle and looked about for Tibullus. He was gone somewhere. She pouted, peering dizzily into the distance, and found him far away in a little crowd, inspecting a curious iron chariot larger than she had ever seen.

It stood beside a large pavilion of yellow silk. From the several tent poles scarlet pennons fluttered. A tall staff stood before it, bearing a silken banner with the device of a fiercely ramping dragon, breathing fire over a forked tongue which lolled from a wide-open mouth, savagely fanged.

She scowled a little, but against her will she could not bring herself to be too angry at Tibullus for leaving her.

This was a great marvel. Even stranger than the pavilion and chariot were the silken-robed people who were displaying these wonders to the curious. They were such as she had never seen or heard mentioned in the most fantastic tales.

Their skins were golden as the rind of a ripe quince!



## THE OMEN

Lilia pulled back hard on the reins. The white camel burred and hooted unhappily but came to a stop.

"Down! Down!" she commanded. The cameleer stuck out a grimy palm.

"Ah, lady. Be generous to the poor. When you smile, the glory of your countenance brings desolation to the sun and moon. Envy darkens their faces! Another sesterce or Bishareen will refuse to kneel."

"Let her stand so forever, then." Lilia flung herself from the camel's back and landed lightly on her sandaled feet. She set off at a run, leaving the man screaming crackling curses after her.

She pushed her way into the group, using elbows and knees with reckless freedom. This brought forth some grunts until the victims saw who it was. They gave way with good humor, passing her on through to the side of Tibullus.

The chariot was an awe-inspiring war machine. It was drawn by two sturdy Asian horses, broad-chested, deep of wind—seventeen hands high and giants of their kind. They tossed their heads and arched their necks. When they rolled the bit, foam flew, for they had recently displayed their power and speed.

Nearby, two replacements were being led up for their exercise, likewise full of fire and proud in the neck.

The crowd, constantly growing, watched the exchange with interest. The fine leather equipment was decorated with polished medallions and small bronze plates, as was the center shaft of the chariot.

The metal body was doubly armored with tough leather, tightly shrunken and emblazoned with ugly dragons, lions, and tigers ridden by armed demons. It was supported by an iron axle

and two heavy iron-shod wheels. These had brightly polished bronze hubs that projected far beyond each wheel rim. Each was armed with saw teeth which surrounded their long hooked points.

The driver stood in the chariot, waiting. He was an iron-thewed man, rather short, with muscles that moved like silken cables under his yellow skin. He wore no cap and his bullethead was closely shaven and darkened by many desert winds and suns. Belted around his loose sleeveless gown was a horse-headed knife, heavy as a butcher's cleaver, and a bow case hung upon his left shoulder.

He gathered up the reins and wrapped them around his left hand. He took up his bronze-shafted whip and beckoned with it to the warrior who had been talking to Manlius, Quintus, and a knot of officers.

Lilia could not see the second man's face clearly. His skin was equally weather-beaten. If he were the owner of the chariot and the leader of these people, as she judged him to be by his fine equipment, he had not favored himself above the others. They made way for him with deference as he mounted to a position on the driver's right side.

He snugged down his concealing bronze casque-helmet. The long feather crest upon it streamed down his back. When he turned to see if the way was clear on both sides, Lilia noticed that a ram's head decorated the helmet's brow. Long cheekpieces had frightening whorl patterns outlined with jade inlay.

A dagger hung at his side also, for infighting. He wore trousers and a blouse with tight-wristed sleeves. The feet of both men were bare, the better to maintain balance.

The man-at-arms made ready for simulated combat. He fitted his heavy spear into its chariot socket. It had broad lateral blades, mounted to form a diamond-shaped cross section which would open a man's chest with a fist-sized hole. He slid his left arm into a curved leather shield, patterned after the designs on the sides of the chariot and even more brightly colored.

He raised the shield like the pinion of an immense bird ready to take wing. "Wu Hail" he shouted. The long whip lashed out and cracked over the horses' backs. The crowd scattered and the equipage thundered away toward the mountains.

It dwindled into distance. It seemed to stop, but it was only swinging about in a tight circle. A dust devil boiled up in the wind. It followed the chariot as now it came rushing toward the city as though to hurl itself upon the Romans in a wild onslaught.

They stood their ground. As it came closer, they saw that the warrior stood easily, disdaining to touch a handhold, although the platform bounced wildly beneath the riders. He brandished the spear. He flung it and it chunked solidly into the target which had been set up—a stout mantelet of cedar planks.

He turned his upper body as the chariot dashed by. His arm circled and a hand ax spun to strike and bury itself beside the spear. The crowd cheered, thinking the show was over.

The racing horses veered, the wheels slid; the chariot heeled aside, tilted, and found its level again; it rumbled by on the opposite side of the target.

The warrior placed his shield into its carrying rack and unslung his powerful bow from its shoulder case. Now both he and the charioteer—who had wound his reins around a pin to free his hands—began to feather the sweet-smelling cedar with three-foot bronze-tipped bamboo arrows.

In an instant they were past and gone. In that time, ten shafts had struck home inside a circle which could have been covered by the lid of Lilia's best copper kettle.

In the wicker quivers lashed inside the chariot, the early onlookers knew that there were forty more arrows. They looked at each other.

Was this what they must face upon the Scythian plains? Were ponderous weapons like these to be hurled into their marching ranks in doomful collision, by tens—perhaps by hundreds? What could possibly stand against such force—such redoubtable men?

Their flesh crawled at the thought. Tibullus, always ruled by his fevered imagination, looked as though he were about to faint. The chariot turned for the last time and came rattling easily back toward the spot from which it had started.

The charioteer pulled up the foam-streaked horses. The warrior replaced his sturdy laminated bow in its case, tugged the spear point out of the target, and gave spear and ax to the

driver, who placed them carefully in their sockets. He then alighted.

The charioteer took a deferential place behind him but not in the attitude of a servant, while the attendants led the animals away. They walked the horses slowly, breathing them before a rubdown, speaking to them affectionately and patting their damp sides.

The warrior watched them go, his own affection plain to see. While the chariot was being placed between two tents and the wheels chained so it could not be moved, Manlius went up to the warrior to express his admiration.

"Liu Mang," he said in Koine, "you told me that your demonstration might hold some interest for us. May I say that you belittled your skills?"

"I have never seen the equal of this display, either in my own country or anywhere I have ever traveled. Your equipment is extraordinary, your archery splendid, your charioteer comparable to the best who compete in our games. He would be a sensation in Rome."

Liu Mang acknowledged the compliment with a deep bow. He turned to the driver and translated what had been said. The man inclined his head slightly. He did not change his expression. It was frigid and imperturbable. He stood with folded arms, waiting on the will of his master, who replied in the jargon:

"The war lord of Ta-Ch'in does his humble admirer too much honor. Regretfully, Honorable General of the West, this person is among the least in the land of Ch'in. It is his understanding that the Enlightened Emperor of the Sublimely Elevated Commander of the Army, who now stands before him, can darken the world with marching men. This person is informed the Emperor sits upon the throne of *wan-ch'eng chih kuo*."

Manlius looked puzzled. A robed attendant, wearing a square black hat with a vermilion button, came forward and whispered in Liu Mang's ear. His face lightened.

"Kindly overlook the unpardonable ignorance of this illiterate trader. He learns slowly, being but a witling. He meant to say 'a kingdom of ten thousand chariots.' It is so?"

Manlius shook his head. "Not so. I have never seen a similar

chariot. Is this the strength of your country's army? Its main arm?"

With some pausing for words and a little help from the scholar beside him, Liu Mang continued.

"No longer, Worthy General. For hundreds of years the chariots of the Shang Empire swept the plains of Ch'in clean of invaders. The Yu-Chi, the Parni, and the Dahae came against us. The iron-plated chariots of the Shang scattered them all, rolled them under, and drove them away. Then the Sacae and the Hsiung-Nu fought one another and us as well, but by that time Ch'in had the Great Wall to protect it and no longer needed chariots.

"Of course, the Shang were no longer there either. The Han Dynasty rules now."

He hesitated, a little diffidently, Manlius thought, and confessed, "This one is an antiquarian. He likes old things and enjoys old ways. He found books in an ancient tomb, with pictures not shown even in the Book of Mountains and Seas.

"These weapons, these chariots, are constructed in the old manner. They are impressive, but not much use against the horse-archers of this land. Against men like yours, who march on foot, they are still terrible and terrifying. Is it not?"

Manlius agreed. "Have you ever seen such men as ours before? Have the people of Ch'in met such as we are, in battle?"

"Only the people of Li-jien, in the county of P'an-ho. They are Wu-Sun, who came to us out of Parthia. We did not fight them. We gave them land so that they might have a city of their own.

"It is said that they fight in a fish-scale formation."

Manlius felt a thrill of excitement. Could this be a description of the quincunx? The harrow formation? Perhaps the close order of overlapping shields known as the testudo—the tortoise? Either might look, to the unskilled eye, like fish scales at a distance.

Quintus eagerly interrupted. "These Wu-Sun. Their skins are white like ours?"

Liu Mang nodded. "I have not seen them myself. It is said that they are white, pink, red, dark, brown—many colors. Like you, with red or brown or black hair, and eyes of gray, green, or blue. Strange people, not like us with yellow skins, black hair and eyes. Are all Westerners of Ta-Ch'in so?"

"Mostly. We come from many lands, many races."

Liu Mang repressed a shudder. "It must be dreadful to be so mongrelized. Only *wonks*—our village dogs—are so carelessly mixed in the Celestial Kingdom. May the benevolent gods blend your peoples quickly and make you one."

"Thank you for your sympathy and kind wishes, but we are happy as we are. Perhaps," Manlius added, "we can speak of the Wu-Sun later and at greater length. For the present, would you be so kind as to tell us a little more of yourself?"

"Very little to relate of this uninteresting individual. Many scholars in his ancestry. Two war lords, some bonzes, one poet. Unfortunately, Liu Mang none of these—merely an insignificant trader who longs for far places and would see strange peoples with his own indiscriminating eyes. Sad to be of so little importance before such illustrious travelers who can speak of marvels."

From within the pavilion, a gong crashed. Liu Mang glanced at the sun and said, "Perhaps redoubtable war lord and his fearless officers will share this person's frugal meal. One must confess a certain lassitude due to a deplorable weakness of the body."

Quintus muttered under his breath, "If I had been that weak at his age, I would have been a gladiator!" He bowed, as did Manlius and Matho, and followed his friends inside the pavilion.

They were met by kowtowing attendants who ushered them to their seats—silken cushions arranged around two low tables placed end to end, not quite abutting. Between them, in a circle of jade-green tiles, charcoal glowed. Set inside the heat, without actual contact with the coals, were several large bronze receptacles. Steam issued from the pierced lids and filled the tent with a savory odor.

Quintus looked around, slightly disappointed that all the servants were male. Evidently Liu Mang, warrior-trader-explorer, whatever he was, led a spartan existence and observed few of the little amenities which render life bearable in strange lands.

He was somewhat cheered to find a small porcelain cup set before him as soon as he had settled himself, containing what he recognized as wine. Their host raised his cup in salutation and sipped from it daintily.

Quintus, disdaining to follow this example, drained his at a single gulp. He instantly discovered that this had been a mistake.

Apparently the wine was distilled from grapes which had grown in Hell! He thought his throat had been scalded. His palate and tongue became numb. He cawed and water came to his eyes. He was sure that his tears must be boiling with the heat.

Liu Mang looked sympathetic. "Sorrowful regrets, valiant officer. This one should have warned his friends to drink with discretion. The gift of the gods is not to be enjoyed lightly."

Manlius and Matho were laughing. Quintus spared them a dirty look and picked up his refilled cup again. He was delighted to find that there was a more comfortable sensation in the pit of his stomach than in his throat. It rapidly spread and brought a pleasant euphoria throughout his entire body. A cautious sip proved that his tongue had not been cauterized, as he had feared.

He beamed. "An excellent vintage, my lord. A little weak, perhaps, but quite tasty. It should prove an excellent drink for the elderly ladies of Rome. I should be delighted to act as your middleman, should you decide to export for the Western market."

Liu Mang bowed. "Perhaps the possibility of mutual advantage in such an enterprise might be examined later. Shall we now dine?"

He clapped his hands. Bowls of noodles, flanked by trays of salted pickles, preserved bamboo shoots, and water chestnuts were placed before each. All were unfamiliar to the Romans.

While these viands were being discussed, the attendants removed the heavy bronzes with tongs and placed one in the center of each of the tables, where tile inlays protected the ebony and pearl-shell tops from the heat.

Somewhere a harmonious tinkle of sound began. Matho, who had an ear for music, sought its source. A light breeze rippled the silken walls of the pavilion and set airily ringing wind chimes aswing. The others studied the main course of the feast.

The cooking vessels were works of art. Small dragon and lion designs, individual in themselves, blended into a larger composition of the same faces, and in turn into a single complicated visage upon each of the four sides. This extended downward, covering the tripod legs of each pot with tiny figures.

The lids were lifted to disclose steamers filled with a white

substance which was dipped into a new set of clean bowls for the diners.

While the guests were looking upon the food with some dismay, for they had come simultaneously to the same horrifying suspicion, the steamers were taken out of the bronzes, covered, and set aside.

Below, in the body of the pot, was the main dish, a combination of chicken and pork, so thoroughly steamed that the meat fell away from the bones when it was touched by the separating chopsticks. This was placed artistically into the bowls and vegetables taken from the hollow legs of the bronzes where they had been simmering and absorbing the blended flavors of the meat above.

The Romans had little difficulty in picking up the savory slivers of chicken with the unfamiliar tools, or in pinching firmly the scraps of celery and bamboo shoots to carry them to their mouths.

However, their host, who had been eating with enjoyment, suddenly noticed that they were avoiding the other fare. Manlius caught his glance. He laid down the sticks with which he had been poking at the food out of courtesy but without enthusiasm.

He said bluntly, "It sorrows me, Liu Mang, to seem boorish and not to accept completely such well-meant hospitality as we have been offered. Such a man of the world as you are must realize that customs vary greatly in different lands. What is well received in one country is repugnant in another.

"I grieve to tell you, most gracious host, that with all our earnest desire to please we cannot bring ourselves to eat these maggots that you have offered us."

For a moment Liu Mang's self-possession deserted him. He appeared horrified.

"Maggots? You think . . . ? General, I assure you! Maggots! I would not dream of such an insult." He took a quick swallow of wine to compose himself, while he was still talking. Quintus was happy to see that the fiery brew went down the wrong way and created the same interesting effect which it had had upon himself.

When the coughing and spluttering were over, Liu Mang was red-eyed and contrite. "Lord—officers! Eat with confidence, I



pray. Be assured, this is wholesome grain. I supposed it was familiar to you. Behold!"

He took a large mouthful and seasoned it with a pickle, chewing with relish and washing it down with a careful drink.

The Romans looked at each other with embarrassment. Matho took a tentative bite of the rice. "Delicious," he mumbled, and helped himself to more. They all ate heartily without misgivings.

Tea was brought, and sweet wafers. They took both novelties without comment. One blunder was enough for the day.

By the time the meal was over there was congeniality, brought about not alone by the good food and the rice wine. Mellowness pervaded the gathering. The trader had recovered his aplomb and looked upon them with benevolent beatitude.

"This person wishes that he were to journey back to his miserable home in the company of such illustrious warriors as he sees before him," Liu Mang announced, beaming upon each of them in turn. "The experience would be one to gladden the spirits of his ancestors and make light the hearts of his grandchildren for many generations yet to come.

"Possibly some small service might be rendered, with his woe-fully inept archery, his clumsy chariots and doltish followers, and thus travel for mutual benefit in the train of the powerful and dragon-frightening war lord of Ta-Ch'in?"

"Delighted to have you along," Manlius said, somewhat drugged by the powerful wine, but not so fuzzy that he could not appreciate instantly the strength inherent in the ten chariots he had seen drawn up in the Chinese camp. If these people of Ch'in were actually the mysterious folk who inhabited the fabled land of Serica, he might be well on the way to accomplishing both parts of his mission.

To reach the land of silk, where the white Wu-Sun fought in the Roman manner, he now had the unexpected offer of willing guides.

The attendants and servingmen were all stout fellows, strongly muscled, with calloused hands and sharp eyes. He thought that their leather armor and bronze helmets were not far away. He suspected that bows and shields, if not actually carried at the moment by archers concealed behind the loose hangings of the pavilion to guard their master, could easily be reached.

Liu Mang, for all his self-deprecation, was no fool. More than mere hospitality was involved in this invitation to a lavish dinner. This was a banquet. It had been planned.

There must be a good reason why he did not wish to attempt the return trip with his relatively small company.

"Your home is far from here?" he asked in a casual tone.

"Many *li*. Six rivers, two deserts, eighteen mountain ranges. All dangerous, each obstacle in its own manner.

"We lost men on the way, to the Hsiung-Nu on the plains, also to bandits, also by fever in the marshes of Fu-Nan and by thirst in the Desert of Lop. We lost two wagons in the mountains and fifteen *tan* of rice. We almost starved.

"The Valley of the Singing Winds brought madness to some. They ran away in the night, hearing voices, thinking they were being called to the Seventh Circle. They left us forever.

"It is not a way that we desire to return. When you said that a new way to the north was being sought to bring caravans from Ta-Ch'in to Ch'in, this person's slow wits decided that such dangers should not be risked again."

"There may be greater ones to the north."

"True," agreed the trader. "If so, they will be new ones and new things are interesting. Not?" He shrugged. "No man lives forever. Should he not see what he may while he still breathes?"

Manlius' voice was serious. "I must warn you that we suspect treachery from the Parthians. There is no surety that you will not be involved if there is such. You may be risking your lives needlessly."

Liu Mang was not impressed. "No risk is needless. We do not fear the An-hsi. They are kin to the men of Sarmatia, whom we chased out of Ch'in.

"Even so, no death goes unnoticed. The gods watch. If we go down, they will know. That is enough."

Manlius rose and extended his hand. Matho and Quintus rose also and stood beside him. Liu Mang looked puzzled but took the hand that was offered.

Manlius said, "We shall be honored to have you with us, man of the Shang. Let us go then in company and let Fortuna decide our mutual destinies as we travel henceforth together."

The Elburz Range turned out to be no such impossible barrier as local predictions had indicated. The Pylae Caspiae was narrow and arduous, but not so difficult as the Cilician Gates had been.

The wagons easily negotiated its slopes and followed a well-traveled road to the northern passes. Now and then they were obliged to give way for, or force to one side, lengthy trains of the two-humped, long-haired Bactrian camels moving south, heavily laden.

These carried large earthenware pots or fat goatskin containers of liquid slung in nets on either side. A reeking aura hung over the caravans, which, combined with the strong smell of the beasts and the long since unwashed drivers, caused Lilia to hold her nose as they passed.

She was no longer the fastidious girl that she had been in Rome, but this was too much.

"Faugh!" she gasped. "What horrible stuff have they got in those pots?"

Tibullus did not know. Antimon, who marched in the rank behind them, heard and answered. "I asked a man at the last camp. He told me that it is naphtha. It seems that there is a place north of here where Bellerophon, mounted on Pegasus, fought the Chimaera. When the Chimaera fell flaming out of the sky, he sank deep into the earth. His breath still issues from the ground in fountains of fire. His blood bubbles up in wells and springs.

"These people round about worship fire. Their devil, Ahriman, is also their fire god. They use naphtha in their evil rites and bring it to all of Ahriman's temples from the Chimaera's graveyard, which is called Badku."

Lilia was skeptical. "Do you believe that wild story?"

Antimon grinned. "I only tell you what I heard. These are modern times. I never saw a winged horse or a dragon with fiery breath. I do know that this odd liquid will burn and water will not put out the fire. I wish I had some to use in my experiments. I can think of a lot of things I could do with it."

The road climbed higher into the mountains. It was too narrow now for double lines of traffic. Below, swift torrents of white water rushed through the tortuous gaps which eons had cut into

the rock. Above were strips of sky, thin, cold, and edged by jagged pinnacles of bare stone, unless softened by sparse growths of wind-tortured trees clinging desperately with octopoid roots driven deep into crannies.

The Parthian guides rode in advance of the legion, blowing on rams' horns to warn other travelers to pull aside into such by-passes as existed. The Thirteenth slogged on unhindered.

Prickers patrolled the heights. Cavalry units preceded the march and brought up the rear. Last of all came the wagons and chariots of the yellow men of Ch'in. All uneasily scanned the slit of sky. No better place than this could be found for a treacherous attack.

The road was littered with stones which had fallen. None came down upon the column, although the rumbling of heavy wheels set echoes flying through the ravines. It crossed bridges, from one side of the river to the other and back again, as the road sought the easiest track.

Shadows darkened the passes as the day progressed and a guide rode back anxiously to urge greater speed. It would be impossible for so many to find a campground at this point.

Manlius commanded the drummers to strike up a beat which would increase the pace. A little after nightfall the legion passed through a section where there was no natural foothold at all. Here the builders had found it necessary to construct huge brackets of beams and solid plank platforms which jutted out over the stream, to carry traffic on its way. Matho's cavalry suddenly saw the canyon walls drop away on either side.

Ahead, under the starlight's pale illumination, the road descended easily toward a plain where scattered campfires gleamed, indicating the presence of caravans at rest. There were little clusters of lights from villages and fishing hamlets.

At a distance, in the quiet air, the weary cohorts heard the sound of surf breaking on a distant beach and knew that at last the mountains were behind and that they had come to the shores of the Caspian Sea.

The road continued on. In spots it was an artificial causeway, for all this area was low and swampy. Rather than divert from it and make a camp with the usual fortifications in the middle of

some marsh, Manlius gave orders to use the beach itself and post a triple guard of sentries to assure safety.

Lilia, Tibullus, and Galba the Farmer found themselves together in the third watch, staring out over the water. Their vigil seemed foolish and unnecessary. Even if there had been an enemy, it would hardly be reckless enough to attack by boat.

Nevertheless the group was well used to army methods by this time and did not grumble while they waited for their relief.

The Farmer reached down and picked up a handful of sand, as was his custom almost everywhere he stopped. Tibullus said, "What do you think you could grow in that soil, Galba? Fleas?"

"You might be surprised. Take some of that swamp dirt, spread it here and spade it in; mix it well and plant almost anything. It would be better than we had at home."

He tossed it into the water which now, as the wind had died during the night, caressed the strand in fingering ripples. The moon had risen and showed the three clearly as they stood upon the beach.

At the sudden motion of the Farmer's arm, something dived beneath the surface not far away, sending out a widening circle.

"What was that?" Lilia pointed, staring out toward the sound. "It looked like a man's head."

"A fish leaping," said Tibullus.

"Too large," said the Farmer. "I saw it too."

They stood watching and waiting quietly, scarcely daring to breathe. Soon it reappeared, clearly outlined in the silvery moon track. A head in very truth. Another beside it, then between them a third, baby size.

They sent out little wakes of bubbles, circling, playing in the water, diving, leaping in gay joyousness of life.

"Those are not fish," whispered Lilia, afraid to startle the swimmers by a sudden noise.

"We are watching a merman's family," said the Farmer. "I never believed that there were any."

They plunged, they swam, they cuddled together in a loving little group—then all at once they stopped and listened, as at a summons. A call rang out, distantly, over the water.

High, clear, piercingly sustained, it belled in such sweet

beauty that tears came into Lilia's eyes. She clutched Tibullus' arm. "Oh! What can it be?"

He knew no more than she, nor could many have told them. Far-scattered and scarce are those who, highly privileged, have heard even once the singing of the seals.

Lilia was not really superstitious, but there was a strain of mysticism in her. She thought she had been favored with an omen. The fancy haunted her through the night and through the following days of march, during which the legion traversed the narrow strip of flat land between the mountains and the sea.

Their route turned easterly, then north again, under the direction of the guides. The ground gradually rose once more into foothills. Beyond them, mountains shot up, less jagged than the Elburz but no less formidable.

The legion turned toward them after almost a week of easy travel. The sun was well down, sending long shadows in the line of march, pointing out their way like long-legged moving guide-posts.

One shadow and its owner remained motionless. The chief of the Parthian guides waited for the point of the cavalcade to come up. He indicated an isolated, almost flat-topped summit, crowned with buildings and surrounded with a high city wall.

"Jaxikarta," he said succinctly. "You stay here till Surena says go." He wheeled his horse and galloped away toward the city.

The setting sun shone brightly upon the white buildings. There was a central temple with pinnacles and spires, crooked and spiraled as a demon's horns. It was colored by the sunset, not pinkly, but with an ominous reddish hue. At this distance the hill looked like a sinister, fantastically decorated cake.

Lilia shivered, though the air was warm. The clouds hovering over the city seemed to be in the shape of three giant women. One wove, one measured, and one was sharpening shears. She blinked. It was a trick of the light. They were gone.

IV

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SCYTHIA





## ENCOUNTER ON THE JOPPA ROAD

The old military road out of Egypt into Palestine skirted the Great Sea. Beyond Joppa, it carried an added burden of traffic moving north from Jerusalem to the seaports.

It was not a steady stream. It moved, as on all highways of the world, in clots and groups of people and animals. Especially so in that almost jungle wilderness of the Plain of Sharon, where thick coverts of brush offered hiding places penetrable chiefly to those bandits who knew their ways.

Lonely travelers were few, but there were some who, for their own reasons, avoided company. One of these was the man in the red Phrygian hat.

For the better part of the day he had pushed on strongly, slackening his pace only to let fast-moving caravans pass, or hurrying a little to maintain his distance ahead of the dust of others.

When conversation could not be avoided he spoke little, not seeking company, and soon, being considered churlish, he found himself alone again. It was not often that he was bothered. His appearance was against him. His dour expression and the well-worn sword which hung at his belt caused most people to look at him askance. This well suited his mood.

As twilight fell he saw, moving ahead of him in the same direction, a man dressed in a plain gray robe. The pilgrim, if such he was, walked slowly, aiding himself with a staff—too slowly to avoid being overtaken.

It was simpler to increase speed and pass. He meant to do this, but before he had gained more than a few steps he saw the other traveler confronted by three stout fellows who had come out of hiding.

There was a brief coming together. The pilgrim staff rose to fall soundly upon the head of one of the bandits, who went

down. Then the traveler stumbled and fell. The remaining pair leapt upon him like wild dogs.

The man in the red Phrygian hat cast down his heavy pack and ran, sword out, shouting encouragement to the victim. The group shook itself apart and he was at its center in an instant.

He knew the sword bit deep. A bandit howled and went hopping sidelong into the brush, holding his bleeding leg. His companion, a heavily bearded robber, now joined by the one who had been felled, turned his attention upon the more dangerous antagonist.

There was a flurry of steel among the three. Almost casually, the rescuer removed his red hat and, holding it by the peak in his left hand, whirled it around his head like a sling.

He flicked the weighted lappets with precision, straight into the eyes of the man behind him. At the same time, without more than a glance backward to observe the success of his crafty trick, he beat down the blade of the bearded one. The reverse stroke upward lopped off that sword hand before it could rise again.

The two travelers found themselves alone on the deserted highway, with only the blood in the dirt and a diminishing crash of brush in the distance to remind them of the danger passed.

The rescuer retrieved his hat, pulling it well down over his face. He helped the other to his feet, dusted his robe, and then turned his back upon the stranger to cleanse his sword with a handful of grass.

He would have gone on without a word. The other fell into the same pace as he assumed, however, and held out his hand in gratitude.

"It may be that I owe you my life. Receive the thanks of Paul of Tarsus. If we are traveling the same way, let us do so in company."

The man in the red hat mumbled a surly response. He neither offered his name nor refused fellowship. After a long time he said, "You did well back there—for a man who carries nothing but a pilgrim staff. You are a fool to travel these roads unarmed."

"Since it has pleased God to reveal His Son to me, I no longer breathe threatening and slaughter."

A disgusted grunt was the only reply.

Paul said, "I take it you have been a soldier. I would not pry—but if you are in conflict with the law, I can perhaps be of some help. I am on my way to friends who will aid you for my sake."

A long pause. "I had a little trouble in Alexandria. It is all over now. I need nothing, except information which you would not have. I am following the Thirteenth Legion and I do not know where it has gone."

"There you are wrong, young man!" Paul's voice showed his pleasure. "Last year I traveled with the Thirteenth for a time, almost to Jerusalem. I was told that, after a term of duty in garrison, it was to travel on into Armenia."

"You should seek your friends there. Is it permitted to inquire how you became separated from your unit?"

"It is not." The answer was gruff and uncompromising. Conversation languished. They walked on together, in silence, to meet the deepening dark.

## MEN OF THE NIGHT

That same night, darkness lay over the streets of sleeping Jaxikarta. It was tempered only by an occasional cresset at a corner or intersection. The Everlasting Flame, which burned on the topmost pinnacle of the Temple of Ahriman, served only to indicate the eternal watchfulness of the dread god. It did nothing to illuminate the city on the mountaintop.

The gates were closed and guarded. Like a spreading stain of wine on a crumpled cloth, war was moving outward from Ctesiphon to blight the land. No man knew in what direction it would travel next or to whom he should offer allegiance.

The watchmen on the wall looked upon the dangers of the plain, sounding their hourly rattles to inform those who slept restlessly that all was yet well. The sentries at the gates were blinded by their own torchlight. Neither saw the man who moved stealthily through the streets, seeking a safe spot to climb the wall and leave the city.

Atticus was deserting. His sandaled feet made little sound. Most of the streets were unpaved and none of the alleys which he had used had anything but earth underfoot—actually mud just now, because of a recent rain.

He had not minded the ordeals of the long march. He had rather enjoyed the excitement of the battle in Armenia. He had been able to ignore the coarse food. He had, somehow, even acquired a perverted taste for the horrible Vatican wine.

He had thrilled to the exhortation Commander Manlius gave the army before the entry into Jaxikarta, when he had ridden out where all could see him. The commander's words were carried back into every rank by the usual announcers.

"Men of the Thirteenth!" The resonant voice sounded loud in the stillness. "The function of a soldier in a foreign land is to

uphold the honor of his country. In doing so, he upholds his own.

"Sometimes this must be done upon the field of battle. Sometimes it must be accomplished in lesser but equally important ways.

"Yourself, your officers, your tribunes, and your commander represent your Empire. You carry out the will of your Emperor and through him the will of your gods. Your responsibility is great. Do not fail.

"Each of you is a citizen and a soldier of Rome. Wherever you tread, you stamp that ground Roman soil. Should you die and be buried in it, that soil is doubly blessed.

"Therefore, be proud. Keep your back straight, your neck stiff, your honor and your metal equally untarnished. Hold your head high and walk as though you walked with kings!"

There was a spontaneous cheer. For one moment, Atticus felt himself more completely an integral part of the legion than he ever had before.

He saw Commander Manlius wheel his horse and lift his hand. "Follow me!" When the arm fell, the cavalry moved forward with tossing heads and plumes waving as though this were a dress parade.

The Thousand Cohort swung in behind. The drums crashed, the pipes squealed, the tubas brayed like lions roaring defiance at the distant Parthian city. All the ranks wheeled into motion.

Atticus remembered seeing nearby the comrades he knew. Lilia, looking taller than before under the spell of those inspiring words, more desirable than ever with the flush in her cheeks; Longinus, critically watching for something to go wrong; the stolid Farmer, stepping lightly for once, not as though he dragged his feet along a furrow—even clumsy Tibullus had straightened his usually sagging shoulders.

Tibullus struck up a song. It burst out of a full heart. Soon all were singing.

*"Clear the way! We march today  
Beneath Heaven's azure dome.  
In dark of night or bright daylight  
We'll lift the flags of Rome!"*

*For we have thoughts to comfort us  
When we are far from home  
Of Romulus and Remus  
And the Seven Hills of Rome!*

*Let foes beware! We comrades share  
On Field of Mars or Neptune's foam.  
We'll never leave our Eagles  
That scream the pride of Rome!*

*And when the journey's over,  
We'll all be going home  
To Romulus and Remus  
And the Seven Hills of Rome."*

Atticus sighed. It had been a great moment. When the heavy artillery wheels racketed along the narrow streets, Jaxikarta was impressed. The city had been ablaze with lights. All the might and brilliant panoply of a Roman triumph surged around him.

The banners and pennons displayed everywhere; the faces that beamed welcome; the pretty girls with garlands of flowers—it was like coming home.

But the rapport between the legion and the people of the city had departed, almost with the first day. Barracks and officers' quarters alike went under tight guard. Most of Jaxikarta's interesting sections became out of bounds to military personnel. Tension increased daily.

Now a month of such days had gone by. The men stagnated with inactivity. There was no news from the war in the south, no indication of when they might be in movement again, nothing even for rumors to feed upon.

The situation was most unpleasant for everyone. It had become intolerable to Atticus. Boredom! That was the reason for desertion.

Down an avenue lit more brightly than the others, a squad from the Second Cohort came swinging toward him, on their way to replace the stationarii at headquarters.

He quickly sidled deeper into the alley, although he had little fear of being seen and questioned. Unconsciously straightening

his back, the young patrician hurried away in the regulation forty-inch stride, marching into the darkness to the beat of an inward drum.

He came out of the alley into a muddy street and saw that he was following another pedestrian. He was not far behind. Water was still oozing into a small footprint, that of either a child or a woman. He thought it was probably the latter, for the sandal track toed slightly inward and he had seen some of the city girls walk that way to emphasize their attractive figures.

He went on, looking down at the ground, in the dimness between the lights. The little line of footprints went demurely in a straight line. Now he could see, where there was no water to obscure the impressions, that in each there appeared to be Greek letters formed by nails driven into the soles of the sandals.

In the circle of brightness beneath a cresset at the next corner, he made out the words "Follow me." They were spelled out by these nails.

Atticus began to feel himself quite a huntsman. This was like following a trail in a wood. What sort of quarry would be at the end of it, if he did follow as the invitation suggested?

He had quite forgotten that he was deserting. The interest of this mystery drove him on. He could hardly remain under the cresset staring at the footprints. They continued a little farther into shadow and then turned into another dark alley. He followed them into it, as urged.

His night sight, dazzled by the flames of the cresset, was slow in coming back. Otherwise he would not have bumped so solidly into the soft warm body which was leaning up against a wall, waiting for him to do just that.

The shock and the surprise seemed to be entirely confined to himself. He made out dimly, although she speedily became clearer to his vision, a young girl standing there with one arm akimbo. Her hand casually rested on her scantily covered hip—the other was swinging a little bag to and fro.

She seemed quite unafraid of him. Atticus squinted to make out her features more clearly. She was smiling. She was pretty—no, more than that, she was lovely and her voice suited her well, being both musical and silkily inviting.

"*Chairé*, soldier," she said in Koine. "I am Lyssa. Who are you?"

A prostitute? Before Atticus could answer, he heard a whisper of sound, like the muffled clinking of a chain, not far from the entrance to the alley.

The girl flinched. She seized his arm and thrust him deeper into the darkness. Atticus could see nothing, but he followed her sure guidance and did not stumble.

He looked back as she stopped and did the same. Against the dim light which outlined the alley mouth he saw several dark figures. He supposed they must be men, but they came into the alley entirely without sound of any kind. It seemed impossible that human beings could move so quietly.

He could distinguish no motion of arms or legs as they approached. It was as though they were solidified cylinders of shadow without feet. The tops came to a sharp point, much higher than the head of a man, and the bases glided evenly over the ground.

There was a subtle change in the atmosphere about him. Without being able to see, he knew that this was a blind alley and that they had arrived at the end of it. Lyssa was fumbling at a heavy door in an agony of haste. He could feel her terror as she stood pressed against him. Her whole body shook with a convulsive trembling.

A soft puff of disturbed air struck against his face. She tugged at him frantically and he struck his stumbling foot upon a threshold. Then they were inside a warm chamber without light. The door closed behind them on noiseless, well-oiled hinges.

A bar slid solidly into a muffled socket and the two stood there waiting—listening—Atticus for he knew not what, and Lyssa, all too well aware, shivering in his arms.

He drew her head down to his breast. She was not tall and he was reminded of Tibullus' wife. He felt an unaccustomed surge of protectiveness. He drew his dagger, buried his face in her hair, and looked over her shoulder at the door.

She was very frightened. Her heartbeat was ragged and uneven. Her breath came in short gasps, as though she had been running a long way. Then she clung to him more tightly than before.



There was a soft patting and scratching against the door. It was as though a heavy animal were testing its strength with unsheathed claws. Pressure came against it. It creaked but did not give. The bar held.

All at once Atticus knew that whatever had been outside was gone. He had heard no footsteps in the alley, nor had he been conscious of any other diminishing sound. He was only aware that a menacing presence had been removed.

Lyssa breathed again. A long sigh of relief. She pushed gently against his chest and he released her. He heard her moving away from him in the dark. Steel struck against flint and he saw her face illuminated from beneath, as she blew the glowing tinder into flame.

Then the soft glow of a saucer lamp disclosed them to each other and Atticus saw for the first time the dimensions of his unexpected refuge.

It was not a large room. It was neat and clean, furnished lightly with stools and table. A figurine of Aphrodite, set in a niche facing the door, welcomed the visitor with partly extended arms. It had been tinted pink. The tight curls were black and the eyes were blue.

Like Aphrodite, Lyssa was definitely Greek. She wore a thin, clinging Ionic chiton of linen. It was a little shorter than usually seen for street wear, and rather boldly slashed at the hips to afford a glimpse of white skin through the softly hued mauve fabric.

Her only articles of jewelry, apparently her main items of real value, were the three elaborate golden grasshoppers on each bare shoulder. They clipped together the upper edge of the garment to form short sleeves.

Atticus studied her as she bent her head in prayer before the figurine. Her back was turned to him while she rearranged sprays of sweet-smelling yellow roses, Aphrodite's favorite flower, in a red and black vase ornamented with flying cranes.

Along the right-hand wall was a small cooking place, with shelves for pots and dishes and a couple of copper kettles. He saw a bin for charcoal, almost empty. There was a round flat loaf of bread on the table and, nearby, a flagon of wine, neatly stoppered.

No other food was visible, unless two jars, set against the cool stone of the wall which backed the shelves, held olive oil or honey. Their shapes indicated that they did.

An upright loom was placed against the opposite wall. It was strung, but the warp was empty and the basket held no spindles of thread.

A man's worn himation, unornamented, hardly more than a rectangular piece of peasant's weave, served to conceal partly a doorway to another room. Atticus assumed that this must be a sleeping chamber.

Everything he saw hinted at a proud poverty and, except for the intimation the hanging cloak provided, a habitation for herself alone.

She turned and saw him staring. She followed his gaze and guessed his thought. She smiled. There was a trusting sweetness in it that called for a return in kind.

"There is no one here but ourselves, soldier. You may feel at home and be without care. The Men of the Night will not return."

"They were human beings? I thought—"

"That they were shades? Turncoats? Furies, born of the blood of Cronus, maybe? No, they are true men."

She sighed and sat down, wearily, he thought. "Yet, at the same time, they are all of these—and worse. They are the emissaries of Ahriman, the fire demon, the devil god of these barbarous peoples.

"Alas! I have dwelt so long among barbarians that I forget my manners."

She sliced bread and poured wine. She heated olive oil to smoking point, for a dip, and placed honey on the table. They ate and looked at each other, liking what they saw.

No sounds from the outside entered the little room. Nevertheless, they spoke in low tones. She learned that he was a deserter and why. He told her of Ciscus and the floggings he had received. Her blue eyes were like steel, although her expression was tender and sympathetic.

She listened while he talked himself out: his loneliness among his crowd in Rome; his disgust at his aimless life; his inability to

fit into the harsh routine of existence as a legionary; his hatred for his officers.

When he had finished he found that she was holding his hand tightly. He had not noticed when she took it. He laid his other hand on hers and she allowed it to remain.

After a little while she gently withdrew. She replaced the uneaten remnants of the meal carefully in their proper places but left the wine. There was enough to fill a small cup apiece. It emptied the flagon.

She rinsed it out with water from a hanging two-handled pitcher and stood it upside down to dry before coming back to the table. Her voice was music, he thought. The swing of her scanty kirtle was poetry in motion. The way she tossed her curls when she felt his regard was most endearing. It seemed that they had been friends for a long time.

Suddenly he was disinclined to accept her hospitality any further without some recompense. He shook his few coins upon the table—it had been some time since payday—and pushed them toward her.

Then he saw the hurt in Lyssa's eyes and knew that his first impressions of her had been at least partly wrong. He should have trusted his intuition. He had blundered.

"For tomorrow's wine," he said hastily. This brought the wistful smile he had wanted to see again.

She placed a small forefinger upon the least of the coins, drew it to her side of the table, and he returned the remainder to his pouch and that into his belt.

She arose, went into the other room, and came back carrying a much worn shepherd's Panpipe.

"My grandfather's," she said, stroking the instrument fondly. The sound of the reeds was a mellow and soothing whisper in the chamber.

"He used to play this while he watched the sheep. He was a kind man who had made his peace with the world. Almighty Zeus grant that it scatter the Erinyes—the Furies—that plague you."

She continued to play soft and soothing melodies for a little while. The oil in the lamp burned low. The flame shrank to a bluish point of light.

Lyssa laid down the pipes and gave him back his cup. There was a little tinge of motherliness in her voice as she picked up her own and held it for him to touch.

"Take up your rhython, friend. Drink with me." Now there was a hint of a teasing promise in her gentle voice which enthralled him as she sang:

*"Fruitful earth drinks up the rain;  
Trees from earth drink that again;  
Sea drinks air and soon the sun  
Drinks the sea and it the moon.  
Is it wise that we should think  
We should thirst when all else drink?"*

He drank with her, sip for sip, until the cups were empty, their eyes fixed upon the depths of the other's. He felt his melancholy fade away as the warmth of her sympathy permeated his tortured soul—as the light waned.

She took his hand, then, in her soft clasp. She blew out the lamp. Darkness enclosed them and he followed her urging. He felt the hanging himation of the chamber doorway pushed aside to fall again behind them, shutting them in, in quiet seclusion.

It was a perfumed room, but not heavily scented like others he had known. There was no reek to dull the senses and make the mind reel in cheap revulsion. This was an indefinable aura which somehow belonged there, which was a part of Lyssa's personality.

"Glycera, Sweet One," he whispered huskily, and touched her without passion, feeling himself honored by her unspoken invitation.

She came into his arms then and in her voice was kindness and again that tinge of understanding, but with it a little undercurrent of warning as well.

"My heart is no tablecloth to be spread over everything," she breathed.

He did not answer, but words were no longer necessary between them.

Now began an idyll such as Atticus, the contemptuous patrician, scornful wastrel, had never known. It became a wonder

to him how short a day could be when she was there and what an eternity an hour seemed when she was not.

There were times when, at dusk, she would kiss him sadly, lingeringly, and go out into the darkling streets. Those nights were long and lonely. And when, near dawn, she would return, his heart would leap, but his throat would choke to see her.

Although he realized that she was doing only what she had been trained to do, plying the only profession that she knew—and there was not, in the background of either, the conventions of today which make unsanctioned happiness a sin—yet his love, for so it quickly became, was fiercely jealous and possessive. He did not speak of this. Both knew. It was enough.

He was constantly surprised by the quality of her mind. He had recognized the old drinking song, as ancient and classical. He was pleased to find in her chamber an excellent selection of books and scrolls and whiled away much of his lonely hours in reading, while he waited for her return and the longer wait for the legion to move on.

It seemed that her memory contained the contents of all, to be brought forth at will. Lyssa could cap any quotation he made from Aeschylus or Sophocles. They discussed history. It appeared that she knew Virgil by heart. She was familiar with all the major Greek and Roman poets and many of the minor ones, some of whom he remembered only by their names.

She teased him with love lines from Catullus and Ovid and laughed at him when he stumbled in his recollection. When she breathed the magic phrases of Sappho and Pindar and smiled upon him with affection, her caress gave the words a new and subtle meaning which had escaped him until then.

Her knowledge of international affairs and geography, in so far as they related to trade routes and business, at first amazed him. Only in knowledge of military tactics, of which he had picked up a good deal in spite of himself from Ciscus and Longinus, could he best her. She would listen to his exposition of some old lost cause and battles long ago without interrupting while he explained how these had been lost or won and how he would have planned, had he been in the place of either general.

“My strategos!” she would exclaim, and gaze upon him with

admiration. At those moments he thought of Ciscus almost fondly.

Atticus knew that a hetaira filled the gap in society which lay between wives and common courtesans, but he had not been aware of the reasons for their breadth of information. He realized that this must be derived from the necessity to hold intelligent conversation with her clientele. He resented her broad resources only as they emphasized her occupation.

As witty, intellectual companions to men, the hetairai occupied the position later to be filled by the geisha. If they loved, they did so not by compulsion but by choice. At least, he knew it to be so in Greece and Italy. It seemed to be the same in Parthia.

This matter, also, he never discussed with Lyssa. She was lovely and while she was with him she was his. The other part of her life was contained in a separate compartment, locked and put away. So the days went on, without counting toward their end.

What neither had considered in their new-found happiness was their present time and place. For some years past Parthia had been entering a moralistic phase which was strict on the surface, however casual it was beneath.

Thus, the atmosphere of Jaxikarta was not and could not be that of the hedonism prevalent in Athens and Rome. The profession of hetaira was suspect and suspects are watched.

It did not long remain a secret from the sly police of Ahriman, those dreaded Men of the Night, that Lyssa bought, and carried in each day, food for two.

