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THE ROBBER

A Tale of the Time of the Herods

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COLLINS

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*"To face all ruins and defeats;
To sing a beaten world to shame."*

—SIR J. C. SQUIRE

THE ROBBER

PART I

Spring came that year with the sudden fury of summer. The maddening heat blazed over fields and vineyards, drying up streams and springs, and withering the young crops, while flocks grew lean and died in the scorched pastures. Earthquakes rocked the hills along the whole northern coast of the Mediterranean from Antioch to Tarshish. Omens and prophecies multiplied, and the belief began to spread through all the Roman world that this might be the last summer mankind would ever see.

It was said that the phoenix-bird, fiery symbol of catastrophe, had reappeared in Egypt after an interval of fourteen hundred years. In Persia the priests of the Sun God kept their altars flaming in expectation of the earth's immediate purification by fire. Caesar Tiberius had fled to the island of Capri, surrounding himself with soothsayers who nightly watched the skies for signs of the end of the world. Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who had seduced his brother's wife in Rome, hastened back with her to his petty kingdom of Galilee, fearing that victims of his father's slaughter, thirty years before, had risen from the dead to snatch away his throne. Pontius Pilate, the new governor of Judea, who had stirred up priests and people to ominous rioting, was being urged by his fear-ridden spouse, Claudia, to resign his post. Interpreters of her dreams had filled her with forebodings of a revolt of the Jews, led by a superhuman hero, who would usurp the power of all the rulers of the world. Premonitions that the tyranny of Rome was doomed had revived hopes of the coming of a Messiah to the chosen people. It was rumoured in Galilee that the promised Son of David had already come. A prophet who baptized penitents in the Jordan declared to all who would listen that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Beyond Jordan another prophet, who was also a robber, sharing his spoils among the needy, preached to his victims of a coming time when all kingdoms would be abolished.

In that year of drought and disaster there was no lack of prophecy. The whole world was ready to believe that wickedness must soon be swallowed up in a day of awful judgment.

The sun, blazing down into the great gorge of the Jordan, day after day, had shrivelled the young fruit blossoms, and now the fig trees were blackened as in winter, and the silver olive leaves were rusty and wrinkled. The parched fields flanking the Jericho Road looked desolate, and the road itself was deserted as the fierce sun declined on the sixth day of the month Sivan, for everyone capable of the journey had gone up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost.

Alone on the road as it descended to the ford of the Jordan, a wounded man, staggering dizzily at the end of his strength, flung a backward glance over his shoulder, seeking the movement of pursuers in the hills behind, before he started across the dried-up river. Sliding at every step on the slimy stones, he grew giddy, stumbled, and found himself on his hands and knees in the trickling water. Blood was oozing from a wound in his face. A savage sword-stroke had cut into his jaw, and he had been alternately running and plodding for more than an hour, pressing a bleeding piece of flesh against the splintered bone. His wrist and one side of his coarse garment were splattered with blood, and now dark, heavy drops were dripping from his beard as his head swayed forward.

He had hoped to cross the Jordan by nightfall, but as he tried to raise himself, he saw that the long shadowy fingers of dusk which had been reaching out ahead of him had closed together into a dark fist, enfolding the whole valley in deepening gloom. Eastward, beyond the marshes, the path to Bethabara threaded steeply upward to the summit of the mountainous cliff. A few houses standing close to the overhanging brow of rock, their tiny white walls stained by the last fierce glow of the sunset, appeared like scraps of bread dipped in a ruddy wine.

The fugitive groaned. Up there in the village, among those who had known him since youth, someone could be found to bind up his wound and hide him until it had healed, but when he tried to stand upright the trembling in his legs told him that he must find a closer refuge. It would be all he could do to reach the pools, a little above the first steep twist in the road. Nearby was a cave where he had hidden a year before. It was known to few, for the opening was screened by a thicket of oleanders growing close to the spring which welled up from the cavern floor.

The oncoming darkness would hide the splotches of blood he had left at every step on the road, but when dawn came they would betray him. He began to doubt that he would see another day's light, yet through a throbbing haze of pain the need for haste urged him on. His pursuers could not be far behind.