## “FOLLOW ME!”

While Atticus remained hidden in his pleasant hermitage, events were taking place in the world outside.

The ebb and flow of battles and the movement of marching men brought fire and destruction throughout Rhagiana. It swept north and east, like a wave lapping the Elburz. The armies beat against each other in fury, scorching the land, leaving their dead to fertilize it for the refugees who came back to plant and rebuild.

Still farther north, almost to the borders of dissident Bactria, which now raised the flag of independence and challenged both, the forces of the rival kinsmen, Gotarzes and Vardanes, faced one another. Gathering strength for the final test, each waited for the other to move.

Through all this, life in Jaxikarta went on much as usual. Bakers still made bread; butchers still had supplies in their shops; there was no lack in this city, untouched as yet by war, for caravans came in as they always had.

There was wine, there was flour and grain, and there was an unending flow of camel trains bringing these necessities from the peaceful hinterland of the northern Caspian littoral. There was fish and meat. There was a stream of jars filled with Chimaera's blood from Badku.

The best of all these things, and all the naphtha, went up to the Temple of Ahriman, one of the many places off limits to the legionaries. As always, there was much curiosity concerning anything forbidden or out of bounds.

Antimon, an insatiable tinkerer, had a particular interest in obtaining entry to the temple. He spoke of this one day to Lilia. She and Tibullus were visiting him in the barrack room that he had fitted up as a combination shop and laboratory. Here he

carried on experiments which had been permitted and encouraged by no other than Commander Manlius.

Here had been brought the store of copper sheets, plates, and tubes salvaged from Tigranocerta. Here water had been piped in for his convenience and here stood alcohol lamps and alembics. There were tools fit for an artisan such as he, constantly busy with new ideas. That he might have time to himself, not broken into by fatigue duty, he had been made an immune.

Tibullus envied him this leisure. To the visitors, the place seemed the haunt of a magician or alchemist. Young as he was, Antimon was becoming a master of fire and steam. His busy hands could not keep pace with his active mind.

An improved replica of Heron of Alexandria's aeolipile spun merrily on its axis, enshrouded in jetting vapor. It was no mere toy, for it turned a grinding wheel. A copy of *Pneumatica* lay unrolled on the bench where the budding inventor had been studying.

A kettle bubbled over a lamp, warbling cheerily through a set of intricate inner pipes as the steam issued forth. A little metal bird perched upon the kettle lid raised its head, opened its beak, and flapped its wings in time to the notes.

Antimon looked up from his book as they approached. He welcomed them with a secretive look and picked up the kettle. It continued chirping its bird song as he held it out to Tibullus.

"Here is something I just discovered. A new trick. See?"

He set the throbbing kettle on the palm of his hand and held it out, still boiling, for a few seconds. "Try it, Tibullus?"

"Oh no! Not me! I burn easy." Tibullus emphatically put his hands behind him.

"I will," said Lilia. "I can do it if you can, Antimon."

"That's my girl. It's too cold now. Let's heat it again." He put it back on the loop above the lamp and soon the kettle resumed its singing. Lilia held out her open hand and Antimon placed it on her calloused palm.

She looked at it there, spouting out a merry cloud of steam. Her face showed her gleeful surprise. "Why, it isn't hot at all! Try it, Tibullus."

He took it gingerly by the handle and lifted it away. Then, as



the bottom of the kettle touched his own hand, he howled, dropped it, and danced around, blowing on his palm.

“Poor fellow!” Antimon’s sympathy did not sound quite sincere. “I should have warned you that the trick is a short one. While the water is boiling, the heat goes up and you don’t feel it. When it stops—then the heat goes down and you might get burned.”

“Might?” wailed Tibullus. “I should have known better than to trust either one of you!” He nursed his hand.

“Oh, stick it in that tank and cool off. You’ll live. Come here, Lilia, and see what I have made. It is all finished now.”

He led the way to a large shrouded machine and whipped off the concealing canvas. In the light of the bright sunshine it shone like a burnished metal monster. It was golden bronze and it crouched as though it would bay at the sky.

It was wheeled with the same undercarriage that the car-robollistae used, but there the resemblance ended. Its nose was a heavy copper cylinder; its body, a large squat tank of the same material, but triply thick, heavily bolted together, and all seams soldered with spelter and reinforced. Tubes like clasping arms reached out from this tank and embraced the base of the cylinder. Each of these was fitted with a metal spigot, like those used on wine barrels.

Beneath the tank was a furnace, in which there was no fire. Antimon gestured ruefully at the cold pit. “Finished. All except the food that I need to give life to my pet. I have nothing to fill the tank.

“I lack only the right fuel. Charcoal doesn’t give enough heat for a quick supply of steam. One discharge and I must wait for more pressure to build up.

“Alcohol is better, but there isn’t enough of it around to be practical. Anyway, somebody would be sure to steal it and get drunk. If I could only get some naphtha. That would be just what I need.”

“It is beautiful, Antimon.” Lilia’s voice thrilled with admiration. She stroked the cool, polished metal. Tibullus grunted. “It is the prettiest thing you have ever made. I like it. What is it for?”

The Greek’s eyebrows shot up into his low bangs. “I thought

you knew. Didn't I tell you? It is a weapon that will change all wars. Maybe stop them.

"No more catapults—no more onagers—maybe no more scorpions, if I can get naphtha and make a lot of these. A big one would knock down a city gate, better than a battering ram. One like this will send a stone ball through a whole company of soldiers. The big puff of steam would frighten horses and break a charge of cavalry.

"Think of it! No more mule gut to stretch and lose its strength! With this we can drop a stone wherever we want it. Shot after shot and always in the same place, even in the dark."

"You are wonderful, Antimon. How do you think of these things?"

He shook his head ruefully. "Not really my own invention, this time. Some of the toys, yes—not this. I may have improved on the original a little. I hope so. A better man than I will ever be invented it. If he had thought of it sooner, maybe Syracuse would not have fallen. You are looking at the steam cannon of Archimedes."

Jaxikarta was situated upon an elevation which fell away gently in all directions from the center. Not quite like either a butte or a mesa, this hill contained a large living area, all of which was occupied by buildings and narrow streets. Most of the buildings were tall, for the population was large. From some of the rooftops the city wall could be overlooked. None was high enough, however, for an observer to spy within the compound of the palace, the parade ground of the legion, for the palace barracks was also circumvallated—a fort within a fortress.

None except the Temple of Ahriman, which encrusted the central peak with its bizarre outlines of cusps and cornutes, its two twisted hornlike towers and walkway-crowned ridges, commanded both the barrack complex and the city surrounding it.

For this reason Manlius did not doubt that every movement inside the compound was under constant observation. Therefore the testing of the steam cannon took place under cover of darkness and behind shielding mantelets.

Only Manlius, Antimon and his crew, and a few staff officers were present. Anxious to make a good showing, Antimon al-

lowed pressure to build up in the storage chamber until its stout walls creaked. Then a stone ball, heated until its surface ran with squirming lines of sparks, was lifted from its furnace with tongs and rolled into the mouth of the engine, to settle itself a few inches from the bottom of the breech.

“Because the missile is hot, the steam will not be suddenly cooled when it is injected into the engine,” Antimon explained.

For the purposes of the demonstration, a target had already been set up against the wall. Antimon depressed the tube as close to the horizontal as possible, without losing the ball.

He gave the signal and the four men who had been detailed as handlers jerked simultaneously upon the cords which opened the four spigots in the tubes.

For an agonizing instant that lengthened unbearably for the inventor, nothing happened—then a soft dragon hiss issued from the throat of the crouching monster. Steam leaked out around the ball as the pressure increased. All at once the whole was hidden in a cloud of superheated vapor. The heavy stone burst forth and flew across the compound, to smash through the thick wooden target and splinter itself on the wall of masonry behind.

The crash of this impact had been the only betraying sound. Manlius doubted that this was sufficient, even in the quiet of the night, to expose its real meaning and purpose to any observer on the temple roof who might be straining eyes and ears.

“Well done, engineer! Your engine has possibilities. That is enough for now. We do not want to attract undue attention.”

“I would not be able to use it again until it is recharged.” Antimon looked unhappy. “It takes some time to do that. I think that, if I had naphtha to create a hotter fire than charcoal, I could heat the chamber in half the time.”

Manlius clapped him on the shoulder. “You shall certainly have your naphtha. I will see to it myself. In the meantime, keep on with your work. You are excused from all other duties.

“Let me know immediately if you have other ideas which might prove useful to us.”

“I have meditated upon a number of things, Commander, but they all require naphtha. Perhaps if I could also be supplied with some sulphur and bitumen?”

“Requisition anything you need or want from stores. If we

haven't got it, we will see that we do. Keep these men as your helpers until otherwise ordered. Your pay is permanently increased to that of quadranton of engineers, as of now. We shall have to think of a new official title for you. There seems to be nothing in the roster which describes your activities."

Manlius was as good as his word. The next time a caravan came into the city, two of the camel drivers turned aside and entered the compound with their laden beasts. The Babylonian storage jars were lifted from their carrying nets and hurriedly emptied into other containers by Antimon's waiting men.

Six homers were thus unloaded from each net. Three times the burden of a donkey. Then the camels rejoined the train.

The whole operation had taken less than five minutes and the headman was well satisfied with his reward for his deception. It was in Roman silver.

Antimon was overjoyed with his supply of naphtha. It far exceeded his hopes. He meant to use it frugally. He said to Decius, the former fire fighter and sometime incendiary, "Now you will be able to start fires again. We'll use those siphons you told me about."

Decius said, "It's a good thing those Bactrian camels can carry a six-hundred-pound load. Siphons hold a lot of liquid."

"One trial ought to be enough to prove the experiment. Maybe we can get more later."

So the work went on. There was smoke and there was fire. There was unavoidable noise. There were also successes which made Manlius smile to himself. His own plans went forward in as much secrecy as was possible. It was noticed by many that his face was less grim than it had been for weeks. Once he was seen to laugh. He was often in long conferences with Eitel and Liu Mang. Sometimes a map maker was called in.

How much of what went on in the compound was known or suspected by the priests of Ahriman, Manlius could not guess. Pigeons flew in and out of the city, over the heads of the Romans. He was well aware that messages were being carried. It could not be prevented.

The status of the Thirteenth was still unclear. Prisoners or honored guests, they were equally detained. They would be per-

mitted to leave Parthia in peace when the war was over, he hoped.

If not, then they must fight their way out. But if word of these tests should leak into the camp, doubly dangerous would it be that it might go further.

Somehow, he must assure himself that this had not occurred. To that end, he sent for Lilia.

“Lilia, you have a quick ear for gossip. Are the men talking about what is going on concerning your friend Antimon?”

“You mean his promotion? Only that he has made himself so liked that most think he deserves it.”

“Anything said that we might be cooking up something interesting for our friends the Parthians?”

Lilia frowned in thought. He reached out and fondly ruffled her hair. More and more in these past few days of strain and uncertainty he had come to feel happiness in her mere presence.

“No, not to me, or anyone else when I’ve been around. What did you have in mind?”

He did not answer at once. “You like him?”

“Oh, yes!” Her face glowed. “He jokes. He laughs. He makes such pretty things—some of them even useful. He is never so happy as when a challenge is set before him.”

“I wish you would listen well whenever Antimon’s name is mentioned. Tell me what is said about him? Encourage him to make many useful things?”

“Of course, Commander. Anything for you. But why?”

“It must remain secret for a while. Even from you, amica. You may go now.”

After she left, he sat a few moments, dreamily meditating.

A soldier of the legion. A beautiful, tenderhearted young woman. Now—a spy on a friend? His head sank into his hands.

The loneliness of command came down upon him in all its great weight.

Ah, Eunice! She could never fill your place, but if you know how I feel—if you could have known her, I think you would have loved her when she first came to us and now—?

If it were not for Tibullus.

He shook himself free from his meditations, rose, clasped his cloak around him, and went out to make his solitary rounds.

Manlius spent many a sleepless night before he felt that he had taken into account all contingencies over which he held any control. Then he brooded no longer until, as usual in such cases, the unexpected event was the one that affected and altered his schemes.

The city itself remained calm on the surface, however the undercurrents ran. Apparently Antimon's ventures caused no unease and little interest in the camp. Lilia found nothing to report.

However, the decision of Gotarzes and Vardanes to end the civil strife by declaring mutual affection for each other astonished and pleased the whole country. The resolution of Vardanes, the well loved, to retire from public life and devote his attention to his estates and family was not so pleasing to the people as a whole.

Manlius began to worry again. All reports indicated that Gotarzes could not be trusted.

Surena Pacorus received his instructions at Merv, on the Scythian border, by pigeon post. He accepted them with as good grace as possible.

Privately he complained to his wife, "I must obey, but this is the rankest treachery! Why could not Gotarzes send such a message directly to Jaxikarta? Why through me? This is a most dishonorable act. To command me thus will stain me forever."

The Surenad tried to soothe him. "After all, it was you who placed the Romans where they are. It must be you who displaces them. Do not blame yourself, my dear lord. If there be fault, it will not lessen you in the eyes of the people, or in mine. You must obey the orders of the King."

"Let it be at once, then. Let it be quick. Bring me parchment and a pigeon. The quicker the order goes to Jaxikarta the sooner Gotarzes will be damned! The gods shall judge between us."

Atticus had long since expended his small store of coins. While they lasted, he had felt that in some way he was buying happiness. When he bought food with them, there had been no need for Lyssa to leave him.

Her last excursion had kept them together for days. Now the

shelves were bare, the jars empty, the hearth cold. It was time for her to go out into the night again.

Hours later she returned. He was sleeping and she shook him awake. “Great news! Wonderful news!” Lyssa’s words stumbled over each other in excited haste. “Oh, sweetheart, such news!”

“Soon it will be all over. You won’t have to hide any more. We can go away. No one will be looking for you. Oh, Lucius, it is really true. We can get away from Jaxikarta!”

She flung herself upon him, hugging and kissing his lips, his face, out of breath with running. He laughed, sharing her happiness without knowing why. He held her away a little.

“What are you talking about? Who told you? Have you been drinking too much?”

“Not much. Only a little. Hardly any. I am drunk with joy. Just think—no more hiding. Ever. Just you and me. You can go back to Rome and take me with you!”

“What has happened? Is the war over? Is the legion moving out?”

“Yes, it’s all over! Finished. No more fighting. The war has come to an end. Gotarzes is King of Kings. Everybody knows that, but I know more. I have learned a great secret.

“I was—entertaining—at the temple tonight. This morning the high priest of the temple got a message by pigeon from Merv. He was so happy that he got drunk, told the priests, and one of them had a friend in the City Guards.

“I was dancing at their table. The officer knew I heard. At first he threatened me and then he gave me this. Look, Lucius—a whole gold piece! Just to keep my mouth shut!”

She hugged him tight. “You don’t need to worry any more. You won’t ever be caught!”

“This wonderful secret—what is it?”

She pulled away from him and looked into his eyes.

“Listen. There is going to be a huge banquet very soon, in honor of Ahriman. The whole city will be celebrating. The legion will be invited, to share in the jubilation of Coronation Day.

“There will be drinking then. Lots of it. The celebration will last three days. On the third night a fight will start which will be an excuse for the city to rise.

“It is arranged that the officers will be separated from the

legionaries and attacked first. While the legion is disorganized and without leaders, they will be bewildered and easy to defeat. They are all to be massacred.

"Think of it, Lucius! No more legion. No one to hunt you down. No more worry for us!"

Late that afternoon, while Lyssa drowsed, Atticus stretched out beside her, though he could not sleep. Sunlight came in through cracks in the wooden shutter which was never opened. It struck golden fingers across the floor, reaching toward the wall.

It was very quiet in the room. There was no noise from the street on one side of the house or the alley on the other. Lyssa nestled at his back. Atticus moved a little to give her room, watching the sun's rays slowly lengthen. His eyelids had drooped, in spite of himself, when a bright gleam of light was reflected into his half-closed eyes as from a mirror.

The moving sunbeam had reached the wall and touched Lyssa's discarded sandals, one of which lay upside down. From the nails set in the sole, worn shiny and polished by use, it was sent flashing back at him. He lay there, idly watching one outlined letter after another catch the glow and fade.

"F-O-L-L-O-W      M-E."

"He will never order you to do anything that he won't do himself," the medicus had told him that first day. "His favorite order is 'Follow me!' You see that you do it."

Lyssa awoke in the dusk, to find him sitting at the foot of the bed waiting for her. He took her hands in his and kissed them. His face was sober. She searched it, equally quiet.

He could not bear her steady regard. He took her into his arms and spoke against her hair, feeling her heart pound so unevenly, so close to his, knowing her fears and her love and knowing that this might be the last time that he would ever hold her so.

"I must go back, darling. The legion must be warned. I cannot let them be slaughtered without a chance."

She lay against his breast, close held in his clasp. When at last he turned her face up, it was wet with tears.

"Lyssa—love! You know it must be done. I have no other



choice. It is a matter of honor. It is my duty. Tell me you understand?”

“I was thinking of something in the *Odyssey*.” Her voice was repressed and even. He knew she was on the verge of incoherent sobbing. He held her tightly.

“‘Cherish the stranger in the house and speed him as soon as he has the mind.’ Oh, Lucius, this is my Moira—my Fate—the will of Zeus Dikē! How am I to live without you?”

“I will return for you. Somehow I will come back. Everything will be as it was before.”

“You will never return. I know and you know. Oh, Zeus! What is duty, which brings death to men and bereavement to women?”

She released her grasp. “Make ready, my love. I will smile you away and weep no more.”

Darkness outside was now complete. Lyssa helped him bind his leggings, she tightened his belt, she adjusted the hood of his cloak to hide his face.

The door bar snicked softly out of its socket. As she had promised, she smiled. It was his last sight of her face before the door closed. He heard the bar replaced. If she sobbed then, he could not hear her. He was in the alley, in the dark, as he had been more than a month gone. This time he was alone.

A shadow among shadows, Atticus moved toward the dimly lighted entrance to the street. He had not taken a dozen steps before he felt a noiseless presence behind him. He whirled.

Approaching rapidly was one of the cylindrical figures he had caught a brief glimpse of before. It was almost within arm’s length, if the thing had arms. He could see none. It spoke in a hollow voice.

“You are a Roman soldier. You are my prisoner. Do not try to resist. It will be useless.”

Atticus heard the clinking that he had heard at the other encounter. He saw loose batwings unfold. He glanced back at the street. Two more of the cloaked Men of the Night had entered the alley, their arms widespread to touch either wall.

They glided silently over the ground. Neither feet, hands, nor faces were visible, but they were men, not demons, and men could be fought.

He backed slightly away from his nearest antagonist, his hand seeking the dagger which was his only weapon. Apparently the enemy could see better in the dark than he would have supposed possible. The slight movement did not go unnoticed.

One flapping sleeve swung up and outward. They were six feet apart, but at the same instant, without seeing anything lifted or hurled, Atticus felt a terrific blow against his cheekbone. Something ripped and tore the flesh like a savage claw.

He staggered and almost went to his knees. Blood poured from his right eye and he knew that it was gone. He sprang against the attacker, holding his dagger low, point upward as Lucas, the knife fighter, had taught him to do, stabbing for the belly and crouching at the same time.

The thing, or another like it, whistled through the air again, this time over his bent head. A thin chain wrapped around his neck like a strangling cord. He yanked at it, toppling the robed man toward him, who cried out in pain as the dagger sank deep into his vitals.

The other two rushed upon the entangled pair. Even in that time-stopped moment he noticed that he could not hear their feet. He knew why, now. He had seen the thick felt slippers that his first attacker wore.

A scream like that of a frenzied maenad rang through the alley. It was a wordless yell that he had not dreamed a woman could emit. Lyssa had flung herself into the fray.

He saw her striking out with a long, heavy stick. For an instant the pair were pushed back. She turned and thrust the stick into his hands. It was the pole upon which the himation had been hung.

"Run, Lucius! Run! Run!" She was struggling in their arms, not to get away—to hold them there.

It was then that he thanked Ciscus once more for what he had learned. The stick was long and heavy as a quarterstaff. He beat one man down with a single blow; he dashed the end of it into the spot where he judged the face of the other must be under the pointed hood. He heard a strangled cry of pain as that man fell, kicking and jerking in the mud.

"Come, Lyssa! Quick!" Before she could follow, the entrance to the alley was darkened with robed figures. He ran at them,

striking out like a maniac to clear a way for her. They separated and let him through. He threw down the pole and went, reeling, stumbling, but faster than he would have believed any man could run with the injuries he knew he had.

He thought he heard her following. “Hurry, Lyssa!” He could see the sentries at the barracks gate, watching him come.

Their shields went up. The pilum points dropped to receive his pursuers. “Decurion of the guard! Gate Number Two!” The runners turned aside and vanished.

He gasped, “I am Lucius Sempronius Atticus. Legionary—Tenth Cohort! Take me to Commander Varro at once!” and fell into the arms of the nearest stationarius.

At the hospital, the medici did their best to keep the wounded man alive until all of the story had been told. Manlius, roused from bed, looked down upon him as Lilia bathed the face of her companion and friend.

“I thought little of women until I met you, Metellus,” he whispered at the very end through his shapeless lips. His eyes closed.

After a time Lilia looked up at Manlius’ stern face.

“It is all over, sir.”

Manlius nodded. “Homer says, ‘We are all puppets in the hands of aegis-bearing Zeus. In a moment Zeus can make a brave man run away and lose a battle and the next day the same god will spur him on to fight.’ He has won his battle and given us our chance to win ours. No man could have done better.”

Outside of Lilia’s prayers and tears, there was no other epitaph, no other mourning.

In the little house with the alley entrance, Lyssa was done with struggling. She sat, now, helpless in the strong hands of two angry robed men. She could not see their faces and that frightened her more than anything else. The pain they had already inflicted upon her had not yet been unbearable, for she was still conscious, but the impersonality of it seemed more than she could stand. It was the soulless cruelty of the machine.

She had told them nothing. She sat in sullen defiance. Now a new interrogator had arrived, robed like the others, except that his faceless hood was marked with two twisted golden horns.

They deferred to him. Obviously he held high authority. The

blankness of black cloth stared at her. It moved only slightly in front of his mouth. She must not allow him the satisfaction of knowing her inward terror. If he was human, and she knew he must be, then he was a Parthian. She was a Hellene, before whom the armies of Darius, the fleets of Xerxes, had gone to rack, before whom all Persia had humbled itself.

She stared back, proudly and as firmly. She would not speak.

"Who was the man? What have you told him? Why did he go to the Romans? Was he a Roman?"

She remained silent. He took out a scroll from somewhere in his robes. The pointed hood bent over it. She could not see the slits for his eyes.

On the floor lay the pathetically shattered figurine of Aphrodite. The vase with white cranes was in fragments. Someone had stepped on the cherished Panpipes.

He looked up from the scroll. "Lyssa, the hetaira, daughter of Aletha, the hetaira, granddaughter of Bilitis, the hetaira—

"It seems an honored profession in your line. Are there more in your ancestry?"

Lyssa did not reply. "You will go to the temple if you do not answer," he said grimly. She said nothing.

"A most curious family. I find no male parent on the list. Are you androgynous? It will be interesting to find out."

He signed to the men who held her. She screamed once, then, but there was no one but her enemies to hear.

## THE INVENTOR

Lights burned long that night in the old audience room of the palace, where Manlius held his headquarters. Guards stood at every door.

Quadrantion Antimon looked around. Tribunes Quintus and Mancinus were chatting. That group of strange yellow men stood by themselves, watching, silently listening. They looked placid as sleeping tigers.

Ambassador Valens and Liu Mang sat side by side at the commander's table. Mentally Antimon ticked off the articles which he had brought. They were covered by a cloth. Had he forgotten anything?

Manlius rose. The subdued buzz of low voices came to an end.

"Gentlemen. I am sure you are now completely familiar with the crisis with which we are faced. Our foes—for now we must definitely consider them as such—plan our imminent destruction.

"Fortunately, owing to the self-sacrifice of an extremely brave and devoted man, we have not been taken by surprise.

"Before I proceed further, I must remind you, Liu Mang, that you are in no way obligated to share our fortunes and our perils."

Liu Mang stood up and bowed, his hands clasped before him. His glance swept across the little group of his countrymen. Something passed between them, imperceptible to the Westerners.

"Honorable war lord of Ta-Ch'in, the matter has already been discussed among this humble person and those lionhearted warriors who deign to follow him in his wanderings.

"It has been wisely observed that death is the ultimate adventure and should be awaited with eager curiosity, rather than pusillanimous dread. We go with you."

"I accept your decision, man of the Shang, and commend you and your followers to the honorable attention of your ancestors.

"Will you now repeat, for this assembly, what you have privately told me, so that all may be informed of the dangers which lie before us when we leave this city?"

Liu Mang unrolled a large scroll and fastened it against the wall. He placed a pointer against its nearest edge. Allowing for lack of perspective, it was not difficult to recognize Jaxikarta.

"This is where we stand. To the north is Bactria, to the south Ctesiphon, and over here Merv."

"What can you tell us, Liu Mang, concerning Merv?"

"It is a green island in a sea of sand, surrounded by a wall about one hundred and eighty-two and a half li in extent. It would be impossible to take with your small force.

"It lies eastward, in a straight line, some twenty-six hundred of your stadia, upon the river known as the Water of Birds. To the north of it, westward and eastward, too, is the almost impassable Desert of Scarlet Sands, but in Merv are parks and hunting grounds, which are called paradises, where wild animals are preserved. Here we saw our first elephants. Here, too, is a military base of great size.

"Doubtless, from it, your enemy is even now probably making ready to advance upon you, in case this treacherous attack fails."

The trader bowed and sat down. Manlius said, "Ambassador Valens, can you add anything of value? It would appear that we must skirt this colorful desert to the north, more or less following the shoreline of the Caspian. We can hardly venture upon the dangers of the southern periphery of it, or cross it directly east.

"I believe that we can expect, shortly after leaving here, to be pursued by the army of the grand marshal, who will move up from Ctesiphon. The young Surena will try to intercept us, by coming from Merv, before we can cross the Parthian border.

"Liu Mang has mentioned elephants. I have not read that the Parthians have used elephants in war. Do you think that they will in this action?"

Valens looked thoughtful. "I know that Surena Pacorus holds

you in considerable respect. I know that he considers the Thirteenth a redoubtable force."

The officers looked at one another and grinned. There was a growling murmur.

"It would seem that he would certainly bring them. But—should he do so, he must consider logistics. An elephant requires almost a thousand pounds of fodder a day and immense quantities of water. This would necessitate following the river Margus, which Trader Liu calls the Water of Birds, to the river Oxus, which is the border between Parthia and the almost unknown land of Scythia.

"Without elephants, he should have no trouble and his army will be well rested and waiting. We must take that route, for we will be otherwise passing between two deserts, extremely dangerous to ourselves.

"If he does take the elephants, I believe he can still block off the mountain passes we must take, but he should arrive there much later and with exhausted troops."

"You say 'we,' Ambassador?"

Valens squared his shoulders. "I am a Roman. I am coming with you!" There was a subdued murmur of appreciation.

"Well spoken, sir. I thank you for your confidence in our cause. We must certainly hope our friend does not leave his elephants behind. I believe someone else here may have a few ideas that will affect the behavior of elephants.

"Quadranton Antimon, will you exhibit your inventions to us?"

All heads turned toward the Greek gadgeteer. He stood up and removed the coverings from the table.

"As some who have worked with me know, these items on display depend upon the use of the liquid naphtha. To those who are unfamiliar with it, I can only say that it is a natural product of the earth which holds within itself great power and fury.

"In the confines of this room, it would be impossible to demonstrate its strength without endangering us all. Therefore I have prepared models. Judge them in miniature."

He held up a small copper tube no larger than a man's finger. It was capped and threaded at both ends. He unscrewed one of the caps. "It is hollow, as you see. I now fill it with sawdust and tamp this down well. Into the tube I pour naphtha from this

flask, until the sawdust has absorbed all the liquid it can take. Then I recap the tube tightly."

Antimon uncovered a brazier, laid the tube, with tender care, upon the glowing charcoal, and hastily covered the container with a heavy iron lid. Over all he threw a thick rug. He backed away and waited.

A moment later there was a sharp report. The rug heaved and rose into the air, bursting into flame. Antimon's helpers threw sand over the whole and stamped out the smoldering embers.

The lid had been split in twain. The brazier lay in scattered fragments. Of the tube there was nothing to be seen. He held up a similar tube, large as a man's wrist, wrapped in wire and about two feet long.

"This is the size which would be used in war. The wire will fly in deadly scraps. The explosion of the weapon will blow a hole in soft earth deep enough to hide a team of mules."

The assemblage looked at one another in awe. There was a muffled buzz of comment. Curus Appius, Master of Artillery, asked what others were wondering. "Could this be fired from a ballista?"

"I suggest that it would be of more value against a city gate. There is a risk that it might explode in the air or among ourselves. Possibly, if it were wrapped in naphtha-soaked rags and attached to a lance, it could be hurled, flaming, over a wall to let it explode inside. It would be better than our phalaricas."

There were some who nodded in sober assent. Manlius said, "Continue."

"Now this"—Antimon held up a clay jug, stoppered with a rag—"is safer to the user. One has more time. Filled with naphtha and thrown by hand after igniting the wick, it will not really be dangerous until the jug breaks among the enemy."

"A slinger has thrown a few of these in practice, with good success, up to two hundred feet."

"This is a siphon." Again a long fat tube, but one with a pointed nozzle and a movable handle. "You will recognize it as similar to the ones used in Rome by the fire fighters. The model is smaller but an exact copy. It does not use water." No one laughed.

A helper came up with a lighted torch. Antimon, having filled



the squirt gun with naphtha, aimed a thin stream above the flame, sending out a pencil-thick jet of fire into the air. It dripped, still burning, upon the stone flagging of the room.

"Unfortunately, even the large size is good only for about fifty feet. It requires the strength of two men to operate the full-size siphon, one to carry the instrument, the other to drive home the piston. It will be up to the tacticians to devise the best use for the arm."

Quintus nudged Manlius and said one word. "Elephants!" Manlius nodded. He became withdrawn and thoughtful. Quintus, having nothing more to contribute, absently drew a flagon of wine away from the reaching hand of Matho and closer to himself. He regarded it with affection.

Antimon passed around little pots of a dark, tarry substance which reeked. "Now here is something better than we had during the attack of the pirates." Vorco looked interested. "It is sticky, will spread slowly and not run. It burns for a long time, water will not put out its flame, which is furious enough to melt bronze. I submit that this is the substance to be used in the ballistas and perhaps the onagers.

"Naphtha is its base, with bitumen and sulphur added. It will burn up through covering sand. Vinegar will not choke it. It will ravage and feed until all the material is used up. This is not the place for a demonstration."

When all had seen the pots, the boxes were repacked by the helpers, and Antimon displayed the steam cannon in its gleaming splendor. It had, until then, remained enshrouded by a canvas.

He stood beside it, with modest pride, while it was being examined, answering questions and explaining its construction and purpose.

When everyone had passed by, Manlius called the assembly to attention. "I need hardly impress upon you the importance of not discussing upon the outside anything that you have heard here today.

"You have seen the new weapons. I shall be receptive to any suggestions as to their practical use. We have some of these already constructed. Material for more is available. Work upon them is going forward with all speed.

“We lack only one important item—a sufficient supply of naphtha to arm them. I assure you, we shall soon have that.

“Apply yourselves thoughtfully to the subject. The meeting is dismissed.”

## BANQUET IN JAXIKARTA

A tubby Roman roundship squattered through choppy waves of the Black Sea, off the Armenian coast. The man in the red Phrygian hat stood broodingly silent beside the captain of the *Thetis*.

The latter pointed ahead. "Batum," he said. "Here we pick up cargo and return to Alexandria. Are you sure that you will not come back with us?"

"I have been to Alexandria," was the laconic reply.

"I am sorry. You have been valuable to us. You proved your worth when we were attacked off Sinope. I knew you were a good man when I first saw you fight in the arena at Antioch.

"Here is your wage. Let me give you a little advice. Do not show much money in Batum. It is a nest of thieves. Attach yourself to a caravan if you want to go into Armenia. It would be best to pretend you have no money and work your way.

"Your journey is useless. I do not understand why you want to go on. I told you what I heard in Byzantium about the Thirteenth Legion. You know they were all drowned in a flood. No survivors at all. I got it straight from the proconsul."

"I must see the place. I can take care of myself."

"Yes," said the captain, studying him thoughtfully. "I believe you can."

That same morning dawned bright and clear over Jaxikarta. Nothing unusual marked it. There were no omens. The auguries were conventional in aspect and not alarming. Manlius noted that the smoke from the burning entrails on the altar of Mars rose straight into the air until it reached the height of the walls about the compound. Then the wind carried it east.

He took this as a good sign. Jupiter still indicated the path the

legion must take. This city, dangerous as he knew it to be, was not the stopping place. They were to go on.

Inhabitants who had early business on the streets pleasantly greeted what few strolling legionaries were abroad. If they noticed that those soldiers were heavily armed and walked in pairs, they made no comment. If there was suspicion on either side, it did not show.

As the day wore on it might have been observed that there were more armed Parthians loitering about the public buildings than ordinarily had been seen. These also came and went in couples and threes. When they casually entered the buildings, it was not often that the same number came out again.

In the barracks the routine of the Thirteenth appeared to go on as it always had in bivouac. There was an indefinable air of alertness apparent, **nothing more.**

Lucius Julius Octavianus sanded the floor. Publius Clodius Secundus polished Centurion Helius' boots. Gaius Julius Tertius swabbed out the bathhouse, and Cassius Rufus sweated out barrack fatigue as he had each day for two weeks, since brawling in a town tavern and making a shambles of its interior.

The griping was nothing unusual, especially in the outer yards where the horses were being groomed and girths mended.

This was an affair which always held the interest of whatever loafers were hanging about. Today there seemed to be quite a lot of them. By the amount of nudging, the sly smiles, and the sarcastically muttered comments that were passed, there seemed to be some secret joke which the Romans were not supposed to share.

Trooper Proxillus, the young trumpeter, was in an especially bad mood. Lilia, off duty at the moment, stopped to admire and pet his horse. She heard him say, as he threw down his rug in disgust just as she came up:

"What? Use my own rations? My own vinegar and salt? I'll never do it. Not a drop. Not a grain. Let supply furnish the cruddy brass polish, or it will go green as a meadow for all me!"

"Suit yourself, lad," said Trooper Gemellus, busily at work beside him, shortening a stirrup. "The centurion is a remarkably lenient man. There's many a thing he won't have a blister-seat

hung up by the thumbs for. Too bad dirty brass ain't one of them! If you didn't polish that banged-up trumpet ten times a day you wouldn't run out of salt."

Proxillus was about to retort, but Squadron Leader Apollinaris came up, ostensibly to see how the work was going. Both troopers fell silent and applied themselves to the brasswork.

Apollinaris watched them furtively while he pointed out the fine qualities of animals and equipment to Lilia.

"Matho's Orphans! We're proud of that name. Just look at them, Lilia. Aren't they beautiful? Not a knock-knee, spavin, or pigeon-toe in the lot. If the farrier spots one pointing a toe, that horse goes into the remounts at the first break."

"I thought horses were afraid of men. They have such big eyes. Don't we look bigger to them than we really are?"

Apollinaris laughed. "That's an old story. No truth in it. Somebody who was afraid of a horse made that up, to make himself feel better.

"Actually, they like men. They are as intelligent as men, in their own way. Look at them. See how their ears are all pricked up? They know these wagons aren't being moved for nothing.

"They know we're getting ready to pull out. That's something these sniggling gawkers all around us, up on the wall, haven't caught onto—yet.

"Horses are smarter than Parthians, anyway."

Lilia swept the enclosure with a casual glance. It was true. The ever present watchers were paying little or no attention to the tank wagons which were being moved out of the enclosure to a new station farther up the hill—a terrace which was mostly a broad plaza, close to the temple grounds.

Benches and tables for the coming banquet were being erected in the space which the removed wagons would finally leave available.

The day wore on. To those who knew what was being plotted, it seemed interminable. At last dusk came. The cressets were lit, the enclosure blazed with lights, all was ready for the feast.

Ambassador Valens, because of his rank, had been domiciled in Government House, which was actually a part of the palace

barrack complex and separated from it only by a small propylaeum.

This outer courtyard had a fountain and a pool of golden carp. All was surrounded by a wall which abutted upon the wall of the barracks, forming a continuation of the main curtain. It was likewise protected by guardhouses.

This fortalice could be either a strong bastion to the general system of outworks or a deadly trap to those within it. Which it would be depended entirely on whether or not it was possible to take those officers who were dining there by surprise.

**The knowledge was burdening them all.**

As the evening was warm and fine, the tables had been set up in the garden surrounding the pool. The dining hall, though elegantly furnished, was much too small for the officers and their distinguished guests. Thus Manlius, Matho, and Quintus were in a position to have the guards who walked the wall constantly under observation.

Everything moved smoothly on as the various courses appeared, were discussed, and the dishes removed. Politeness ruled. The wines were exquisite and tempting. The Romans used them sparingly, although the Parthian nobility drank with freedom.

It was noticed that their attitude was tense and the ladies with them seemed nervous and withdrawn. Their laughter was short and brittle, as though they felt out of place. Quintus, who had a shrewd eye for such things, doubted that these were the wives and daughters of their companions, regardless of rich jewelry and fine gowns. For once, he divided his attention among them instead of singling out the most likely with low whispers and subtle invitations. He sipped his wine slowly, making it last instead of gulping it down. His goblet was not often refilled.

The servants came and went. They glided noiselessly about on their felt slippers, but their movements, while not clumsy, were noticeably awkward. When not occupied with some service, they stood ready with almost a military bearing.

Matho saw a calloused hand pour his wine. This was most unusual among house servants. He suddenly turned and stared over his shoulder. He caught a look of haughty insolence. It instantly passed, but it had been there.

Through the open gate which led to the compound where the legionaries dined in their long close ranks, there now rose a cheer of surprise and admiration.

The governor of Jaxikarta, who sat next to Manlius, turned and favored him with a slight bow. "They are bringing in the main dish. It is far too large to be shown here. Shall we go and see?"

All in the garden rose from the tables and crowded around the gate to look out into the compound. A procession from outside the wall was entering the main gate, preceded and followed by an honor guard of Parthian men-at-arms in full armor. They wore no weapons except elaborate dress sabers without which any Parthian felt naked.

The light from the torches displayed their rich flowing robes and spiked helmets to fine advantage. The scales on their armor slid smoothly to and fro as they approached, like the integument of gaudy lizards. Their black, curled beards glittered with golden thread, woven thickly in spiral designs.

The Farmer was lost in wide-eyed admiration. "What a beautiful set of men! I could buy the best farm in the Po Valley with that much gold."

"Hyrceanian gold," grunted Longinus. "Guarded by one-eyed griffins. That country is dirty with gold. These people must get it in trade. Look at them! Think they'd ever fight for it?"

He belched, being already far gone in drink. Tibullus, even tipsier, laughed with brave cup-scorn.

"Hey, Centurion, ever hear how they got their name? Used to call themselves Persians. So many of them lisp now that they can't say the word. Perthians! Parthians! Get it, Centurion? Act proud of it, don't they?"

The procession went by with measured tread. Lighted torches quivered in their hands, betraying that the slow-pacing guards had heard. Tibullus, caught and momentarily intimidated by a battery of savage glares, subsided into quiet. He took another drink and felt courage surge back into his veins.

Now behind the armed men came a troop of jugglers, tossing shiny balls, spangled discs, and sharp knives. There were tumblers and acrobats who did cartwheels. There was a man who drank naphtha and blew six-foot streams of flame out of his

mouth. It whoofed and roared above the heads of those seated at the tables he passed.

The diners gave these mountebanks scant attention. Behind them came the main wonder of the feast, carried on the shoulders of twenty men in ornate battle dress, as though they bore the litter of a noble.

It was a noble sight. They strained under a heavy load—a platform upon which rested a whole roasted camel. Its legs were folded beneath it. Its head was raised haughtily as though it stared about with its yellow eyes of candied citron.

A fat legionary rubbed his thigh and gloated. "I hope that's the one that bit me!" A ripple of laughter ran down the benches. Even the grim marchers smiled wintrily as they passed on toward the clear space reserved for the carving men and servers who waited with heavy cleavers and long two-tined forks that looked like bifurcated spears.

As it was set down near the gate where the officers stood, they could see how handsomely the Parthian cooks had embellished their masterpiece.

"Inside it," proclaimed the governor with pride, "is a whole roast sheep carcass, which is stuffed with baked fowl, which contain in their bellies boiled fish stuffed with cooked eggs."

The camel sent out a composite of savory odors. On its back it bore a saddle composed of sweetmeats, partly covered with a throw of candied rose petals. Surrounding all were wreaths of fruit, which alternated with dishes and salvers of condiments, sauces, and preserved figs in honey. Dates were carefully arranged to simulate clumps of coarse hair.

Quintus stood gazing at this display, momentarily taken aback. He shrugged and said, "Ample for a gathering of this size, no doubt, who are merely hungry. A discerning epicure appreciates a more delicate dish, such as my cook frequently prepared for me in Spain.

"How I miss him! I have not dined with proper refinement since I left him. He would select an almond out of a hundred choice nuts, blanch it in olive oil from Málaga, which has no competitor anywhere in the world—the first pressing of course—and place it inside the body of a plump hummingbird, seasoned with tarragon and thyme.



"The hummingbird was carefully inserted into the interior of a tender sparrow, bred for that purpose and always nurtured on aromatic seeds. The body must not be bruised or it loses much of its savory essence.

"After the sparrow had been sewed up with thread steeped in cinnamon, and basted with the finest garum, it was placed inside a robin and the robin into a quail. After these had been partially roasted, but not to crispness, the quail went into a partridge, imported from Gaul and marinated in white wine, and the partridge was placed within a boned capon. All were adequately enveloped by a goose from Strasburg.

"When this combination is properly arranged and roasted with the care and attention it deserves, one who enjoys really fine food will discover that the almond has acquired a most exquisite flavor, worthy of the palate of the most jaded of gourmets."

The governor gazed blankly at the sober faces of the officers. His own was a study in indignant fury. No one spoke and with an immense effort he controlled himself. His voice throbbed with repressed emotion: "I must compose my soul in peace until I am enabled to satisfy my longing for such a delightful dainty.

"In the meantime, shall we return to our tables and dine upon such coarse food as the cooks of my household have been able to provide?"

The dishes were filled and refilled, until finally only bones remained upon the platform. The entertainment continued. More Parthians came into the compound to watch and applaud. They stood around the edges, leaning against the walls, their arms folded or hidden entirely under their long flowing robes.

A few even came into the courtyard where the officers were. There were no women among the new arrivals, only wiry-looking men with concealed hands and fierce faces.

Outside, there was boisterous shouting and apparently little sobriety. Someone yelled, "A song! Tibullus, give us a song!"

Manlius and the others heard a bibulous voice upraised. The words came to them clearly. As it went on, the Parthian nobles looked at one another in dismay. The women tittered, the men grew red with anger, for hypocrisy and prudishness go together.

Tibullus sang:

*"My girl met Pan in April,  
We were wed in May.  
Time passed, as time will,  
Our babe was born today."*

Out roared the chorus of hundreds of drunken voices:

*"Yellow-eyed!  
Crooked shank!  
Hairy on the flank!  
My girl met Pan in April  
And  
I wear his horns today!"*

Again the solo and the chorus:

*"When Pan awakes, he's angry—  
At least, that's what they say.  
Why shouldn't I be angry too?  
He led my girl astray!"*

*"Curly head!  
Shiny hoofs!  
See him dancing on the roofs!  
My girl met Pan in April  
And  
Should not have stopped to play!"*

Tibullus reeled, selected one of the prettiest of the Parthian ladies, and leered at her boldly, singing:

*"If you meet that wanton godling  
Make haste to run away,  
Lest your baby's eyes be yellow.  
It will happen if you stay!"*

The chorus was like thunder. The women shrank before it. Manlius, white-faced, sprang to his feet. Too late!

*"Now I sorrow!  
Tears she wipes,  
When we hear those pagan pipes!"*

*My girl met Pan in April  
And  
We cry 'Alackaday!'*

There was one instant of horrified silence among the Parthians. The governor sprang to the gateway of the compound before Manlius could reach it and shouted, "The dog of a Roman insults our women and all Parthia! Slay! Slay!"

And in that instant battle was joined in Jaxikarta. The Romans snatched out their swords, which had been fastened under the table tops. Ambassador Valens and the governor himself were among the first to fall.

From the four gates in the wall about the city, streets ran straight up the hill upon which it was built. They ended at the four corresponding entrances to the Temple of Ahriman. Each passed first through the broad encircling plaza on the terrace just outside.

Under cover of darkness, the picked maniples of legionaries came out of the close, hot confines of the water wagons where they had lain concealed during most of the day.

In preparation for their dangerous mission, they were dressed in dark clothing, their faces were blackened, and all bright metal had been smeared with soot.

The horses, which had been stabled upon the north side of the plaza awaiting this moment, were led out as noiselessly as possible on muffled hoofs and harnessed, ready for action.

Eitel and the other chosen wagoners held their breaths. No sound came from the looming fabric of the temple which overshadowed them on this lateral terrace. Vorco, who had been given command of the striking force, turned over his hourglass for the last time. From far away, the cheerful noise of revelry came drifting up from the banqueters.

Suddenly he stiffened. Silhouetted against the lights of the brightly illuminated compound, he saw the street in crawling motion. It was filled with shadows which came together in small groups.

They moved silently as shades. As they passed down the hill, the cressets and torches at street corners and alley intersections

went black behind them. For an instant he debated mentally the wisdom of sending a runner down to the barracks.

He shrugged. His orders were clear. He had little doubt that this contingency had been foreseen by the commander and measures taken against any surprise. Matho had orders to observe—remain in readiness—and intervene if and when it might become necessary. Until then the cavalry must remain hidden and silently wait on events. This affair of his own depended upon strict timing and obedience to his own instructions.

Vorco held up the glass against the only light near enough to be of service, the undying flame which hissed from the topmost tower of the temple. Only half the sand had run out, but he felt that he dared wait no longer. He held up his arm.

Without speaking, Antimon, who stood beside him, signaled the next in line in the same manner. They were gray shadows in the dark. In a few seconds, all were alerted. The maniple, each man briefed thoroughly in what was expected of him, moved forward toward the north gate of the temple.

It was closed and barred. This they had expected. It always was at sunset. Vorco pressed his ear against it. He thought he heard the sound of heavy breathing on the other side.

A pyramid of men was rising against the gate. Vorco always moved with the grace of a cat. He did so now, springing lightly and without clink of metal to the topmost tier. Like a cat, he raised his head slowly above the edge, constantly listening for any change in the sound below.

A single torch gave feeble illumination to the stone-paved courtyard. He could see a man below him, lying upon a bench. The man did not move and Vorco could not make out whether the warder had his eyes open, scanning the stars, or whether he was dozing away his watch.

Knowing himself what was afoot, Vorco wondered that the man took so little interest in the coming events of the later hours of the night. The fool must feel that the issue has only one end, he thought.

He squatted down upon the shoulders of the legionary under him and whispered a command. A bow was passed up. Vorco raised himself again, higher, and took careful aim.

The twang of the bowstring was almost inaudible. Not much

louder was the brief gasp from below and the soft, intermittent drumming of the warder's heels.

"Sleep sound! Dream of Vorco the Volscian!" The former pirate poised upon the top of the gate and leapt down. He crouched beside the man who, nailed to the bench by the arrow through his throat, gave up his soul to the mercies of his devil god.

The others on the wall came dropping lightly to the stones. Soon the gate, its bars drawn, opened wide for the entry of all. Some noise, now, was unavoidable. The legionaries fanned out to secure the inner yard and here they met their first resistance.

One of the black-robed figures sprang to his feet, slammed a door shut against them as the wagons came rumbling through the gateway on their rag-wrapped wheels, and fled, shouting, unable to bar the inner doors in time against the invader.

Vorco sprang after him, leaping in great bounds. The man did not rise when Vorco did, but the alarm had been given. In moments the Men of the Night were upon them. Bitter fighting spread into the dim corridors of the inner temple.

From the descriptions given by the cameleers whose naphtha had been diverted to Antimon's experiments by Roman gold, Vorco knew that the temple was but the merest shell in comparison to the warren of tunnels which ran deep into the hill.

How many men could be brought against his small task force he could not imagine. Undoubtedly his command would be outnumbered, possibly taken in the rear. There would be secret passages and concealed exits. He had no time to look for them.

Every legionary in the contingent had studied the diagrams of the route taken by the laden camels into the temple interior. The corridor they wanted was broad and high. It led straight into a great echoing chamber.

The Men of the Night gave back slowly. The clang of sword-play, the whistling whirl of swinging chains, the thud of jagged lumps of iron, and the shouts of dying men rang hollowly against the walls of the enormous room.

The chain fighters had the advantage. Knowing every inch of the vault and having room to ply their peculiar weapons, they did much damage to Vorco's force before the place was cleared.

Surprisingly, all at once the chamber was quiet, except for the sounds of groaning wounded. Vorco immediately detailed six men to guard the courtyard doors.

The tank wagons, which had followed close upon the fighting, rolled in after the dead were dragged out of the way of the wheels. The wagoners swung their animals to the right as they came out of the corridor to encircle the huge stone reservoir which occupied the center of the room. Here lay the treasure they had fought so hard to secure.

High in the walls, just below the roughhewn timbers of the ceiling, were small window openings. Through these came the only light, the flickering glow of the beacon which always burned on the pinnacle, although a cunningly arranged set of polished mirrors outside reflected sunlight within, during the day.

In the dim light the work began, ever more rapidly as the eyes of the men became accustomed to the dark. Leather buckets passed from hand to hand in a long chain, from the several spigots in the walls of the reservoir to the men perched on the tops of the wagons.

Others fed different lines by dipping down with their buckets into the reeking liquid through the manholes of the immense tank, where covers had been slid aside. Steadily the level fell.

The air became foul with fumes from the spilled naphtha. The horses nervously tossed their heads. It became difficult to hold them in place, for they, as well as the men, were suffering for a clean breath. Little dancing lights and colored circles swirled phantomlike before their inner vision.

There was suddenly a distant sound of fighting. They paused to listen. It did not last long. A dull booming noise and a shudder in the air followed. Vorco felt his heart slow. We are prisoners, he thought, but signaled for the work to continue. Now it's up to the gods!

The workers slaved with diminishing speed but with choking lungs. Heads seemed encircled with iron bands, tightening beyond endurance as the precious moments raced on.

Antimon, knowing the danger more than any other, felt himself to be inside a gigantic bomb, ready to explode with titanic force at a single careless spark. The floor was slippery with

naphtha, the sides of the wagons dripped with it—even the clothes of the workers were soaked. He was thankful he had insisted that no hobnailed boots should be worn by anyone. He prayed that the wrappings of the wheels might stay in place at least until they were outside. Iron rims and stone together—just one little spark! He could imagine the flash of blinding light—the concussion that would follow.

At last the wagons were filled, the caps dogged down. The reservoir was almost empty. Its thousands of gallons of Chimaera's blood now belonged to Antimon and the Thirteenth Legion, to be used in whatever strategy his ingenious mind might conceive, to further the broader plans of Manlius. It remained now to get the treasure out of the trap that it and the survivors of the maniple were in.

Only the four men who stood at the entrance to the chamber as a guard against surprise had not been contaminated. These few, who could handle torches with safety, led the way toward the outer world. They walked with swords in hand, removing the torches from the wall as they passed, careful to leave no glowing coal behind. They lit the way far ahead of those who followed. The heavily laden wagons rolled after.

The men at point met with no resistance until they came to the obstruction responsible for the dull noise they had heard. Those heavy bronze doors had slid from either side of the entrance, to meet and close the outlet. The detail had been slain. They were shut off from the courtyard.

Vorco ran forward, holding up his hand for silence. Again he listened. There was a confused murmur of sound outside. He could not make out whether it was the clangor of fighting or merely the babble of a crowd gathering to oppose them, when and if they broke out.

He was about to order Antimon to bring up one of his heavy tubes that had been prepared for that purpose, if necessary, and regardless of the danger to themselves, to blow down the doors. Thankfully, before he could issue the command, he saw the portals rush apart, vanishing into their wall slots.

The courtyard became visible, filled with mounted men, their horses milling about, under protection of a thin ring of bowmen

and slingers working hard to hold the walls clear. Matho's cata-phracts, come to rescue, and themselves under attack!

All around, rising from the city below, was a pandemonium of noise to assault their hearing. Trumpets blared and gongs clashed, but higher than all was the shrieking outcry of frantic women who saw their men cut down, their homes burning, their city being wrecked.

Somewhere a bell was tolling, its sonorous voice throbbing like a regular heartbeat, whether as an alarum or in mournful requiem could be known only to its ringer.

The wagons rolled into the courtyard to be surrounded at once by their welcome escort. Vorco laughed in relief. He went up to the nearest trooper and clapped him heartily on the leg.

"By Jupiter and Mars!" he swore. "This is the first time I was ever glad to see one of you lazy swaggerers. How does it feel to do a little work? Bend down here and let me give you a big, sloppy kiss!"

"Not the way you stink, road-pounder!" The retort came with a good-humored grin. "What in Hades have you been doing? Cleaning sewers?"

Without a pause, the cavalcade clattered out into the street. From the roofs of the houses a shower of stones and tiles poured down upon their uplifted shields.

Vorco, his thoughts distracted by the trooper, was too late. He reeled and fell beneath the hoofs. A gash in his skull revealed gray pulp which oozed out slowly. His face showed no pain. His sardonic, mocking smile continued to show his contempt for life in general, as it always had.

Antimon dragged him away from the moving wheels. What a futile death for a brave man! he thought. What a waste! But that was war. When had war been anything else? There was nothing more he could do. The convoy of wagons moved on.

As it neared the flat of the first intersecting lateral terrace, a fresh crowd rushed upon the weary men, blowing whistles and screaming inarticulate war cries. Interspersed among them were a few of the black robes. They seemed to be directing the attack and acting as leaders.

Here the Balearic slingers were in their element. They singled out and speedily cut down the Men of the Night. The armored



troopers pushed into the throng, slashing a way for the wagons with their sabers, as the work was too close to use lances.

Eitel's whip was a deadly snake. It lashed and coiled and struck again, ahead, to the sides and the rear. It caught necks and dragged and strangled. It came loose and darted its fang at eyes, at throats, at naked chests. It drank and spat and drank again—a scarlet serpent seeking flesh. The wheels of the heavy wagons bumped and squished over unidentifiable obstacles while the uproar continued with intensity.

As the convoy neared the palace barracks, the beleaguered, exhausted men could see Government House in flames. Against the lurid light, a horde of dark figures was outlined, hurling themselves in desperate waves against the defenders of the compound. The bell tolled on—whatever it was before, it was now a tocsin.

## THE SMOKE DRIVES EAST

The gates opened. Suddenly there was a rush of the remaining cavalry which momentarily cleared the area. Following came the cohorts in testudo formation—outer ranks interlocking shields, inner ranks holding theirs over their heads as protection from the rooftops.

The tank wagons were instantly surrounded and shielded from danger. The weary men and decimated cavalry were, for the moment, given breathing time.

The Thirteenth Legion thus began its evacuation of Jaxikarta.

The street outside became raked by a heavy discharge of stones from such onagers as could be brought to bear from that section of wall. When the barrage was over, the Balearic slingers brought their deadly weapons into play, followed immediately by two hundred picked archers, selected from the best each cohort had to offer.

Protected by these snipers and sharpshooters, the youngest and most agile of the principes, the shock troops, came close behind. They were skilled in street fighting and their object was just that—to clear the houses on either side which lined the way the legion must travel to the North Gate, the nearest exit from the city.

Then Antimon followed, acting as decurion over the ten men under his command who knew something about the use of the deadly flame-throwing siphons. Attendants ran with them, bearing torches for ignition and making of themselves excellent targets.

Sappers and engineers followed with their crowbars and tools. One street barricade was visible from the wall. There would inevitably be more.

Leaving only its dead and the heavy artillery which could not

be dismantled from its mounts in time, the legion filled the street and started downhill toward the distant city wall. It marched with interlocked shields, for this would be a road of death.

At first resistance was small. The surprise attack by the slingers had accomplished its purpose well. Most of the near housetops were already occupied by young agile principes who maintained their posts only long enough to make certain that the way was secure. Then they hurried on, sometimes leaping from roof to roof, across the narrow alleys between.

As they went, they tumbled coping stones and tiles upon the heads of those who hid below in ambush points, pierced them with arrows from above, or directed a fiercely incinerating stream of liquid fire into the alley depths.

Antimon ordered a sparing use of the siphons, until the tank wagons should pass. He dreaded that one might be ignited and block the street. That would be disaster most horrible.

The vehicles moved in single file, still covered thickly by the water-soaked blankets. Beside them marched units detailed for their protection, carrying buckets of water and a minimum of weapons for their own.

The embattled legion was no stranger to street fighting. Many cities had been subdued in its long history; many tough knots of resistance had been crumbled before those cities became Roman.

But not in the longest memory of the oldest veteran had they met anything like this. The attack stiffened. There was no room in which to spread out, no opportunity to employ the usual tactics.

It was far more difficult to crash one's way out of a city determined to slaughter an army in retreat than it was to enter a city dispirited by the knowledge that its walls had been breached, its defenders thrown back and scattered.

Even the most inexperienced of the recruits knew they were in a strong trap. Every inch of the way was fiercely contested, as all Jaxikarta rose in arms. Every house was a fort which must be taken. Every intersection had its barricade which must be cleared under fire, before the indispensable supply wagons and artillery could be moved through.

Each open square, where the downward slopes of the street leveled off onto a lateral terrace, was a separate battleground.

Each had its individual acts of heroism, its scrambling melee, its toll of lives. Each was passed, leaving behind the detritus of war and crumpled bodies, both Roman and Parthian.

The legionaries stumbled over a dead mule, cut out of harness. A little farther along, they came upon the obstacle of a supply wagon, contents spilled on the stones, already surrounded by city looters, swinging it about to block the street while fighting among themselves over the unexpected booty inside.

Always the rain of missiles upon the head of the column; always the screaming onslaught, continuing with no lessening of its savage fury; always the war cries, the frantic trumpets, the shouted commands. These sounds blended with the crash of masonry, the clanging tocsin calling "To arms!" and the crackling of flames.

The buildings were now burning all along the route and the conflagration spreading fast to either side. The scattered blazes were on the way to becoming a holocaust unplanned by either of the combatants.

At the tail of the Roman column staggered the walking wounded, some supported by their companions. Others clung to the sides of the wagons. They weaved dizzily, almost blindly, down the hill, hanging on desperately lest they fall beneath the wheels or be left behind to the mercies of those who followed.

Here straggled the riffraff of the city, not brave enough to face the brunt of battle: the looters, the poor, anxious to profit somehow; the men and women who haunted dark alleys and slept by day; all those who enjoyed the sight of helpless suffering.

Into the hands of such as these fall the unfortunate of all wars, to die not soon enough, each in his own private hell.

A squadron of Matho's horse brought up the extreme rear. It made swift sallies with leveled lances, driving back this slinking pack which pursued, snarling. Now and then a wounded legionary would seize a stirrup and be hauled along into comparative safety until he could rejoin the marching column. Sometimes he would fall again, not to rise, watching the squadron depart, watching the marauders coming closer—agonized terror in his eyes, cruel anticipation in theirs, and rescue not even a dream.

A solid mass of men and equipment, no sector of it not under vicious attack, the legion inched on, jammed together when the

ranks were stopped by barricades ahead—stretching out again when these were torn apart. So they descended the hill, street by blood-drenched street, the center files still holding their shields high to form a roof over the head of the war-torn edges of the march.

Steepest of all the declivities was the final descent which ended at the heavily fortified North Gate, the leaves of which swung inward. They were now jammed by a heap of rubble. Paving stones, furniture, heavy beams, all were piled in a tangled and seemingly inextricable mass, defended by rank upon rank of Jaxikarta's garrison troops. These had not yet been involved in the fighting. They were fresh and anxious for battle. Above them waved their banner in the wind caused by the up-draft from the nearing flames.

They had sworn not to fall back a single cubit. The force and the gate were protected from above by archers who lined the parapets, waiting for the head of the column to come within range.

Against this formidable barrier, rendered almost impregnable by the addition of hastily erected curtain barricades on the side streets which forbade diversionary action, the legion, weary and battered, must hurl itself on a narrow front. There could be no other alternative, until it was destroyed by sheer attrition, was forced to capitulate, or somehow found a means to force its way through.

The position of the Thousand Cohort, first to bear the brunt, was rapidly becoming untenable. Assailed on all sides by a now infuriated populace hysterically brave, the situation was desperate. Added to the danger was a thickening rain of glowing cinders and scraps of burning thatch whirling up from the roofs of the houses set ablaze behind. Ahriman's fiery breath scorched the invaders of his mountain realm.

Suffocating smoke lay upon the city like a shroud. Beneath it, the deadly struggle went on.

The ten siphon-bearers ran forward, Antimon in the center and directing the discharge of their horrible weapons. Around them, protecting them, was a double rank of shield-bearers, archers, and slingers. Up rose curving jets, fountains, lances of

liquid fire which splashed against the gate bastions, clearing the wall tops of its defenders for a short time.

While the gouts of flame still cascaded down the masonry, as a drapery of seething incandescence constantly replenished by the madly pumping siphon men, the sappers dashed at the gate.

They plied their bars, they tugged away the beams and stones—they fought and died.

All around, as they worked, the battle went on without slackening. Heartbreakingly, when the Parthian soldiery had been scattered, the barricade removed and the gate uncovered, it was found that the mechanism which would have opened it was destroyed.

The cogs of the wheels had been battered shapeless by hammers, the counterbalances were gone. Worse still, the heavy chains lay fallen into the spaces between gate and wall, jammed hopelessly in tangled coils that joined bronze and masonry together.

Manlius came forward through a storm of racketing missiles to see and judge the extent of the calamity for himself. A battering ram might have opened the road, but the legion carried none. He was about to give orders to attack the east and west barricades which penned them in, when Antimon forced his way to his side. His eyes were wild and bloodshot, his clothing smoked and was dotted with char-rimmed holes, his hair was crisped away on one side of his head, and a great puffy blister covered one bare arm from wrist to elbow.

He still carried his empty siphon in his left hand. He saluted Manlius with punctilio.

"Sir, I request permission to try my engine against this gate."

Manlius looked at him narrowly and shrugged. He doubted its power against such a formidable barrier. There was little choice.

"Permission granted." A wave of his hand opened and divided the ranks, hurling them against the flanking barricades. This formed a covering assault to protect the narrow corridor which now opened.

Down this cleared passage Antimon raced to the spot where the steam cannon rolled among the advancing scorpions. Willing hands urged it forward to the head of the line.

"Make way! Make way for the great Archimedes!"

As it rolled ponderously on its way, a splash of naphtha went into the furnace, a brand of fire ignited it under the boiler, and by the time it jostled into place, tight against the bronze gate, steam was already being emitted through a loose spigot in a thin stream. Even above the uproar, it whistled out like an angry, imprisoned dragon's shrill warning of menace.

There was no pause in the battle because of this new development. While the steam cannon was being aimed and a stone ball dropped in the barrel; while Antimon's leather jacket was being rammed on top of it with all the force that strong arms could summon to send home the plug; while the pressure built up and the whistle became a shriek; while the cannon crew dropped flat, shielding their heads, awaiting the moment—men fought and fell where they stood along the line, unable to move.

The turmoil was indescribable. Lilia could do nothing but hold her shield above her head, feeling the jar in her arms when something heavy struck and ricocheted away, usually not knowing what it was.

There was heat and smoke all about her. Tibullus, at her side, was coughing and holding his shield tightly against hers. She heard Centurion Longinus shout, "Courage, boys, they're moving up ahead!"

The press stumbled on for a few feet and stopped again.

Somewhere a wounded horse screamed in agony. Lilia shuddered. It seemed all one voice now—the voice of Jaxikarta in extremity—the sounds of the battle, the thunder of falling stone, the clash of metal. All blended into one voice from a giant straining throat, the agonized wail of a dying city, fighting hard for life.

Then, above all else, she heard a stunning explosion. A white cloud shot high into the air. Far ahead as it was, Lilia felt a jar run through the ground into the soles of her feet as though a giant had struck the earth with a massive hammer.

All action stopped for an instant of stunned listening. Quiet descended upon the embattled streets. Longinus, running backward, swung an encouraging arm to his company. He yelled, "They're moving, up front! Here we go. Forward, all. The gates are down!"

Forward indeed! As though struck palsied by dismay and hor-

ror, the blows aimed at the stricken line seemed now to come from enfeebled arms. Opposition fell away from the front. The patter of deadly rain upon the upraised shields ceased entirely.

Almost at a full marching pace, the victorious but decimated legion quitted the city which had so nearly proved their tomb.

Out upon the plain they moved unhindered, ranks forming in accustomed order as they went, Liu Mang's iron chariots and weary fighting men, wagons, and artillery engines rolling in their accustomed places. The cavalry divided itself into two equal bodies, screening either flank, Matho's Orphans bringing up the rear guard.

Gaps in the battered ranks were speedily closed, until the high priest, observing from high on the Temple of Ahriman, thought that the legion had won through, intact and almost unscathed.

He raised his arms on high. "O mighty Lord, bring down your arrows of fire! Destroy them utterly with your flaming breath!"

There was no need of curses. There were not so many wagons. The heavy artillery had been lost. Two of Liu Mang's chariots and much of his baggage remained behind. Not so many horses—not so many men.

But among the now ordered march the tank wagons rolled, undamaged, toward the time when they might become of use.

Behind the marching men, the smoke from burning Jaxikarta rose high into the sky, turning the sun into a reddened disk. It flattened out, caught by the wind, and drove on above them into the east.

Not long after, a hooded man in black, one of the Men of the Night, appeared on the topmost tower of the undamaged temple. He bore a cage in his hand. He set it down upon the wall coping. He looked upon smoldering ruins below. Nearly every building he saw had suffered.

Carefully, he fitted a message quill to the leg of the cock pigeon in the cage. It took the air for Merv, fighting for altitude in the hot updraft of smoke, then away high and fast to find its home cote and carry the news of this defeat to the army of Surena Pacorus.



## TO DO AND TO ENDURE

The Surena Pacorus stood at sunset upon the highest battlement of the royal palace, looking out over the city of Merv. With him, equally lost in thought, was Roxana. Neither had eyes for the curtain of flaming glory hung in the western sky, or for the distant peaks of the Bam-i-Dunya—the Roof of the World. Before them stretched a green loveliness of gardens, the hallowed spot which legend called Eden, but they scarcely saw it.

Beyond, to the north, the greenery ended where the fearsome deserts began. The onrushing shadows were settling down like waiting birds of evil omen, over the route which the army must take at dawn.

“You know it is my duty,” he said.

He could hardly hear her murmured answer. “I know you must obey the commands of Gotarzes. I only wonder if his decisions are wise.”

“We will be twelve thousand. The Romans cannot muster, now, more than five. They suffered great losses at Jaxikarta. It will be Carrhae all over again!”

“Do not forget, my lord and love, it is not Crassus who leads these men.” She paused a moment, then said in a lighter voice, “In this army I saw a Roman girl soldier. I liked her. She was ready to fight beside her husband as the nomad women do. Spare her, if she falls into your hands.”

She moved into his arms, seeking to lengthen the moment. Like bubbles of sound, the delicate notes of a lonely bulbul rose up from the rose-arbored pleasance far below—the nightingale lamenting his solitary state.

“I will come home in triumph, Roxana, my sweetling, with banners and rejoicing,” he said with a smile. “I will spare the

Roman girl for your sake and she shall be your companion, as was the Princess Enine."

During the night the assembling went on. Elephants dozed and dreamed, sensing war and little running things to trample. Camels snuffled and moaned, as if aware of the huge loads of arrows baled and stacked, and that long, heavy labor lay before them.

Men-at-arms said their bibulous good-bys in the wineshops and nobles reveled late. Apart from all this, in their secluded chamber open to the perfumed garden, the Surena and his lady lay together and whispered and loved long and well, while outside the bulbul sang.

Toward dawn he slept, though she lay wakeful, cradling him in her arms—that magic circle every woman thinks would keep her lover safe, were he but to remain within it.

So, in the bright of morning, the trumpets caroled and the cymbals clashed and the proud ones rode away to war.

The man in the red Phrygian cap stood on the heights overlooking the scattered ruins of Tigranocerta and turned to the surly peasant who had guided him there.

"I had heard that an army perished here, but I see no graves in this waste of tumbled stone. Explain."

The peasant grinned, his eyes on the coin in the other's hand. Suddenly he snatched it and ran. He scrambled up the rocks at a speed which could not be matched. At a safe distance, or what he thought to be so, he picked up a stone and hurled it.

"They should have died here, dog of a Roman, but they will elsewhere, as you will if you go on. Either the Parthians or the devils of the desert will have them all. Go then. Follow to your just doom. The curses of all Armenians ride upon your back."

He disappeared among the rocks. The man removed his cap, bent down without haste, and put the round stone into the loop of cloth. He waited.

The peasant came into sight again, higher on the path. It was then that the cap circled, a red blur in the air. The stone buzzed, invisible to its victim. Thuck! The peasant threw up his hands and fell.

The man in the red Phrygian cap wearily shouldered his sack, retrieved his coin, and sought an easier way eastward.

Eastward, into the Balkhan Mountains, at that same hour but a little later into dawn, the Thirteenth turned away from the Caspian shores, which it had followed until then. Faster than their own progress, the news of their coming sped along the extensive valley they traversed between the mountain ridges that formed the southern border of the desert plains.

The march of men and the march of days went on together. As the legion came to villages and little towns, dotted along the river Atrek like beads along a string, these were found deserted. There were no compunctions about living off the land. Supply commandeered everything edible; the quaestors seized whatever hoards of coin could be found in thatch, under doorsteps, in fire-place chimneys; all was rationed out by cooks and signifers.

Little by little, much of what had been lost or left behind was replaced in this way.

Ahead and behind, smoke rose in the hills by day and beacon fires reddened the sky by night. Along the edges of the northern foothills, moving dust clouds paralleled their course, betraying that small bodies of horsemen observed their progress. It was possible, Manlius reflected, that these might gather in sufficient strength to contest entry to the passes toward which, by forced marches, the legion steadily drove.

Once more he sent word back to Liu Mang, who now acted as guide, having come into Parthia by this route. In a few moments his chariot rolled abreast of the column head. Manlius alighted, gave his horse in charge of his aide, and sprang lightly up to stand beside the trader.

Both Liu Mang and the charioteer were bearing up well, though they looked tired. None of the group of yellow men had complained about their privations, their hardships, or their losses. There were no more silken tents, no softly glowing lamps to light their evening meal, and few remaining delicacies. They slept and ate as did the marching men, or went hungry with them.

Their eyes were rimmed with dust and their lips cracked from the heat. If there was any remorse in their hearts for the loss of

two iron chariots, because of the alliance with the Romans, it did not show after they had once mourned for the dead.

Manlius steadied himself as the vehicle lurched over the rough ground, without reaching for the side rail. Liu Mang noticed and favored him with a tight little smile.

"Man of the Shang, what of the way ahead?" Manlius asked after a respectful interval. He had learned that this was necessary.

Liu Mang bowed, as well as he could under the circumstances, and answered, "In the opinion of this lamentably uninformed individual, the redoubtable war lord would do better to consult his own gods, as the advice from this person's unconcerned deities seems consistently obscure and most depressing."

He searched his voluminous robes and extracted a tortoise plastron, seamed with new cracks. Manlius had seen him divining at other times, asking a question of a sheep shoulder bone by driving in a red-hot needle and studying the zigzag fissures which resulted.

"Knowing that the situation was most dire, the great god Shang Ti was questioned last night. This is the very last piece of tortoise shell available for matters of such importance.

"The efforts of this obtrusive seeker after knowledge doubtless disturbed Shang Ti's ineffable meditations and were regarded as an undesired impertinence.

"The answer was, as the honorable general can readily see, that the mission engaged upon, being unfortunate in conception, can lead only to disaster and that the path of wise men should lead in a reverse direction."

"Have you been talking to Tribune Quintus? Those phrases, so elegantly framed, convey sentiments that I recognize."

Liu Mang shook his head in emphatic denial. "It is so affirmed by the plastron. Further questioning elicited no response, Shang Ti no doubt suffering a callous lack of interest in the affairs of this importunate mortal and retiring to consider matters of greater moment in the Celestial Spheres."

Manlius could read nothing in the aimless fissures, but he accepted the extended shell and studied it politely. "The prognostication does appear definitely somber. However, a return being impractical for ourselves, I can only suggest, worthy trader, that

you offer us such directions as you may feel will be serviceable to us, concerning the route upon which we are irrevocably committed.

"Following the proffer of this valuable aid, which I trust you will render, I beseech you and your entourage to consider your own safety and withdraw from such dangerous companionship as that in which you now find yourselves.

"Rest assured that our understanding of your virtuous and valorous qualities is complete and will not be held in question, should you so decide."

Liu Mang's slender mustache visibly bristled. He tensed in momentary anger, then relaxed in realization of the generosity of the offer.

"Worthy General, our destinies are intertwined. It will not be necessary to consult the thoughts of this person's fellows upon this matter. The will of the war lord is our will. We go forward together."

"Then, estimable Liu Mang, may I ask once more the favor of your instruction concerning the road we should take through yonder mountains?"

Realizing his error, the trader's sun-leathered cheeks colored a little. It was the first time that Manlius had seen Liu Mang show any sign of embarrassment. His customarily suave façade had crumbled a little. No longer courteously expressionless, he answered more to the point.

"When we arrived at Ctesiphon, we had been on the road for almost a full year. Eighteen mountain ranges, six major rivers, deserts strewn with the bones of dragons—" He shuddered and his black eyes closed to narrow slits.

"When I think on dragons, my blood thickens to a cold grue that moves slowly in my veins. Forgive me.

"After those dangers, we passed through the grassy plains of Kushan, where we were attacked by roving bands of the Sien-Pi. Treacherous fellows! They come at you naked, bowing, smiling, begging with empty hands. You think them harmless.

"Then, when they are close, you find the air full of spears. They have dragged these, hidden in the grass, with their bare toes. We lost three men to them, but we ran them down with chariots.

"At last the river you call Oxus, which we forded and so entered Parthia, for that is this country's boundary. It lies not far across those mountains. The pass we used is the only one fit for wagons and chariots, but there is another nearby, more northerly downstream, which could be used by agile climbers, if not too heavily laden."

"This river—what is the terrain between it and the mountains? Are there many fords?"

"We found only one. On either side of it are flat, level plains. To the east, they run for many hundreds of *li*. Between the mountains and the river, perhaps only four."

Manlius made a rapid mental calculation. "About three Roman miles, all open to cavalry maneuvers. That is where they will be waiting, if we are not in time. We must evade them or pass directly through their established array."

"If we were not impeded by the slow wagons! If we send the baggage train upstream, out of the way, could it cross higher up and rejoin us on the other side?"

"It may be there are other fords. I do not know. The water runs white through narrow channels and steep banks. We did not go seeking. There was no reason."

"There may be now," Manlius grimly remarked. "I thank you, man of the Shang. I see more clearly what must be done."

He signaled to his aide, who followed leading the white charger.

As he prepared to mount, Liu Mang said. "Do not think that we regret our choice or that we fear to follow where you lead. Life, while it lasts, should be lived fully to deserve praise from the gods and to set an example for other men. Still, worthy General, your decisions determine the destinies of many. Can you bear the burden? Do their wills go hand in hand with yours?"

Manlius swung into the saddle and took the reins in his hand. He turned his gaze on the trader. "The virtues of any soldier are courage, perseverance, and duty. To do and to endure—that is the whole Roman!"

He spurred ahead into his accustomed place. Liu Mang pulled aside to let the cavalry jangle past. He watched the straight, stiff back of the commander recede into the dust and then waited for

the wagons to go by until he could re-enter the gap he had left in the column.

He caught a glimpse of a friendly face peering out from under the canopy at them. His mood lightened at Lilia's smile. He answered her wave with a lifted hand, the charioteer reined in ahead of the line of scorpions, and all the iron chariots lumbered on together.

Lilia settled back in the dim, dusty interior of the hospital wagon. It heaved and lurched over the uneven road. At the worst bumps there was a chorus of tight-lipped moaning which could not be held back.

Here rode the more severely wounded of those injured in the city, tended throughout the day by the old surgeon and Lilia, each to a separate vehicle.

Her heart was torn by sympathy, for each sufferer was a tried friend, but she was grateful for the opportunity to bring a little comfort in any way she could. She did not let herself feel glad that she could be spared the ordeal of the long arduous marches, for that seemed a shirking. When the thought could not be repressed, she was more attentive than ever.

Just now she was changing the bandages on the stump of the young artist's left arm. There was heat in it and red streaks that ran upward to the shoulder. His fever-bright eyes alternately sought her calm face and watched her fingers while she stanchd the slow bleeding with a pad of cobwebs soaked in vinegar and oil.

He raised himself from the thin pallet on the hard wagon bed. The straw below had been worn away to almost nothing.

His eyes were wild, his voice an incoherent babbling. He began to struggle to sit up. The fingers of his hand sought frantically, scrabbling in the straw.

Lilia knew what he wanted and placed the little leather brush case in his grasp. As the wagon rolled on, she stroked his brow with a wet sponge until he grew quieter. A little later she gave him a cup which held an infusion of willow bark and compelled him to drink the bitter brew. He returned her a feeble smile in which there was a return of sanity.

His eyes closed and his breathing came evenly and relaxed.

Lilia had turned to the next man when the old medicus swung up over the tailboard of the moving wagon, to see how she managed.

"There is no more cobweb," she told him. "No more seaweed for poultices. It is hard to keep the flies away. I need vinegar."

"I will have some sent. I've brought my Stone of Memphis. It will numb the artist's arm for a while. You shall have some Egyptian cotton for pads. Is there anything else?"

"Poppy extract, if you have it."

The surgeon shook his head. "Not for these. They are healing. It may be needed more desperately later. Give them Vatican. Let them drink all they want. Are you afraid to be with them alone, if they become drunk?"

"These? My friends?"

"Very well." He dug in his pockets for Tears of Isis to sweeten the air. "Use some of this Eye of Typhon for lung humors. They won't clear up until we get out of this dust, if we ever do."

"Enough of the powder to cover the thumbnail in a little warm water will help. It brings up the phlegm."

"So many Egyptian remedies!" Lilia smiled in spite of herself. "Have they no honest Latin names?"

The old man shrugged. "Most of our medical knowledge comes to us from the Greeks, who obtained it from Egypt. You can call this one squill and that one verbena, if you like. But I stick to rhubarb for laxative, pomegranate for tapeworm, something Egyptian for everything really serious. Even soldiers are comforted if it has an Egyptian name."

He grinned at Lilia as he left. "How about a nice bit of unicorn horn for your young man's wine tonight? Very good for a love potion, you know."

Lilia couldn't stop herself from blushing. She knew, too, that he'd seen the sparkle of interest in her eyes.

He let himself down over the tailboard. "Of course it's really rhinoceros horn, if you must know." Chuckling at the way her face fell, he lifted a hand in farewell, dropped to the road, and stood waiting in the dust, to check the following wagons.



## THE HIGH PASS

The mountains slowly crept closer, heaving themselves into the sky. The foothills developed ravines previously invisible as the weary legion plodded into the Hyrcanian Range. These led ever upward.

Now two ways diverged. Into one, escorted by the cavalry, passed the long train of wagons, chariots, and artillery. Into the other, a much steeper, narrower, and more tortuous path, moved the marching legionaries, carrying tent sections and entrenching tools with their packs, as always, but armed with the most essential weapons. Each had water and one day's rations.

The long wagon convoy, protected from the dangerous heights only by skirmishing bands of slingers and archers, made distance with agonizing slowness. Many were the nervous upward glances at the narrow strip of sky between the frowning, often overhanging cliffs.

Matho constantly scanned the menacing edges, whence at any moment a boulder or an avalanche of stones might descend.

He had Quintus beside him for moral support. Manlius, disregarding his friend's protest, had insisted that he ride with Matho, although he himself, discarding his horse for once, led the marching column into the second, steeper pass on foot.

Matho, oppressed by the close confines of rock walls, was unusually talkative.

"In case something should happen, Tribune, you might have to take over. I name you second in command. See that they get through.

"Don't feed the horses too much grain. Cut down your equipment. Leave the wagons if you must. It will be more important to save the cataphracts for support of the cohorts. Divide the

force to cover both flanks, unless you get other orders. Stay close to the army.

"Parthian horses are all muscle and wind. They live on natural forage of grass and weed and not much of that. I hear that the Hun horses are even better. They can cover forty to sixty miles a day easy, with their scouts out in all directions for ten to twenty miles.

"These Parthians are cousins to the Huns. You can't surprise them. They will choose the battleground and you will fight and die on it, if you get too confident. Remember, if they run, don't follow. They want you to do that.

"When you are close, they will turn in the saddle, manage their beasts with their knees, and discharge arrows into your faces. They will break, reform, and surround. You will never get back. See that your men work as a tight unit. Never let them scatter."

Quintus listened without joy. His experience as a cavalry officer was far in the past and he had no ambition to renew it. The possibility of field promotion gave him no pleasure. He inspected Matho gloomily. More than ever he wondered what he was doing with this army of stubborn, wooden-headed madmen, seemingly bent on destruction. No good answer came to mind.

He squinted back along the line with an expression of distaste. The rumbling wagons filled the high-walled gorge with clamor. It could probably be heard for miles ahead. There was, as yet, no sign of an enemy. This was no encouragement to Quintus, separated as he was from all that made life bearable.

He gnawed morosely at a hard biscuit and washed it down with a sparing swallow of good old caustic Vesuvian. Too bad the lava hadn't been strained out of it first.

Sun made the bare rocks into an oven. He moved in an aura of horse sweat. When the wind was right, Matho smelled worse.

This was no place for a man of culture. A little charming company would have improved the situation, but there was none. Even Lilia was not riding today with the wagons. She marched in the proper place for her in such an emergency—in the ranks, at the side of Tibullus.

In the farther pass, out of sight and hearing of the straining baggage train, the long line of climbing legionaries toiled pain-

fully upward. They met with no resistance. If they were spied upon, the observers were well concealed, for they never showed themselves.

Manlius wondered at this. He was finally forced to the conclusion that the inhabitants of this border region could not be inclined favorably toward Parthia. Though he was not certain, he suspected that these mountains sheltered people who were only too glad to be let alone and had no love for armies. Boundaries are often battlegrounds and always a haven for outlaws and malcontents of both sides.

He sent down word, through the chain of command, that there must be no lagging behind. He did not doubt that any straggler would receive scant mercy, once he became separated from his fellows.

As in the case of the wagoners, flankers here also held the heights and a small troop of prickers led the way at point, searching out the easiest slopes.

One of the scouts in the advance unit was Eitel. He was no longer with the wagon train, for his vehicle was among those which had been wrecked and left behind in the rubble-choked streets of Jaxikarta.

He moved tirelessly up the steep incline, burdened only with a dagger at his belt and his long whip, which he wore hung upon his shoulder and coiled across his body. He carried no shield, for the thick leather cuirass was body protection enough. The heavy steel boss which projected from it made him look pigeon-breasted, but no one he knew laughed any longer at his appearance. Experience and a few casualties had taught them wisdom.

There seemed to be no end to the rising of the ground. Large trees in the foothills had given way to scrub pine forests. As the point moved higher, almost silently on the thick carpet of brown needles underfoot, a deer started up, ran a few steps, and turned to watch them as they went by.

Eitel grunted. A lynx, which had been stalking the deer, snarled down from the branch where he had waited to pounce. His great moon-yellow eyes narrowed with hate for the men. He would go hungry tonight, Eitel thought, hungry as he himself was apt to become.

An arrow buzzed and the deer fell, to be quickly quartered by

the archer, who would turn it over later to one of the cooks, provided a fire could be built wherever they would camp.

Eitel held out his hand silently. Lilia should have meat to-night, whoever else went without.

The pines were left behind. Now they climbed through dwarf oak and elms, just leafing out, for altitude held back the seasons. Here partridge and quail ran, hobbling into the brush of low mastic bushes and wind-tortured holly. All the trees were gnarled and twisted, cursed by wizard winds.

Higher yet. Now the cold mist rolled down upon the climbers. Almost hidden by it, Eitel saw the shivering slingers go to either side and wondered if their hands would be too numb to protect themselves and those who followed.

Somewhere in the cloud cap a vixen barked. Eitel could not see her but knew that in a nearby cranny there must be pups. They would live and grow fat on the plump hay-harvesting conies that lived in the barren rocks the men had now reached. No other vegetation grew so high, except lichens, and still the rough staircase of giant rock shelves went up like steps to Olympus.

Then, most abruptly, a wailing wind gust whipped away the enshrouding clouds. The scouts had reached, not the top, but a broad shelf, almost flat, which rose gently to a division between two high, slender pinnacles. It was a plateau large enough to accommodate the entire legion, but it was already peopled.

Beyond was blue, empty sky stretching out infinitely, to where a flock of little clouds came drifting toward the peaks, like pasturing sheep returning to the fold. Immediately at hand, in the high crack, a fire burned and men, like resting shepherds huddled in sheepskins, warmed themselves by it.

Eitel motioned a halt, his broad flat hand waving down his followers to their bellies on the cold wet stones behind him. He inched ahead a few feet, moving only when intermittent gusts brought wisps and shreds of mist to give him cover.

When his body was hidden by a boulder, he cautiously lifted his head. The leather skullcap he wore, almost the color of his scarred face, blended into the outline of the rock. Unless someone remembered its contours, which seemed unlikely, he felt sheltered. He surveyed the situation.

There was a large pile of fuel handy to the fire, in itself so small that it was obvious the group was using the wood sparingly. Eitel suspected they probably had orders not to use it at all, for it was plain that the main pile must be a beacon.

Nearby stood a small keg. He flared his nostrils into the wind. Tar, for thick black smoke by day—the fire itself for a warning signal by night.

From this height, either would be visible for miles. He could not see beyond the knot of men, but he was certain this must be the watershed of the range and the way onward would lead down. These watchers could only be posted here to act as advance sentinels of the Parthian army. No outlaws or mountain men would remain by choice in such an exposed, uncomfortable spot when they could be sheltered inside a cave, out of the keen-ing blasts which eagerly sucked life and warmth from the very marrow of a man's bones.

He considered, squatting behind the boulder. The two groups were about equally matched. Unless there were others, unseen on the far side of the split, surprise might be the determining factor here. He knew he must decide at once. Any instant might bring some restless individual in his direction to check on this side of the high pass.

He beckoned up a slinger and lifted his whip off his shoulder. When the man had crawled noiselessly to Eitel's side, a few words apprised him of the situation. He went back to the others, **breathing warmth into his stiff fingers.**

Eitel, looking back, saw his unit separate. Flattening themselves against the sides of the narrow cranny, they came within hurling range, taking advantage of every projection. He wished he could bring up the archers, but there was no time to send a runner back and he knew that, in such wet air, bowstrings would be **lax and accuracy unlikely.**

All was as ready as it would ever be. Eitel held his whip coiled. He raised his hand and the slingers sprang out from the walls into the center of the pass to give themselves room for the circling slings.

The Parthians were by no means as inert as they had seemed to be. At the first whirl of cords, they scattered in all directions as

though blasted away from the fire. Their bowstrings were dry at least, and they also had slingers.

Stones whistled into each body of men, thudding against flesh or ricocheting with deadly whining from the rocks. Atro Behouin, Chief of Slingers, slumped beside Eitel, arrow-slain without a cry. A Parthian threw up his hands and disappeared. Eitel thought he heard a long, fading scream.

Another enemy staggered, clutching at his forehead, where a third eye had suddenly appeared between the other two. He fell into the fire and lay there, his greasy sheepskin flaring up into smoky red spikes of flame. Without making any attempt to pull him out, one of the few sentinels still on his feet snatched up a brand, thrust it into the beacon, and blew frantically upon it.

Eitel's whip snaked out, wrapping itself around the man's arm, yanking him away. Another threw the tar keg into the pile of wood before he was shot down. The brand still burned. Then the slingers were upon the survivors, stabbing, strangling with their cords, yapping like excited dogs at a victorious hunt.

Eitel played the Parthian captive like a fish. He hauled him in, hand over hand, until with a stunning buffet from his cestus-armed fist he laid the man senseless at his feet. He sat upon his trophy and unwound the lash.

Now the brand had been plucked out of the pile of damp fuel and the smoldering fire stamped out. Eitel's prisoner was the only one left alive. The bodies were heaped together out of the way, the dead man in the fire withdrawn.

Hurriedly, the fuel was divided and carried down the western slope, where neither light nor smoke could be seen from the other side. While it was being stacked by his men, Eitel ran to a point from which he could look at whatever the sentinels had been assigned to protect.

He saw, far below, a broad, shelterless plain; beyond it, the glint of sun upon a wide river; and between both, strung along the water's edge for what seemed to be miles, the array of a mighty army.

His keen vision discerned tents, campfires, picketed horses—crowds of men—all guarding the riverbank and whatever fords might there be available. The army of Surena Pacorus had arrived at the Oxus before the Thirteenth and was waiting pa-

tiently for the coming of the Romans, upon ground of their own choosing.

On the western side of the range, as yet ignorant of the danger ahead, Manlius looked up at the serrated cliff edge. High and almost far enough away to be a star, a balefire twinkled.

Then a second. A moment later, still a third sprang into view beside the others, ruddy and gleaming against the shadowed heights. "The signal!" exclaimed Manlius to Tribune Mancinus. "Our men hold the pass!"

Like wildfire, the good news ran down the long, weary line of climbers. It gave them new breath; it strengthened tired legs; it added speed to their labors. Not until the first rankers came panting up to the top of the pass, to spread out as well as space would allow, were they struck dumb by the sight of what lay before them.

Manlius was one of the first. He looked long, estimating the Parthian strength. No one ventured to disturb his thoughts. After a brief interval he turned away to examine Eitel's prisoner, who was now conscious and lay bound, glaring his fury at his captors.

"Has he talked?"

"Nothing worth while, Commander." Eitel grinned. "He seems to have many gods. He has called on all of them, I think, asking them to blast us. Probably they are all sleeping, as nothing has happened."

"Do not blaspheme," Manlius said sternly.

"No, Commander." Eitel had a twinkle in his eyes, but his face was expressionless. He stood at strict attention.