Dragging himself wearily from rock to rock, he reached the fringe of the marsh. The soil was baked hard by weeks of blistering heat, and the overgrown stand of papyrus reeds, twice the height of a man, offered immediate concealment. He began to crawl through the brittle stalks which broke under his weight with a cracking noise with every movement he made. Now and then he lay still, listening for the tread of sandals on the stony road, but there was no sound in all the valley except the occasional screech of birds overhead flying homeward for the night.

He could not see the sky, which was already darkening, through the tangle of reeds above him. Creeping slowly and blindly, desperately fighting the dizziness which threatened to daze his mind, he lost all sense of direction. He could not tell whether he was moving toward the cliff, but he struggled on, and at last the wall of stalks thinned around him. A gasp of hope rose in his throat as he saw the jagged chalky side of the precipice towering above him.

The greatest effort was to come. Avoiding the road, he would have to find the goat path he had discovered the year before. Loss of blood had so weakened him that his heart was dismayed at the thought of dragging himself up between sharp rocks to the level of the pools. Night was falling with tropical swiftness, but fortunately the path gleamed white in the dusk. With a great sigh he began the ascent, first reaching up and clinging to ledges of rock and then dragging up his numbed body and trembling legs after him.

The climb seemed endless, but before long the smell of the spring water was wafted down to him like a cool breath. Refreshed for the moment, he clambered the rest of the way more quickly until he saw a fading light on the pool nearest the road. Outside the cave there were three rock basins, one above the other, fed by springs which welled up silently from green niches in the limestone cliff. The upper pools emptied themselves by wide smooth-flowing falls into the lowest and largest, which was an almost perfect oval set like a sapphire in a projecting shelf of the mountainside.

Crawling to the brink of the uppermost pool, the fugitive gulped down a draught of the cold earth-smelling water, then dipped his face, rocking his head to and fro until the cool flow had soothed his throbbing wound.

A bleating sound, close at hand, startled him. Glancing anxiously behind him, he saw a goat tethered to a bush. It was of the kind kept for its milk, a heavy, shaggy beast with curved horns and enormous hanging ears. He immediately surmised that someone was now living in the cave and in a moment his suspicions were verified by a pair of hairy hands parting the oleander bushes which hid the entrance. A man stepped forth. It could be seen at once that he was a hermit and one who had taken religious vows, for his long unruly hair and thick beard had never been touched by shears, while his almost fleshless arms and legs spoke of long periods of fasting. He was wearing a shirt of coarse hair-cloth, girdled by a strip of hide. In the dusk his sun-blackened face was hardly distinguishable, except for the hollows of his deep-set eyes.

The fugitive raised his head and tried to speak, but his jaw was stiff and the stabbing pain prevented him from uttering more than a few disjointed syllables.

Hastening forward, the hermit knelt down and looked closely at the jagged wound. In a hoarse voice he began questioning the injured man, asking him if he had fallen among thieves; but being answered only with a groan, he nodded his understanding of the other's pain.

"In my cave I have an ointment of tamarisk bark that will stop the bleeding," he said. "It is only a few steps."

There was little strength in the hermit's arms, but with his help the wounded man tottered upright. He was almost a head taller than his rescuer, who suddenly flung up at him a piercing glance of recognition.

Without a word the hermit moved forward, bearing all he could of the other's weight. Darkness shrouded the inside of the cave, but after a few steps the injured man felt something soft under his feet, and at a word from his guide he sank down on a bed of skins.

Striking a spark to the wick of a tiny earthenware lamp, the hermit began searching among many jars and vessels in a niche of the wall until he found the black odorous salve he wanted. Then, kneeling beside the fugitive, who held the lamp close, he gently sealed the edges of the wound with a thick layer of the ointment of tamarisk bark.

Leaving the lamp on the floor, he went out of the cave, returning after a brief absence with a handful of tendrils of some wiry creeping plant. These he twisted into cords and bound them across the wound.

"By daybreak the blood will be dried," he said. "Then you will be able to swallow a sop of goat's milk and honey."

The sun was up when the wounded man awakened, startled by harsh voices outside the cavern, seemingly in dispute.