Manlius caught a glint of metal under the dirty sheepskin. He bent and ripped it open. Beneath was the scale-mail shirt of a Parthian knight and, hanging upon it, the gold chain of an undersatrap.

"Your name and rank, noble sir?"

The Parthian spat at Manlius' boot. He did not move away and continued to stare down at the prostrate man. "What is the strength of the force I see encamped?"

Silence. The officer turned his head away. Eitel snatched a handful of long hair, curled in heavy ringlets, and forced him to face Manlius.

"Answer when the commander questions you!" The Parthian

growled, deep in his throat. It was an inarticulate rattle of defiance.

"Who leads? It is Surena Pacorus?" There was still no reply.

"With the commander's permission," gritted Eitel. "A few minutes alone with me will loosen his tongue!"

"You think he will talk for you?"

"Like a lovesick damsel, my General. Like a magpie with a split tongue. If he does not, may mine be split."

"So be it. He is yours." Manlius turned casually away. "There is no present haste. Commune as long as you like. Make sure he speaks the truth."

He singled out the nearest onlooker. "Pass the word down the line. Last man on the mountain is to return with all speed to the wagon convoy. It is to be halted wherever it is found, until further orders. It is not to continue to the outlet of that pass until so instructed.

"Scouts to be sent forward to the outlet. Any enemy patrol found there is to be killed or captured. No exceptions. No one to escape, under penalty of death for all in the scouting unit."

He turned back to scanning the plain.

Midday had come. The heights lay bare. Manlius pulled on one of the sheepskins over his own armor. The others were distributed among his staff.

Tribune Mancinus wrinkled his patrician nose at the smell. He protested, "I see no use in this, Commander. Surely they cannot see us at such a distance."

"You can see them and they cannot see you?"

Mancinus said no more. It was true that individuals could be distinguished among the troops strung along the river. Here and there, bright moving flashes indicated that armored horsemen were passing through the avenues in the camp.

The layout of the camp itself seemed to be without pattern or system. No palisade or agger was visible. Farther to the east, there was a park of vehicles. Mancinus wished he had the benefit of the commander's leather tube. After the curt rebuff, he hesitated to ask the loan of it.

Instead, with the point of his dagger he punched a tiny hole in the liner of his helmet. Peering through this makeshift lens, he



made out that what he had thought might be wagons were in reality chariots. He called Manlius' attention to his discovery.

They stared, wondering. Both knew that the Parthians, in all their long history, had not used chariots in war. Yet there these were. As the sun shifted in its descending course to warm the still climbing Ninth and Tenth Cohorts, the shadows of the peaks stretched across the plain. The lengthening rays brought out more detail among the enemy battalions.

Now tiny slivers of light glinted and flickered in the park. Scythe blades! They could be nothing else. Then it occurred to Manlius that chariot racing, so popular in Rome and its colonies, might have been introduced into Asia Minor through Byzantium and taken up as a new fad in Parthia, although he had not heard of any hippodromes or arenas in that country.

If this were true, then these chariots would be of small importance. Light, flimsy things, probably wicker and cedar constructions, built for speed and hastily armed for the emergency.

Manlius dismissed them from his worries and scanned the line once more. It was not hard to pick out the tents of the nobles.

The largest was surely that of the Surena, for he could see a long pennon floating from it, marking a headquarters. Nearby and huddled around it was a little village of smaller tents.

He fixed the position in his mind. Were it possible to send in a flying squadron, this was where it should drive. Alas! Matho and his cataphracts were committed to another plan. It was too late to change it now.

He doubted that such a forlorn hope would have succeeded. Still, practical or not, he could not release the idea, knowing that the organization of any Eastern army depended greatly upon its leader. Once that leader was killed or captured, unless another came immediately to the fore, battles were frequently lost.

Much depended upon the force of character of that leader. He had no illusions concerning the respect in which Surena Pacorus was held by his followers. If Pacorus really led this waiting army, it would be a formidable enemy. He sighed and quitted his position. Perhaps the Hun with the whip would have some information by now.

The last ranks of the Tenth Cohort arrived at the plateau and spread out, sinking down wearily in whatever shelter could be

found from the cutting wind. It blew unabated. Even in the midst of the crowd there was a common feeling of loneliness and depression. A certain tone in the snarl of the wind made each man look about uneasily, feeling himself wanted by it.

Tibullus, whose sensitivity rendered him more susceptible to such things than most, had an immediate reaction of terror. His teeth chattered and his body shook with more than the cold. Lilia pressed against him, but her warm body did not have its customary effect.

"Do you see any fires, Lilia? Is there any wine?" Tibullus shivered uncontrollably. His lips were blue.

Lilia looked helplessly at Centurion Longinus. He shook his head. "My canteen is empty. I could do with a gulp myself."

"I will see if I can find Eitel, Tibullus. He has a big canteen. He might have some he can spare. Can you stay close till I get back, Centurion? Tibullus is not well."

Longinus did not seem overly pleased. He nodded. "Don't be long, Legionary Metellus, I have other more important duties than this one."

Lilia set off, searching among the huddled figures, backs to the blast. They sat with heads down, tent flaps and blankets drawn up over themselves, waiting patiently for orders. Here and there cooks were trying to create miracles with twigs, weeds, and a helmet of red coals.

On both sides, the jagged cliffs frowned down. The level saddle of the pass funneled in toward the crack between the peaks, straight as an ax cleft through the mountaintop. In this direction, led by the trend of the plateau, she continued searching.

For a long time she could not find her friend. When she did, she was horrified. He stood with his back to her, facing a white-faced stranger fastened against the wall of the pass. The man was bare to the waist and bleeding from a hundred superficial cuts. If he had not been supported by two strong legionaries he would have slumped to his knees. His head was lolling upon his breast and his eyes were closed.

Lilia was no stranger to the harsh discipline of legion life, but this was different. It looked like slow murder. She was revolted by unnecessary cruelty. She could only stand and gasp while Eitel's long whip swung back for another stroke.

Commander Manlius was watching. Why didn't he stop it? How could Eitel do this terrible thing? The little blade on the end of the thong trailed a crooked bloody streak along the stones.

Eitel growled, "The right eye, Parthian! Speak!" The men holding the captive yanked his head up, ready for the bite of the lash.

"No!" Lilia screamed, and jumped forward. She came down with both feet upon the whip. The group turned, startled out of their absorption by her indignant outcry.

Lilia felt abashed at her impulsive act, but she was pleased to note that she was not the only one. Eitel looked sheepish and his eyes avoided her accusing look. Manlius himself had an indescribable expression. It passed instantly. Lilia was positive that in a man less in command of his emotions it would have been a look of shame.

He lifted his hand. "Enough, wagoner. He has no more to tell us. Dismissed." He turned away and went farther into the cleft, paying no more attention to the little scene and with no word of censure to Lilia.

As she stared at Eitel, he pulled at the whiplash. She stumbled back against an officer who was in the act of pushing past. It was Tribune Quintus, coming up from the wagons, to report that the caravan had been halted at a safe distance from the pass outlet and, as yet, was undiscovered.

He steadied Lilia but did not speak to her. She would not have noticed, for she was pinning Eitel with one of her most disapproving stares and under it he wriggled like a misbehaving youth.

"Orders, Lilia. Only orders. What could I do?"

"Orders to torture? You could have refused."

"We had to have information. What he told us may help save the lives of all of us. Maybe yours, Lilia."

"Mine? Don't say you did this horrible thing for me! Oh, Eitel, I thought you were good—I thought you were kind."

The Hun hung his head. Her heart softened and she went closer, gripping his immense biceps in her small hands.

"I believe you. I know you have to obey orders. But, Eitel, you looked as though you were enjoying it!"

"Oh, Lilia!" There was such hurt in his face that she realized she had misjudged him. This honesty could not be feigned. She patted his arm.

"I forgive you. I am glad I came when I did though."

"So am I. Anyway, the commander has what he needs—I think."

"If he hasn't, let him find someone else. Come, let us go back to the Tenth and get something to eat. This is no place for either of us."

Quintus found his old friend sitting beside Tribune Mancinus, almost concealed in the farthest niche in the pass, where they were studying the disposition of the Parthian forces. On all fours, he crawled to their exposed position and settled himself where he too could see out across the plain.

Manlius looked surprised to see him. He arched one eyebrow.

"I thought you wanted to ride with the cataphracts. Getting saddle-sore?"

Quintus grinned. "Matho seemed to believe he could spare me better than one of his own men. I didn't think much of the idea of taking over command, in case he became a casualty. Anyway, I wanted to see what was going on up here. Got anything to drink? My canteen is dusty inside and out."

"Only water tonight for everybody and not much of that."

"Water! I'd rather stay thirsty."

"Suit yourself. Make yourself comfortable. You might as well stay, now that you are here. Take a good look, if you want to see why you should be drinking water. We'll be moving down early, while it is still dark enough to hide us."

Quintus moved cautiously forward and looked over the edge. He whistled low and turned a sober gaze on the commander. The eastern slope descended gradually, but it was dangerously steep for men who could not see their way. Here and there were straight drops of twenty or thirty feet, small escarpments which must be skirted. It would be simple enough by day, difficult and almost impossible by night.

Without comment, he held out his hand. Tribune Mancinus passed over his canteen and Quintus drank, making a wry face.

"Matho get his orders?"

Quintus returned the canteen, omitting thanks, and nodded.

"His flying squadrons will emerge under cover of darkness, fan out in both directions, and overwhelm all posts they find along the edge of the foothills. These will be occupied to pick up any reliefs that may come in.

"When I left, his slingers and archers had the post at the head of the pass under observation. There were only a score of men in it. The fools haven't even set up a barricade. Just a few riders to give warning if we came that way. Those Balearic sharpshooters will have them cut down before a man can fork a saddle."

"That's about what I expected. The Surena—by the way, Pacorus *is* leading them, and he *did* bring his elephants—doesn't have any idea of immobilizing us here in the mountains until reinforcements come up. He wants the glory of defeating us by himself.

"He intends to draw us out, where we can't retreat before his horse-archers can finish us off at their leisure. Like Carrhae."

Quintus took the leather tube. Far away, beyond the chariot park, he could see the elephants as massive bulks, huge even at that distance in comparison with the stands of picketed horses and enclosed herds of camels darkening the riverbank.

"Camels?"

"Lancers. Baggage animals." Manlius confirmed the sighting. "The Surena apparently believes he can use the same strategy that was used against Crassus. He doesn't intend to run out of arrows. Did the engineers remodel those carroballistae?"

"They were grumbling about it but had them almost finished the last I knew. Not very happy with you, though. Said the idea will never work. Just a ruination of valuable artillery."

"Well. From the moment we come out upon the plain we will be under observation and attack should immediately follow, unless Pacorus holds off, as I am hoping, to draw us out. If we can eliminate the cavalry for even a short time, we have a slender chance.

"We must make certain their finest arm is used against us late or not at all."

"Impossible! A Parthian battle has never been fought without

the horse-archers. Their whole plan of attack is based upon the strength of their cavalry."

"I have a plan which may divert some of it. Listen. As they have displayed no originality in tactics since Carrhae, I think we may assume they will not do so now.

"I trust they have convinced themselves that in the elephants they possess an invincible weapon, one so feared by us that even the horse-archers will be considered secondary to it.

"Parthians have used Carrhae as a classic example of success during nearly a century. However, this elegant boy fancies himself a strategist. Perhaps he can be persuaded to improve on his predecessor's battle plan.

"We know he is a fellow of great ambition. I think he expects to amplify his personal glory in this engagement. I hope he believes that the ineptitude of Crassus will be repeated on our side. We must encourage that thought and give him an apparent weakness to exploit.

"If your enemy thinks he knows your plans, it may well be that you do know the greater part of his!"

## “FOR PARTHIA!”

The shadow of the two peaks stretched out toward the river like inquisitive fingers. As the sun sank, the clouds settled back on the plateau, lower as time went on, hiding and chilling the patiently waiting men. They made themselves as comfortable as possible, gathering together in little close knots for warmth.

Fires were not permitted. Some unrolled their blankets; others wrapped themselves tightly in the leather tent sections each man carried. These were better protection against the damp.

There was little complaining. Dry, in comparison to the Parthian host, for desultory rain showers scurried over the lands below, they were thankful to be above the lowered sea of cloud.

Some slept. Old campaigners, awaiting the hour. A few chatted in low voices. The officers made their rounds, collecting their tablets and checking the alertness of the sentries. Here and there a chaplain unable to seek an augury from a slaughtered animal, for there were none on the heights, sought to predict the outcome of the next day by the cloud movements.

No raven, owl, or nightjar flew over, a surer omen, in the late twilight. Finally complete darkness fell without a decided portent. Men began to talk in whispers of somber things.

In what remained of the Tenth Century, Tenth Cohort, Lilia and Tibullus lay quietly, with arms about each other, and listened. Nearby, friends were talking.

“Well, I haven’t got anything to regret, no matter what happens.” Decius’ chuckle came out of the dark. “I won’t leave a sesterce unspent. I’ve even drawn a ten-day advance on my pay, and that’s gone. I’ve done everything I ever wanted to do. Haven’t missed a fight, skipped a free drink, or turned down a kiss. If I don’t come out of it tomorrow, I’m way ahead. How about you boys?”

"It will be too sudden for me," Morgo's young voice answered. "I never did get initiated into the brotherhood of Mithras. Looks as though I never will. How about you, Farmer? I suppose you'd like to put in a crop of peas and hang around until they're ripe for picking?"

"Peas wouldn't grow well around here. If I had any choice, I would like to see my brother once more." The words were slow and pensive. They brought a brief silence to the group as each called to mind other days and peopled the dark with faces.

Antimon spoke first. "I will have to live until payday. Like Decius, I have no coin for the Ferryman. Unless, of course, he'd take a pinwheel or a whistling copper bird."

A laugh went around the circle. Tibullus trembled in Lilia's clasp. She hugged him closer. The atmosphere lightened for the others.

"Just kill your two men first. That will earn you a ride across the Styx."

With mild surprise, Lilia recognized the voice of Longinus. She had never heard him speak so lightly. He sounded pleased at the prospect of action. The heaviness that customarily hung over his soul seemed to have been lifted, as though a conscience momentarily cleared might yet bring peaceful nights and happy days.

Lilia smiled drowsily to herself. Suddenly she was jolted to semi-wakefulness. A heavy body settled down at her back and a great bucket head came snuffling against her cheek. Cerberus, the big Molossian, had slipped his thong and found her out among the companies.

It was her last conscious remembrance of the long cold night. The rock beneath her blanket grew softer and softer. Pleasantly content between Tibullus and the huge animal, she slept, warmed by their bodies, until the third hour before dawn.

She was roused by movement all about her. Men were rising silently to their feet, repacking their equipment, rolling up their blankets.

She heard a calm, resonant voice in the darkness. She recognized it as belonging to Commander Manlius. Apparently he had been speaking for some time.

Cerberus was gone. She nudged Tibullus awake and they



stood up, massaging their stiff limbs and hastily getting their gear in shape.

Manlius did not speak loudly, but his voice carried. Standing in the center of the plateau, he turned and repeated his words to the four quarters of the tightly packed encampment so all could hear.

“Now is the hour of the coming to the contest. We are fewer than our enemy but greater in courage. We have met obstacles in the past and have not been turned back. We shall accomplish our mission, because it is our destiny to do so.

“Be of good heart. Obey your officers. Trust in your weapons and the comrade beside you. Thrust, don’t slash. Never leave your right arm and side bare.

“We learn courage by the deeds and endurance of others before us. Many have met greater odds than you will find facing us today. Remember Thermopylae and the three hundred Spartans! The men they met were better than these who are skulking by the river, afraid to look for us here.

“Through these very mountains Xenophon led his men to safety, and the ancestors of these Parthians and Persians could not stop him.

“Those were Greeks! We are Romans! Remember why we are here! Remember the captives of Carrhae! Their grandsons and granddaughters languish in slavery, waiting for us to rescue and escort them home.

“Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country. Men of the Thirteenth, follow me!”

He turned without a backward glance, strode through the press, up the pass, and out its end—down and out of sight.

Lilia looked longingly after him. O Fortuna, whoever dies today, let it not be he!

No trumpets to thrill one’s soul—only the eerie whistles of the centurions. Tribunes Mancinus and Quintus were already sliding down the steep declivity, barely able to pick their way in safety.

Behind them, over the lip of the range, wave after wave, the legion poured.

By the time it was the turn of the Tenth Cohort to move out, the eastern sky had appreciably lightened. Eitel, temporarily at-

tached to Longinus' century, happily stood on a ledge invisible in mist and lifted his arms to Lilia.

She felt again his strength and thrilled to it as she had before, half ashamed that the touch of another man could do this to her. What on earth was the matter with her lately? She felt momentarily like a wanton. These thoughts were infidelity to Tibullus. Could the body rule the mind so?

She struggled gently to be free. He did not immediately release her. She felt his lips move against her ear.

"Stay close to me today, little Roman."

It was a long time since he had called her that. Her resolve weakened and for one confused, drawn-out instant she did not push away.

Then they separated. Tibullus was stumbling down the slope ahead, intent only upon his own difficulties; behind, the last few in the line were coming.

Eitel followed the pair. Unseen by Lilia, his hand went up to his scarred cheek, his broken nose. He followed and the clouds rose and hid his ugliness.

The plateau was empty now and the mountain was alive with moving men, indistinctly shrouded by mist. They looked out over and into the sea of cloud which hid the descending slope.

After the first few hundred feet of descent and negotiating a treacherous bit of rockfall, Lilia found the way easier. The fog hung in layers and proved to be not so thick as it had appeared from above. She heard Galba mutter, "Looks like rain," and Longinus' reply: "Always rains after a battle."

Now she could see the meandering line of legionaries below. It stretched far, the head of the column out of sight. She was sure that Manlius still led, moving with his usual assurance which was reflected in the bearing of his men. She felt encouraged. How could the mission fail with such a leader?

The damp cold, the depressing darkness, her hunger, the ache in her thigh muscles—all this was as nothing. Commander Manlius led! She felt sorry for the Parthians who stood in his way.

Her confidence was not shared by Manlius himself. His back was straight as he reached the bottom of the long descent, his face confident, his mind in turmoil. So much depended on preci-

sion timing—so much upon absolute obedience to orders—so much upon surprise.

He looked back. His staff was now gathered about him on the flat ground. Fanning out on either side, the Thousand Cohort was making way for the following ranks.

Low orders rapped down the chain of command. Slingers and archers took their flank position. The legion began to assume its customary form. Cohort after cohort strung itself out along the edges of the upward slope, ready for orders, waiting in the shadows which dawn would soon dispel. As yet, they were invisible, Manlius hoped, to any scouts who might be stationed between his own force and the Parthian camp along that haven of the river, so far away.

The sun had not yet risen, but a redness above the clouds, which he hoped would linger, already tinged the summits of those high peaks they had quitted. The little army waited in the shielding dark. Soon it would lift and expose them to the enemy.

Where were the *carroballistae*—the indispensable scorpions upon which so much now depended? The wagons? Were they ready to move at the proper instant? Matho? The cavalry? Were they also standing to arms?

Indecision did not show in his calm face, but his mind was torn by frantic thoughts. Had something gone wrong? Was Matho pinned down in his own pass? Had he been unable to break out?

If so, the battle was already lost.

Manlius half turned toward his orderly, who stood beside him as shield-bearer, and was about to call for a runner when he heard a low mutter of sound approaching from the direction of the farther pass.

The men about him stiffened, peering into the cold drizzle and nervously gripping their weapons. He heard a murmur run down the ranks toward him as they recognized their supply wagons.

Only three were coming. These led a long train of moving vehicles, the fifty scorpions, loaded and ready for action. The whole convoy was escorted by a single squadron of troopers. Behind the artillery, Liu Mang's eight heavy chariots rolled, manned and bristling with weapons, looking even more formidable than usual in the early morning dusk.

As the wagons passed the center, where Manlius stood with his officers, and continued down the long array of legionaries, the subsistence men were seen frantically dropping off sacks of biscuit, onions, dried meat and, more carefully, skins of wine and water for each cohort.

With the skill of long practice, these necessities were speedily distributed. The men stood in ranks, eating, without much talk. One to each century hurriedly refilled canteens with whatever liquid first came to hand, regardless of the grumbling of those who received water instead of wine.

The junior centurion of cavalry pulled up before Manlius and saluted. He led Manlius' horse. Other troopers had brought horses for the staff. Quintus mounted, even as he was soothing his parched throat with astringent Vatican.

"Commander Matho to General Manlius, sir. Commander Matho wishes the general to be informed that all is in readiness. The Sixth Ala awaits the signal."

"General Manlius presents his compliments to Commander Matho and says, he places implicit confidence in Commander Matho and his excellent officers and men. He is certain that this day will long be remembered to the sorrow of Parthia."

The junior centurion hesitated. He did not swing his horse's head away.

"Something else, Centurion?"

He looked straight ahead, not meeting Manlius' eyes. "A personal message, sir. 'Good Fortuna watch over you—and farewell.'"

"Is there any answer, sir?"

"Just say, 'Farewell, old friend.'"

The young officer saluted crisply and clattered away at the head of his detachment. He was soon out of sight.

Manlius looked after him. No one had been close enough to hear but Quintus, who sat at his side. He held out his canteen without a word.

Not long after, the Ninth and Tenth Cohorts came down from the heights through the cold gray of that weeping dawn, the word ran down the line to make ready. As though this were a signal, the Parthian tents, almost three miles distant across the

separating plain, dark shapes on the horizon, began now to take distinct form and configuration.

A streamer of light shot out from above them like a searching beam and struck upon the Romans where they stood, sharply etching their shadows against the cliff behind. The sky lightened all along the sawtooth edge of the Parthian encampment and a red arc of sun appeared. It lifted steadily away from the world's rim and floated free, scattering the drifting clouds before it.

The plain was as brilliantly displayed as though it had just been created.

The last arrivals had hardly time to snatch a few mouthfuls before taking their places at the head of the column. They now led the march instead of the Thousand Cohort, situated directly behind the Tenth. This chosen division was divided and between its two ranks the long train of the fifty carroballistae stood ready, aimed like a lance at the center of the Parthian array.

Lilia wondered at this unusual arrangement, until the briefing on the coming maneuver was passed along to all. Then she smiled. Past experience was enough to give her an understanding of what General Manlius hoped to accomplish.

Behind these, the other seven cohorts remained in their usual order, but spread out, deployed along a wide front. From the air, an observing raven would have seen the legion as an inverted T, its long arm pointing at the river.

So suddenly that it made her start, Longinus' whistle shrilled. A chorus of high chirping passed through the companies. Manlius and the staff officers were riding to the head of the artillery. Up went the standard—this time proudly lifted before the Ninth Cohort.

Whips cracked. The scorpions rolled. Longinus ran backward a few steps, sweeping his gaze across the ragged line of his century.

“Straighten up! Close in! Tibullus, Eitel—tighten on Lilia! Keep your eyes on the Eagle!

“Better to live one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep! Remember that!”

Satisfied with their appearance, he swung into his customary place. The cohorts surged forward, unit after unit, with no apparent order. Far to the east, on the right flank, the wagon

rolled, as though in flight to save themselves from the coming encounter. They also headed for the river, but by another ford.

We must look, Lilia thought, from the enemy's distant viewpoint like a shapeless crowd.

So they debouched upon the plain in full view as a disorganized mass—five thousand men who in another time might have been separately less than unusual—men with aching bones, shaking with fever, men with every ailment from tired feet to hernias, cowards, malingerers, skulkers and idealists, the vicious, the mild, the fearful, and the brave.

Just an average array of ordinary men, marching together on the glory road, to do a deed in the sullen dawn that Mars himself should not have expected from his most heroic sons.

Around them all the mist rose lightly in the dawn—sun-smoke from the grass.

Manlius bowed his head in silent prayer. "O Jupiter! O Venus Genetrix! O Unknown God of Saul the Tentmaker! Look with kindly favor upon us in this hour of no return! Let them send in the elephants first!"

It was difficult at that distance to make out details, but the Surena could not at first make himself believe that this disorderly crowd of people which dragged itself so pitifully out of the ravines and gullies could possibly be the fine army of crack troops which he had so admired at the conference at the Zab.

It did not seem to be arranged in companies or cohorts. There was no definite demarcation between units—no spirit in this mob—no *élan*. Even the pennants hung dispiritedly from their staffs.

It was no longer a legion. It did not march—it stumbled. A cloddish, unwieldy bulk of reeling individuals, leaning together as though for mutual comfort and support, limped out and staggered doggedly toward the river. The Thirteenth Legion was obviously dying on its feet.

Was this remnant all that existed of their large and comprehensive baggage train, so well outfitted for any emergency? He knew that much heavy artillery had been left behind at the evacuation of Jaxikarta. It did not seem possible that a little over one hundred parasangs of desert and mountain travel, between that point and this, had done for the remainder that was missing.

On the edges of this mass of people, which seemed no longer to be reckoned as an army, men were falling. The column was crumbling away. Many of the fallen remained where they were. Others lagged behind. They bent under the crushing weight of their packs, their shields, their weapons. They weakly leaned upon each other, until they too finally went down.

Some got up again, only to reel helplessly, stumble a few steps farther, and fall once more. They became dark shapes that did not move again.

He had half raised his arm to order the charge of the horse-archers which would crumple this woeful multitude of sufferers when he saw a worthier target for them coming into view much farther away. Out of another pass, hidden by the Roman right flank, the main baggage train of large wagons was veering away, as though in hope of escaping.

The cavalry was clustered about it, either as escort or in a desperate effort to save itself by desertion. The Surena's calculating eyes narrowed. The purpose? It must be desertion. It could be nothing else.

The answer came immediately to mind. Treasure! The looted wealth of gutted Jaxikarta must be in those wagons. His decisions crystallized into action. The baggage train should be intercepted at once. It would be easy and valuable prey. His arm swept out in a commanding gesture to his lords.

“Gentlemen, to horse! All heavy cavalry squadrons will direct themselves immediately to the pursuit and capture of yonder wagon train. Give quarter if it is asked. I prefer prisoners, but use your own judgment in case of resistance.

“Master of Elephants! You will urge your beasts against the Roman center without delay.

“Lord of Lancers! When the Romans are scattered by the elephants, your camel squadrons will complete the rout.

“Marshal Vishtaspa! All light horse will form on the right and left wings and await orders to support camel squadrons.

“Charioteers, make ready for attack. I want prisoners. General Manlius is to be taken alive. If he is harmed, that man who has injured him will answer personally to me.”

He paused in thought a mere instant. A most winning smile swept across his face. He seemed briefly like a gay-spirited boy.

"My lady, your Surenad, has an interest in the preservation of a girl soldier. Let no blade or arrow touch her.

"Gentlemen, to your posts! Trumpeter, sound the charge! For Parthial!"

Out on the quiet plain—that rapidly narrowing strip still undisturbed between the two armies—a plump, furry Mesopotamian mole rat yawned, poked his nose out of his burrow and, seeing nothing to arouse his suspicions, sat up on his haunches to look around at his territory with an air of complacent pride.

He combed a little dirt out of his whiskers, settled back to earth, and went lolloping away to forage for breakfast.

Nearby, deep underground, another war was being plotted. Slaves were needed in Red City. There would be loot, there would be much food to be brought from enemy storehouses. There would be the joy of battle, the excitement of conquest, the satisfaction of a successful operation skillfully completed. The planning of the campaign was almost at an end.

Above the plain, two ravens soared high, looking down upon the moving men. The birds had recently paired. It was time to nest. The female looked with resentment upon this unexpected interference with her plans.

These people! Always coming where they were not wanted. They were frightening away the little rodents, driving the fat grubs deep into the ground with their clumsy, heavy feet. She screamed angrily at them and struck out in irritation with her heavy bill at her overly attentive mate. A black feather drifted down. He angled hastily upward.

The surreptitious reorganization of the advancing legion was almost complete. Hidden behind the ragged edges of the expanded front of the cohorts, from One through Eight, those marchers who had fallen apparently exhausted or dead lay still until those behind had stepped over them. Then they arose and took their proper places at the rear.

Imperceptibly, the legion ranks shrank inward. As the Ninth and Tenth Cohorts were augmented by those who were, almost



unnoticed, resuming the march, the Thirteenth began to look less like a mob.

It moved nearer the river. It tightened upon itself while precious yards were being gained and time passed, until the Parthian trumpets cried against the dawn.

The Ninth and Tenth were now in their proper places, all on their feet and marching. The horde of Romans transformed itself almost magically into a column, suddenly armored with locked shields and bristling lances. It increased its speed and drove toward the imminent encounter.

The mahout dug his ankus into the base of his mount's ear. Dethi, the bull elephant, rumbled but surged obediently forward. There would be time to settle with this nuisance at his own leisure. He raised his trunk, heavy as it was, armed by a broad scythe blade with which he would strike as he attacked. He trumpeted and swung into an ambling trot, not so swift as a horse's gallop, yet ponderous and terrifying.

The other elephants, bulls and cows together, advanced at the same earth-shaking speed in an uneven, impressive line.

On either side, a little ahead, the camel cavalry suited their deceptively shambling pace to that of the greater beasts, maintaining a discreet distance between the two bodies. Little white pennons fluttered from their erect twelve-foot lances. Soon these would drop to the horizontal—soon they would be dyed crimson.

It was time. The units closed a little nearer. Neither animal liked the smell of the other and horses abhorred both. The lancers took a firm grip on the leather-wrapped shanks of their weapons. The points came down into position. The mahouts twisted their ankuses into sensitive ear bases; the elephants belowed and increased their thundering charge. Together, the combined forces rushed upon the marching Romans.

What was this? The fools actually meant to resist. They were not scattering in all directions. They were actually bunching solidly inward to speed the ease of their own destruction! The small escorting squadron of Roman cavalry left the wings of the leading column and came racing to meet the Parthian lunge. The lancers tilted their bearded chins upward to the sky and laughed at the insolence of this tiny force. Why, it was outnumbered ten

to one! They had not even drawn sabers. What did they hope to accomplish?

Suddenly the Romans' horsemen swung in across the front of the advancing legion, racing in two parallel lines past each other. A great cloud of dust arose behind them to hang in the still air. Reversing directions and plunging back again and yet again, adding to the obscurity and hiding the oncoming cohorts completely from the attackers, the squadron scraped the earth as it galloped, dragging behind each horse a bundle of brush which had been carried until then upon each crupper. The two wings joined into a single body.

Up rose the dust, higher, thicker. Out of it, howling like madmen, shrieking strange atavistic war cries that Hannibal would have understood, came Matho's Orphans, slamming into the lancers like a whirling hurly-burly of desert djinn.

Now they chopped with flashing steel at the long bony legs of the camels; now they fleetly avoided the unwieldy lances, which could not be aimed against these dodging, dancing steeds; now the disorganized lancers burst in every direction, tugging at reins, hauling at the tough mouths of their frantic mounts.

Routed for the moment only, the Parthians wheeled and circled, fighting for control. As they did so, the Roman cavalry cut loose their drags and shifted into their customary formation. Once again a tight unit of light horse under a single command, they abandoned the dust-hidden column of scorpions, now being rapidly enveloped by marching legionaries who were arranging themselves in a new battle formation, under cover of the dust cloud.

The troop dashed away. To rejoin their companions, they must cut a road through the Parthian horse-archers, which had been detached from the camp and were engaged in a running battle with the heavy cataphracts surrounding the baggage train, impeded but still moving inexorably toward the upper ford.

In another rising cloud which hung over the scurry of horsemen, the savage engagement passed out of sight of the Roman infantry. The legion had no time to wonder about the outcome. The elephants, unperturbed by either dust or the temporary rout of the camels, were upon it.

## THE BATTLE OF THE OXUS

As the apparently disorganized Thirteenth moved out from the shadow of the foothills into view of the Parthians, Lilia had felt a tenseness all around her. It was not fear so much as a sense of awareness she had never known before. All her perceptions seemed heightened.

There was relief that the moment for action had at last arrived; there was a feeling of being a part of an exciting event; there was the knowledge that, for good or ill, this was a high point in her life.

She thrilled to it. Almost blindingly she realized that this was why men made war.

Not for glory. Not for transitory fame. Not for the pleasure of inflicting pain. All these were vanities. But for the tremendous exaltation of being carried out of oneself, the loss of individuality in the incorporation within the mass, the feeling of wholeness she now momentarily shared with her companions—this awareness of brotherhood and of camaraderie in the presence of danger.

She heard the measured hoofbeats of the horses which hauled the carroballistae—why had they exchanged mules for these?—the jangle of the chains, the shuffle of thousands of feet all about her.

Acrid dust was in her nostrils. Smoke curled up from braziers and cauldrons of glowing charcoal, carried on ammunition caissons. All of this hung low over her head. Through it, the low sun loomed large as though it rose through blood. She gazed intently ahead, half expecting to see the giant cloud women she had seen once before. There was only the distant bulk of the Parthian camp out of which something was stirring, too distant to distinguish clearly.

Her shield seemed heavier than usual. There was much coughing in the ranks. She felt the bite of dust and smoke in her throat.

She had never wanted a drink so badly in her life. She saw others easing their equipment and knew that she was not alone. Veterans knew this feeling of tension also.

The thought raised her spirits. Her chin went up and a spring came into her gait. She looked straight ahead, but out of the corner of her eye saw Eitel studying her and caught his crooked, thin-lipped, approving smile.

She smiled back. He was almost good-looking this morning. Tibullus looked pale, but he marched at her other side sturdily enough. At least today Centurion Longinus would not be at him for not keeping in step. Nobody was doing it. She had never seen such slovenly ranks before.

There—the plan was being put into operation! Would it deceive the terrible Parthians? Longinus motioned at Tibullus, who dropped and rolled out of the way of the tramping boots.

Seconds later it was Lilia's turn. Down—lie still—wait for the footsloggers to go by. Nearby, Eitel likewise pretended to be as helpless as she. Hidden by the screen of marching men, the three got up, ran, and took their places at the rear.

Ahead, from where it had been carried across a caisson, the dead body of one of the Parthians slain at the pass thudded down upon the plain. Others followed to lie inert and be left behind as dark, deceptive blotches after those living legionaries from the Ninth and Tenth Cohorts had risen, some to be incorporated in the ranks, many to follow slowly.

Looking back, she saw them come, singly or in little groups. Here and there a man being dragged along by his companions, until he was dropped by them as too great a burden, and left behind.

That all this could be seen by the enemy she knew, for they were in plain sight, if not in great detail. The host was swinging into motion—a mass of horsemen, rolling things which could only be chariots, the savage, brilliant, winking gleam of early sunshine upon steel.

There were the camels, swaggering into clumsy clumps on either wing and—Oh, gods! The monsters!—the elephants which she had never seen but of which she had heard so much.

Lilia flinched inwardly. Did it show? Eitel had not noticed. She heard Tibullus gasp and knew that he had seen the huge beasts. She reached out and touched his arm. She felt his muscles quivering under the skin. He gave her a wan smile and said:

“What do you suppose they are carrying on their backs?”

Lilia did not know, but Eitel answered, “Those are little houses where archers ride.” Longinus, who had heard the remark, turned and grinned back at them.

“A man could get badly hurt falling out of one of those—if he had an arrow in him!”

A ripple of laughter ran down the ranks. They moved faster, Lilia thought, although no order had come down from the advance.

The Tenth Cohort was entirely in place now. The Ninth was almost as well assembled when the silver thread of trumpet sound reached their ears. Instantly, the column stiffened to receive the cavalry which Lilia saw making ready to charge upon them.

Surprisingly, it swung instead to the Parthian left and went racing away upriver. She had been nerving herself for the impending strike and felt a momentary relief. It could be no more than that, for in their place the camel lancers were undulating across the uneven ground.

All at once they were nearly hidden from her sight. A grimy haze arose behind the squadron of Roman cavalry which had left the column to charge out upon the lancers. She thought she recognized the sour note Proxillus always sounded when excitement made his trumpet call quaver.

Now she could not see the camels at all. They had been scattered and were stampeding, shrouded in a pall of writhing dust which followed in the wind they themselves created, as they and the slashing horsemen rushed together, through the almost lifeless air.

Back came the cavalry, howling, exultant! How brave they were! Friends! Heroes! She saw the many-hued steeds of the troop which bore the proud name of Matho's Orphans. She could not see Proxillus, but she heard his trumpet again as the troop dashed on.

The dust went rolling up and over. The Tenth marched on through it, blindly following the backs of the men ahead.

At last! The awaited signal! The whistles shrilled, down through all the maniples of the Tenth. They swung away to either side of the column, making a little room for the Ninth to come in between them.

Distantly—so very far—the shock troops of the Thousand Cohort were already engaged. Lilia heard the shrill whir of the busy slings. The Balearic auxiliaries were casting now, but she could not see at what.

The dust was an obscuring, stifling shield. Suddenly it lifted and was gone.

Now both the Ninth and Tenth Cohorts were in their accustomed tight formation. Only the bodies of the dead Parthians dotted the plain behind the reorganized legion.

It was no longer a pathetic crowd, an easily conquered multitude. It was again a deadly menace propelled at the Parthians, its stride in unison, its heart and mind that of its leader, General Varro, who rode at the head of the column, in the position of greatest danger.

Lilia thrilled at the sight of his tall horse. She felt safe, protected. Others did not look at the situation in the same way. As the elephants neared, strung out in a wide line with the great bulls in the center, the cows on either end, a cry arose—too far away for her to hear: “General Varro to the rear! Make way for the General!”

Many eager hands clutched at the reins, halting him. The white horse and its rider were surrounded by the thick protection of the First Cohort as it took the impact and engaged the enemy.

Whirling in from both sides, the camel lancers returned. They met a hail of missiles. At greatest distance, even as the steel points dropped, the riders began to fall, knocked from their high saddles by lead balls which could break bronze shields.

Closer in, clay balls and stones filled the air. “Deploy slingers!” The almost naked Balearic Islanders melted away, hurried behind the protecting ranks of the armored legionaries, and the arrow-sleet began—arching out of the moving fort, descending, piercing.

At this murderous reception, the onslaught of the lancers slowed. A few valiants, hurled on by sheer momentum and mi-

raculously untouched, drove in with their lances. In the main, they were chopped down before they could do much damage. Struggling beasts, crawling men littered the ground—some of the latter were Roman.

The ranks steadily closed the gaps, presenting a united front to the next and more impressive danger.

From high above the turmoil, Barlaas, Lord of Archers, looked out of the howdah on the back of Dethi. He inquired of his mahout contemptuously, "What does the crazy Roman think he's doing?"

A legionary, little more than a boy, had left the grimly approaching ranks, cast down his shield, and was running toward the giant beast. Arrows struck all around him, but he sprinted on unharmed, with bared short-sword swinging. He disappeared from view, almost under Barlaas.

Suddenly Dethi trumpeted—a tremendous blast which was more a scream of agony than a challenge. His trunk swung up, his ears flared wide. He reared like a horse who has refused a jump.

Barlaas felt the firing platform tilt beneath his feet, knew himself falling among his shouting men, scattered like tossed dolls from the detached howdah. Above all, he heard an exultant boyish yell from below: "Behold me, brothers in Mithras, I am bathed in the blood of the bull!"

Then the eternal dark closed over the Parthian, under the feet of the trumpeting titan, ripped from sternum to anus, as the mighty creature lurched in wild torment, trampling heedlessly upon the archers lying stunned upon the ground.

Squealing in rage, Dethi seized Morgo around the waist with his trunk, raised him high, and dashed him heavily down. The elephant took two more faltering steps, dragging his intestines, a tangled mass of grayish-blue snakes, and collapsed, hiding unmoving bodies beneath his hulk. He raised his trunk only once, in the very gesture of a defeated gladiator begging for mercy.

A joyous shout went up from the Roman ranks, which continued to advance: "Habet! Thumbs down!" The other elephants, undaunted by the death of the herd leader, came relentlessly on.

Now, as they entered the last few feet of space before immedi-

ate contact with the column, out of that close-packed rank of fighting men rose fountains of nauseously pungent liquid, which the horrified archers immediately recognized as naphtha.

The beasts were drenched with it, the howdahs and men soaked completely, and still the soaring arcs of stinging fluid fell upon them from the Roman siphons. There was no time to turn away, little time to realize what was about to happen. The elephants plunged closer toward the column, where now the slingers had clustered about the fiery cauldrons and were replenishing their supply of missiles.

The circling slings glowed and flamed. Wreaths of smoke rose into the air. The archers sent one hurried flight into the mass before them. It was not enough to meet the threat. Too many of the arrows struck protecting shields. The slingers still stood.

The sticky fireballs of burning pitch flew into the howdahs, clung to broad frontlets wet with naphtha, blazed into enveloping blasts of blinding, searing flame. Wrapped in sheets of waving fire, the herd, bereft of its mighty leader, turned and hastened with unbelievable speed toward the only protection it knew—the horror-stricken Parthian host.

Each animal was in torture from patches of scorching corrosion which ate through thick skin in moments to ignite the fatty, underlying layers of flesh. Howdahs fell, their straps burned through; unrecognizable blackened shapes were scattered on the ground behind them. Here and there a single beast, no longer a menace to anyone, fell and lay burning under a tower of thick, stinking smoke. The others came, bellowing, toward the river.

The Parthian ranks went into disorder. Surena Pacorus watched them scatter, almost as unnerved himself to see that charge of maddened beasts, still trumpeting, still living, but charred and hideous—terrifying, blazing creatures, dying on their feet.

Some lanes opened ahead of the frantic rush. Where there were none, the elephants went through the crowd unhindered, making their own bloody roads—to plunge into the water at a lumbering gallop. It closed, hissing, over their calcined hides. They wallowed in it to drown there, still blasting their shrieking pain.

In their wake, no longer the easy prey the Surena had thought



to meet, the Thirteenth Legion, under its battle flags, its company pennons, and behind its open-beaked, defiant Eagle standard, continued to advance across the plain. It approached the dismayed Parthian host with measured stride and weapons ready.

There were no cheers, no drums—only the eerie wail of the Balearic pipers and the shrilling of centurion whistles. “Close up! Close up!”

Surena Pacorus rode up and down the ragged line of his light cavalry and footmen, milling in wild confusion. His face was livid. “Maintain ranks!” he howled. “Make ready for attack! All chariots forward. Attack! Attack!”

He cast one scornful glance at the routed camel troops, promising himself a slow execution of the Lord of Lancers when all was over.

On either side, from their wagon parks, the chariots rattled out. Their speed increased. A trail of dust followed. With hub scythes flashing in tight circles, they came like comets toward the advancing legion.

Behind them, more slowly, came the Parthian center, a trotting, compact body of horse, footmen clinging to stirrups and running beside the riders, unlimbering bows, fitting arrows, making ready to take advantage of the disorganization the chariot strike was bound to create.

On either flank moved the baggage camels, laden with buckets, bales, and quivers of arrows, to supply the horse-archers as needed.

The legion was now halfway across the plain. It marched with shields covering the sides of the column. Above all, the shields of the men in the center were raised to form an overlapping roof. The testudo—that tortoise formation customarily used to protect a company engaged in battering down a city gate—had been amplified to act as a defense for the whole army.

Surena Pacorus saw them come—a defiant, metal-scaled dragon, its many legs moving with firm, determined stride. The two forces advanced toward each other.

Now he saw the dragon’s head, its glittering, golden crest, the Eagle which must be brought low to wring victory out of this ill-omened beginning of the day. He wished he could recall the

heavy cavalry, but it was engaged, far out of sight, with the baggage wagon convoy. He regretted his hasty action in diverting his most powerful force.

He shook away his indefinable premonitions and rode ahead of his men. He laughed and waved his arm. He tossed his saber carelessly, jauntily, from hand to hand. He urged his horse into a canter.

The chariots had almost made contact. It was time to follow up the blow they were about to give. Behind its gay young leader, the light cavalry increased its pace.

As though the approach were a signal, the shield ranks parted briefly on either side, making room for two thrusting arms which reached in menace toward the Parthians. Liu Mang's iron chariots, four on the right, four on the left, were swinging out to meet the Parthian chariots head on.

Encouraging itself, the dragon raised its multitudinous voice and bellowed at the enemy. The legion was singing as it marched to battle:

*"When, at the end, I get my licks,  
I'll take the ferryboat over the Styx,  
With nothing to spend, bequeath, or lend,  
But my denarius for the day!"*

Lilia heard the hoarse chant rise all around her. It came from croaking throats husky with the stifling dust. It was shady under the upraised shields. She gripped her own more firmly, holding it high and flat. It would not be this one that would lower to leave a gap for a plunging arrow.

She could see nothing but the back of the man ahead, covered as all were now by their packs, unrolled blankets, and trailing tent sections, to absorb the force of a deflected missile. Eitel strode at her left and Tibullus on her right. Beyond that she moved in a little private space.

From far ahead she heard an increasingly louder noise of rapid wheels, a rolling rumble of pounding hoofs. Something ominous was coming. In this close-packed formation it was invisible to her. All at once she heard a medley of shouts and curses, a terrific crash, an inhuman scream which she did not recognize.

It was the first time she had ever heard the sound of a dying horse.

For a few seconds the pace of the column slowed in front of her. It did not stop, but it flinched away from its straight course. Longinus yelled, "Right oblique! Look out for those legs!"

Briefly, she saw the obstacle as a splintered mass of cedar and wicker which they must go around. A wheel was still turning slowly on its broken axle. A horse, hampered by its harness, was flailing wildly as it struggled to get to its feet. Its mate lay dead beside it and there were dead men all around.

She stepped high over corpses, as the others ahead of her were doing. She felt her sandaled feet wet with something warm. She did not look down to see what it was. She did not want to know.

The peremptory whistles shrilled ahead. "Close up! Close up!" Lilia ran a few steps to keep up with her companions. Now the huge gap made somewhere in the forward rank by the charging chariot was filled in.

Who was gone? Who was dead? Was it quick? How would it feel to die?

Another crash. O Jupiter, help us! I have been a good girl. They are committing suicide in our ranks. Do they hate us so much? Don't they care for their lives? Do they *want* to die?

As though he had heard her unspoken questions, Eitel turned his head and grinned at her. "The death-or-glory boys, little Roman! Don't be afraid. They'll have to run over me first."

That was cold comfort. She did not wish to imagine Eitel or Tibullus suddenly hurled at her feet by that plunging projectile of flesh, wood, and slashing scythes. The thought was more terrible than picturing her own extinction.

Through a brief opening in the ranks, caused as a man stumbled, she saw one of the Shang chariots race past without guidance. Its charioteer hung limp over the side; its archer was still shooting at something she could not see. Only a glimpse and the interstice closed. She wondered if Liu Mang was the dead man.

Another series of piping whistles ran down the line, almost lost in the rising uproar. Lilia understood the code. She reached under the blanket of the man in front, trailing to his waist, and unhooked a caltrop as others were doing. She felt fumbling fingers scrabbling at her own back. Again and again. The center

ranks passed the caltrops outward from the center lines to the sides of the column. Slingers seized them, randomly sowing a lane of deadly protection along the edges, twenty feet away.

Inside this area of upstanding steel points the next Parthian chariot raced to its doom. A caltrop pierced into and through the soft frog of the off horse's hoof. The chariot swung away, both horses slowing, then coming to a halt, unable to continue.

A slinger took careful aim. The charioteer threw both hands to his face and slumped dead into his archer, who fell across him feathered with arrows.

Some flew on, into the next vehicle. This charioteer, who had been coming in alone, jolted out, still attached by the reins fastened about his waist. Diverted from the target, the unguided chariot plunged parallel to the line of march. The ends of the wicked scythe blades slashed viciously through the air, only inches away from the bare legs of the marching men. Flick, flick, flick, they circled, deadly and close, until some rise in the ground caused the menace to swing away. The legionaries maintained their even pace. No man broke ranks.

Another was coming. Lilia could hear it, loud, dangerous, frightening. It was very close. Where would it strike? Where?

Just ahead! She saw it. Two rearing horses, their eyes wild and frantically rolling—their jaws white with spume that flew in clots through the air. A javelin was buried in the breast of one.

Crash! It overturned. A Parthian soared like a great sprawling bird, still clutching his bow. There was a terrific clatter of spilled shields and fallen men. Light broke in under the canopy of shields.

A trough, a furrow—an avenue—had been plowed completely through the column. A whole manipule was gone out of the Tenth Cohort!

Lilia caught a series of instant, terrifying pictures. A cripple, who must be ignored, raising an arm in plea for help. An iron chariot striking a wicker one, to explode it in a shower of fragments and then heel over on its side and be dragged by its horses out of sight. No yellow man rolled away from the wreck.

She saw an enraged legionary grab the bridle of a camel, swing himself up to that great height, and knock the lancer out

of the saddle with a single blow of his fist. He went racing off—to safety or to death? She would never know.

She, Eitel, Tibullus, stumbled together over the tangled row of dead and injured. "Close up! Close up! Fill in that gap! Keep going!"

Longinus, his face distorted, howling at them. Was he made of iron? Did he think there was still a chance for them on this clanging day of deadly ruin?

Through the narrowing gap, arrows stridulated from the cloud of horse-archers which wheeled and circled past. They struck with sullen thuds or keened away at strange angles. Lilia saw some men with arrows embedded in their packs, others with points hanging loosely from the blankets which had taken the force out of the missile.

For an instant a whole squadron of horse was visible through the small open space. It swirled down upon the Tenth, shooting with deadly precision. More men fell, the gap widened a little. Another chariot made for the breach. It would tear it wide open and separate the remainder of the last cohort from the main body.

"Pilums into those wheels! Cast!" Centurion Longinus yelled, hurling his own. A score of iron-shafted javelins flew. Spokes became bright cedar flinders. Dragged by the uninjured horses, the body of the chariot bounded high and wheelless and disappeared empty out of her sight.

She had no eyes for its further progress. Tibullus was gone! Was he down? Where was he? There! Running across the plain, shield lost, sword flung away, he raced wildly from the column.

Behind him, shouting, laughing, hunting him down like a deer—an enemy horseman who took his deliberate time, enjoying the chase which could have but one end.

A Parthian charger, panther lean, was close, with dragging reins and empty saddle. Lilia dropped her own shield and sprang for his back. The horse snorted and plunged, but her strong thighs gripped his barrel and her firm grip on the reins gave her the mastery.

A short lance still stood in its boot. Lilia snatched it out and, with it couched as though she had practiced the action for a lifetime, drove down upon the pursuer like a thunderbolt.

Now Tibullus had fallen. The Parthian rider leapt down, seizing him by the hair. She saw the cruel dagger rise and fall. The hand went up again for the finishing slash. Absorbed in his deadly work, the killer did not see Lilia coming. She held the lance steady. It tore through his mail shirt, through his body, and hurled him away.

With the shock of the blow, Lilia was unseated. She struck heavily on her shoulder beside Tibullus. Toward the prostrate pair a little knot of horsemen came cantering, with leveled lances. She gathered his bleeding body into her arms, shielding him with her own. They were coming in fast. She closed her eyes, waiting for the tearing points, welcoming them.

She heard a man leap down and then a close and dreadful cry which seemed to be almost above her head. It was indeed. The stallion she had taken, trained as all Parthian war horses were to fight with teeth and hoofs and to stand over and protect a fallen rider, had done this for her. With his great yellow teeth he seized the Parthian attacker by the belly and tossed him, dying, into the air.

The other riders shouted and closed in. Her befriending charger reared and struck at them, biting at legs with lips curled back, tearing at the other horses. His big hoofs raked down the crest of the nearest mount. It swung away, torn and bleeding.

As it swerved, the rider shot out of the saddle as though a long thin snake had him by the throat, to fall heavily to the ground beneath the fighting horses. She heard a guttural snarl to chill one's blood. A massive body struck against a second rider, snapping with fangs that ripped and yanked him down, worrying him to his death.

At the side of this second ally, a third raced in, a raging demon to the rescue. Cerberus, the fierce Molossian war hound, and Irax, his mate. Beside them, shouting them to the attack, Eitel, striking out with his strangling, knife-tipped lash, until there was no one left alive in the self-confident group.

The big Hun stood by, panting. The dogs paced, stiff-legged, around a tight little circle, waiting for orders. He tried to lift Lilia to her feet. She clung to Tibullus, bending her ear to his lips to hear his weak voice.

He was bleeding from a deep gash in his chest and his eyelids

fluttered, but he knew her. He smiled and touched her cheek. His whisper was of the faintest.

"I could never have been what you wanted me to be, or what you thought I was. I have always failed you—but I did try."

"I know—I do know. Do not fret. Sleep now. Forever rest, my darling boy."

She bent again and kissed him. His eyes opened once more. He was looking over her shoulder and she did not know he was speaking to Eitel.

"It doesn't hurt. I always thought it would. I'll never be afraid again." There was a question in his eyes, a plea unspoken. Eitel knew what he would ask and nodded. He rested his palm protectively on Lilia's shoulder.

Tibullus sighed once and lay back. All color drained from his face. Lilia released him and seized the dagger which lay nearby. She aimed it at her breast. Eitel snatched it and flung it far away.

A trumpet brayed over their heads. Lost in the tragic moment, none concerned had seen the abrupt approach of a mailed noble. In a squadron of followers, he sat his horse, looking down upon them. His jeweled saber swung loose in his bare hand, partly covered by the long sleeve of his steel-scaled shirt.

The dogs snarled. Their hackles rose. Eitel sprang before Lilia, unhooking his mace from his belt, but the leader made no attempt to close in. Instead, he held back his men.

Lilia had seen this man riding proudly by, at the conclave at the Zab. She recognized him as the Surena. It seemed incredible that he could have noticed her. Apparently he had. He looked upon her now with what seemed to be sympathy and pity.

"You shall not be harmed, girl. I offer you sanctuary."

The words made no impression upon her numbed mind. She raised her tear-wet face to the Surena. Even worn, weary, and in her distress, she was still beautiful. "He was mine. Kill me too. He was all I had."

The Surena looked at the defiant dogs. His gaze swept over the massive form of the giant Hun, whose attitude challenged the world.

"Nay, lady, I think you have more. Much more than you know."

Lilia strained Tibullus' head to her breast and rocked back and forth. Her hair fell loose across his closed eyes. It hid his wounds and her sorrow from the Parthian.

Surena Pacorus sat watching. He signaled to his trumpeter. A clarion blast, loud and sweet, thrilled through the uproar of the battle, immediately to be taken up and carried by the trumpeters of the attacking troops.

He turned to Eitel. "I will not make war upon women or take either of you prisoner in this way. Accept the fortunes of the day. I give you amnesty until the issue is decided. Continue to guard her as you have done.

"Lady, return to your people."

Momentarily, it seemed as though time had stopped. Lilia could not realize that hours had not passed. The Parthian host had withdrawn briefly from the attack, the column had progressed hardly at all toward the river since she had quitted it. Half carried, half led by Eitel, she was hurried back to the decimated ranks of the Thirteenth, which was taking advantage of the interruption to tighten and strengthen itself for the next onslaught.

It would be much later that she would remember the litter of war which strewed the hoof-torn bloody route she crossed, the many helpless wounded of both forces, the moaning sufferers, the stolid-faced dead. She saw them now and knew that many of them were friends.

Decius watched her pass. He lifted a hand in farewell, but she did not see. It did not seem to matter. He had loved Lilia in his own lighthearted way. He had never told her so. He felt regret for this, but there was a deeper sorrow. To die thus, far from home, upon strange soil, without the proper rites—this was the greater grief.

"O Divine Zeus, I accept your judgment upon such evil as I may wittingly have done in the world. I pray in this, the hour of my death, that the wrongs I may have unintentionally committed be balanced against such good as I have purposely accomplished."

There! His peace had been made and mercy asked. There was nothing to do but await the pleasure of the god.



The calm moment was over. He heard the sound of wheels again. It came toward him over the hard ground. It was not the mad rush of a Parthian charge. Somehow, the rumble was different. It could not be one of the heavy war cars of the yellow men—he knew that most of those were gone, sacrificed against the overwhelming numbers sent against them, the horses slain in their harness, the strangers cut down where they stood.

The hoofs of the horses beat upon the ground like a drum-head. It was as though the vehicle they drew rolled slowly over a great re-echoing hollow beneath him. Now he saw it, drawn by a pair of magnificent steeds, glossy and black. It was a sable chariot, gleaming with polished jet and white ivory. Ebony plumes nodded and waved in a wind he could not feel.

A grave-faced, handsome young man held the reins and pulled the chariot to a halt beside him. He smiled as though they were old friends and beckoned.

The youth knew him at once. "I have nothing for you."

The resonant voice of the charioteer was understanding and kindly. "He who rides in Pluto's carriage needs no sop for Cerberus, nor any coin for the Ferryman.

"Come. Give me your hand. Proserpine waits to welcome the brave."

He mounted the chariot. The whip cracked and Decius, former vigilus, was carried, rejoicing, to the Undercountry of the Shades.

The breathing space had been brief. As though it had brought new strength to the antagonists, the storm of war broke now with redoubled fury. A deadly rain beat down on the upraised shields, where Lilia stumbled in dazed misery.

Eitel held his shield over them both. His arm was comfortingly around her, but he knew she did not know he held her. He murmured into her ear, "This is the crying time. If you can cry, do so now."

She gave no sign that she heard him. He muttered to himself, "Tread lightly, my little, lonely one. You are walking on my heart."

## THE FARMER FINDS HIS BROTHER

The conflict was no less savage at the head of the column. Here, attrition had been alarming on both sides. The resistance against the thrust of the Thirteenth had slowed but never stopped the legion. Neither cavalry nor foot had been able to divert the course of the column along its determined way. Now that the Parthian chariots were demolished or otherwise rendered inactive, Manlius called back Liu Mang and his charioteer, the only survivors of their train.

The dragon flag they had raised above themselves at the beginning of the march still flew, tattered by arrow slits, although both men were unwounded. The heavy iron chariots had proved their worth as the warrior-trader had said they would. Their weight, the accurate marksmanship of the fighting crews, had been of inestimable value in breaking up the wild rush of the lighter vehicles. There was nothing left for the single remaining chariot to do.

Liu Mang swung his tired horses into place at the rear of the long line of scorpions. The marching men, who had divided ranks to let him in, closed once more and filled the gap.

As though this were a signal, the fury of the horse-archers broke all along the line with increased madness. Manlius saw them drive in and wondered at their desperate courage. He soon learned the reason.

The river was less than a half mile ahead. No units were being detached from the reserves holding the Parthian camp, but in the distance a large body of horsemen was sweeping toward the embattled legion from upstream. The heavy-armed riders who had pursued the wagons were now returning. Manlius had little doubt that their work there was finished.

He signaled for an increase in speed. From somewhere within

exhausted bodies, the plodding legionaries called upon deep resources.

Surena Pacorus had observed his nearing reinforcements only a moment before Manlius saw their approach. However, the time was sufficient for him to order a maneuver which had been impossible under the earlier conditions of the battle.

This was the tactical move so brilliantly executed by his predecessor at the victory of Carrhae. He had no knowledge that Manlius had anticipated the thought and made preparations against it, which the pompous and cocksure General Crassus had failed to do.

Pacorus ordered his remaining horse-archers, now sadly diminished, into the classic formation of the caracole.

A large ring of swiftly moving cavalry came into being at once, on both sides of the Roman column, which thrust forward like an ingot of hot iron being squeezed through the cylinders of a rolling mill.

As each horseman came toward his position in the circle nearest to the resolutely marching men, he discharged an arrow, another as he passed, and, turning in the saddle, let loose a third shaft over his horse's crupper, while the well-trained steed raced on, guided only by the rider's knees.

This system of attack, directed heavily upon one point in the column, produced an immediate and deadly effect. Regardless of protective armor and shields, despite the dubious value of thick packs and dangling leather buffers, this continual heavy cross fire, delivered as a steady broadside, began to take its dreadful toll.

It went on and on. As each archer exhausted his quiver of arrows he replenished it from the supplies carried by the herd of baggage camels in the center of the forward-moving circle. He immediately swung back into action.

The caracole, not to be seen again in war until the invention of the horse pistol and the War of the Roses, continued without interruption. Under a deadly delivery of missiles, the edges of the column began to melt away.

Fortunately the onslaught proved to be brief. The roof of shields went down in the center of the legion's disciplined array.

This uncovered those few scorpions which had been reconstructed in readiness for just this contingency.

Up and outward, in high, soaring arcs which carried them above the ring of archers, directly into the herd of close-packed camels, flew flaming phalaricas—lances with burning naphtha-soaked bundles of tow attached. In instant succession came other missiles—clay jugs of naphtha which burst on impact and ignited with explosive fury.

Up and outward, on either side—for these scorpions had been turned upon their axles to shoot not straight ahead or to the rear but sideways. For the first time in Roman warfare, a battery of artillery could be used in action while still in movement. At such a massed target, it was impossible to miss.

A stout legionary saw, through a cranny in the shield wall, a gangly-legged, long-necked horror go lolloping through the herd. It was hardly to be recognized as a camel. He saw it as a moving pillar of black smoke, its long bunches of hair soaked with naphtha and blazing like wicks all along its body. As it went, it set fire to others, scattering the herd, breaking up the wheel of archers, until the plain on both sides was a disorganized confusion of riders attempting to resume formation.

The camel ran. It bubbled with terror. It moaned and hooted its scorching pain and soon it fell. As the fiery darts still flew into the tangled horde, the stout legionary laughed and pointed.

"We didn't eat him after all! I recognize that one! That man-eating, flea-carrying bag of bones that tried to gnaw my leg off!"

His companion did not answer. He lay underfoot, a hindrance to the boots of the men behind. A second later the speaker was also struck down. The gaps they had left immediately filled.

"Close up! Close up!" The legion tramped doggedly on toward the Oxus, only a short distance away. The barrier of the tents lay between, the Parthian encampment protected by a thin line of infantry and camp followers, hastily armed.

There was no agger of sharpened stakes, no deep ditch before the camp, no horsemen to meet. The column received one point-blank but straggling volley of hurriedly aimed arrows and, almost unharmed by them, punched contemptuously into the camp.

The footmen were not professional soldiers but serfs, quickly

levied to act as an impressive entourage for each great lord. They had no stamina to resist this indomitable, apparently indestructible force that was upon them.

A panic-stricken hostler yelled, "They are still coming! They are daityas! Angra-Mainyu himself couldn't stop them!"

He threw down his useless bow and ran for his life. The infantry went into rout. It scattered and melted away. Through them the head of the column plunged into the slow-moving river, shoulder deep, following the uprise of bottom which created a passable ford.

As they did so, Manlius pulled aside and sat his horse, between Tribunes Mancinus and Quintus, to direct the crossing. None of the three had been more than superficially wounded, but all were bleeding.

Manlius saw the line of scorpions fanning out in a wide arc on the riverbank. He saw the horses cut free and led into the water. He saw the crews drive the trails of the *carroballistae* into the soft ground of the riverbank and stand ready. He heard the gruff commands of the nearest engineers and handlers as they took their stance.

The artillerymen stood and waited, while the legionaries streamed past under the eyes of the three officers, and they did not flinch.

Lilia was hardly aware of the cold water rising about her. She had marched as in a dream since the death of Tibullus. She had only one thought—that somehow she must survive for him.

She had lost her brief desire to die. If she did, it would be a desertion now. It was her duty to live. She tried to explain this to Eitel as he supported her in the stream. Her feet did not touch ground and the water filled her mouth. It tasted terrible. It burned her lips and throat.

She tried to say, "He will always be with me now. During the kalends of September I shall have his child." She only coughed and strangled. Eitel hurried her on.

Whistles shrilled. Commanding, urging. "Don't stop! Keep going! Don't drink!" Centurion Longinus, giving orders again.

Who could be thirsty enough to drink that nasty stuff? She looked back. Oh, Jupiter! Sweet Goddess Fortuna! They are

coming and not all of us are across yet! They will kill us in the water.

Tibullus! Tibullus! If you were only with me now!

Out on the scurrying plain, the two bodies of Parthian horse came together. They melded. Light cavalry; running footmen grabbing at stirrups or reaching for girths, ready to leap again into the close-packed Roman ranks to slay all they could before they were themselves killed; heavily armored cataphracts; nobles in mail on mail-skirted fighting horses; a few camel-lancers—all these still constituted a powerful force.

To hurl it against the battered remnants of the surely disorganized legion, which he could see crossing—some clambering out of the river on the far side, many in the water, most still waiting their turn to enter and clustered upon the nearer shore—Surena Pacorus rode out in front of his assembled troops.

He raised his flashing saber in the sun. Ahead of his men, his stallion moved out at a slow amble. Trumpets caroled. The pace increased to a trot, a canter, a gallop. The sound of the hoofs behind him became a rolling thunder. The charge was a headlong rush. The gathered force, urged to its fullest speed, stormed over the plain toward the opposing mass of men on foot.

“For Parthia!”

These now turned and knelt in double rank behind their shields and with leveled bows and javelins, waiting for the impact. There was the glittering water. There was the objective. There was General Varro sitting his horse like a statue. There was victory.

Suddenly the Parthian riders entered arrow range. A blur of speedy shafts flew toward them. They returned the volley but, in the van, wounded horses plunged and reared, men flew over their heads—the charge slackened in its rush.

The archers turned and fled into the river. Disclosed behind this vanished screen of men the Surena plainly saw the serrated line of waiting artillery pieces, the points of heavy javelins in the troughs, smoke rising from cauldrons in the narrow aisles between the engines.

He flung up his hand to divert the frontal attack upon this deadly and unexpected menace. Too late to split and come in on

the flanks, the mixed cavalry drove head on into the volley of missiles. Men were nailed to their horses, pierced through armor, front and back, by the sharp spears that did not stop. Driven by the power of tightly cranked crossbows, for such the carroballistae actually were, the javelins passed through three men at a time, at such short range.

The center of the charge collapsed into a pile of thrashing bodies, upon which those behind stampeded helplessly and were overthrown.

All along the line the scorpions sprang and stung. The engineers had time for only one concentrated volley. Although the heart was torn out of the attack by the massed fire of fifty engines, it was not stopped. It slowed almost to a halt. Then, through the screaming ruck of wounded, the melee came on, with no formation or order.

A scattering pelt of missiles met them from the few crews who had managed to reload. There was not enough force in it to stop the storm that now broke upon the engineers.

The Parthian cavaliers struck into the battery: enraged wild riders, swinging sabers that rose and fell, slashing, hacking at those who turned to run; a crowd of slaving, excited horses that fought their bits, their masters, and the men they trampled.

They pounded on between the scorpions, overturning them, cutting the skeins of gut, the bow cords—driving hard into the archers crowded into the shallows, still striking, spurring the crush of their horses' weight against the closely packed legionaries.

Here there was bitter resistance. There was aimless battle. Flesh against flesh, men and animals poured over the riverbank into the muddy foam. The bodies, some still feebly moving, drifted slowly down in the sluggish current, companioned in death, laced together with bloody streaks which twisted over the iridescent surface of the stream.

Unexpectedly, the attack ceased. Manlius, now halfway across the river, where he and his tribunes had been thrust by the sheer pressure of the rout, saw the close groups of horse pull back and withdraw. He did not understand. It seemed that the Surena had held them in the hollow of his hand.

He did not know that Pacorus had been flung headlong and was being carried, senseless, out of the battle.

Reload! Reload! But the line of engines was manned mainly by the dead.

There! They were forming again! This time it would be for the kill. Manlius dipped up a handful of water and tasted it. He spat it out and smiled. His horse kneed into the churned mud of the shallow edge. The river was empty, except for a few artillerymen determined to save their pieces. He signaled for a torch to be brought him. Four scorpions were manhandled through the river while he waited.

Out on the plain, the Parthian cavalry was ready. Surena Pacorus, again mounted and fully recovered, lifted his saber for the final onslaught.

His high, exultant voice rang like the cry of a bugle.

"For Parthia!" This charge would not be stopped.

Rear-ranker Number Five, Sixth Maniple, Fourth Century, Second Cohort—Scorpion Cranker, First Class—sprawled dying over the trail of a loaded and aimed engine. Beside him, the engineer and javelin man lay dead, bristling with arrows.

He could hear, still streaming across the river, the noise of the plunging battery horses that had been retrieved to draw away some of the engines. The last of the legionaries had reached the farther bank.

Now, with his failing sight, he made out upon the mid-plain the torrent of Parthians surging into largeness. There was no order in the onrush, no even front rank. This final attack would be every man for himself, to drive slashing into the rear guard of the routed legion.

A few were pulling ahead in the mad race, mounted upon better horses, no doubt. The dying rear-ranker, his vision for an instant preternaturally sharpened, could make out those who formed the advance.

One magnificent stallion led them all. The rider threw his head back and laughed exultantly, tossing his saber from hand to hand. The rear-ranker could see that the individual scales of his bright armor were edged in scarlet. Jewels flashed on the saber hilt.



Now the host was thundering over their own dead. The great stallion swung to the left to avoid a heap of corpses. Glancing down the javelin trough, through gathering grayness, the rear-ranker saw the gaudy Parthian framed in the notch.

He struck loose the slip hook. He saw the Parthian flung backward twenty feet over the stallion's crupper. The cavalry poured on by sheer momentum, their faces horror-stricken. He looked up at huge descending hoofs.

"Oh, Mother! You said you would not miss me, but you will!"

And in far Rome, where it was still dark, a woman woke in a slum tenement of the Suburra, sat up in her bed, and screamed—and screamed.

There was other yelling on that day of merciless slaughter. There was the shrieking of hapless men, in water that suddenly raged into waving billows of man-high roaring flame, as Manlius flung his torch into the naphtha which floated upon its surface—naphtha from the water wagons Matho's men had brought upstream at terrible cost, to broach and let drain into the Oxus for this very purpose.

There was the defiant, challenging shout of a huge, ugly man, shaking with exhaustion, who stood with spiked mace in hand, with an unconscious girl between his feet on the riverbank, ready to defend her to the death. "Come over the river, you slimy lizards!"

There was the melancholy keening of the leaderless Parthian host, which clustered aimlessly around the body of its gay young leader.

And there was the bull-throated answer to their lament. It came across the drifting flames—the old, old cry of the triumphant legions of Rome, on a day of magnificent victory.

"Vicimus! Vicimus! Vicimus!"

As the flames drifted away downstream, the two battered armies faced each other across the water. Taking advantage of every precious moment, the tired legionaries prepared to use the river as a moat. They furiously plied shovels and trenching tools. They slammed the stakes they had carried on their backs deep

into the ground and slanted the sharpened ends toward the water.

The four rescued scorpions were set up to command the ford. Those archers and slingers who survived and still had ammunition were hastily assembled as a unit and brought into position. They waited, but the Parthians did not come. The enemy seemed to be in heated discussion.

The water flowed clear and safe for crossing. The last ripples of fire had sunk away to nothing.

Marshal Vishtaspa, formerly second in command and now nominal leader, screamed hysterically at his men.

"I am Surena now! Attack! I command you—attack!"

They stood in stolid, bewildered clumps among the tattered, overthrown tents of their demolished camp. Vishtaspa used his whip. They did not appear to feel it.

He raved and apparently they did not hear him. He plunged his horse chest deep into the Oxus and no one followed. He wallowed back among the stunned riders and they neither laughed at his comical appearance nor quailed at his fury.

There was a slow drifting in and out of the loose groups. It milled about the sprawled body of their dead leader. The men stared and pointed and mourned. It was as though they waited for him to rise, mount his horse, and wave them on again.

The marshal continued to shout. At length a few of the satraps and underofficers wearily formed a rude semblance of a line of assault. Others began to gather amidst the ruined Roman artillery pieces.

A troop of heavy-armed riders couched their lances in readiness, their scaled mail casting twinkles of light upon the water.

Behind them, rank upon rank of sweaty, grim-visaged men—steel-fibered veterans all, the household guard of Surena Pacorus—took their places, to follow up the coming charge.

Marshal Vishtaspa rode down the line in satisfaction. He could feel courage welling up again, as it was steadily being reinforced by new additions. The rows of horsemen were tight, impressive, powerful. They were broken and interrupted only by the debris the Romans had been obliged to leave behind.

These were unimportant hindrances—the engines and their

caissons, a few large cooking kettles and cauldrons which still smoked and steamed on the tops of some of the wheeled ammunition carriers or rested on the ground by their sides.

He wondered for what purpose the Romans carried such heavy, useless things with such care. He peered down into one of them. The contents were not food but glowing charcoal.

In this one there lay a thick, heavy bronze tube, sealed at both ends. It crackled with heat. He looked closer. A little vapor oozed from a hairline at one end. This was the last thing he ever saw.

There was a brilliant white light, a terrific concussion which shook the ground and set echoes flying back from the hills. Shrieking fragments of red-hot metal flew among the assembled cavalry, emptying saddles or dropping injured horses beneath injured men.

Where the marshal had stood was only a deep, smoking hole. It was sufficient to form a grave for both horse and man, but both had disappeared.

As though this catastrophe were a signal to the other booby-trapped cauldrons, they too began to erupt in irregular explosions which tore and scattered the demoralized ranks.

Without waiting to salvage anything from the demon-haunted camp, the surviving Parthians streamed wildly away from the river in all directions. They were no longer an army. They were no longer interested in the legion which stood, almost helplessly, at bay.

The battle of the Oxus had come to an end.

The trap proved a success greater than Manlius had dared hope. At the river's bank he was observing the Parthian consternation from the back of his exhausted horse, and still rejoicing over it, when a wounded trooper came up and saluted. The man carried a battered cavalry trumpet slung on his shoulder and his outfit marked him as one of Matho's men.

Proxillus held the salute and remained at attention. He was wet and shivering. It seemed to be more from weakness and emotion than from actual cold.

"Stand quiet, trumpeter. You have a report? Tell me first—what of the fight at the upper ford?"

"It was heavy, sir." The boy's voice trembled despite the immense effort he was maintaining to keep it steady. "We were pursued, with many casualties, always in close contact except at one time. A baggage wagon broke up, after losing a wheel, and scattered goods over the ground. We thought it was an accident, but Commander Matho had planned it so.

"The Parthians fell into the trap and many stopped to loot. When they did, our light cavalry hit them hard from the rear. The remaining wagons went on and reached the ford. We did not see any of the light cavalry again. I think they all died there.

"My troop was overrun. We had made a barricade of all the wagons and fought behind it on the riverbank, until the command was given to retire. There were not many around me at that time and most of the horses were killed or driven off.

"The naphtha wagons had been broached and the spigots broken off, so that the flow could not be stopped. I believe the Parthians did not understand what was happening.

"I fought as long as I could, sir. I did not desert my comrades. All my wounds are in front."

"Go on."

"I was knocked into the water. When I came up, I swam for the farther shore. I was alone and the Parthians were swarming over the battleground. I came down this bank and no one crossed over to follow me. There was not enough interest in one man, I think."

Manlius heard him out. His impassive face showed nothing of his inner concern. He turned to Mancinus, who stood at his side.

"Tribune, see that this trooper has wine and a few moments' rest.

"When you have recovered, trumpeter, return to your squadron. Bid Commander Matho rejoin us upon this side of the river."

Trooper Proxillus resumed his rigid stance. He saluted with dignity.

"With respect and apology, sir. What the general orders is impossible, sir. I am the only survivor. I am the Sixth Ala."

The rain that had been predicted, which always seemed to follow a battle, finally fell upon the littered plain like tears. Like

tears, the water was warm and for some time the Farmer lay in it, dreaming his life away. He knew he was bleeding badly. It did not seem to matter.

If he did not move, there was little pain. At times he could not feel the wet ground on which he lay. He seemed light as a cloud.

He heard the spatter of the rain upon his shield and, sliding back through time, heard it fall again upon the roof above his bed.

He heard Balbus, his elder brother, come in from the stable, knocking mud from his boots, and call out to him and their mother, "The drought has broken at last! It is raining bread to-night!"

"Yes, brother," he thought he answered, "on our good black soil!" Falling comfortably into the long sleep, he distantly heard his brother shut the door.

The mole rat had known frightful panic. Long before he reached his burrow, he was stopped by a mountainous interference.

It shook the ground and passed on. Never in all his little life had such a cataclysm disrupted his placid existence. When he thought himself unseen he came out of the grass and ran for safety.

His eyes were big and round and glazed with fear. The entrance to his burrow had been crushed in by an enormous foot. He dug frantically, his small claws hurling the compacted earth backward in clods between his scratching hind legs.

Before he uncovered the tunnel enough to enter, his small world was again faced with destruction, this time by great beasts which came plunging straight at him. They dragged a clattering horror behind, with the obvious intention of flattening him beneath it.

He squealed and dug and waggled his plump, delicious little body into his tunnel just in time, before he could be devoured by the monsters. Something made a terrible noise in the air above, as he went down. There was a savage cry, louder than any disappointed eagle he had ever heard miss its eager, claw-extended stoop.

A heavy bulk jarred the ground he had just torn open. He

raced ahead of the attacker, to hurl himself into his grass-lined sleeping chamber, to lie panting and quivering against the warm side of his tiny mate.

With little whifflings and whuffings of breath, he tried to tell her how dreadful it all was, until the experience faded from his shallow memory and, curled together in a tight ball, they both slept, oblivious to what was happening in the frightening outer world.

He would not be disturbed again until he tried to leave the burrow. Then he would know exasperation. A dead man, a great bulky nuisance, lay across the entrance, blocking the hole.

Above, high in air, the two ravens soared. Their bright, peering eyes had marked this spot and their intelligent minds had already determined how they could profit by the incident. There was nothing better than soft hair to line the nest of twigs they were planning.

Now the material would be near the place where they meant to build and soon it would be easy to pluck.

A scout from Red City had already investigated the unexpected and welcome gift which had so suddenly come to his metropolis. He made his report to headquarters. The Central Intelligence of the Formicary discarded the plan of attack which had been devised to overcome the City of the Blacks. Those tactics could wait until another time.

There would be food enough for the winter, without the trouble of making war.

So, while the brain which might have hastened the Age of Steam, had the body of Antimon been permitted to function, now began its steady process of dissolution, these fortunate ones rejoiced.

In the larger view, which is never fully revealed, some little good thus came out of the battle after all.

## THE SEA OF GRASS

It remained now to cast the reckoning, salvage what could be recovered, and leave this dismal scene. Following their debacle, the Parthians had taken a savage vengeance upon those wounded who had fallen helpless on the plain. It had been a cruel and merciless day. Wherever the legionaries sought for missing comrades they found only the dead.

There was one exception. The hospital wagons which had gone upstream with the convoy were missing. Manlius wondered if these had been captured, if the drivers had somehow withdrawn the wounded to a place of safety, or if the Parthians had granted these mercy.

Scouts found a few horses and were sent out to search. They reported wheel tracks leading back toward the mountains, soon lost on hard ground and not to be followed far.

Lilia wondered what had become of her friend Titus, who had lain helpless in the delirium of fever. Surely the Parthians would grant mercy to a painter, who could never again bear arms against them.

Manlius had no time to speculate upon the fate of individuals.

Even now, the Chief Surena's levies must be pressing hard toward this very place. Possibly, at the moment, they had met the defeated army of Pacorus, turned it, and were coming in the hope of overtaking the remainder of the legion.

The work went on. Not much was left to salvage, but even so there was no time for burials. On the edges of the semicircle of wagons, behind which Matho and his Spaniards had fought and died, a few vehicles remained untouched. Skins of water and wine, food, some ammunition—a few mules that stood patiently in the traces beside their dead teammates, unable to move

against those dragging weights. Nothing more except everywhere the fallen.

Covered by their cloaks like scarlet shrouds, the men of the Sixth Ala lay surrounded by the scaled dead of Parthia. All that could be done for them by the men who had so little time for formalities of honor was to commit these bodies to the local river god. They watched the sad procession drift away toward the Caspian Sea—the flamboyant mantles floating wide in last bravado as each passed out of sight.

A legionary looked up from his task and said, in musing wonder, "Do you notice? Hardly any blood shows on these cloaks."

His mate grunted. "Didn't you know? That is why the cavalry wore that color. The enemy could never tell if they were wounded."

"And I always thought it was just for show."

The men at the lower ford did not pause in their work to watch the bodies come bobbing by. They did not look at faces, being too long inured to death. Even Lilia had no time to dwell upon her own personal misery. She was far too busily occupied with the tending of the wounded who had managed to reach safety but now needed attention.

The reek of seared flesh hung heavy in the tattered tent which had once been used for the officers' mess. The pile of limbs grew in the buckets; there was no juice of poppy to create a narcotic wine; no time for mercy or sympathy.

There was only the mallet for anodyne. Only the swiftness of the surgeon's skill with saw and knife to lessen the time of pain. Only the courage of patient, doctor, and nurse to sustain each in this sudden, triple union.

The labor went on, late into the night. Behind the fence of sharp stakes that still guarded the ford, the legion again took shape. After the roll had been called, Manlius found himself commanding a little less than half his former effective force. No unit had escaped unscathed.

Somehow, almost casually, a meal was prepared and the men fed. At last, beneath tent coverings which let in starlight through arrow rents, the camp slept under double guard.

It was not until the rising sun broke loose from the horizon, pointing out the direction in which they must travel, that an



alarm was raised. Silhouetted against the ruddy disc of morning rode a distant host of horsemen, moving implacably toward the camp.

Slings hung ready. Arrows were on the string. The four little scorpions were loaded, manned, and aimed at the advancing center.

The legion waited, squinting at the chaotic moving mass, surrounded by blinding brilliance which dazzled their eyes.

Suddenly from out its midst a single rider advanced at a swift trot. Above him, the folds of a white flag rippled wide in the morning breeze.

Manlius nodded to his aide. Tribune Mancinus swung into the saddle and rode out to meet the herald. There was a brief parley and soon both horsemen came galloping toward the spot where Manlius and Quintus waited. Tribune Mancinus was grinning in relief.

"Azatran Ganitrade of Bactria, Undersatrap of Her Supreme Majesty's Household Cavalry, with a message for Imperator Manlius Varro, Commander of the Thirteenth Legion," he announced, and assumed his proper position, behind and to the left of the group of officers.

There was a twinkle in the Bactrian's eye as he glanced over the force which stood ready for any eventuality. His face was composed and showed no inkling of his thoughts, but Manlius suspected that he missed nothing.

The two courteously recognized each other's rank with a slight measured bow. Inwardly, Manlius was irritated at the sudden promotion his aide had given him. It was common to be so hailed after a victory, but he felt that, under the circumstances, the resounding title was out of place. He was, however, more interested in the unusual prefix Undersatrap Ganitrade had used.

"You were introduced as 'Freeman,' sir. Is this customary in Her Majesty's forces?"

"Very recently, General. Only since our beloved Princess Enine returned to us and severed relationships with Parthia—upon her assumption of the throne. Bactria is no longer a Parthian province but an independent nation. We are all freemen."

He withdrew a scroll from the folds of his richly embroidered surcoat and proffered it. "From our Queen's own hand."

Manlius took it and broke the seals. He rapidly scanned the contents of the letter.

Dear One:

Wherever this may find you, be aware that there is my heart also. It goes with you always, until, if the gods of both our peoples be kind, our souls shall meet again and be united forever.

When I think that it might have been my doom never to have known happiness—to have shuddered in the arms of hated Co-tarzes—to have riveted the chains of slavery tighter upon my beloved country—my heart and my spirit faint within me.

Know that your valor and integrity have brought me courage to face the future and bring independence to my people. We shall, while I live, never be vassals to Parthia or seek alliance to any of that Empire's kings.

If you could now sit beside me, you would honor my throne and myself, but I know that this can never be, my lord and only love.

The brief hours we had together are today the brightest and most cherished jewels in my crown.

Farewell, from your Enine

Manlius' fingers trembled. He rolled and tied the scroll and placed it inside his tunic. He did not trust his voice for some moments.

He cleared his throat gruffly and managed, "Pray convey my deepest respects to your honored lady Queen and inform her that the Thirteenth Legion, Emperor's Own, bears her in the highest regard; that men and officers of all ranks consider her above all others most suitable for her present exalted position; that if Jupiter had permitted a more lasting alliance between us, then no other such desirable and intimate relationship would have been more gratifying to myself personally.

"It is the fortunes of war that have rendered such an event impossible and those alone."

Manlius wondered if the Undersatrap Ganitrando was better informed than he should be of the private affairs of his Queen.

Would he perceive the double meaning in the words, which Manlius was certain would not be overlooked by Enine? He studied the Bactrian's face covertly. Apparently not.

Ganitrando bowed again.

"I am instructed to say that, in view of the precarious situation in which Bactria finds itself, since the murder of Vardanes

and his family by Gotarzes, the nation cannot take sides in the present quarrel. It must preserve its neutrality. Neither am I commissioned to offer material aid, in so far as a military entanglement is concerned.

"Within these narrow limits, is there anything I can offer? Either for yourself or for your command?"

"We are regretfully hampered by many seriously wounded, who will be unable to resume their duties for a long time, if ever. Could you permit them sanctuary within your borders?"

"It shall be done. Later, we will arrange safe conduct for them back to Rome or, if they wish to remain with us, I am certain they will be allowed citizenship. And?"

Manlius hesitated. "If you have any medical supplies which you can spare—beyond your own needs?"

"They shall be delivered at once." Ganitrando waited and as Manlius made no reply he said in a confidential voice:

"I am instructed to say, unofficially, of course, that for three days' journey, maintaining no communication between our forces and keeping a discreet distance, I have secret orders to march along our own borders to see that your command does not attempt to enter Bactria.

"Should the legion travel only eastward, away from my country, my duty is to follow, ascertain your direction to be permanent, and not to interfere with it.

"It is my earnest conviction that your departure should not be delayed. Patrols of our falconers have intercepted a number of pigeons meant for Ctesiphon.

"In short, Imperator, I trust that you will understand that this action will effectively guard your back against pursuit."

Manlius found it difficult to speak. He took the Undersatrap's hand and pressed it. It was one of his few impulsive gestures.

True to their leader's word, the riders veered away at sunset on the third day of march. The following dawn, they were nowhere within view.

Ahead, far as the eye could see, from where the sentinels stood to scan the eastern horizon, there stretched an illimitable plain. It was dim with haze, unrelieved by any elevation, unmarked by building or monument. It was level and green.

Upon it, distant animals grazed, too far to distinguish numbers or species. They were dark insects slowly crawling across a verdurous carpet.

Dappled by drifting cloud shadows, this broad expanse rippled and shook as the migrant winds sent waves scudding across it, mile upon uneasy mile.

Eitel could not see enough of it. His heart leaped within his breast with joy. The air, pungent with odors his father had described, rich with oxygen, filled his enormous chest and exhilarated his soul. This was his native land. Never seen, always longed for, so familiar to his mind. He was coming home.

It was the land known, first to the Persians, then to all the folk of Central Asia, as the Sea of Grass.

Shoulder high to a horse, in many places taller than the heads of marching men, wherever the ground was moist the grass formed an impediment which dwarfed man by its immensity. A treasure to the barbaric nations which fringed its perimeter and a road to conquest, it was still held by the wandering nomad hordes which pastured their horse herds there.

The Sacae had fought for this land against those who would tame and colonize it. The Greeks described its inhabitants with horror, naming them scalp-hunting cannibals and calling their country Scythia. Out of it had stormed the Parni, the Sacae's cousins, the first Parthians, to slash deeply southward into the soft, flowered land of Iran. Later the Huns would increase their power here. Already their vanguard was moving westward. year by year.

In another age, the Tatars and the Mongols would move across it with sword and fire, to find here a bridge from Asia into Europe. Wherever grass grows, cavalry horses can feed and wagons roll.

All had guarded, and jealously would guard, its borders against any invader. Into this seemingly deserted but many-peopled land which we know as the Russian steppes, setting their course by their only landmarks—the rising sun and the bright constellations—the legion grimly plunged.

The smoke drove east. The Fates looked down.

V

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CHINA



## JAXIKARTA AGAIN

For Lilia, there was little difference in the days. They were filled with incident, there was life, sound, and movement, but there was no excitement, no happiness, no interest, no looking forward to any new thing. The thought of the coming child gave her no joy.

Sometimes the ache in her heart became dull. It always returned. It never disappeared. When she lay in her tent alone, for now she had one to herself, it seemed that time stopped. There was no future, no present. She lived in a past which could not be recalled.

Lilia was now permanently assigned to the hospital. Each night she made a tour of duty, for there were still walking wounded who were recovering on the march and some borderline cases who rode. These should have gone with the Bactrians but had refused. She spent much time there.

Her feeling of loss was somewhat assuaged by these regular visits. While she cared for the men whom she knew so well, while she shared their confidences, eased their pain, and prayed for their recovery, her own trouble seemed smaller.

When Eitel was not occupied elsewhere he always walked with her on her rounds. She came to depend upon his presence as she would have upon a strong staff for support. He was a silent man and they seldom spoke together, but it was good to have him near. When he was not able to come, her loneliness was much greater.

One night, as she quitted her tent to go to the tending of the sick, she caught a movement along the short tent street. She did not turn her head. She watched sidelong and saw that she was being followed by a man who slunk along behind the tents she was passing.

He did not come close. He remained a short distance behind, ran crouching across the open spaces, and waited until she had gone farther before he repeated the action. He did not enter the hospital or offer any word of recognition to call attention to himself.

When she left she did not see him, but Lilia felt that he was there, watching, waiting to follow. She was not afraid, only curious as to the mystery of his actions. As she entered her own tent she quickly turned and caught a glimpse of his sly, stealthily retreating figure darting out of sight.

All through the next day she wondered about this. Although she had several opportunities to speak to Eitel, she did not mention the strange occurrence to him or feel any trepidation concerning the oncoming night.

She left at the usual time and found that she was again being followed. She walked on a few slow steps, then suddenly turned aside between the tents, ran back, and confronted the man face to face.

She was startled to find that it was her old acquaintance, Pandarus, who had been thrown out and beaten up because of a mistake in judging her status among her tent companions. So long ago!

So much had happened. Galba, the slow-spoken Farmer, missing in action. Vorco, her carefree prisoner, dead, fighting for his hereditary enemy, Rome. Antimon, the amusing toymaker and inventor, disappeared. Tibullus . . . She put the thought of him away.

This man, now. How much the sight of him brought back! She demanded sternly, "Why do you follow me, Pandarus?"

His eyes fell before her wrathful look. His voice faltered.

"I did not want you to know. I thought you would be angry with me, if you knew."

"What is it that you want? Would you like to try to sell me to an officer again?"

Pandarus looked at her with such a woeful, struck expression that her anger softened. He did not answer. Lilia came closer and put her hand on his shoulder. It gave them both a feeling of comfort which words could not express. Her tone became kind.

"I'm sorry. I see that I was wrong. Tell me."



It seemed hard for him to speak. Finally he blurted, "I was afraid you would come to some harm. You are so often alone."

Lilia laughed. The sound seemed to startle him. He looked at her with the eyes of a patient dog. Her returning glance was derisive.

"You thought someone might hurt me? Everybody is my friend and I am theirs. I am safe anywhere in camp. Go back to your tent, Pandarus. I am in no danger."

He did not look at her or move. He sought the ground at her feet and stood still. He muttered, "You are so thin and small. You always look as though you want to cry, but you never do."

She reached for his hand. A lump caught in her throat. He flinched at the quick movement and drew away, as though he expected a rebuff.

Her voice was a tiny thing. "Have you been following me like this every night? Even when Eitel was with me?"

Pandarus did not answer. His nod was barely perceptible.

"Would it please you to walk with me on my rounds?" This time his face lit up as he lifted his head.

"Come then."

She started. Pandarus followed uncertainly, a few steps behind.

"With me, legionary. Beside me. I am proud to have your company."

So they went on together though the quiet camp.

On the eleventh day of the sixth month of the year, and at the last hour before the closing of the gates of Jaxikarta, the man in the red Phrygian hat was arrested by a pair of alert sentries as he sought to enter the city.

He made no effort to resist. He stood peacefully and let his short-sword hang by his side. It was this weapon which had given him away. When the captain of the watch drew it for inspection, he knew at once that the stranger was a Roman soldier.

The captain paused and considered. This was a situation which must be handled by a higher authority than himself. He doubted if Dyzypty Soados, his ranking officer and local magistrate, was the man to consult.

Yet to turn over his prisoner to the mercies of the actual ruler

of the city, the high priest of Ahriman, went against his natural inclinations. Fighting men, as was the captain, of many years' experience in honorable warfare, lived by a common code. It did not include treachery or, except in the most extreme cases, torture. This code went beyond the bounds of nationality.

It was on the tip of his tongue to order the man lectured, released, and ejected from the city when the decision was taken from him.

One of the hated Men of the Night had come up to investigate on noiseless feet. By Angra-Mainyu! These creepers are everywhere!

"Disarm the Roman, Captain. Escort him to the temple without delay."

The voice of the black-robed intruder, muffled by his concealing conical hood, was hollow and inhuman. The captain felt a slight horripilation of the skin. It was as though a huge bat had spoken.

As the prisoner passed through the rising incline of the long streets, he saw all about him the signs of destruction being repaired. There was new tiling and thatch on many of the houses, the walls of which were blackened by fire.

He was no novice in street fighting. He knew, by seeing smoother sections of paving, that here cobblestones had been torn out for barricades and been newly replaced. There were piles of rubble edging vacant lots where houses had once been, although grass grew there and the catastrophe, whatever it was, must have been months ago.

Yet there was no housing shortage, for he saw new buildings under construction, while there were many which looked whole but had no smoke issuing or lights within, although it was time for the evening meal.

He suspected that there was a lack of people to fill these houses and a lack of hands to carry on necessary work. He permitted himself a tight little smile. If war had done this to the city, he thought he knew who had been involved—if not the reason why.

Inside the Temple of Ahriman the prisoner, firmly held by the arms, was hustled through winding corridors and brought into a large audience room, well lighted by torches in wall brackets. In

addition, a broad, shallow basin held bright dancing flames which leaped without smoke.

Directly behind this loomed a gigantic figure in black stone, seated with hairy elbows resting on its knees, clawed toes gripping the pedestal base as though it were about to spring forward.

Between the legs a throne of polished ebony was situated. On it sat another man in black silk robes embroidered with flames, in the very attitude of the devil god he served. Yellow gold winked and sparkled on his pointed hat, divided into twin peaks, like the piercing spikes of the oryx.

The man in the red Phrygian hat could not see his face, for it was hooded, but he felt it must be similar to that of Ahriman, who looked down upon him with a cynical grin, as though the image held enough sentience to despise men, whether captor or captive.

The expression changed. It seemed to writhe and snarl in anticipation, as the flickering lights and shadows alternated across the thin lips, jutting planes of cheekbones, and polished horns thrusting out from snaky locks of carven hair.

A voice boomed in the stillness of the chamber. The prisoner started, in spite of his iron self-control. For an instant he was unsure whether it was the man he faced or the demoniac image which demanded:

"Are you a madman, Roman, or only a fool—that you return alone to Jaxikarta?"

"I have never been here before. I have come far, seeking friends. Men, whom I asked upon the road, gave me directions which have guided me to this city."

"If that were true, then those who gave you this information were no more friends of yours than those to whom we gave shelter were friends of ours. But we know it is not true. Admit that you are a liar, an enemy, and a spy!"

"I do not understand. I seek only the Thirteenth Legion. I am told that it passed this way. I wish to join it. I desire only to travel in peace. As for spying, I see nothing here that would be of any interest to my government when I return to Rome."

"You shall neither follow nor return, for it is plain that the truth is not in you. Yet, lest you consider Parthians inhospitable

to foreign travelers, we shall shelter you at our expense, until you are ready to tell us, of your own free will, what I wish to know.

"How many come behind you into Parthia? By whom are they sent? What do they hope to do here, and when will they arrive?"

"We will wine you and dine you, until out of gratitude you will gladly speak with freedom and at length. You will joy in speaking.

"Then, perhaps, if we are satisfied with what you have told us, we will permit you to resume your travels. Possibly you may remain here. The decision shall be yours."

The hollow voice struck out into the chamber like the snap of a whip. "Executioner!"

One of the silent black-robed figures who stood against the walls came forward and bowed. He was in no way distinguishable from any of the others, except that their hands were concealed in their long sleeves, while in his he bore a short piece of cord with a wooden handle on either end.

He formed a loop and slipped it around the prisoner's neck to form a garrote. He twisted the cord firmly taut, but not so tight as to shut off breath. He looked questioningly at the high priest.

"The Boat."

The executioner nodded. A tug on the cord indicated to the Roman that he must follow, and he was led away as on a leash.

The pair, thus linked, came to the first steps of winding stairs which spiraled up and up, past darkened floors, flight after flight, until they reached the high, flat roof of the temple.

On all the journey, resistance had been useless, for they were preceded and followed by two pairs of guards, so close that the group moved as a tight unit. As they came out under the stars the guards took the added precaution of seizing their prisoner tightly by the arms, while the strangling cord was removed.

They unbound his hands and ripped off his clothes, leaving him naked to the night air. He was hustled across the roof toward a construction of timbers, where a heavy pulley block hung, supporting a stout rope. This, by means of a dogged-down winch, held in air an inverted stone trough like the cover of a sarcophagus.

It was severely plain, with no ornamentation other than five

semicircles cut in either end and at each side. A similar container lay beneath this pendant lid. It was unlined stone. It was discolored and it stank.

"Your couch," said the executioner. "Sleep well. You look weary."

The four guards lifted the helpless Roman. His feet were swept out from under him and he had no time to struggle before he was laid in the trough and held down firmly, with his hands, feet, and head lying in the niches corresponding to those above.

The executioner released the pawl on the cogwheel of the winch. He lowered the lid until it fitted to the rim of the one below, being exactly equal and neither broader nor longer than the other.

Now hands and feet and head protruded, uncovered, from the torture device, so simple and so fiendish in design. The man within could neither turn nor move nor withdraw his hands. He lay with his face to the sky, looking upward, where the sun would later strike full upon him.

He lay and clenched his teeth against the food that he was offered. It was spicy and smelled delicious. He was hungry but would not eat. He needed no explanation of what was to come.

What he ate and drank must eventually be evacuated, to attract insects which would breed within the boat to devour him. Flies, wasps, all manner of stinging, carrion-eating tormentors would plague him, unless he could somehow make his peace with his cruel captors or slow death were to release him.

His mouth was roughly pried open and the food stuffed in it. He must swallow or choke. The spices burned. He accepted the wine reluctantly but with relief. More food, until he felt sickened by the surfeit. The wine was thick and sweet. It was sticky on his neck and cheeks where it had been spilled. He felt it drying there. His lips were lacerated and swollen when they had finished feeding him.

When the executioner left, last of the group to go, he stood over the captive for a moment, then bent and touched him almost fondly. His voice seemed kind and sympathetic.

"I do this without malice. Actually I have an affection for you. I like you well.

"Without such as you, I would have no respected office, no

employment, no money, and my lord would have no use for me. You are my dear friend.”

It was not until after he had followed the others that the Roman realized that, while the black-robed man patted and stroked, he had actually been anointing face and hair with honey.

## “MAKE WAY FOR THE WIND!”

His hat had been removed. Now that the sun had risen, he wished for its protection. There was nothing under his head to support its weight and relieve the strain upon his neck. When it sagged back, he could not reach the flatness of the roof. When he raised it, he saw the edge of the sun upon an upside-down horizon, enormously huge and red, already hot. It lifted higher, shrank in size, gained in heat as the distance increased and the brilliance became dazzling.

The light alone was painful to his eyes and the day had only begun. A cool wind blew across his face. Later it, too, would be scorching, made torrid by the expanse of heated roof over which it traveled.

He raised his head and looked straight up. There were no clouds in the sky. He held that position as long as he could. By and by it would not be any comfort to him. The sun would be directly overhead and he must stare into it.

He wondered if blindness or death would come first. As the boat was laid on a line running east and west, he could expect no artificial shade for relief until the sun sank below the edge of the upper lid and was hidden by it. He did not believe that by that time he would much care.

The flaming orb continued to rise. His neck sagged back. Involuntarily his mouth opened. This slackened slightly the almost unbearable tension on his neck muscles, but soon the pain returned.

He moved his head, rocking it from side to side, and gritted his teeth. He would give no one the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. The sun had now risen by the full width of its diameter and was smaller. He could not look at it. It was an incandescent hole in the sky, burning its way across the heavens.

He became aware that he was not alone. The executioner had returned, with another hooded figure who carried a steaming kettle and a jug. He was to be fed again.

Afterward, he was almost unconscious, almost stupefied by the rich food which he had been compelled to swallow. The men had stood carefully to one side, so that no shadow could fall upon his burning face.

When they had finished with the spooning, the executioner said pleasantly, "You have enjoyed the same viands upon which my lord has breakfasted. Shall I express to him your thanks? No other in the temple eats as well as do you two friends."

The prisoner did not reply. His head hung limply down. A sticky sweat ran down his face and dripped off the ends of his hair. He heard a buzzing sound in his ears as they waited for his answer.

Finally they went away, laughing. The buzzing continued and grew in intensity. The insects had found him and they remained.

Inside the boat, the prisoner felt the questing itch of many small feet, the irritation of stings and bites, as the smell of his sweat and that of other unfortunates before him drew these little explorers into the crannies of the dark interior.

The sun rose inexorably into the zenith, like a white-hot brand held by a malevolent god, to sear a hated earth. Once the shadow of an upright or a crossbeam lay across his blistered skin.

He tried to turn his head to keep his face within the shadow. The sun was relentless. It moved on and the mercy of the scant shade moved with it.

At midday he was again faced with the enforcement of another feeding. Afterward, although he had fought against acceding to the natural processes of the body, it was impossible to do so any longer.

There were more flies which came, then. Repulsive fat-bodied bluebottles which crawled and swarmed within his vision and disappeared. He knew where they had gone, and why. They would lay eggs which would hatch into maggots, later to devour him.

He lay, unable to think coherently, no longer certain of what he saw or heard. He was almost in delirium—and this was only



the first day. Unless he could somehow mollify his captors, or escape, there would be many more, for this was a slow, prolonged death, although those who suffered it were not long conscious that they were dying.

Once, as the sun sank, he thought he heard distantly a half-smothered sobbing. It sounded like a female voice. He tried to see who might be watching, if someone was really there, but his eyelids were stuck together, inflamed and swollen. He could not open them.

If anyone had gazed upon him with pity, that person was frightened away by the arrival of the executioner and his henchman. This time the sufferer did not try to resist. He let them do as they would. Only his iron determination to live, to somehow resume the task he had set himself, kept him from hoping that he would be suffocated by their efforts.

It seemed that they got little pleasure from this last visit. They did not stay as long or taunt him as before. The executioner said, somewhat sardonically, “Saddest of all moments is the last one before parting.”

He laid a green branch upon the lid, as one does in memory of the dead. Then he went away.

At last the kindness of shadow fell upon the prisoner’s face. Although he could not see it, and had no desire to watch its descent, he knew the terrible sun was sinking.

Slowly the red pain in his aching eyes faded into a purple darkness. The heat went out of the wind as the roof cooled with the absence of the sun. The torture boat itself retained its oven-like temperature. The stone was thick and the air inside was warmed also by his own feverish and miserably irritated body.

He was hardly conscious of any difference in his discomfort because of the night, but he was thankful and startled when, like a benison from heaven, a sprinkle of cool drops fell upon his swollen cheeks and scorched forehead.

He opened his mouth and let the water trickle upon his tongue. It was the first that he had enjoyed in over twenty-four hours. This was not rain. It entered his mouth in a small careful stream, not enough to choke him, not in any amount sufficient to bring distress. It was merely a tiny, blessed gift which was like an infusion of life and strength.

He heard little whispers of wordless sympathy and felt a soft wet pad sponging his face. It soaked away the hardened sludge which cemented his eyelids together.

Gradually his misery became less acute. His voice came out in a hoarse croak. "Who are you?" He had little control over its strength and the loudness startled his benefactor. The hand on his forehead twitched and immediately was laid on his lips. He breathed in a light fragrance and knew that he was being tended by a woman.

In gratitude, he kissed the merciful fingers. He let his head fall back and found it pillowed on a soft thigh. With a great effort he opened his eyes, only to see a formless shadow bending over him. She too was hooded, like all the others he had seen in the temple.

He lowered his tone. Now it was suspicious. "Why should a Parthian offer this kindness to a Roman?"

The answer was in the very lightest of whispers. It could not have been heard a foot away. "I am a Hellene. Be very quiet. I have come to save you."

There was something strange about her voice. It was as though she spoke with much effort, through vocal cords which had been rendered permanently hoarse. She rose. His head, no longer supported, drooped. Hope gave him strength to raise it a little. He could see her, a shadow among shadows, laboring at the handle of the winch.

A pawl clinked against the ratchet. The sound seemed very loud in the stillness which brooded over the flat temple roof.

All motion ceased. The shadows seemed to cluster about to listen. After a long time there was another tiny tinkle, much fainter. He knew that somehow this mysterious friend was managing to turn the handle and, at the same time, to finger the pawl almost noiselessly down into its slot. The effort must be almost superhuman, considering the weight of the stone lid.

It moved a hairsbreadth. It lifted away from the lower trough. It swung free. It swayed. Summoning up all his strength, at the cost of a little skin, he pulled his right hand through the hole where it had been gripped.

Now he could turn the upper part of his body on its side. His

shoulder struck against the lid as the wheel turned another notch. He lifted. The other hand came loose.

He lay back in the trough, put both hands against the lid, and took the weight upon himself. He was surprised and pleased to find that he still had so much strength.

He heard the pawl clink rapidly, one, two, and three, as the wheel turned with unexpected ease. He heard a little, frightened gasp from the woman. She stopped pushing on the handle of the winch. To listen—or to flee in terror?

He had no intention of waiting to learn which it might be. There was a half inch of space between the two sections of the boat. He swung the lid at right angles to the lower. It turned freely, suspended by its cable. The space thus created was small, but it was enough. He turned face down and, smeared with his own filth, gasping for breath, he slid over the slippery edge of his prison to lie exhausted upon the still warm surface of the roof.

Then she was at him like a ministering angel, with cloths and water, laving his sore body, cleansing him, oblivious of his condition. In his nostrils, ever stronger as the dirt was washed away, was her fragrance. He knew he would never forget the essence of that perfume, should he die and be reborn again.

When he was clean and dry she helped him dizzily to rise. His weakness passed in moments. Now his will strengthened. He felt the desire for life and vengeance surging through his veins.

Someone would pay in heaping measure for the bitterness of this day.

She led him, motioning for silence, down a little flight of steps and closed the door of a small, dark room behind them. It was softly perfumed and he knew it must be hers. A sliding panel let the starlight in.

There was no other illumination, but it was enough for him to see that his weapons and his sack were on the floor, where she had dragged them—from what secret, dangerous place below?

He began to realize how much she had dared for him, in fear, and obviously in great danger to herself. He took a step toward her, rather than first to his belongings. He must see her face. Must know whom to thank.

She guessed his purpose, clenched her veil tighter about her

throat. Only her eyes reflected the gleam of stars as she thrust a clean tunic at him, as much to ward him away as to proffer the garment. Her hand lay against his bare chest. It was warm and friendly and they were alone.

The action created no passion in him. He placed his own calloused hand over her small one, slid it down across his breast, and let his heartbeat tell her his thanks for a brief moment.

He dressed in the gloom. Tunic, his own leggings and stout boots, his scarred armor from out of the sack he had carried so many weary miles and used often on the road—when it had been necessary to cut his way across Asia.

He girded on his heavy leather belt—short-sword at his right hip, dagger hanging loose and easy at his left. He made a tight little bundle of his red hat, his sack and small things, slinging this on his back. He slipped a knobbed cestus over the knuckles of his left hand, making of that arm a diresome maul—then, feeling ready to test his strength against any who stood in his way, he said, "Now I am my own man once more. Take or lead me where you will."

She made no immediate move to quit the room or to come near him.

"When I told you that I was a Hellene, I meant you to understand that, although these upstart barbarians have taken this land which the mighty Alexander made ours, we still have our heritage and our pride. There are not many of us left, but we have not been crushed.

"You have seen today that Romans can also be made into slaves.

"I think it is time for these Parthians to learn that neither Greeks nor Romans need remain so. Will you help me show them what I mean?"

"I owe you my life. I will do whatever you ask."

"Then sit here beside me and listen. I know why you are here and who you are following. There was a boy"—her voice faltered and into it came a note of tenderness which rendered it soft and beautiful—"a Roman boy of steadfast bravery and honor, who taught me what love could be. He thought himself a weakling and a coward without faith, but I knew him differently.

"He knew me too, for what I was, and he did not care. He

never spoke of it to me, not even when he left me forever to do his duty to his comrades. He knew that in warning them of their danger here he was to lose his life. He never came back to me.”

Her voice broke. There was a moment of stillness. She continued. “The secret police took me to the high priest for questioning. Oh, Zeus! I was all alone. I had no friends. There was no one to help me.

“They suspected it was I who had told someone that the legion, guests here, were to be treacherously massacred. They tried to make me confess.

“I did not care for my life then. I do not care now. I thought he might be captive and I could save him from torture if I did not speak. I know now that it was all for nothing.

“He was dead and I am desolate.”

She did not seem to notice when she was taken into arms which held her firmly close. Now it was her turn to feel soothing hands stroking her hair. She resisted only when he gently tried to raise her veil to see her face. He did not persist when she held it close.

“I had nothing they could take away from me—no money, no jewels, no treasure—nothing but a little beauty, so they took that. The high priest gave me into the hands of the executioner and they laughed. I knew it was Ananke—my destiny—and I must withstand, for the honor of Magna Graecia and the love of my heroic strategos.

“There were knives and there was fire. It was then that I lost my voice from screaming and I was glad, because I could tell them nothing. At last, when all else failed, there were the ants—”

She shuddered in his enclosing arms.

“Would you believe it is possible to sleep while the ants are so busy? They say I did. I do not know. I only know that I told them nothing and in the end—they stopped. My face—my lips—when I was recovered, they made me a temple girl, where beauty does not matter.

“The chambers are always darkened. It is not necessary that a temple girl be pretty—only accomplished.”

A warm tear fell against his bare forearm in the dark. “I broke my mirrors long ago. Well I know death to be more honorable, but one clings to life. At first there is the feeling that nothing so

terrible can endure, that the horror of existence cannot be borne. Then one has the hope of rescue, however frail, and the long waiting begins and the despair lessens. Finally the knowledge comes that all hope is vain and one lives without hope, but not without purpose.

"There is the persisting, burning, never ending hate and the crying without tears in the night and the planning for vengeance. It is for that vengeance that I have lived and waited."

"I promise you that you have not waited in vain. This is the night of your vengeance, if you want it so. Lead me to the chambers of the high priest and show me how I can pay my debt to you and to these men of Parthia."

"Then rise and follow me."

She cautiously opened the door. The two stepped out upon the stair which led downward in tight spirals. This was not the same way his captors had taken to reach the roof. He suspected that the route led between the thick walls of the temple, probably for the secret use of the priests, for purposes of private vices not widely known.

After several dark levels, his guide slid aside a panel in the wall. They looked out into an enormous chamber, vision aided only by the dim light which seeped in from a far corridor where distant cressets burned. There were no torches here nor any brackets for them. It was the room wherein lay the naphtha reservoir, again refilled from the jars of many camel caravans, for the use of the never dying flame which burned to the glory of Ahri-man in the audience room directly above and the beacon on the high tower.

At first the couple thought the chamber to be empty. Then, near the doorway, a dark bulk separated itself and became the outline of a human being. He stood with folded arms, leaning as though in pensive thought against the wall.

The girl felt a breath against her ear. It stirred her concealing veil and the whisper was frighteningly chill: "Our friend the executioner. There stands a man who has made his peace with the world. I know him by his size."

All at once she was alone. She heard no sound and marveled that a man so large and heavy could move like a panther across a

stone floor in hobnailed army boots. Yet, if nothing came to her ears, something had warned the hunter's quarry.

The executioner straightened, listening. Too late. Out of the dark chamber, his nemesis rushed upon him, dodging, as he sprang, the flashing chains, the jagged lumps of iron which found no target of flesh.

“This I give you, out of *my* deep affection and friendship,” he gritted. The cestus struck high on the executioner's cheekbone and raked down. The black-robed man went down without a sound, his face crushed in. He looked as though he had been clawed by a tiger.

Instantly the girl ran across the room. “Quickly! He is not a guard. He should not be here. A guard must be close. Something is wrong. We may not have much time. Come with me.”

She tugged him back to the immense stone reservoir, with its thousands of gallons of inflammable fluid. Together they hurried around its circle, sliding open the manhole covers. Behind them, opened spigots allowed the splashing naphtha to pour out, forming rivulets which ran across the floor and disappeared into drains below.

When all was done, the girl pushed her helper toward a far door.

“Go now. Here we separate. This leads out on the street. I think that you will not be noticed when you leave the city. There will be something else for the sentinels to see.”

“You must come with me. I will not go without you.” He took her in his arms and, in spite of her resistance, lifted her veil.

He looked on her face in the dimness. His voice was steadier than he would have believed he could make it. “You are very beautiful,” he lied. “I wish the one you loved so dearly could have been me.” His lips came tight against the seared scars of her cheek, the only spot where a kiss could be placed upon soft flesh.

She lay passive for a few seconds, then laid her cheek against his. “My name is Lyssa, soldier. Keep my memory alive among the Shades by thinking of me. Now go. You have seen why I shall remain. Go and go quickly. Run, for soon the very air will burn.”

She pushed him away then, out the door, and barred it behind

him. She ran ankle deep through the broad pool of naphtha which filled the room, covering all the floor. Behind her, the disturbed naphtha filled the air with a fog of rising fumes.

A cry of alarm shocked her as she passed out into the open corridor. Coming down from the other direction, toward the chamber, were three Men of the Night. They ran silently on padded feet.

The high priest, made known to her by the golden, twisted horns on his high cap! Behind him, two powerful guards.

Lyssa seized a torch from its bracket and dashed back toward them as they reached the entrance and peered in. The guards spun about to make her captive, thinking she was running into their widespread arms.

The high priest felt a chilling of his blood as she sprang at them like an inspired maenad. He did not recognize her as anyone he had ever seen before, with wild hair streaming out behind in company with the flaring torch, mouth wide open, emitting a daunting shriek.

He quailed at her fierce cry. "Evoel!" She leapt between them. He did not recognize it as the terrible scream of the ancient Greek paean, but the atavistic horror of that war yell froze him in his tracks.

When Lyssa swung the torch to a snapping circle of sparks and with a shout of "Aera! Aera! Make way for the wind!" flung it into the vapor-filled chamber, he moved at last with the idea of flight.

By that time it was far too late.

The escaping prisoner, barred from re-entry to the temple, threw his weight once against the door. To leave his rescuer inside, at the mercy of those who had so cruelly mistreated her, even though she willed it so, seemed a shameful act. The door did not yield.

Because there was nothing else to do, he obeyed her command and ran. He had a vague intention of finding another way in. To do so meant descending a terrace slope which led to the north portico and coming back by the main entrance, for the temple was built foursquare.

As he hurried down this long ramp he heard a purling ripple



beside him. It sounded like a little mountain brook, coursing over pebbles. Before this night, he had never seen or smelled naphtha. He had no idea of what it could do, but he knew from Lyssa's attitude toward it that it was dangerous and to be avoided.

He identified the liquid now. Strong odors surrounded him. It was the substance which he and the girl had released into the drains. He felt fear.

He ran down the center of the dark street, keeping well away from the sides where the volatile contents of the reservoir were flowing down the hill upon which the temple was built. Dammed by leaves or garbage in the gutters, the naphtha sluiced in all directions over the narrow walks, across the cobbles, and even across doorsills and thresholds, entering houses silently in the night.

He felt a tremendous vibration in the ground. It was like the shock of a giant hammer. The clouds were illuminated from beneath by a glare of ruddy light and he was deafened by a stunning detonation, which he would have been unable to find words to describe.

He was not knocked off his feet, though he reeled at the concussion. Some tiles rattled and slid to shatter on the stones. A chimney fell. He heard a startled outcry of awakened people inside the dwellings he passed. He continued to run down the hill, for to return to the temple to rescue Lyssa was now pointless.

Looking over his shoulder, he had seen the temple roof lift like a cap, set and balanced upon a tower of flame. It crumbled apart in mid-air and fell back inside the glaring inferno which was erupting beneath it.

Away from this blazing volcano, picking out the outlines of the hill and marking the layout of the city streets, the gutters brimmed with liquid fire. It quickly spread into houses, shops, and piles of uncleared rubble, to smoke and reek and burn.

As though in collusion with the terrible destructive element, the west wind was rising to be his ally and to avenge the death of the one who had called upon it for aid.

In a pillar of sparks and steaming black smoke, the roofs of the city burst into a rising, twisting, roaring fire storm, wherever

there was thatch. It sent down a glowing drift of incendiary flakes into sections of the city otherwise untouched.

He ran on, the rills keeping even pace with him, as though he led a squirming following of evil salamanders gleefully to destroy whatever was still intact. They did not diminish in size or speed, being replenished by the seemingly inexhaustible supply from the huge tank, still blazing in the now shapeless home of Ahriman, the devil god of fire.

Already the streets were crowding with refugees who, like himself, ran with only the thought of safety in mind. None made any effort to fight the holocaust. They surged toward the city gates in a frantic, screaming mass.

He saw sentinels, standing at their posts, buffeted from side to side but keeping their feet. No one saw or cared that he was a stranger. The city was awash with flame. The blazing sea surged in flat waves against and across the burning islands which once had been homes.

He ran with sword bare in his hand, cestus clenched ready for use, fury in his heart, the thought of Lyssa in his mind.

"Keep me alive in the Land of the Shades by remembering me," she had begged. While I live, that will I do, he vowed, and ran out, breathless and weeping, beyond the scattered, halting crowd who had reached safety before him on the plain.

He continued his rapid pace alone, leaving them behind to watch the destruction of their city. Jaxikarta, falling apart in crumbling ruin, its savage flames for the second time in half a year roaring toward the uncaring stars.

He doubted it would be rebuilt for many years. Turning his back upon it, he settled into a rapid trot toward the eastern horizon, flushing with dawn, across which and preceding him the Thirteenth Legion had made its way.

## QUINTUS RECEIVES A PROMOTION

As the days passed and the high line of mist in the sky disappeared, no longer marking the course of the Oxus, the clump of Roman boots resounded deeper and deeper into the seemingly endless plains of Scythia. The order of march continued unchanged.

Iron discipline still held the ranks firm. Now, in addition to each heavy pack, the legionaries carried water in every way possible—skins, canteens, jars, whatever had been salvaged from the wreck of battle on that silent field. There were no more water wagons. There were few mules or horses to haul them if there had been any.

Other shortages were discovered and substitutes found, concessions to necessity made. The latrines were stocked with soft grass—there were no more scraps of sponge soaked in vinegar to be had. The hospital had requisitioned all that remained, to burn them and use the ashes for poultices and bandage disinfectant.

The cooks worked hastily with the quick flame of twisted grass to heat their kettles. There was no more wood, except the irreplaceable stakes for the palisade, carried now six to the back of each man—the pitifully few baggage wagons had no room for these.

Food was rationed, medicines were low. Quintus nursed tenderly, vigilantly, his last leather bottle of wine.

Yet there was no variation of routine. Every night the camp came into being as usual, agger, ditch, watchful sentinels patrolling beneath the stars. Every morning it was broken at the usual time. The legion moved on at the will of its determined leader, unquestioning, indomitably persistent, its obdurate composite face resolutely turned in the same direction as his—east.

"You say Matho offered you command of the Sixth Ala in the expectation of being struck down? Why?"

Tribune Quintus hesitated before replying. He, Manlius, and Liu Mang were grouped together in the patched tent, which was headquarters, for an informal conclave.

The former quaestor did not like the way the conversation was trending. The camp was in a spot in the eastern road where the Silk Route forked. The further journey was being discussed.

Here the legion had a choice of continuing directly east to Serica, Liu Mang's Ch'in, or of turning southerly into India.

The second way would be long and arduous over the Roof of the World, but safer. It meant an eventual arrival at ports where Roman merchantmen called, at Taprobane; it meant an abandonment of a reckless, futile journey—an embarkation—home.

It meant also that the expedition had been given up as a useless effort. It would be admitting failure, but a grant of life for five cohorts of legionaries, almost three thousand men.

Eastward meant a plunging on into the unknown, using Liu Mang as the legion's guide.

Quintus saw ahead only catastrophe, but he answered truthfully:

"I think it was because I told him that I had served as a cavalry officer under Aelius Gallus in the Arabian campaign, twenty years ago. I was second in command then. Matho thought I still outranked any of his underofficers. It was not my own idea. I did not want the honor."

Manlius slapped his hand down on an opened scroll. There was not much left of his little library. "I have been studying the *Anabasis*. Xenophon may not have been more than a mediocre strategos, but he made a pertinent observation when he remarked that the art of war is that of maintaining freedom of movement.

"He understood well the value of cavalry and was quick to see the advantage of its use at Cunaxa. By mounting a few of his hoplites and using them as scouts for the mercenaries under his command, the Ten Thousand made themselves a way through wild mountains and wild peoples. They had to endure a thousand dangers and hardships, but they did what they had to do.

"We are faced with much the same situation, except that we

are traveling in the opposite direction. I believe we have an excellent guide in our friend and ally, Liu Mang, who is well acquainted with the ground we must cover."

Quintus breathed heavily. This did not sound like India and a sea voyage.

"We have twenty good horses available for service as mounts for a scouting troop," Manlius reviewed. "We have one experienced cavalryman, the trooper who was Matho's trumpeter, second class. I shall leave it to him to select such men as he thinks will make good troopers, subject of course to your final decision."

"Mine?" Quintus looked horrified. "Would you ask a staff officer to lead?"

"Yours. I expect no officer to lead his men where I will not first lead him. Were it possible I would take this position myself. You must be my other hands—my second pair of eyes.

"I confirm your promotion and give you Centurion Longinus as your second in command. He is a most able and trustworthy man. You should do well together.

"Troop Commander Quintus, let me congratulate you. The security of the legion could lie in no better hands."

Quintus violently shook his head. "You are taking advantage of our old friendship. Be careful, Manlius, it might end here. I do not want the responsibility."

"Be not so modest. You already have it. Nay, demur no more. I will hear no complaints. I do not want to listen to your thanks."

"It will be a long wait before you hear any," grumbled Quintus. He stormed out of the tent to look over his sudden and unwelcome acquisitions. Later he would fortify himself with the hoarded contents of his bottle. There could be no better time.

India! What a vain and empty dream!

Lilia was passing when Quintus hurried by without speaking. She was staring after him when the commander and Liu Mang came out of the tent, still talking. She liked the man from Ch'in. She had a taste for sweets and he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of candied ginger which he had dealt out generously in the past few weeks of travel.

Strolling on slowly, ahead of the two men, she caught something of their conversation. Liu Mang was saying:

"Now that the Sea of Reeds lies behind us, we shall soon find it necessary to avoid the hordes of the Hsiung-nu and the Huang-yang by crossing the Tien Shan Mountains. We will be in desert country, where there is little high grass, although there is game and wandering peoples.

"If we stay between the foothills and the Tarim River we will come to Lop Nor. This person has never seen with his own eyes the lake which lies there. It is said that nearby is the city of the Wu-Sun, white people with gray or blue eyes, and hair of different colors than black. It may be these that you seek."

"And beyond lies your own country?"

"Many *li*. A far travel through the Gobi. Mountains, deserts, all difficult, but none impassable. There are shallow streams and deep wells. Then one sees the Celestial Mountains which bound the land of Ch'in and the Great Wall which protects that land from the barbarians.

"Beyond all this lies this person's homeland—the Celestial Kingdom. One journey out of it, such as this one has been, is enough in the lifetime of any man."

They overtook and passed Lilia. She walked on toward the mess tent, digesting what she had overheard. There might not be much more than that for the evening meal, unless some game had been brought in. The men at point and flank were constantly watchful, but the noise of so many on the march frightened away most animals, out of arrow shot.

It appeared that there were months yet of travel. She was inured to hardship now and distance held no particular dread for her, but the long journey was becoming pointless.

She had learned to live for the day only. If there were a future, she cared little what it might bring. She smiled to herself as she neared the tent. Something smelled good. That was enough.

At last she had acquired the true legionary attitude. The camp must be her home, the men in it her family. There was no need to do her own thinking or make her own plans—her decisions were all subordinate to those of Commander Manlius, her father, her protector, her King.

Inside the tent there was gaiety. Many were already eating. Her glance swept the benches, but she did not want to sit with the officers tonight. She went to the line and took her place

among the men of the Tenth Cohort, although technically, because of her long service in the hospital, she outranked them all. Eitel was absent, probably on picket duty.

She held out her pannikin to the fat cook who had been her particular friend since she poulticed a boil on his neck. He dredged deep in the cauldron and brought up a scrap of unidentifiable gray meat. It was good soup, seasoned with wild onions picked up somewhere on the march, and lacked only salt—no one had salt now.

There was even a small biscuit apiece—the last of the flour? She was pretty sure it must be.

She found a place to sit in the grass and began to eat, small bites to make it last longer, close to the serving to make the scant meal more enjoyable by smelling the steaming kettles.

Nearby she heard a familiar voice. The cook was being chaffed again. "Hey, food burner! What is it this time? Scalded water? Fried grass?"

"Baked wind for you, Decurion Probus. What did you expect? A banquet?"

"Speaking of banquets— What did you have for breakfast, Lilia, when you were at home? We know all about you rich people. Tell us about those dormice dipped in honey and poppy seed—those pies made of nightingales' tongues—virgin sow-bellies, rolled and stuffed with hummingbirds' hearts and tongues and kidneys."

Lilia looked up from her pannikin somewhat indignantly.

"You seem to know more than I do about those things, Probus. We never ate like that. I don't believe anyone does. We generally had wheat porridge, a piece of fish, and some new-baked bread. Then a green salad, with onion and garlic and olive oil. Maybe after that a little fruit or sweet cakes, cheese of course, and always wine, but not more than three kinds at any meal."

She looked around, puzzled. It was very quiet during this recital. Those who were near enough to hear had stopped eating and were hanging upon every word.

There was a moment of silence, until Probus turned to the others and said somewhat wistfully, "See what I told you, fellows? A banquet!" And the gathering roared with good humor at

Lilia's expense, until she saw that the joke was on her and ruefully joined in.

The familiar routine of life on the march continued. Each day saw the legion twenty miles farther into the East, nearer, Manlius hoped, to the mysterious Wu-Sun.

Each night the camp was fortified as usual, although no enemy appeared. The ditch was dug, the mound raised to surround it, the stakes set in place, and the sentries stood their watch.

Each morning the trumpets and whistles sounded, the Eagle was saluted, the auguries cast whenever there was game to be sacrificed, and devotions were held at the shrine of Mars and Mithras.

Then tents were repacked, after all had eaten—lavishly, after a few hungry days, for a herd of small wild ponies was driven over a deep-cut bank and slaughtered by scores. Stakes were again pulled and shouldered.

Immediately after this was done, Quintus' troop rode away and soon was out of sight. Commander Manlius mounted his white horse and cast a sweeping look backward along the shortened ranks of his command.

"Follow me!"

Into the rising sun, their footprints clear in the frosty rime which now made each morning chill, the legion took the endless road.

Behind the marching men, the four scorpions brought up the rear, followed by the few baggage wagons and Liu Mang's iron chariot acting as guard. Soon no sign existed that they had passed this way, except the scarred earth of the ditch which had outlined the camp perimeter and the trampled grass of the streets inside.

Paydays came and went, marked by nights of gambling, for there was no other use for money, except when, as now more frequently happened, some few wandering bands of nomads were met. Then the coins were spent for kumiss—all the herdsmen could spare.

Quintus painstakingly acquired and cultivated a taste for this strong unpleasant drink, after his first genteel shudder of revulsion upon discovering that it was made from the milk of mares.



To the best of his knowledge, he had not tasted milk since he had been weaned.

As Lilia had suspected, there was no more biscuit—no more porridge—yet, after a few days at short rations, food was no longer a desperate problem. They had entered antelope country.

Now there was meat in plenty. Learning from the accidental bounty of the slaughtered ponies and instructed by the nomads, they organized great drives in the manner of the Scythians, as the legion passed through the Kirghiz Steppe, south of the Balkhash Lake, toward the Barluk Mountains.

The legionaries swept across the grasslands in a long, attenuated line, shouting, beating upon shields. Ahead of them, hares, antelope, wild horses, foxes, even a strayed camel or two, raced away in panic.

The line curved toward spots indicated by Quintus and his scouts. The frightened animals changed direction, seeing men ahead of them. In a compact herd, they plunged over unseen banks to their deaths in furrows cut deep by the action of wind and water between sharp ridges of clay.

Then there was butchering. The meat was dried or smoked. The wagons were loaded. There were days of feasting before the legion marched on again toward Mongolia and the Gobi.

To Eitel, well instructed in the lore of his tribal folk, from the tales of his exiled Hun father, all this was familiar. He longed to see them. He smelled the air of the steppes with delight. He kept Manlius constantly informed of everything he recalled. He prayed to the blue sky and the four winds. He sought far horizons with sharp eyes which peered into the distance under thick bony ridges of outjutting brows.

Lilia thought his face grew fiercer and more hawklike day by day. A look of wildness came over him, softened and made tender only when he looked at her. At such moments his voice was always gentle. "I am coming home," he said. "I shall see my people."

It seemed that now he went out of his way to touch her whenever he could without appearing too fond. It was as though he could not wait to wander, yet could not bring himself to go.

Sometimes when he sat with her, roasting meat on sticks at a small grass fire, their fingers would meet. Occasionally he walked

beside her on the march and their shoulders would brush briefly together.

At such accidents, he would flush and move away, only to be as close again a few moments later, without intending it to be so. Once he combed tangles out of her hair, as carefully as any woman could have done, until embarrassment made his hands clumsy.

With a sudden, stumbling excuse, he let fall the comb and walked away, leaving Lilia staring after him in dubious wonder.

She learned much lore of the plains from Eitel's remembered stories. How his people were wed on horseback; how the girls and boys learned to ride before they could walk; how they used horses both as transportation and as food.

She already knew, from hard times in the past, that the meat of a worn-out cavalry horse was stringy, leathery, and nauseating. Lately she had discovered that young colt was quite tasty, almost as good as antelope or mountain sheep. He began to instruct her by beginning to practice some of the things he knew but had never had the opportunity to try.

He gave her a piece of meat which had been tenderized and seasoned by being placed between his saddle and the back of the horse he rode, whenever he had a day's scouting with Quintus to relieve some other rider.

Lilia thanked him, although she could not bring herself to try it, dropping it out of sight unobtrusively when he was not watching. She was even more revolted by his substitute for a canteen—the intestines of a horse, cleaned and filled with water, tied at the ends and looped around the saddlebow.

Otherwise, she was glad to learn from Eitel. In talking with herders or huntsmen they met on the march, he was surprised to find how much he remembered from his father's teaching. These things he taught to Lilia.

At times they carried on long conversations without using a word of either Latin or Koine. Thus a new bond between them was being intangibly forged. It was without intent and almost without notice, for no other of their friends bothered to speak the language of the barbarians.

Eitel regarded this willful ignorance with scorn and contempt. "These Romans," he sneered, "think all other people stupid

and without culture. To think so marks them as stupid and uncultured."

Lilia, who was being introduced to, and learning the advantages of, a new way of life, could not but agree with him.

Day by day the legion penetrated farther eastward, never relaxing its vigilance as it marched or lay in camp. It never broke formation except on the hunt, even then always prepared to give or withstand siege.

Day by day the Sea of Grass opened before them its immensity of treasure. It was rich in promise for settlers yet to come. It was an empire for the taking, lonely and almost unpeopled except for scattered families which Liu Mang said were members of the Yu-Chi Horde, a tribe chased out of the borders of Ch'in by the savage Huns. Here the refugees were coming together to form a nation once more.

Shortly before the legion reached the point where it must turn south to cross the mountains visible as faint purple promontories that sent out fingering spurs running into the plains, it was halted by one of Quintus' riders.

He pulled up before the head of the column in a state of excitement. "A camp of dead men, Generall" he stammered, omitting the proper formalities in his haste. "Troop Commander Quintus asks your immediate presence—sir!"

Manlius sent word down the line for Liu Mang to attend him and they rode forward, in advance of the marching cohorts, to the spot where the cavalry scouts were waiting.

Quintus pointed to the north. Not far away lay a small uprising in the plain, an island knoll in the high grass against which the ripples of the wind broke like waves. It was crowned by a dark mound of earth and surrounded by a circle of mounted men, sitting their horses, facing outward as though ready to defend it against attack from any direction.

"They are all dead," Quintus said in a tone of hushed awe. He looked surprised and angry when Liu Mang laughed.

"It is only a Yu-Chi tomb. A royal grave. One of their kings is buried here, with his treasure, his hunting dogs and his falcons ready at his side. Near him is his mistress, or perhaps his Queen,

his groom, his attendant, his courier, and his favorite horse. All together. All dead. All under that mound."

Manlius rode forward with the troopers. As the little band came closer, he could see that the horses were skeletons with posts driven through them from tail to neck and supported erect by stakes. The bones were clothed only with leather trappings and what remained of their own desiccated skin.

The riders, skeletons themselves, fastened together with leather thongs, sat as they had been placed long before, still in their lacquered armor and helmets, still clutching upright lances in bony hands.

No repulsive odor emanated from the throng which guarded the peace and quiet of their King. The birds, the animals and insects, the hot sun and the dry wind had long since seen to that.

Nothing disturbed the stillness except the crepitant flutter of tattered rags still clinging to the wind-polished bones.

The living sat for a few long moments, silently looking upon the loneliness of the dead. Finally Manlius wheeled his horse away. He gestured toward the distant mountains.

"We will turn southward here. It is best that the men do not look upon this."

"But the nearest pass to the land of the Wu-Sun is still many, many *li* to the eastward," Liu Mang protested. "The nearer to the mountains we travel on this side of the Tien Shan Range, the more likely we are to meet enemies. The grass is richer there for their herds. The water from the snows is more plentiful. There will be much danger."

"We shall soon need water ourselves. Our supplies are running low. The risk is unavoidable.

"Quintus, from now on your squadron will ride a full day's journey ahead. Search for a pass we may use for crossing. We will take the first one we find, regardless of its height or difficulty of passage. Leave none unexamined.

"Remain at that distance, unless you make contact with an enemy or discover a practicable entry into the mountains. I feel that we are approaching our destination—the welcome ending and successful accomplishment of our long journey."

Quintus looked doubtful. He rode away without saluting and rejoined the legion. Shortly after it surged again into motion, his

orders snapped out. The scouts cantered away, stiff-backed, toward the blue haze of the foothills. Beyond lay the snow-robed peaks, resting like sleeping Titans all along the width of the far horizon.

Soon the squadron was lost to sight. In its track the legion also swung south—a slowly pursuing serpent, above which its golden Eagle rose, dipped low, and soaring pointed out the way.

As the weeks passed and the kalends of September neared, Lilia rode more often, and for much of each day, in the wagons. She was heavy with the child.

Eitel hovered over her like a mothering hen, anxiously doing all he could for her welfare. He and Pandarus pulled grass for the soft bed she lay upon each night; they saved the choicest bits of meat for her and whatever fruit they were able to forage.

Now that the legion traveled closer to the mountains, there was no lack of pure water. They saw to it that her canteen was always full and always fresh and cold. There was little else they could do for her comfort.

Once the fat cook was able to procure a fine pheasant which he roasted for her with scrupulous nicety and once Liu Mang came by with an air of mystery and hands behind him, bidding her guess the right one. It was the last lump of preserved ginger.

Lilia remained cheerful, but often pensive and silent. Knowing what her thoughts must be, her friends did not intrude upon such quiet moments. She brightened when Manlius called to find how she fared, as he now did each night before retiring, for she had been relieved of all active duties.

She enjoyed the tales Liu Mang told her of his homeland and its many wonders. She looked forward to seeing the magnificent pagodas, the curves of their tiled roofs hung with silver bells tinkling in the soft winds which stirred the surrounding willows, reflected in still pools where golden carp lazily fanned the clear water with frondlike fins.

She could hardly wait to see the impressive parades; to taste the delicacies he described; to admire the stately warriors and noble lords and ladies with which Liu Mang peopled the straight streets and broad avenues of the grand cities of his Celestial Kingdom.

It seemed to her that such splendid pageantry must be like a never ending celebration, for he never mentioned the poor and she almost became convinced that there could be none in a country so filled with riches.

Only when he spoke of the lovely, slender ladies of Ch'in and the marvelous silks in which they clothed themselves to dazzle the eyes and enchant the hearts of men did Lilia look down at her own changed form and stroke ruefully the coarse linen of her tunica.

She had no need to do so. She had long been more beautiful than she knew. In the frequent glances of the men she read only pity and sympathy—and quailed inwardly before them—not knowing what joy those glances brought to the beholder because she, the little sister to the camp, was the one delicate and precious thing they had to love.

The only hint she had that she was so prized was Eitel's constant attention. He was so often nearby that she felt a sense of loss when his duties called him elsewhere. Then she busied herself with sewing, as she rode, or sat resting in the entrance to her tent, looking out in the evening across the busy camp.

Liu Mang gave her one of his ceremonial robes to wear, fierce with haughty, ramping dragons breathing fire. With this as a pattern she made a tiny replica, well embroidered, from a piece of silk he brought. "For the little warrior!" he said. She smiled and thanked him, careful as she worked to let no tear spot the gorgeous fabric, when she thought upon the one who would soon wear it.

She never doubted that her child, Tibullus' child, would be a son.

Troop Commander Quintus seldom was seen now in camp. When he did appear, it was briefly and only for supplies. He always smiled and had a kind word—but he did not spend much time with her.

Lilia supposed it was because he only had eyes for pretty girls. This thought confirmed her already low opinion of herself. Actually, Quintus was finding his responsibilities resting even more heavily than he had expected.

He looked ten years younger. He had lost weight now that he

no longer had rich food at his disposal. His eyes, cleared because of the lack of fine wines, had narrowed and sharpened in vision with the constant squinting into far distances. His body had become supple and strong as it had once been when he was actively campaigning in Arabia.

Though he carped and grumbled to Manlius, cursing his lot aloud, inwardly he enjoyed these trips of exploration into the mountain depths.

There was always some new thing to mark and keep separate the days, although as yet each canyon proved to be a blind alley. Each was followed to its end, no matter how high it rose, either in an impassable cliff white with waterfalls plunging down from eternal snows, or bare sun-scorched rock precipice which barred the way through the mountain range. The very next one might be the avenue that would lead them on into the land of the white-skinned Wu-Sun. Each day that passed strengthened the conviction of legionary and officer that on the other side of the Tien Shan they would find the home of the Lost Legion whom they sought.

At last a rider came in with good news from Quintus. A low pass had been sighted, with a gradual slope practicable for wagons and a little less than six thousand feet in elevation. From below it appeared to be bare rock, not much loose scree of gravel and not choked by fallen rock or snow. What lay beyond was unknown.

Manlius sent back word that the pass should be explored to its ending. The Thirteenth would go into camp, rest for a day, make necessary repairs to the wagons, and wait in readiness for assurance that a successful crossing could be made.

The rider saluted and rode off with these orders for Quintus' troop. It was late afternoon, near the usual time to make camp.

By the time the tents were set up, the ditch dug, and the palisade erected, the long shadows of the mountains reached across the intervening three miles of distance to bring a brooding twilight early to the camp.

Lilia had an indefinable sense of foreboding. She lay sleepless a long time, the more disturbed by the realization that the restlessness was not confined to herself alone.

There was a low buzz of voices in the nearby tents which com-

bined to create an unusual feeling of premonition, although nothing during the day had occurred to bring about such an uneasiness.

She hoped she would not dream. The chaplain will surely cast a careful augury tomorrow, she thought drowsily as she at last felt sleep to be near.

The subdued murmur faded from her consciousness. She drew the blankets tight around her shoulders and directed her thoughts inward. They were good wool, but worn and thin. She shivered, not entirely with cold. Her time could be measured now in days.

Perhaps, just on the other side of that pass, she would hold her son in her arms. It would be like being with Tibullus again. She tried to picture his features in her mind. Would his son look like him? Strangely, she could not see him; another face kept coming between—the craggy, scarred, ugly, warm face of Eitel; as before—and even now at times—Manlius occupied her thoughts. Was she a wanton then?

Resolutely, in anger with herself, she tried to put the vision away. It kept returning against her will, not nearly as homely as it used to appear. She felt ashamed. Eitel had been so good, so kind—how could she dismiss him so carelessly? She was glad he did not know her ungrateful thoughts.

Be at home in my mind, Eitel, she invited. Do not go away. You and I are friends. Good friends. At least that.

She wept a little into her muffling blanket. The darkness gave no comfort. She slept.

The night passed without incident. Just at daybreak the chaplain officiated at the sacrifice of a young mountain sheep.

The altar, fed with its offal, sent a thick dark cloud of smoke streaming straight upward into the almost windless air, until a vagrant breeze caught it and sent a pencil line straight into the east. He smiled and rubbed his hands together.

“A good omen. Jupiter points the way for us. That liver, though. The spots are hard to read. They contradict each other. And the entrails—they have fallen wrong.

“Helvius, bring me that antelope. We must try again.”



## FOR THE HONOR OF THE LEGION

A few miles farther to the east, a man crawled out of his sleeping furs, peered at the sunrise through the entrance of his felt yurt, and stood up. None of his women was awake. His camp was quiet. It would be a good day and this was the best hour of it.

He was a large man, although he did not stand high, for his legs were bowed and bandy from a lifetime spent in deforming saddles. His head was egg-shaped, having been bound by leather straps when the bones were soft. His forehead outjugged, for it was a thick pad of bone and flesh which not only gave him the overhanging brows peculiar to the males of his race as a mark of beauty but served the utilitarian purpose of guarding his small, **sunken eyes from a dagger thrust.**

By the standards of his people, he was an exceptionally handsome man. His face was a mass of small scars caused by searing brands applied to kill the hair on his face during adolescence. Now that he was adult, a fierce warrior and chief of his nation, he was beardless, although he possessed and nursed a long, slender, trailing black mustache which gave him a threatening appearance. He was very proud of this ornament, and now as he looked over his grazing herds, his many wagons, the broad territory over which he ruled undisputed, he stroked it thoughtfully, **feeling a grim pleasure in his life.**

He was young to be so rich; his wives were beautiful and their voices not too shrill; his children were many and not too contentious, nor were they old enough to dispute his chieftainship. He was strong and virile. No man dared speak against him in council or meet him in battle.

**His name was Togruk and he was a Hun.**

He turned slowly, scanning the terrain. He scratched himself and yawned. He belched and relieved himself while looking to-

ward the snow-capped mountains. It was time to move the herds to the winter feeding grounds on the southern circle of the thousand-mile range that he claimed.

His head swung toward the west and his neck stiffened. All his body became tense. His eyes narrowed and he squinted into the distance.

His nostrils flared, not because he detected any odor, but in malevolent fury at what he saw across the flat grasslands. His face became suffused. He felt as though he were about to choke.

Smoke was rising. Because his people had neither friends nor allies, he knew that an enemy had come.

Without waiting to saddle or bridle, Togruk seized the mane of the nearest horse and, shouting, rode through the awakening center of the camp. His Horde boiled out of their yurts and tented wagons.

Dogs barked, children wailed, startled from their companionable sleep; men snatched up their weapons and followed their chief, not knowing why; women, with bows and axes, took their accustomed places under or between the wagons, ready to repel any attack.

Togruk galloped on, slapping his horse on the withers, digging his knees into its sides, clubbing its head with his great fist to stimulate it to even greater speed, howling angrily as he reached a little knoll. He brought the beast to a panting stop.

Once upon the height, he sprang to a standing position on the horse's bare back. He balanced there with an agility and poise which belied the clumsiness expected in a man of his huge size and weight. With eyes never dimmed by reading, accustomed to interpreting the signs which meant life to the men of the interminable remotenesses of the steppes, he scanned the rising, questionable smoke.

From this elevation above the plain, almost one hundred feet in the air, he had extended his horizon to a fifteen-mile distance. His sight overlooked the familiar aspect of the camp, the untouched waving grass beyond, which stretched across those intervening miles—and reached, with telescopic intensity, the compact Roman encampment.

He had no idea who the strangers might be. The purpose of their invasion of his territory admitted of no doubt. It was for

the same reason all other invaders had come. They had been eliminated. These would suffer the same fate.

Togruk rode down the side of the knoll, snapping out incisive orders to the men who clustered along his way, armed and waiting. His face was grim and determined as he came to his circular yurt. He slid from his horse and faced his first wife, tense and alarmed at the sight of his wrath. The others gathered together in a pale group, but it was to her unspoken question that he said, "City men. They have come to build houses and take our land."

"Is it war then?"

He grunted and nodded heavily. "What else can it be?"

They stood staring at each other for a few long seconds. He laid his great arm, heavy with sinew, across her shoulders, then they separated—she to enter the yurt and bring out his weapons and prepare to strike the tent with the other women, Togruk to roar, bull-throated:

"Sound the nakers! Make ready the kettledrums! We ride!"

At the same moment, miles away from either camp, the troop of scouts were high in the hills. They had slept where the sloping pass ended in a small mountain meadow, lushly green and spangled with late flowers, but walled in the direction in which they must continue by a steep escarpment of bare rock.

This was practicable of ascent by climbing men, even though heavily laden with weapons and packs. It was quite impossible for either horses or wagons. It was also the only pass they had yet found which provided any road over these formidable heights.

During the night Quintus and Centurion Longinus had consulted the others. It had been unanimously decided that the pass must be explored its full distance, even down to its lower outlet upon the lowlands on the farther side of the mountain.

This might take longer than Commander Manlius cared to wait. Such had been the original orders and in no other way could a fully complete and honest report be given. Leaving one trooper to tend the animals, the climbers quitted the little meadow, set their feet to the steep ledges of the cliff face, and were soon out of sight of the horse herder below. They toiled on,

upward into the obscuring mists of the overhanging morning clouds.

The meadow was at a six-thousand-foot elevation and the pass still rose toward a saddle, hidden somewhere in the higher snows.

The augury, determined by the antelope entrails, proved to be no more encouraging than the one the sheep had provided.

With some disappointment and reluctance, the chaplain worded his findings in the least depressing form he could and was bringing it for the consideration of Manlius when he was interrupted by a cry from the sentry stationed at the eastern gate.

"Army approaching!"

The legion instantly sprang to the alert along the entire defense perimeter.

It had seemed to the sentry that a long way off he could see houses and tents against the skyline. They were in motion. Like the undulations of a wave, these domes and peaked roofs rose and fell and came nearer as they poured over the imperceptible depressions in the limitless steppe. It was impossible to judge their distance or know their size. There were no landmarks to use in comparison. There were only the wind and the endlessly marching ripples across that mighty Sea of Grass.

It seemed a magician's dream, a fantastic airy metropolis which, with the rising sun, would shimmer, fall apart, and vanish. At the sound of the alarm, the encampment came alive. The legionaries gazed in awe at the unusual spectacle. Faint and far, like the beating of the excited and quickened blood in their tense bodies, they were aware of a distant and loudening throb.

It came closer, increasingly plain, and then they heard the sharp popping of whips, barbarous unintelligible cries, and the high squealing of ungreased axles.

Against all hope, they knew that this was no mirage which would pass away. Now they could see the straining animals which hauled these moving dwellings. They were still a black, amorphous mass, individually tiny, dwarfed by distance, scarcely visible above the level of the tall grass which hid their legs, but there was no doubt of their identity. They were hardy little steppe ponies.

With this identification, the proportions of the abodes could be judged. The watching men gasped in amazement. Were the tented wagons as massive as they seemed, a hundred beasts would not be too many for the hauling of the largest, although all sizes could now be distinguished, bobbing, rocking, as they rolled nearer.

From their peaks fluttered pennons and flags. The sun rose higher and colors could be seen. In the main, the tents were black, but they were decorated with designs in white and gold and scarlet figures of felt. Gods? Demons? The lares and penates of these strange unknown people? The Romans could only conjecture.

Around the vehicles, moving aimlessly back and forth with no apparent order or discipline, an immense throng of horsemen milled. Irregular cavalry, which chose its course at random, so long as the general direction was forward.

Kettledrums boomed out a measured rhythm. Now a troop detached itself from the shifting mass and, under a ragged guidon, galloped toward the legion camp. Behind them the grass continued to disappear under the trampling hoofs and heavy wheels of the wains.

All the plain was crawling with motion and still the jagged peaks and rounded canopies advanced in pouring serrations against the distant line of sky, like a marching mountain range.

It was more than an encampment which darkened the plain; more than a migratory grouping of pastoral people seeking better feed for their herds. It was a nation which lived by war, that was pushing westward year by year—it was the wagon city of the Huns.

Watching it come, Manlius felt no doubt of its sinister purpose or its ability to accomplish its intention. Long before the reconnoitering troop broke away from the parent body and moved forward in challenge, he gave to his aide the first order of the day.

It was an order which set the trumpets blaring—the order which meant no retreat—the only order which any Roman commander in his position could have given, short of surrender:

**“Prepare the castellum! This is the end!”**

Lilia, well schooled in all the trumpet signals, understood this one at once, although she had never heard it used, as yet, upon

the long march. She was preparing to take her place in the close ranks. "Into the wagon! Stay there, where you will be safe. Do you think you can fight in your condition?"

"I am a legionary. It is my duty. I can use a bow or a sling as well as any man!"

"You are a little fool. You can die, too. What of your baby, then?"

She clung to him. "Oh, Eitel! I don't know what to do. Who are these terrible people? Must there be a fight?"

His face was contorted with sorrow. "This is the country I sought. The one my father longed for. My homeland. My people, little Roman, and today I must kill as many as I can of them.

"Yes, there will be a fight. I think I can see the end of it." He pointed into the sky. It was no longer empty. Above the battleground to be, the hungry ravens already peered and wheeled.

Out of the troop, come to test their enemy's strength, rode a mighty man of valor, holding above him a lance from which wolf tails streamed in the wind. Behind him the waiting riders sat their saddles like statues. Beyond, the wagons and main body of his following fanned out in a thick surrounding circle, a mile in circumference. The vehicles stood side by side, almost touching each other. From them a subdued rumble of wheels, hoofs, and muttering voices filled the air. Above this background of noise the herald raised his voice.

"I am Togruk, son of Amlak, son of Batu—plague to evil spirits, scourge to invaders, favored by the Spirit of the Blue Sky. I am Tandjou of my Horde. I devour my enemies. I drink kumiss from their skulls. I kill!

"Return whence you came—or die."

Manlius understood nothing of the arrogant speech, but Liu Mang, who stood nearby, came up to interpret. The two held a low colloquy. Manlius nodded, and Liu Mang stepped out a short distance nearer to the rider and said:

"We wish nothing of yours, except free passage through your country. We do not seek battle.

"I have met the Mongolian tiger and the Siberian bear in single combat. I sleep in their hides at night. My friend, Ung-Khan of this tuman, claims the she-wolf as his mother. Beware the long arrows of the Shang! Fear the wolf cub's fangs!"

Togruk laughed contemptuously. "I know you, man of Ch'in. One day I shall pasture my herds where your cities now stand.

"Your friends shall give me their skulls to line with gold, for my drinking cups. Expect from me no more than this."

He wheeled his mount and rode back to his command. They turned away toward the waiting circle of wagons. From it a roar of voices went up to give them welcome. It sounded to the Romans like the savage outcry of a multitude of beasts, baying, yelping, howling in anticipation and blood lust.

From all sides a cloud of riders came rushing upon the camp. Encouraging them in the attack, a deep growl of muted, menacing thunder accompanied the charge—drums carried at saddlebows or stationed among the watching Horde. Upon these, muscular arms pounded a continuous and threatening beat.

The word ran down the line: "Stand firm!" It was emphasized by the contemptuous challenge of the trumpet and the grunt of the tubas. High and shrill, the screaming war cry of the pipes stirred the blood of the besieged and stiffened their spirits.

They rigidly awaited the impact. The only movement in all the armored ranks was a slight turn of each head—a flick of the eyes—toward the spot where Manlius stood in the center of the camp. Here, before his tent, struck flat to give him better vision, he was flanked by his trumpeter and the aquilifer, who held the Eagle high so that all might see for what they fought.

The rolling surge of drums and hoofs swept in advance of the charge, assaulting the ears like a blow upon all the senses. A thickening of the air pressed upon every nerve.

Now, over the high edge of the sharp stakes, slanted outward above the straight six-foot fall of the ditch beyond, all that could be seen was the upper portion of the riders' bodies—open, howling mouths, heaving horse heads, rawhide helmets garnished with wolf fangs in bizarre, ugly patterns like second faces picked out in ivory mosaic.

"Up shields!"

The segments of that iron roof clanked together as one. All had seen the stout horn bows flex and rise against the sky, like the tangled leafless branches, hurricane-tossed, of a terrible moving forest.

On the very edge of the agger, the Hun vanguard stopped, spread out and thickened, as the hissing discharge of short,

heavy arrows arced to descend as a pitiless hail or was delivered point-blank into the front rank of the Romans.

The deadly darts found interstices between the shields. They were cruelly barbed with sharpened bone or headed with slate points which shattered in flesh and remained to grieve the wound. They spun as they flew through the air. In the heads or shanks, cunningly made hollows caught the shrieking wind to bring terror with them.

Undaunted, the Thirteenth replied in kind. The shields parted for an instant. The ready slingers cast their lead balls and weighty stones; the archers sent back an aimed drift of feathered, lethal destruction.

Wounded ponies screamed, reared, and plunged, falling with their riders into the ditch or racing away with empty saddles, tortured by rankling agony which they could not outrun.

The four little scorpions clanked and chunked; javelins flew, ripping holes in the clots of mounted men.

The bottom of the ditch was soon covered with Hun dead—men and mounts inextricably mingled.

Ever the rolling rumble of the kettledrums' giant booming voices, the rattle of small tambours, the doglike yelps, the howling war cries, the shouting and the groans—as though there could be no end to the uproar.

Rising above all, the combating, blatant, resonance of the Hunnish buffalo horns was answered by brazen, defiant trumpets and the rending screech of the heartening pipes—and, in the end, the deep exultant cheering of the embattled Thirteenth.

The mass of riders melted into scattered clumps, which went racing away toward their wagons, leaving behind only the dead and those who feebly struggled on the plain or in that bloody trap of the ditch.

The first wave had washed in, broken against an island of adamant resistance—and ebbed.

High in the hills the clamor of that dire conflict rose to the ears of the trooper stationed to guard the horses in the mountain meadow. It came as an incoherent murmur of sound, dulled by distance, barred from him directly by a spur of the mountain range which intervened.



He could not distinguish its exact direction or its cause. He stared upward into the haze where his companions had disappeared, undecided whether he should follow and leave the horses to their own devices or remain with them as he had been charged.

He listened, wondering, not alarmed but indefinitely disturbed. He walked to the edge of the declivity up which they had ridden. As he did so, the subdued whisper died away to nothing.

The first phase of the engagement was ended. The wind had changed and he was too far away to hear the cries of the wounded.

He sat down again, idly humming to himself, watching the mounts as they grazed.

Equally far from the beleaguered, but in the opposite direction and out upon the open plain, the man in the red Phrygian hat not only heard the crash of combat but saw the headlong rush of Huns as a dark moving stain across the sweeping waves of grass.

He watched, unable to make out the identity of the rival forces, impressed by the intense ferocity of the struggle, trying to detect something which would confirm his terrible suspicions.

After a long time the sun struck a golden glint into his straining eyes. It was reflected from the very center of the turbulence. He started but still was not certain. He could see no flags or pennons, could distinguish no familiar word in the cacophony of shouts and battle cries.

Then the same wind which had taken the sounds away from the scout on the mountain brought them clearly to this watcher's hearing. He heard distantly the triumphant trumpet blast which signaled the Hun withdrawal; he heard the savage drums that drowned out the clear notes; he saw once more the gleam of the defiant Eagle.

He cast a glance at the sun, an hour past its zenith. He sat down, hidden by the tall grass, removed his armor from his sack, and began, methodically and with slow patience, to polish each piece to brightness.

When he was completely satisfied that it would in no way de-

tract from his high sense of personal pride, he finished his work, donned it, and moved, stooping, to take every advantage of concealment, through depressions, around low knolls, protected by high clumps of grass.

Behind him lay his castoff clothing, his red hat, his sack and remaining scraps of food, no longer anything but unnecessary encumbrances.

He pushed on, marked only from the air by the speculative, calculating eyes of the gathering birds of prey.

“They are coming!”

Lilia heard the shout from where she worked with bandages, salves, and amputating knife beside the surgeon, his arms reddened to the elbows with the blood of her friends.

She heard the rustle all around her as the ranks braced for the impact of the charging enemy. The pipes shrilled. The trumpet sounded, “Alert!” Somewhere close, one of the dogs of war growled deep-throated, an ominous mutter to raise her own hackles. She felt the atavistic thrill along her spine.

The scorpions clattered as they were being loaded, but she saw, only briefly, the men who had been gathering up the spent and scattered Hun arrows to use in those troughs. They were running back to take their places in the line again. Her eyes swung back to the tired visage of the overwrought surgeon and his fingers which never made an unnecessary motion—these were her guides, her immediate world.

The rising tattoo of hundreds of thudding hoofs filled the air. She heard some officer yell—it did not sound like Commander Manlius—how was he faring—“Archers, shoot! Pilum men, make ready to cast! Trumpeter, sound—Cast! Advance all scorpions!”

She knew that the attacking cavalry was very close. The extreme range of the formidable iron-hafted javelins, in the hands of experts provided with throwing thongs, was less than one hundred and fifty feet. She did not look farther than the face of the sufferer she attended. She smiled comfortingly at him and held his hand clenched desperately tight upon her own.

“Cast! By the count—Cast! Cast!”

Crash! Oh, Jupiter! The poor screaming ponies, impaled upon

the stakes as the heavy chargers had been in Armenia! That meant that some riders had crossed the partly filled ditch and actually struck against the fortifications. Had they broken through? Were they inside the circle of defenders?

She did not want to see. She did not seem to care. What was the value of her own desolate life in the midst of such surrounding horror?

Pandarus stood beside her. Eitel was very close. The surgeon still labored with quick, precise movements.

Now the encouraging pipes squealed incessantly. This was fidelity to the last moment. This was the honor no man might shirk—the honor of the legion—and she was a legionary too.

The scorpions thudded, time after time, punctuating the pandemonium of yells, whistling arrows, the hiss and slap of sling thongs and stones. Then there was a new sound of metal blades, striking, sliding across armor, which meant that there was fighting behind her not far away and hand to hand.

The wolf-headed enemy had entered the circle—had broken through. Lilia thought she could smell their unwashed bodies over the raw scent of blood and the acrid stench of smoking tar.

They must be very close. The surgeon still labors head down, eyes fixed upon his work. Pandarus and Eitel are still standing like rocks beside me. I will not move. I will not look. I am not afraid—oh, darling Goddess Fortuna—don't let them know I am so afraid! She did not move.

Thud, thud, thud, thud—the scorpions continued to eject their deadly missiles, four minutes apart, the time it took a crew, working at top speed, to reload and shoot. The sound was like the delayed drip of a giant water clock and it went on and on.

The incessant roar of the enemy drums, the inhuman war cries, the inspiriting pipes and clarion trumpets which answered—then, at last and once more, the exultant yell which meant that the attacking Huns had for a second time been flung back upon their reserves and were fleeing in rout across the churned earth and flattened grass of the plain.

“Vicimus! Vicimus! Vicimus!”

But in her heart she knew that this was not victory and they would come again.

All day Manlius, contemptuous of personal risk, had exposed himself frequently in positions of extreme danger. Consequently, when the momentary breakthrough came and a score of skin-clad cavalry tore across a filled section of ditch, ripped down the loosened stakes of the palisade, and plunged howling into the camp, he was directly in front of the gap thus made.

He was knocked prone and trampled by a rider. As he rolled aside, the man struck down one savage blow with a saw-toothed club. Manlius collapsed senseless on the ground, his breastplate torn away and a deep wound ripped open in his breast.

Tribune Mancinus was instantly crouching above him, but there was no need for him to sacrifice his own life. Lancers and archers had already laid the invaders and their plunging animals dead in the center of the camp. The broken ranks closed firm behind them.

By the time Manlius had been dragged to a position of greater safety, the engagement was over. Before the wound was bandaged and the bleeding temporarily stopped, he was conscious and hidden from the sight of the men, inside his hastily re-erected tent.

He lay on his pallet, unable to rise but able to receive reports. Mancinus and Liu Mang hovered over him. The afternoon was well advanced toward evening. He spoke weakly to the tribune. "Are they making ready for another attempt?"

Mancinus shook his head. "Their losses have been great. I see many smokes in their wagon ring, which may be cooking fires. Liu Mang doubts they will come again before dawn."

Manlius nodded. "It seems unlikely. But we must keep a sharp watch. See that the men are fed. Clear the ditch and make a barricade of the bodies on the farther edge. Salvage every weapon. Dig wolf pits and set out all caltrops that we have, beyond the farthest holes.

"Permit no one besides yourselves and the surgeons to know how badly I am wounded."

Mancinus thought he had fainted, but the medicus, who came in with an anxious Lilia, said that the exhausted commander had been granted the mercy of an undrugged sleep.

## THE LAST REDOUBT

About midnight a powerful stranger, in the brilliant and costly armor of a Praetorian Guard, came out of the darkness before one of the farthest outposts.

"I am Andronicus, son of Commander Manlius Varro. I request to be taken to him at once."

The startled sentry blew his whistle, summoning his centurion of the guard and the patrol.

"Are you a scout for reinforcements? How many are behind you? What legion? How many cataphracts? How did you get through?"

"I am alone. I have come alone from Rome. I carry only valuable information for your general—my father. I must speak with him immediately."

"Come with me."

Tribune Mancinus was haggard and weary. He almost rubbed his eyes in amazement at the sight of the stranger in his excellent equipment. He rose from the table where he had been sitting to plan the defense in the open air, the better to recall the surrounding terrain.

"I will take you to him. Expect little. He has been severely injured and may be unconscious. I must warn you that we fear the worst. You would be more wisely advised to leave him undisturbed." But he led the way to the tent where Manlius lay.

The commander's head was propped against a rolled blanket. His eyes were open and a little color showed in his cheeks. He was being fed slow spoonfuls of broth by Lilia.

Neither father nor son displayed any unusual emotion at the meeting. Andronicus gave the usual salute, his quick glance taking in the situation at once. The wounded man, with death written in his face; the tattered tent and ragged blankets; the short-

sword lying bare within easy reach; all this indicated to him the desperateness of the hour.

"Hail, Father."

"Hail, son."

Lilia scanned this visitor with astonishment, recognizing in his face and attitude the young Manlius, as he must have been.

The resemblance was striking. Here were the same strength, the stubborn determination, the courage, and the indomitable will to persist in his own way that had so endeared the commander to her, even during the time she had opposed him, in her efforts to join the camp.

She laid down the cup and spoon. She half rose to go, but Manlius' hand fell back from the salute he had returned to his son and lay restrainingly upon her arm. He smiled faintly, seeing the slight disdain on Andronicus' mouth as those searching eyes probed her loose, unbelted stola.

"The wife of one of my brave soldiers. She has shared our every trial and is well beloved and respected by all of us.

"Sometimes I have thought her to be my conscience personified and come to life. I think, for the benefit of both of us, it is best that she stay."

Andronicus at once dismissed Lilia from his thoughts. His uncompromising attitude softened. His voice had a tiny tremor in it, but his words were still formal.

"Sir, I have come to report that the mission upon which you were sent is no longer necessary. The insane orders you were given need not bind you further. You and your command may return to Rome. The Emperor Caligula is dead!"

"Have you brought me letters of recall? If not, I am still bound."

"No, sir. Such were not available to me. I left Rome in haste."

"I bought you a commission in the Praetorian Guard from that scoundrel, Praefect Macro. Have you dishonored it? Are you a deserter? Let me see your diploma."

Lilia was taken aback at this turn in the conversation. Was this how father and son, in the proud family of Varro, met in such a place and time—after so long a parting?

She remembered the night, many months ago, when she had been given unwanted protection in the commander's tent and

her unnecessary fears as she lay awake, wondering whether Manlius wanted her himself. It came to her now that he had then talked in his sleep. She had never understood the inward burden that tortured him. She only knew he suffered and deserved pity. Now she realized that much of his agony had been because of his son.

Lilia hated this newcomer, who had arrived to disturb his father's last few hours. She glared at him, willing him away, but his next words brought her a new understanding of both men.

"The dishonor is none of mine, sir. Rome was dishonored by the wanton vices of a cruel maniac. I helped to cleanse it. An honest man sits now upon the throne and I played a part in placing him there—and so, unwittingly, did you."

"I? Explain yourself."

"It was common talk among the Guard that your orders were given you to get you out of the way. Caligula was afraid of you. A guardsman heard the Emperor and the Praetorian praefect discussing those fears.

"A whole legion sacrificed, murdered, to get rid of one man! And that man my father!

"The guardsman was killed, but not before he had told a friend, and therefore all the Praetorians. And therefore, eventually, the hotheaded Ajax." His voice was sober. "Even worse, Andronicus, son of Varro."

Ajax? She had not known that the commander's son had fought in the arena under that name. Lilia turned to Manlius with a question in her eyes. He was watching his son intently. His face was like steel, but there was a glint, for just a moment, of a more searching, quieter look. Something like relief, before the mask of sternness closed down once more. Andronicus had seen it, too, she thought. He began speaking again.

"One who had suffered most from Caligula's spiteful insults was Cassius Chaerea, tribune of the Guard. He went daily in fear of his life, as did all of us, for no one knew what mad maggot crawled, nesting in the Emperor's brain.

"I tell you, sir, that there was not one of us who did not feel himself doomed to death or torture and imprisonment at the slightest excuse. Senators were bought, bribed and intimidated; ladies of quality and unblemished virtue dishonored; the Vestal

Virgins shamed and persecuted; Homer, Virgil, and Livy removed from the libraries. Rome had become a squirming snake pit of informers and secret police. There was no safety in it.

"There were men in high places who conspired with Chaerea and me. Consuls Pomponius and Cluvius, Senator Asprenas, the Knight Vinicianus, Vatinius, decurion of the Guard—all were involved. Nevertheless, beloved sir and Father, the plan was mine, all mine, and the vengeance was mine.

"We caught the madman coming from the theater, through a passage that led to the bathhouse. With him, only some slaves and some of his pretty, vicious boys, who ran when they saw us. Cassius Chaerea struck the first blow. It glanced off the Emperor's collarbone and did little damage. I thrust Chaerea aside and ran my sword through his body. He knew me, I think, for he was not slain. I could not get at him again. All the conspirators were hacking. I left the city then, to follow and find you, wherever you might be, if you were not dead.

"I wanted to tell you what I had done, to beg your forgiveness for being an undutiful son, and to tell you that you could come home."

Manlius lay rigid with horror. He looked much older. Andronicus buried his face in his hands.

Lilia could almost read Manlius' thoughts. As he opened his mouth to speak, she knew his words would be harsh. She laid her fingers across his parted lips and bent to kiss his cheek.

"You called me your conscience. Please do what I would do."

The silence lengthened in the tent. At last Manlius said, "We knew long ago what you have told me. I did not know how he died or your part in it. I forgive you that, for I know you did what you thought was right. I forgive you everything, my dear and only son."

He breathed with difficulty and the red spot on his chest bandages slowly spread and widened. He tilted his head back in agony and closed his eyes. "It seems, strangely enough," he added, bringing out each almost inaudible word with a grimace, "that you have been busy saving men's lives, while I have been busy losing them."

Tribune Mancinus gripped the young man's shoulder. "We must leave him now. Lilia, remain and see to his welfare."



Andronicus permitted himself to be led silently from the tent. Once outside, he struck his fists violently against his brow.

"I sought you, my father, across half the world. Oh, useless gods! To be so late, by such a little time!" Almost in a stupor, he followed Mancinus back to the temporary headquarters.

Through the small hours of the night the preparations went on for the next, inevitable clash. There was none who did not realize that they were within the last redoubt.

Lilia finally gave in to exhaustion and was obliged to leave her patient, to seek a little rest. Shortly after those last bitter words Manlius had sunk into unconsciousness, and it did not appear likely that he would soon awaken.

She left Liu Mang, who seemed tireless, to watch over the sleeping man for a while. Before lying down herself, she went into the hospital tent to see how her other charges were faring.

Like Manlius, all had knives or swords beside them, with the intention of selling their lives dearly when the time came.

The men came in from digging the wolf pits while she slept. They dropped with weariness and lay where they fell, knowing that all possible had been done. The world turned in its relentless round, the sky lightened, and the Hun camp awoke.

There was a long wait before the Huns rode out. Lilia had gone to the officers' mess. She walked awkwardly. The previous day had taken toll of her strength and she had come to a private conclusion that, should she somehow escape this danger, she would not go her full time. She sat down and put a bright face on to hide her fears.

"Well, Lucretius, what's in the pot?" The fat cook beamed at her over his kettles and grill.

"Greetings, little lady. What can I burn for you today?" He glanced around with a secret smirk that included her as fellow conspirator. "Saved you a trooper's steak. Nice tender lip of a mule, the best part. Don't tell anybody. Only had one mule."

Lilia laughed in spite of herself. The cook put up his hand in mock protest. "No! No thanks, I pray you. You don't have to be nice to me. I have to feed you anyway."

He set down a bowl of stew and placed beside it a small cup of kumiss.

"Drink it down, quick. It's the last. I found it in Tribune Quintus' supplies. Just eat and don't be dainty about it. It will do you good. Lots of hard work coming up today."

The surgeon came in and sat beside her. His mouth was hard and straight. His hands trembled as though strung with taut wire.

"The commander is awake and saying good-by to Liu Mang. His son and Tribune Mancinus are with him. Liu Mang is going to ride out against the barbarians. The commander is going to be buried."

"Buried!" Lilia dropped her spoon. She was aghast. "Alive? Why?"

"The officers have decided that if he survives he might be rescued when the scouts come back from the mountains. I think it is a slim hope, but it is the only one."

"He may not live until then or the Huns may find him. A pit is being dug under the floor of his tent. At the last, it will be covered and the commander will be hidden."

"Then there is no chance for the rest of us?"

The old surgeon said nothing. While he gazed at her distraughtly a trumpet commanded. He sprang to his feet, clutching his sword, and hurried to the post designated for him at the entrance to the hospital tent.

Lilia swallowed the last of her drink and followed as quickly as she could.

The works known as the castellum—a secondary ditch and mound inside the previous one—had been completed during the night. In one place only there was a gap. Here a few planks from benches and wagon bodies formed a bridge across the ditch to give access to the plain. It was wide enough for Liu Mang's horses and iron chariot.

Liu Mang and his charioteer stood ready in it. They were bare to the waist and had discarded their bows. There were no more arrows long enough for such powerful weapons.

Each had a lance and held his ax looped loosely, to be

snatched out when the lance was hurled. Mancinus was trying to dissuade them from the reckless sally.

Liu Mang's face was peacefully determined. "We are useless here. We shall meet the Hun lord on the plain, not behind a barricade. The ancestors of this person would be shamed if he allowed unswerving Destiny to find him waiting, when he could advance to meet it."

"With axes only?"

"Without regard for life, a man must be guided by his ideals. Forward, always, if with no more than our hands."

He chirruped to his horses. The wheels resounded hollowly upon the makeshift bridge. Behind the two men of Ch'in, the black broad-chested steeds, and the heavy chariot, the legionaries swiftly replaced the stakes and awaited the attack.

Toward the legion's last grim fortification, the Hun forces advanced on all sides at a slow trot. The thunder of their bronze-bound saddle drums welled out ahead of them. A lonely dot upon the plain, Liu Mang's chariot hurtled out to meet the enemy, heading directly for the center where Togruk's wolf-tail standard marked his position. No one in the ranks but held his breath while the waiting for the impact lengthened into a timeless moment.

The Horde eddied within itself as it came closer. There were arcs and sweeps, spirals and turns inside the mass of horsemen. There was a little twisting knot that spun about like a small whirlpool in a wild sea. When it was smoothed away, the wolf-tail standard still advanced. Liu Mang and his charioteer had been joined with their ancestors and Togruk lived.

Now the ground vibrated. The pounding hoofs were like a running river. Nearer, louder, the ground shaking with the shock, the air pulsing with the rhythmic yelps of the riders, which sounded like the high, excited barking of wild dogs.

Then gaps showed in the advanced lines. The wolf pits had taken their first toll. They had no effect in slowing the charge. The first few turned aside rather than ride over their struggling companions, for they could see what had happened. Those behind could not. They galloped over dead and living bodies as though there were solid, unfeeling earth beneath the sharp, unshod hoofs. Soon, in fact, it was no more than that. Other ponies

and horses were down, whinnying, belling out their pain. Caltrop spikes had pierced soft frogs, or driven deep into cannon bones and hocks. Riders rolled frantically aside or ran to escape being trampled. Fruitless effort! They too went down before the following flood.

Some fortunate few swung up behind comrades in the van who reached down helping hands. Most were overrun in the press, tumbled like shapeless packages of rags into the dirt and lost to sight within seconds.

The leader of a tuman shouted to his company, kicked his heels into lathered ribs, and set his steed to leap the barricade. He was dead before he came down, shot in mid-air, but the horse fell with broken legs into the first ditch, scattering the defenders at that point.

Others followed, pulling aside the rampart of bodies to make room. Groups entered. They worked under a pitiless hail of missiles which could do no more than slow the labor, by adding to the obstacle, without preventing its success. Soon the barricade was flattened.

The drums, which had never stopped thudding, picked up a quicker and louder beat, answered by the distant, encouraging, giant tambours among the encircling wagon ring. The cavalry formed its solid front once more and advanced with ever increasing speed.

This time it faced a more dangerous foe. Shoulder to shoulder, the legionaries stood with bows drawn, shooting point-blank over and through the palisade. The scorpions stung with their deadly darts, their crews working at their ultimate limits, aiming, shooting, reloading. Their stock of ammunition was exhausted all too soon. Then they seized other weapons, anything that was available, standing at their engines and waiting to fight at close quarters.

Outside the palisade the scene was one of continued slaughter. As though the Huns cared nothing for life, they continued to ride close, discharge their arrows, fall and die.

At last there was a lull. After some moments, while the weary legionaries watched, tended their wounded, and wondered what the nomads were planning, many of the lumbering vehicles

began to move out of the Huns' ring. They took places in the crowd of horsemen.

Mancinus realized at once what was about to occur. "It is time," he muttered to himself, and hurried to the tent of Manlius.

He found the commander still conscious. Andronicus was beside him, having borne himself well in the battle, taking now this brief interval to visit his father once more. He looked up as the tribune entered.

"He speaks wildly. He is in fever. He does not know me."

Mancinus knelt beside them. "General. My Imperator. Do you have a word for the men?"

Manlius opened his eyes. They wavered vacantly, searching for the source of the familiar voice, then focused upon the face of his aide. For a moment his incoherent speech became lucid and clear, though his mind seemed far away.

Mancinus had the impression that he was not using his own words but quoting those of another. "Say—'Gird yourself with the armor of the Lord—and stand!'" Then the tired lids closed and he lapsed into muttered rambling.

Suddenly the light of sanity flared briefly once more. He saw Mancinus and recognized him. There was strength and hardness in his voice for a few seconds.

"Tribune! Take one with you!"

Mancinus stood up. He saluted, as to an emperor. "Two, Commander. One for you and one for me." He went out, not looking back. He signaled to the detachment that was waiting to lower their beloved leader out of sight, into the blanket-lined pit, and to cover it over.

He did not order Andronicus to follow. He shouted out the Order of the Day he had been given, so all could hear. He rejoined his men, to be with them in the forefront of the battle and to die fighting.

There were incidents.

The pipes wailed like a mourning thing—nailed to the breast of the dead piper, his face ash gray under the gentle fall of the whirling dust.

The fat cook fought with cleaver and a razor-edged en-

trenching spade until he fell. Engineers used their axes and clubs and hammers in the melee.

Licinius stood off three, for some moments, with his shield as weapon. When two were slain, he cast his battered protection aside and, using his last caltrop as a cestus in his bare fist, buried its spike in the forehead of his last enemy, with his last blow.

The aquilifer—fifth to seize the Eagle from the failing grasp of his dead predecessor and to raise it above the struggle—held it high in the center of the final knot of fighters.

Surrounded, his group melting away, he commanded, "Halt! I have fixed the standard! Here is the place to stand!" And rammed the spiked end deep into the ground before the struck tent of Manlius. It was his memorial.

At the same spot Andronicus stood his ground alone, short-sword in one hand, dagger in the other, his back against the standard shaft, using the knowledge of the skilled gladiator in its defense.

"I will raise you a tomb, my father, which will cause the grandchildren of these animals to tremble!"

Killing had been his profession, his love, his desire. Now he began to kill—coldly, scientifically, carefully conserving his strength. One blow to a man was enough.

In the end no more would come against him. They shrank back from where he stood leaning against the Eagle. He whipped off his belt and buckled his body tight against the shaft for a support, before they ringed him and filled him with arrows at a distance.

He could not fall. His blood dripped through the interstices of the mound of dead which effectively covered and hid the concealed pit.

“ABOVE THIS WOMAN  
I RAISE MY TOUG!”

Lilia did not see her friend the surgeon fall. She knew he was inside the hospital tent beside her when a wagon came plunging through. Its horses tore the walls through like paper, rearing and oversetting the cots. It was without a driver and went on like an avalanche, dragging long streamers of canvas behind it.

She did not know how she came to be in the open air, being dragged away at a run, Pandarus on one side, Eitel on the other. Then she was on her back, staring up at the yellow storm of drifting dust above, lying half stunned. Everything was like a terrible dream.

Pandarus was dancing light-footedly before her. She could not understand how he could be so gay at such a time. Her wits cleared and she saw that he was engaged with two squat, skin-clad men. They jabbed at him with shortened spears and he bled from many wounds.

With left arm in front of his face, just below his chin, he warded off their blows with his long knife, held low in his right hand, its point a little above horizontal. He continually sprang in and out, but never from side to side. He never once let the spear points slip by to harm her, until he could no longer stand.

Then he lunged forward on his face, falling upon one of his antagonists whom he had split from chin to groin. Neither moved.

A long snake coiled out above them. It yanked the other Hun from his feet. He flew through the air, straight into the blow of Eitel's mighty fist armed with a knobby cestus. Lilia shrieked. She saw SPQR stamped deep in sunken letters across that snarling visage.

Eitel was reaching down for Lilia when the unguided wagon came racing back. There was no time to pull her out of the way.

He met the wild-eyed, foaming horses head on. A terrific blow from his heavy spike-studded mace crushed in the bone just below the forelock and dropped the stricken one of the team in his harness.

The uninjured horse swung aside. The ponderous wagon heaved, leaned over, and toppled toward Eitel and Lilia. It filled the sky, shutting everything out, and crashed down upon them. Lilia felt herself mightily shoved. She was knocked harmlessly aside, but Eitel lay pinned below the knee by the sharp edge of the wagon body.

Neither was able to stir. They lay there, hidden by the wrecked wagon. The frantic, uninjured horse kicked loose and raced away, trailing its leather reins across the trampled ground.

Lilia crawled to Eitel, clutching her abdomen in great pain. Sobbing, she tried to pull the weight of him out from under the wagon with her small hands, until she saw that he was held fast and the effort was hopeless.

His leg was almost severed. The bone was shattered in several places and protruded in white fragments through the skin.

She knew she must stop the blood from flowing, even though it seemed useless in this extremity. It was all she could do to help him.

She applied a tourniquet and tightened it, until only a small trickle came through the arteries in the open wounds.

Overwrought by the calamity and rendered oblivious to her surroundings by the intensity of her labor, she did not realize until it was finished that the sound of fighting, the inhuman howls, and the clash of arms had ceased.

The long struggle was over.

Lilia and Eitel peered out from behind their precarious shelter. Cerberus and Irax lay close together nearby, black lips still curled back in snarling rictus, the teeth of each savage Molossian hound fixed in the throat of a dead Hun, faithful to the last, in their trust.

It was evident that discovery could not long be delayed. The victors were all over the camp, talking in high voices, looting the dead. Wherever there was movement in one of the bodies, a



quick stab or a viciously casual slash brought stillness to the wounded.

Eitel's voice was low and urgent. "Quick, little Roman! Can you reach Pandarus' knife?"

Lilia thought she knew what he meant to do. She took the lance that he had seized from where the nearest Hun lay within easy reach. She slid it along the ground and tried to drag the knife out of Pandarus' lifeless hand. It was held firmly and would not come loose. The lance point slid down the blade time after time.

Finally, in desperation, she twisted the barb in his tunic and pulled the arm within reach. The body moved as though alive.

Lilia gasped. She was sure the movement must have been observed. It had not. She reached out and unclasped the already stiffening fingers.

"Hurry! Hurry!"

She gave the knife to Eitel, closed her eyes, and raised her throat, bare to the blow. "I am glad it will be you," she said without fear, and waited.

The merciful stroke did not come. She opened her eyes at his despairing groan. Eitel had twisted about, his leg bent at an odd angle, and now was trying to reach the dead horse.

"I cannot," he panted. "Quick! Cut off the tail and give it to me!"

She obeyed without question, not pausing to wonder why. She gave him the bloody stub with its long trailing queue of coarse black hair.

He tore out enough strands to rub a strong cord between his hard palms. With this, he bound the tail to the butt of the lance. "It should be a yak tail, but it will have to do."

As he finished, a group of the looters came around the end of the wagon. They laughed and strode without haste toward the helpless couple, looking gloatingly at Lilia.

One was carrying a dripping ax. He scowled at Eitel and advanced upon him with it upraised. Before he could strike, Eitel jammed the spear point into the ground. The horse tail streamed out in the wind.

"Above this woman I raise my toug. I claim the rights of battle!"

The group halted, their flat faces showing their bewilderment. The bone-tipped spear points dropped. The leader slowly lowered his ax and rested the head of it on the ground. He studied them.

"A Hun?" he asked in his own language.

"A prisoner of the Romans. This is my woman." Lilia shrank a little closer to Eitel. The words were not exactly as she had learned them from Eitel, but she knew what he had said.

The leader considered, in stony-eyed doubt. He scratched his ear and gave up the responsibility of making the decision. He stood out from behind the wagon and bellowed, "Togruk!" across the body-strewn campground.

There was a brief wait. Lilia had not seen the haughty Hun chieftain at close hand. Now she was appalled at the sight of him. The Tandjou was a man of immense strength. His bare arms bulged with knots of muscle. His chest was massive under an open leather jacket ornamented with the skins of field mice.

She did not have to be told that he scorned the use of armor. In his savage face she saw no mercy.

She tried to show no fear, but she reached out and took Eitel's hand. Togruk saw the involuntary movement and grinned.

He nodded at the group. "I will take the woman. Kill him." And turned away.

"Tandjou!" Eitel's shout rang out like a trumpet. "By the laws of the Horde of Tu-Kiu, I challenge you to combat and name you worthless coward if you refuse!"

Togruk turned back. The poised weapons dropped a second time at his signal. "You speak proudly for a beaten man. Who are you?"

"My father was Tannak, kagan of his horde, taken in war, enslaved, tortured by the city men. My mother was a princess of Ethiopia, where all are black. I am fit to meet you with arms.

"I am of your rank by birth—or better."

"That name is known to me and not as a friend. I see you have raised your toug in front of your yurt." Togruk looked at the horse tail and the overturned wagon under which Eitel lay, still pinned. His glance estimated Lilia. "I observe also that you have your own horde behind you. A small one, but growing."

He laughed, contemptuously. "Rise then, Tandjou of Tu-Kiu.

Rise, if you can, and take up your mace. Your death shall be delayed but a short while longer.”

Togruk stood away a few steps and held out his hand without looking back to see what weapon would be given him. Drawn by curiosity, a large crowd of Huns had gathered around. One offered a club. He took it, swinging it lightly.

Lilia watched with terror. She flung her arms around Eitel and shielded him with her own body.

“You can’t do it, Eitel. He will kill you. I will go to him if he will spare your life. Make him promise. I will go, Eitel. I want you to live. If you die, I will die too.”

Eitel ignored her. He pushed her aside roughly, as though women meant nothing to him. He motioned with a peremptory gesture at the man who leaned upon the ax. The savage looked for orders at his chief.

“Give it to him.”

Eitel took the ax and handed it to Lilia. “Free me from this burden.”

She stared at him without understanding. He said angrily, seeming to be vexed at her stupidity, “My leg, woman. Finish it. Take it off.”

Then what he meant came to her in all its bleak necessity and horror. “Oh, Eitel! Oh, Gods! Oh, Jupiter! No!” She threw down the ax as though it were a living snake. “I can’t do it. I won’t!”

She fell on her knees before Togruk, begging. “Take me. I will do anything you say. Don’t hurt him. Don’t kill him. Be merciful, Great Tandjou!”

“Lilia!” The cry was a command. It brought her to a consciousness of herself. “You are a Roman. Behave like a Roman. Pick up that ax and come here.”

Like an automaton, she obeyed. His eyes held her fixed and still. “Legionary Lilia Corinna Metellus, I gave you an order. Do as I told you to do.”

Her voice was a dry monotone, without emotion. “You will be a cripple all your days, without your leg.”

“And with it, I cannot fight for you. Obey!”

She did not remove her gaze from his as she lifted the ax. It seemed as though no one breathed in the crowd. Even the wind no longer stirred the horse tail. All waited.

Her stare flicked aside. She brought down the heavy blade, true and hard. It thudded deep into the ground, severing the flesh which had not been cut through. His face livid with tension, Eitel hauled himself up by the wagon body, standing upon his remaining leg, clutching his spiked mace.

"I am ready, Tandjou! To the death!"

Togruk stood still. In his coarse, seamed face there grew a dawning admiration. No sound had come from the surrounding crowd, since the universal gasp of indrawn breath at the fall of the ax. None came now, but Togruk knew he was being watched.

He felt he had lost some of the approval of his men. Emotions and allegiances shift easily and a leadership is precarious at best. His face turned hard. He lifted his club and took a step forward.

"Wait!" Lilia stood in his way. She had recovered herself now. Her whole attitude was disdainful and condemning. Her scornful glance belittled the Hun chief. Her derisive words cut like a whip.

"Is this the honor of the Huns? Will the tale of the bravery of their chief be sung around their campfires?"

She pointed at the many women who had by this time come in from the wagon ring to glean among the corpses.

"Join these women, Togruk. Call yourself 'man' no more. What man without wound, without pain, would fight a cripple who suffers?"

"You are no man, Togruk. You are no woman, for no woman would do this. You are less than woman. You are a cruel, heartless child, without pride, without breeding, without honor.

"Go, then. Throw down your club and go to drink mother's milk among the infants and may it poison you, for no woman of good heart would hold you to her breast!"

A low mutter of voices ran around the circle. It was sullen and mocking. Togruk looked wildly around. In all the crowd he saw no approval. He stared at them fiercely, but it was his eyes that first fell.

He raised his club above his head and thrust out his foot. The heavy weight fell brutally upon it, crushing the slender bones of his instep. He groaned.

“Now I know pain, little wren whose chirping is so shrill. Are you satisfied?”

“I am content,” Lilia said grimly. Togruk went forward, limping, and the two powerful men came together.

The Tandjou, with his greater power of movement, aimed and delivered the first blow. It seemed to Lilia that, with the force behind it, there could not possibly be another—Eitel must be dead. Then she saw that he had not moved from the spot, except for crouching so quickly that she had not seen the act.

Where his head had been, white splinters flew from the wagon bed and a wide dent showed in the cracked planks. Instantly rising erect, Eitel returned the blow, swinging his mace underhand with all the strength in his arms, back, and thigh muscles.

It struck low on the handle of the club and dashed it from Togruk's grasp, already weakened by the shock which had numbed the Hun's fingers.

Before he could recover, Eitel sprang, pushing himself away from the wagon with all his strength, to collide with Togruk and grapple him around the waist. He pinned the Tandjou's arms to his sides and buried his own head under that jutting chin.

They fell together, Eitel hanging on, doggedly maintaining his grip, but beneath his antagonist's crushing weight and with breath knocked out of himself. He had fallen with his back across the handle of his own mace.

Lilia could see his face go even more sallow than before. She reached down, unnoticed, and picked up Pandarus' knife. She hid her hand in her tunic and edged a little closer. If Eitel lost the encounter—and she could not see how he could win—if he were slain, then Eitel should have this dog of a Togruk for escort into the Land of the Shades, and she would not be far behind.

It came to her, with a sudden shock, that when Eitel told the group that she was his woman she had not been offended. There had been a little leap of pleasure in her heart. She had, for a moment, felt honored. It was as though this was something she had long known.

She did not feel surprised, nor had she any sense of unfaithfulness to the memory of Tibullus.

A little color was coming back into Eitel's dark cheeks. He had his thumbs and fingers twisted together in a death grip behind

Togruk's back. He increased the pressure now, thrusting upward against his enemy, forcing his own head up and up, pushing Togruk's jaw back until it cracked and that scarred chin pointed straight at the sky. The thick cords of both necks stood out, purple with the immense effort.

They lay in each other's arms like a pair of lovers, making no other motion, straining together. Then, to all of them, in the burdening silence, there came the dull sound of a splintered rib.

Lilia wondered that there was air in the lungs of either. Togruk choked and she knew it was he who had the hurt. Eitel did not relax his grip. He gasped, "I have you. Shall I kill? I can crush your heart."

Togruk could not speak. He twisted his head slightly to either side and Eitel allowed him to take one breath and let his head come down to a normal position. With a great heave, he rolled the heavy body off himself and they lay there, side by side, taking in air in wheezing gulps.

It was then that Lilia saw what Eitel's strategy had been.

The projecting metal boss on the leather corselet he always wore in battle had dug deep into the Hun's chest, directly over the heart. There was an indentation there, now filling and turning black with congested blood.

Togruk saw her looking at him with wide eyes filled with panic. He managed the writhe of thin lips that, in him, passed for a smile.

"Fear nothing," he said painfully. "The fight was fair. You shall have bread and salt. I give you both shelter." Then, to those around him, for she reeled with the weakness of joyful relief and seemed about to fall, he snapped, with something of returning arrogance, "Look to the woman. Her time is upon her."

Lilia dropped her knife and women came out of the crowd, supported her on her trembling legs, and led her out of sight into one of their wagons.

Men lifted Eitel and took him to a pot of bubbling tar to seal the amputation. They would have carried Togruk there, that he might see the courage of the new member of the horde, but their Tandjou thrust aside their hands in fury.

He stood up and walked painfully beside his victorious antagonist. "There is no other man here who could have done what

you have done today.” They smiled at each other, as red ribbons laced the surface of the tar.

A warrior brought Togruk a trophy. The Eagle of the Thirteenth gleamed in his hands, its beak sharp and open, still crying silent defiance at the world, its wings spread as though ready to spring to the attack.

The Tandjou looked at its golden glory for a longing moment.

“Put it back where you found it and set the shaft deep. They died for it. It belongs to them.”

There were waves of pain that came and went. There was light that alternated with dark, that streamed across eternities; there was wailing and comfort which returned for all too short a time; there was pain and there was blessed rest.

Lilia opened her eyes. She felt drowsy and at peace. She lay in deep furs, inside a moving, felt-canopied wagon. A tallow-fed lamp smoked overhead, swaying back and forth as the wagon lurched. It sent bars of shadow across her face.

Outside, through the cracks where the leather curtain did not quite join together at the entrance, she could see only darkness and lighted torches on the following wagons. Hers was only one in a long procession.

At first Lilia thought she was alone. Then she saw that a young woman, comely despite her broad features, squatted on her heels beside her, holding a bundle in her arms. When she saw that Lilia was awake she showed startlingly white teeth and held out the bundle for her to take.

“Your strong son,” she said, and placed the sleeping baby in the eager arms.

“I will bring food.” She took up a bowl and let herself out the rear of the wagon.

Lilia cradled the little warm bundle. Soft breathing sounds came from it. She held it tenderly and pushed back the linen cloth to see.

There he was. So tiny—so perfect . . . Hers! Clean, sweet-smelling, cared for . . . Hun women could not be much different from herself, if they cherished children so well.

Distantly, she heard singing. She could not make out the words and there did not seem to be any tune, at least to no scale

that she understood, but there was singing, to which the wagon caravan moved.

It was a melancholy threnody, as befitted the day. She knew that it was a lament and the living mourned their dead. Suddenly she did not feel herself out of place in these strange surroundings.

She started to a lightning stroke of dark memory. Eitel! Oh, Jupiter! Where was he? How could she have forgotten him for even an instant?

She stared wildly around and there he was, likewise lapped in cushioning furs, within arm's reach, propped up on one elbow and watching her. His stern lips were tenderly curved. His face was drawn and tired.

She knew he must be suffering, but how handsome he was! The lines of character in his face, the high, furrowed brow, the funny, broken nose, all the things that she once thought so ugly had combined to make Eitel what he was—and Eitel could never be ugly to her again. Oh, Eitel. How could I ever have been afraid of you?

"I beg your forgiveness, little Roman. While you slept, Togruk came. I showed him the horse birthmark you bear upon your breast.

"He knew the prophecy I never dared tell you—that of such a woman should be born a son who would become a great leader.

"He believes your child to be that one, or perhaps his son's son, to unite all the Hun tribes. You will be greatly honored here as his mother."

She sank back, holding the baby in the crook of her arm, and turned her face to Eitel. She reached out and took the hand he extended.

"I want no other honor than to be the wife of Eitel."

The hand quivered and pulled back, but she would not let it go. She answered the unspoken question in his patient eyes.

"Love makes time pass; time makes love pass. I was in love with love, before. Now I am in love with you and this time it will not pass."

"I have no presents for you, little Roman, no marriage rings, no money, no jewels—not even a drink of kumiss that belongs to me. I am a wanderer and a cripple. I have no home."



She pulled herself a little closer to him and placed her fingers gently on his lips. “Hush. I want none of such things. It is much more that I ask. Home is where I am. Home is me.

“I am a merchant’s daughter. I will give you the rest of my life if you will give me yours.”

She thought he was not going to speak. Finally Eitel said:

“It is a fine, strong son. I will teach him all I know and he will be as my own. He shall have my name.”

“To have your name will be his pride and mine. I will tell him of Rome’s majesty, of her beauty and her power. Perhaps someday he, or some other little Etila or Attilus, will go again to Rome.”

“And I will tell him of Rome’s crimes, of her cruelty and her arrogance. I will bid him, when he goes, to go with sword in hand.”

“So we go together, all that you will is my desire.”

When the Hun maiden returned with the bowl she saw that the three slept and had no wish for food.

The caravan moved on under the stars, singing through the night.

## LITTLE BAND OF BROTHERS

When there was light enough coming through the high clouds which still enshrouded the pass, Troop Commander Quintus led his command down into the mountain meadow. Their camp on the other side of the range had been cold. They were happy to find a good fire burning.

There was no wine. Quintus wondered if there ever would be any again, but Liu Mang had given him a little of his precious store of tea in anticipation of just such a need. The hot drink gave them new life.

With his sling, the legionary who guarded the horses had knocked over some rock conies to occupy his time and had made a stew, seasoned with wild onions. This, with the remainder of the dried meat they had brought for rations, was enough for a lavish, strengthening meal which they sorely needed.

They sat around the fire, warming themselves for the return journey to the camp. The horse tender was anxious to hear of their discoveries.

"It is a good pass," Longinus informed him. "High, about a cubit deep in snow. Not really dangerous for us. Impossible to get the horses any farther than this. We will have to turn them loose when we come back.

"The snow extends down the other side a little way and there are some bad spots, wet and hip deep. We went around a few rotten snow bridges over crevasses, but it is worse on this side."

He looked up at the steep, dark, menacing ridge above. "No more wagons for baggage. We will have to leave the scorpions behind, too."

Quintus agreed. "That's right. Everything will have to be

backpacked now, or left behind. Make the most of that stew. We may not be able to take along the heavy kettles."

Longinus continued. "The snow fields end at a big brow of rock that looks steep and treacherous. We will need all the ropes we can get to make the descent safe for the army, but we few managed to cross a lot of loose rock, by being careful.

"We found chimneys and niches that lead from one terrace to another. They go down the mountain like giant steps. Once out of the snow, it was an easy descent. We went almost all the way down to the flat ground and turned back only when we reached a slippery chute of sliding pebbles, melt water, and mud.

"It wasn't impossible. Still, it would have been hard to climb back up it and there was no need. We could see all we needed to see. **The army can cross here.**

"What about you? The horses look well rested."

The legionary shrugged. "Nothing. It was dull, waiting. I heard some noises over yonder. Quite far." He pointed into the northwest. "Sounded like a storm coming up. There were some sharp cracks of thunder yesterday afternoon. No rain fell and toward night everything was quiet.

"Strange though. There never were any dark clouds and I didn't see any lightning. Lot of birds went over in that direction. The sky was full of them for a while. I haven't seen any this morning.

"Ravens don't migrate, do they?"

"Never heard that they did." Longinus showed no interest, but Quintus looked thoughtful. **He stood up.**

"Leave anything here that we don't need. We'll pick it up on the way. Let's get back to camp. I've got a jar of kumiss there, if some thief hasn't found it."

Once around the spur of the range, the open plain lay before the troop of scouts. They rode at an easy canter, in the direction of the camp, a distance of some two hours' journey at their present rate of travel. As they came closer they saw the wide track of flattened grass, churned soil, and wagon ruts which had been created by the Hun caravan on its way to the camp.

A dawning dismay of comprehension came upon them. They

spurred the horses. They fled over the plain toward the disaster they feared to see and expected to find.

Silence lay everywhere. None of the usual game was in sight. The wind blew from the riders to the camp and nothing indicated what had happened, or what might be happening, except that the earth underfoot was no longer smooth and hidden by grass. It was raw, cut up like a plowed and harrowed field by the impact of thousands of sharp, unshod hoofs.

Then the troop came upon pieces of the detritus of war. Here and there a dead horse, already bloating, from which a wolf slunk, snarling at the interruption of his meal; beyond, in the distance, the dark hulk of an overturned wagon, a prominent landmark upon the plain, even though it was still two miles away.

Still farther. The tents of the camp should now be visible. With almost one accord, each man rose in his stirrups, straining to see. The smokes of the morning cooking fires should have been rising. There was none.

Then the wind shifted and the familiar smell of a battlefield was brought to them and their worst fears were confirmed. They galloped on, flogging their horses.

As they neared the camp, passing now through the circular zone where the Hun wagons had been drawn up, hub to hub, they were relieved to see movement, although it was evident there had been much destruction.

At least the attack had been beaten off, for the besiegers had gone. Quintus rode ahead, shouting. The others followed, allowing their blown horses to take an easier pace. It was then, at the noise of their calling the names of comrades, that they knew the truth.

The chattering they heard was not that of human voices; the movement not that of busy workers repairing the damage they could see; not the bustle of reconstruction.

No voice answered. A cloud of birds rose, to circle, wheel, and screech. Darkening the sun by their complaining numbers, they whirled overhead. Kites, ravens, buzzards, vultures—all spread their dabbled wings and soared, not daring to alight and refusing to leave.

All the foul varieties of the birds of death which cleanse the plains of Asia had gathered like banqueting harpies come to

feast. Under the shadow of these wings the troop rode into camp.

Everything lay flat and desolate. The palisade was down, uprooted by the lassos of those Huns whose bodies filled the two ditches. The tents were leveled. The scorpions were demolished.

The only high points in the encampment were the wrecked wagons, the mounds of the dead where fighting had been most furious, and the Eagle, which still stood, gazing across the corpses of its defenders.

Here was Pandarus and those who had opposed him; here was the piper, his pipes forever silenced; here were many comrades whom the troopers recognized and here, too, was one stranger whom they did not.

Only Quintus had seen Andronicus before, and after beholding him, so long ago, being dragged from the arena unconscious and bleeding, had not thought to see him again. The mystery of him, still wearing his slashed Praetorian dress armor and feathered with arrows, was one they could not solve, until Quintus guessed why he had come. They roamed the enclosure, turning over the bodies, hoping vainly to find one who still had the breath of life. They always returned to stand before the Eagle, where lay the mound of Hun dead which Andronicus had promised to raise over his father's tomb.

As they gathered for the last time before leaving with the few supplies the marauders had overlooked, Proxillus heard a low moan from underneath the pile.

Frantically they heaved the corpses aside and uncovered the lattice of spears and canvas that had shielded their commander. Quintus looked down once more upon the pallid face of his old and dear friend. Many hands gripped the edges of his pallet. Manlius was lifted out into the warm sunlight.

There was no wine to offer, no other stimulant at hand, nor need for any. Nothing could lengthen the short moments still remaining to him.

They made him comfortable. They raised the rags of the tent to shield his eyes from the burning sun. Most of them waited outside and talked in low voices and scanned the plain and snarled at the hovering birds while Quintus and Longinus watched over Manlius until the inevitable end.

He was conscious and seemed to be without pain. His mind was lucid and his voice weak, but commanding and determined to the last. They discussed many things: tactics, the battle with the Huns, the reason why Andronicus had followed.

They spoke of the future. Manlius did so with a weariness Quintus had not seen him show before.

"You were always against this expedition. Now that I have led my command to death, do you think I was right in my determination, or wrong?"

"Being what you are, you could have done nothing else. It is not for me to judge. The gods—if there are any—must decide, not men."

"Yes." His weak voice was soft in reverie. "I shall soon stand before them. Jupiter. Mars. The Unknown God."

Centurion Longinus started and looked keenly at him. His own face flushed with an inexpressible look of sadness. He covered his eyes with his hand and turned his head away from the dying man.

"I wonder which will be the more merciful. Quintus, you are no longer bound by friendship to continue on this futile quest. You can return as you have always wanted to do."

"There will be no turning back." There was a false heartiness in Quintus' voice. "When you are able to be moved, we shall continue. We have gone this far together. We can go the rest of the way."

Manlius was not deceived. "Do as you will. Centurion, are you of the same mind?"

"The men and myself are under your orders, Imperator."

"There are no emperors in the Land of the Shades. I give you my last command. Find the Wu-Sun. Find the Lost Legion."

"Stay with them. Give them good leadership. Train them to be fine soldiers, able to fight their way back home where they belong. They are Romans. Take these exiles back to Rome, Longinus. My heart will be with you, as it has been with them. If this is done, the mission will have succeeded. I shall not have failed."

Quintus said, "No man fails when he has done his utmost. You did. The legion did. No one has failed. We have only died."

They built a cairn of stones over Manlius and his son, but before the two were laid away Longinus, after consulting with Quintus, went into the tent, his sword bared. "Remember his last words," he had said. "He *can* be with us when we find the Wu-Sun."

"I will look in my supplies," Quintus replied after a moment. "I think I have a little salt." He had turned away in agony. "Do what has to be done. I can't."

In the cool shadows of the tent, Longinus did so. "I once swore I'd see your blood on my sword," he said softly as he stood over the body. "But, oh, Imperator, I never thought it would be like this."

Many stadia to the rear now lay the abandoned encampment with its quarreling birds; far behind were the distant snow-covered peaks, crossed with such toil and danger; a month of days had passed.

The land seemed unpeopled. This, in itself, was strange, for there was much game. They had seen wild asses and shaggy, double-humped camels feeding on the sparse verdure in this country of many springs wreathed by green poplars. They had shot antelopes and eaten well.

They had become a little band of brothers—united in mind and determination. They followed the Eagle. The eyes of all continually raised to the little silver box which swung on its slender chain, just beneath the sacred emblem.

They marched thus eastward, as their leader would have wished. They had no thought of turning back. They were twenty deadly men. They saw no one, or any sign of road or dwelling.

Sometimes the troop crossed immense areas of loose sand. This was raised in clouds by storms of wind. The hills and dunes, at such times, marched with them, moving on like waves across the dreary landscape. They were guided only by the stars, the sun, and the dust devils which whirled along in columns of the most fantastic shapes.

It seemed a land shunned by men and so it was, for in this section, which the people of Ch'in called the accursed land of Lop Nor, the river Tarim had changed its course to end in a new lake far to the southeast.

The fishermen had followed it; their reed and mud houses had decayed into ruin; the ducks and cormorants swam in larger pools than were left behind in this desert. Now the road, which the caravans took with their precious loads of silk, swung south in a hundred-mile detour to take advantage of the water which no longer lay along their former route.

Unaware of all this, the troop pressed on, straight east, toward the shores of the dried-up marsh where the vanished lake had been.

Longinus looked back along the way they had come and saw a furtive movement. "It is still following," he said.

Quintus saw the gleam of the firelight in the flash of red eyes. He cursed, picked up a brand, and hurled it wheeling through the air. The eyes disappeared.

"It will soon be back." Longinus nodded and sat down. He gnawed reflectively upon the bone he held.

"The wolf knows. If he waits long enough, one way or another, he will eat. I tell you again. I should depart from you."

"No more of that. Forget this obsession of yours. You are no more to blame for our troubles than I am, or any of the rest of us."

"I do not understand, Troop Commander, why you will not believe me. I have explained to you many times why I am hated. I bring doom to people. Our commander said I was not to blame, but he was wrong. Look at the record.

"This expedition has been dogged by disaster from the start, because I was with it. Without me, with whom God is angry, it might have had a chance. With me along, it never did."

"You exaggerate your own importance, Longinus. I thought your Unknown God was a god of mercy."

"Yes—but not to one who helped to kill His Son."

Quintus had nothing to say to this. Everything had been said before. He sat staring into the fire, half believing—cynic, agnostic, skeptical as he was concerning all deities—in the possibility that, after all, gods, if there were any, might concern themselves in the affairs of men. In the Gobi, especially at night, it is easy to feel malevolence close and active.

He shuddered. A charred stick broke and fell into red ash.



"Let us sleep. Tomorrow comes early."

It was about midnight, while standing sentry, that Longinus thought he saw a man, standing like an indistinct shadow just outside the range of firelight.

He challenged, but there was no answer. He peered into the dark and saw nothing. He listened. No footsteps hastily retiring, not even the faint scratch of the wolf's claws upon the hard clay—a sound with which he had come to be well acquainted.

He stood his watch and mentioned the incident to the sentry who relieved him. The man nodded. "Oh yes, Centurion. I have seen him often. We all have—ever since we left the other side of the mountains."

"Why was no report of this made to me?"

The sentry stared. "We supposed you had seen him. You mean you didn't know?"

"Maintain post. If you see him again, don't challenge—shoot."

Longinus turned on his heel and strode away toward the fire. The sentry looked after him. "No," he muttered to himself. "I don't think I'll do that, Centurion. You don't shoot ghosts with arrows."

"Not this one, anyway. Not when you know who it is."

He walked his post, cheerily whistling under his breath. He was not in the least afraid.

In the morning a light frost lay late on the hard ground. Winter was approaching. Distant peaks, to the northward, now wore robes of snow in addition to their white crowns.

The desert was barren as ever, but across it, angling a little off the way they had been taking, there ran the worn evidences of a disused road.

It was drifted over by dunes.

Sighting along it, Quintus saw what appeared to be a building. When, after about another hour of travel, they reached it, it was found to be a watchtower, deserted, without furniture of any kind and in a state of ruin. It was surrounded by a yard, enclosed within a low rectangular clay wall.

The scene was utterly desolate and forbidding. Across it, a wolf wind blew, cutting and cold.

They followed the road, finding upon it other towers in a simi-

lar condition, situated about three miles apart. In one of these they camped for the night.

During the dark hours Longinus woke with a start. A shadow filled the space where once a rotted door had fallen. He lay looking at it and it did not stir. The men lay around the edges of the large room, wrapped in their blankets and asleep, with their feet to the fire of smoldering camel dung they had picked up on the way. He, and this man who was watching them quietly, were the only ones awake.

Longinus said, "Is that you, Varius? Is something wrong? Why have you left your post?"

There was no answer. He gathered his feet under him for a quick lunge and slipped his blanket aside in readiness. For an instant the corner of it intercepted his vision. The man was gone.

Longinus sprang up and ran out. A hundred feet away, sentry Varius paced the quadrangle in bright moonlight. He could not possibly have regained his post in those few seconds. Neither could any man have crossed that open space without having been seen and challenged.

The centurion opened his mouth to shout, thought better of it, went back into the dim room, and carefully counted the sleepers. With himself, the only one awake, there were nineteen. The sentry made up the full tally. A score of men, no less, no more.

Who, then, was this one who followed to watch, never spoke, and could vanish so abruptly? Could it be the wolf? Longinus was well acquainted with the legend of the turncoat—the *versipellis*—the man who could shed his coat, put it on inside out, and run the woods, hairy, on four feet beneath the moon.

He had been frightened by this story as a child. He had not believed in such tales since. He was hardheaded. However, this was Asia, not Italy, and strange things might be possible here. He grunted. Two sentries, back to back, might be better than one.

The next day, on the march, he mentioned the affair to Quintus in a casual, joking way.

He had not known about the stranger before Longinus told him.

The day's march followed the road as before.

Longinus kept a careful watch to the rear. On the tenth day

since discovering the road, the marchers followed it over a low ridge, to find it descending into a depression filled by a salt marsh. Dry, dead reeds rustled plaintively in the chill, biting winds. Surrounding all was a wide area of baked clay, seamed with deep cracks, where water had receded slowly, until it disappeared.

Near the former shore of this long-vanished shallow lake, some miles away, there stood the walls of a city. The road led toward it, without track of recent feet. The ruts of wheels looked old and timeless, though deeply worn. Approaching it was like coming home.

Here were the gates, where they ought to be, though long decayed and fallen; here was the surrounding deep, defending trench; the mound of earth upon which the first line of impact was meant to shatter; here the rotting line of stakes, like a row of fangs to tear an enemy charge—now softened by time and with many gaps.

They passed inside quietly, as though entering a tomb, and saw what they had expected to see.

The city, laid out as many Roman cities were, followed the same conforming outlines as the Roman fortified camp. Here were rows of houses, where the tents would normally have been, mere low outlines of mud brick without roofs, crumbled and destroyed by rains of many years, by wind and sand and time.

Only the walls of the city, thicker than those of the dwellings, still retained some strength and symmetry. Against them lay high dunes which crept upward to destroy and hide the last vestiges of the exiles these men had come so far to seek.

This was the home that the survivors of Carrhae had made for themselves—the gray- and blue-eyed Wu-Sun, white people Liu Mang had known of only by hearsay. This was the city of the Lost Legion.

There were no signs that the place had ever been taken by war—no charred timbers, no broken weapons. One man picked up a clay doll.

These refugees had taken wives. There had been warmth on their hearths and affection in these buried houses. Near the south gate where a tombstone projected a little way above the

encroaching sand, Proxillus, the trumpeter, saw the beginning of an inscription.

He set the Eagle against the wall and dug until he had uncovered all the worn lettering.

To the Gods, the Shades; for Simplicia Plania, a Most Innocent Being, Who Lived Ten Months. Her Father, Centurion Maxentius Simplex, of the XIIth Legion, Fulminator, Dedicated This.

The shrine of Mars was where it should have been situated, though empty of its Eagle and stripped of its portable altar. Inside it lay the worn share of a broken plow.

It was without doubt the implement which had been used to mark out the first street grids.

To give a plow such an honored place was proof that these city builders had clung to old ways and thought longingly of home.

Quintus turned it over with his foot. "A versatile instrument, the plow. It wounds Mother Earth and forces her to feed us. Noble man! He uses the plow to mark his own borders and cover the leveled ruins of his enemies. Then the wind and the sand cover, in turn, all that he had dreamed would last for ages—all that he has built.

"Speak not to me again of gods! It is a lie—or else they laugh at us. We are a joke to them. There is nothing in this world that is good. Nothing to make us forget, except wine and women, and we have neither!"

He kicked the wooden share aside. It fell apart, riddled with wormholes, into shapeless scraps.

He was violently shaking when Longinus led him out of the ruined shrine.

"It is time to go."

A few moments later the city was again empty. The only sound within it was the melancholy wail of the ever present wind and the thin, dry trickle of sand grains sifting over the walls.

## “PREPARE TO RECEIVE CAVALRY!”

Pools marked the course of the former river and beside it ran the ancient road that was their guide. All roads have a beginning and an end. Toward one of these, not knowing which it might be, the troop journeyed.

It was a guide and a highway for other travelers as well.

Although herds could not find sustenance in this desert, swift marauders could. Grass was scant, but there are those who need little. One day, there would be a nation to be reckoned with.

They rode where they would, with no more direction than the will of the winds, and where they rode their paths were marked by the dead they left behind. Their small, tough ponies could live on weeds, thistles, bark, or the gray, wilted leaves of the thornbush. Beside them, the Huns, their cousins, were mild.

The people of Ch'in called them the “rancid demons,” for, being usually without water, they washed seldom and they smeared themselves with grease against the cold. They slept leaning on the necks of their beasts. They rode and they killed and they rode away. After they had their plunder they disappeared.

The god of these wanderers was the *mongke tengri*—the everlasting blue sky; their devil, the god of the ice. They feared both. One wields the lightning, the other the freezing sleet. The only mercy either knew was that of the knife.

The ordu which called itself proudly the Sons of the Blue Wolf drifted east along the abandoned road. A few people in their way had scratched out a bare existence in some of the tiny oases around the larger springs.

Those who could flee in time and reach the Great Wall had done so, screaming that the Ta-tas were on the way. The others would run no more.

As yet, the troop knew nothing of these spoilers. They marched along the road. Liu Mang could have told them that this had once been the far western end of the great Imperial Highway and the beginning, before the drying up of the lake, of the long Silk Road. He and his knowledge were gone, but they felt sure that somewhere they would find people who would direct them to seaports, Roman ships, and home, for the sea bathes all the coasts of the world.

They sometimes spoke of the past, gazing into campfires, each one seeing pictures in the coals.

They mentioned the old surgeon; Eitel and Lilia, whose bodies had not been found; the wounded to whom the Bactrians had given sanctuary. They wondered about the young artist and his ambition to prove that he could do other than bake and paint cheap pottery.

Proxillus, who had been his friend, said, "If he were with us he would find much to paint, for there is beauty here as well as desolation."

He did not know that at that moment the former legionary, once a crippled prisoner of the Parthians and traded south, from hand to hand, as a useless slave, was experiencing the high point of his life.

In a Buddhist shrine, in what is now named Chinese Turkestan, he dipped his brush for a last time. With it wet in black paint, he backed away from the mural which had engaged so much of his time and paused under the admiring gaze of the priests who had commissioned his work, thinking how he should sign it.

It was a large fresco. The Lord Buddha beamed benevolently upon three people standing in a garden where bamboo curved above its own reflection in a still pool. The girl in the picture was clearly neither Chinese, nor of India, but might have come alive from some lovely miniature at the magic touch of the artist; the man on the right of her was obviously a stern Roman, born to command, and the boy to her left wore the cap of Mithras.

He looked at it, composing briefly what he wished to say, then laughed. On the hindquarters of the elephant, only one of many animals in the scene, he inscribed, in small neat letters:

“This frieze is the work of Titus, who has received three thousand pieces of money for it.”

Cheap pottery plates, indeed!

The troop came at last to a traveled highway for caravans and ox carts. Upon it, given life by a deep well and surrounded by a weary and struggling clump of tamarisk, a little walled village stood—not much more than a posting station, a few huts and a caravanserai.

Just outside, but part of the wall itself, was a drum and clock tower, pierced by a double arch and protected by a heavy gate. This lay open and unguarded by any sentinel.

People littered the streets. They were of all ages, from babes in arms to feeble oldsters. Some had been scalped, the entire circle of hair removed like a lifted cap; others lay with their weapons in their hands, where they had put up a futile resistance. The mayor of the village lay headless on the steps of his yamen—a little boy at his feet, gay in red blouse and green baggy trousers. The missing head hung high above in one of the little wooden cages reserved for criminals.

There were no bodies of young women to be seen anywhere.

Quintus had recovered from his breakdown at the Roman city and was again his coldly calculating self, even more confirmed in his habitual cynicism.

He said to Longinus, “We have drifted across the world like a wild wind in the night, coming unnoticed, gone by morning, driven by destiny, but influencing no one. Our passage has been unmarked, our footprints erased—our road forgotten.”

Longinus meditated upon this. “You cannot say that without knowing all the facts. History may not be the same, because of us. We may have caused changes we cannot foresee. The disturbance of our movements may alter the future of the world.”

The rest period was over. The troop staggered to its feet and resumed the march. The Thirteenth Legion, without a present home or a known destination, moved on, into the East. The web was almost ready to be tied—the thread nearly run out—the shears poised for the cutting.

This was the legion which, by its passing, had interfered in the

lives of men, animals, and insects, had altered the course of events for a nation, had been instrumental in the death of one Emperor and the accession of another, had destroyed a dynasty and established a second, and caused a country to declare its independence.

It had furthered the cause of Christianity and was eventually to hasten the fall of Rome.

Unaware of all this, the score of weary survivors marched on with caution.

That night, bloodied reflections fell upon the earth from the sunset-drenched clouds. They lay wakeful for a long time. At length the wind changed and blew toward them. In the distance, heavy drums were muttering—talking through the night.

Longinus threw back his blankets, put on his worn boots, and climbed a slight elevation near the camp, peering into the dark. A long line of varicolored signal beacons winked across the horizon, changing their colors as he watched. Longinus knew that messages were being transmitted, for Liu Mang had told how his people sprinkled different powders into flame for that purpose.

He felt a brief exultation. The end of their journey was in sight. He turned to go down to the camp and halted. A man stood in the way.

He could not see the man's face, but he knew that this was the mysterious visitor he had seen on two other occasions. He took a few steps closer. The man appeared to recede, maintaining the same distance between them, without apparent movement. Longinus stopped.

"Lord, is my curse lifted? Am I forgiven? Was it Thou who walked with us and guided us?"

"I am with you always, beloved Longinus."

When Longinus lifted his eyes the man was gone. He knew he would not come again.

The sun rose as ominously red as it had descended. When the troop had eaten frugally, Longinus called them to attention. His face was bright.

Starting with the trumpeter, he called the roll of the vanished divisions of the legion. "Sixth Ala?"

"Present and accounted for!" came the crisp answer as Proxillus saluted and stepped back into line.



Cohort after cohort was remembered as the legionaries who faced Longinus answered “Present” for each division of the thousands who had perished.

Quintus received the report as though it had been delivered upon parade and returned Longinus’ salute as precisely as it had been given.

So they shouldered their arms and marched forward to Destiny’s end—under the standard, toward the flaming dawn, and the living no longer thought themselves few, for they felt they were a part of a great host.

Miles fell behind them. Across their route a dark line that could only be man-made stretched as far as eye could see in either direction.

Waving banners, little flecks of movement, twinkles of light from shining weapons marked the watchtowers that studded it. As the troop came closer, it grew in unbelievable length and immensity.

It was soon obvious that they had been sighted. Smoke rose in a series of plumes which spread left and right from the immediate center that faced the troop. It also held, within it, various hues and Quintus realized that news of their coming was being rapidly transmitted in this way.

Faintly far, the sound of calling trumpets and the elfin clangor of gongs spread the alarm from one garrison of wall defenders to another. Toward this dubious greeting the troop made its way. Then, unexpectedly, the measured beating rhythm broke into an alarmed confusion, like a frantic call to arms.

Nothing, at first, was visible to the Romans to explain such excitement. Then, far away and paralleling the course of the wall, a little cloud of rising dust appeared, moving in their direction.

The troop quitted the rough country, reached the easier footing of the beaten highway which ran straight toward the wall, and at double time marched along it. The dust cloud moved with casual tardiness to intercept them, accompanied by the wall signals which marked their progress. As yet, the troop had not been seen by the Sons of the Blue Wolf.

A huge, closed gate of heavy timber filled the opening in the wall and barred the road. On either side of it stood a high watchtower. The troop could see that both were filled with

armed men. Within a few hundred yards of this entrance, the famed Silk Gate, the riders and the legionaries became aware of one another's nearness. The soldiers upon the wall had known of it for much longer.

Quintus hailed the gate. None of the watchers moved or made any indication that it would be opened for their entry or support. The tower captain had already given orders to the contrary.

"When all on the outside of the wall are enemies, does it matter which exterminates the other?"

The Sons of the Blue Wolf howled in joy. They spurred their ponies and increased their velocity. Longinus took the standard and held it high.

"Trumpeter! Prepare to receive cavalry! Sound!"

The Tatar throng was very close and coming in fast. A man in the forefront pounded out the stride on a small saddle drum. His long scalplock trailed out beneath his hide helmet. In this advance the tougs, lined with braids of human hair, flew free in the wind of the rushing charge. Already the horn bows were twanging and the stubby heavy-headed arrows plunging short, but closer.

Shields went up, in the fish-scale locking. Clear and sweet the trumpet sounded its challenge. The twenty lances came down as one, slanting, their butts braced against the ground. The double rank faced the nearing deluge of the ordu.

There was one last cry of the battered cavalry trumpet. Proxillus let the trumpet fall to his side and steadied his lance. Quintus drew his sword.

Longinus shortened the standard and kissed the little silver box. "You to your destiny, faithful heart, and we to ours!"

He hurled the standard as far as he could—eastward, toward the gate. It struck and leaned there, standing proudly in solitary defiance—the Eagle against the Great Wall of China—the silver box swinging pendant on its chain, heart high to a man, as though it watched and waited.

Longinus cast it one quick glance. "You were always in front," he murmured, and set his lance and shield in its defense.

Driven by the wind, a yellow cloud of loess dust rolled ahead of the thundering horsemen. It swept over the unmoving Romans. It obscured the vision of the watchers in their high

safety above. It covered everything, like a thick reek of smoke blowing eastward out of the plains. It curled and eddied and rose.

Out of it came sounds: the dreadful screaming of lance-stricken ponies; the cursing and shouting of men at war; the clash of swords.

When the cloud cleared and the sounds had ebbed, the Romans lay where they had stood, still in a double line—unmoving.

Away, riding hard, the Tatars drove on with the wind, as free, as unpredictable in their wanderings—no more to be considered by the soldiers on the wall than if they had not passed by.

Much later, seeing a slight movement among the slain, a patrol went cautiously out and brought in the only survivor for the captain's inspection. It was Quintus, bitterly wounded and unconscious.

“He will live,” said the squad leader. “Perhaps he may return one day to those who sent him and tell what happened here.

“His armor is like that of our fathers. His skin is as light as our grandfathers' is said to have been. His sword is like mine. How far they must have come! What could they have wanted?”

The captain looked closely at the wounds. “Call one of the young women to minister to him. See that he has rice wine.”

He unfastened the chain on the standard and turned the box over and over in his hands. “The Eagle is like our own, but it has a different inscription and different numbers. T'ang Wu Marcus—take it to the Temple of the War God and place it beside ours.”

He opened the little silver box and looked long at the shrunken, mummified object within. “It is a human heart.”

His yellow, granite face did not betray his sudden pang of regret. “Take this also to the shrine. Bear it thence with drums and banners. Place it in the custody of the bonze and bid him give it honor and respect.

“Tell him to burn incense to the shade who owned it. Surely the one to whom this heart gave life must have been a most valiant warrior, or a very holy man, to have been so greatly loved.”

Lachesis laid down her shears. “Rest, sisters. The pattern is complete. Now let us turn to other things.”




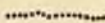













-  Route of the XIII Legion
-  Route of the Man in the Red Phrygian Hat
-  Kings Highway
-  Limits of THE ROMAN EMPIRE (LIMES)
-  Great Wall of CHINA





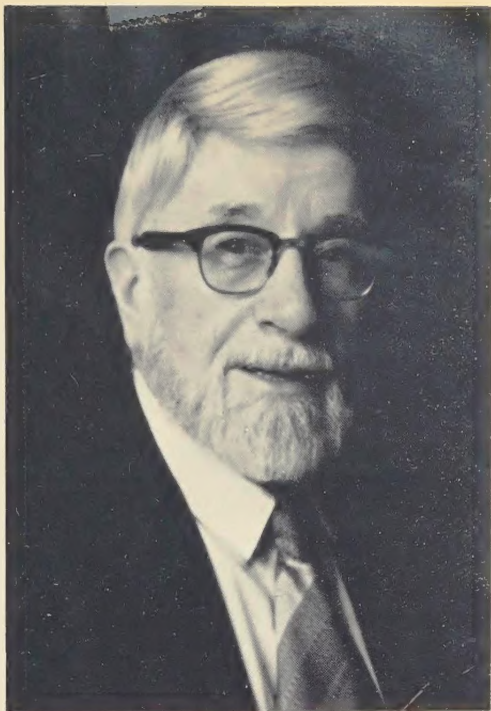


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**H. Warner Munn**, the author of a number of tales of fantasy, here turns his hand to historical fiction, exquisitely researched and realized in this his first major novel. Mr. Munn makes his home in Tacoma, Washington.

JACKET BY PAUL BACON

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"Yonder, the smoke of the city flies East! Under it marches the Lost Legion.

"Heavy the smoke scuds—thick the arrows fly, thickly into the ranks! Yonder the edges whip away. Far, far the ranks grow thin.

"The Eastern sky is wide—beyond the smoke is lost. The lands of Asia are wide enough to bury you all.

"Never the smoke returns. Never the Legion!"

*These words of the Sybil rang out on the Campus Martius in Rome as the Thirteenth Legion set out on its most extraordinary mission: a heroic, impossible journey in search of the Lost Legion, which had vanished past the borders of the known world—into the realm of mystery and legend that lay beyond. Lilia, the daughter of a wealthy Roman aristocrat, lingered by the edge of the field that day, bidding her sweetheart farewell. She did not know then that she would share as well the strange and awesome destiny of the Thirteenth Legion. . . .*

. . . The cavalry began to move. The wind billowed their red cloaks. The horses danced and their trappings jingled. A cheer went up from the crowd.

Up went the standard in the hands of the signifer, high, proud, and visible to all. It streamed out over his head. Up into the clear air went the gay company pennons. The tribune of the Thousand Cohort, crack troops and first in line, raised his arm.

"For-r-ward mar-r-ch! Trumpeter—sound!"

The Thirteenth Legion was on its way.

from

# THE LOST LEGION

H·WARNER MUNN