From ear to chin his face was throbbing, but the pain had lessened and when he touched the wound he found that the blood that had been oozing through the ointment had congealed into a hard crust. He tried opening his jaws very slowly and discovered that he could do so with little pain. Then he began moving his legs, putting more and more weight on them until at last, by clinging to the wall, he dragged himself upright. His whole body was stiff, and cramps tore through his muscles as he groped his way toward the mouth of the cave.

Keeping himself well hidden, he peered through the swaying oleanders and saw at once the plume of a captain's helmet fluttering in the wind that had sprung up during the night. Standing on tiptoe, he could see two or three soldiers farther down the path. They had their backs turned and they seemed to be staring at the falls which sent a faint splashing sound through the quiet of the morning. All that could be seen of the hermit was the crown of his unruly hair. The sound of his harsh voice died away. A younger voice replied, and the fugitive, trying to catch the words blown away by the wind, was able to hear the captain say:

"The man we seek is half a head taller than you or any other man this side of Jordan."

"Then he should not be hard to find."

The hermit's voice sounded contemptuously defiant, and the wounded man felt a sudden warmth melting the fear that had chilled him at his first glimpse of the soldiers. The words and the tone in which they were uttered gave him hope that the hermit would not betray him.

"We found his blood on the path that leads to these pools," the captain answered impatiently. "He must have come here to bathe his wound."

"Are you his kinsman?"

"No. We are from the fortress of Machaerus."

"In the hire of Herod Antipas," the hermit spat out, scornfully.

"We serve the king," said the captain, his fresh young voice lifting with pride.

"And this man you seek, is he another hireling of Herod's?"

"No. He is a robber. He calls himself Barabbas."

"I have heard of him," the hermit answered. "They say he is a prophet."

"He is a thief!"

"I have heard it said that he shares his spoils with the poor and prophesies a day when rich and poor will be levelled."

"He is a robber," the captain persisted, angrily. "Yesterday we surrounded his men when they were about to rob a Syrian merchant. The thieves fled, but Barabbas stayed to fight, to cover their escape. We wounded him and pursued him into the valley. Then night came on and we lost him. We know he came here for there is his blood on the path. You must be hiding him. Where is your dwelling?"

"Wherever God wills."

"What brings you to the pools at this hour?"

"Since the Jordan has dried up I baptize penitents here and warn them of the wrath to come."

The fugitive, crouching out of sight, stifled a gasp of astonishment. He had heard of John, called the Baptist, and had seen him at a distance, surrounded by pilgrims at the ford of the Jordan, but the night before, in the dusk, he had not known him. The Baptist was reputed to judge sinners harshly, yet he had knowingly sheltered him, a robber, and was even now deceiving his pursuers. The reason was plain. John had been fearless in denouncing Antipas as the vilest of the Herods,

and at that moment he was raising his voice against him in the hearing of one of his captains.

"A day of judgment will swallow up your whoring king, whose father murdered his own wife and his own sons ..."

"Beware!"

Barabbas heard the rasp of a sword in its scabbard and was astonished to hear John's violent voice, harsher than ever, crying out: "Put up your sword! My tongue is mightier than your steel, and the voice of a coming One, mightier than I, shall purge the world of such monstrous masters as yours."

"A man of might!" mocked the captain, and his men joined in a burst of laughter. "Shall we take him to the fortress for questioning?"

"He is mad. You will get nothing from him," replied one of the soldiers.

"Moreover, he will preach at us every step of the way," said another.

"Your steps and your ways are evil and those who hire you are evil," John thundered at them. "Turn aside from iniquity! Repent! Repent of your ways! The day of the wrath of Jehovah is at hand!"

"Did I not tell you?" said the soldier.

The voices ceased. Barabbas could hear the soldiers moving down the steep path. Breathing deeply with a sense of relief, he returned slowly to the couch of skins and was stretching himself out again when John came into the cavern.

"You have saved my life," Barabbas said awkwardly, the words muffled by the stiffness of his jaw, but John said severely: "It is the Lord God who saves lives. See to it that the life He has spared repays Him."



At the time of the barley harvest, in the third week after his wounding, Barabbas returned by night to the Baptist's cave. There was no moon, but the season of meteors had come, and the robber risked recognition as he came up from the gorge of the Nimrin behind Bethabara, where he and his men had discovered a safer retreat. His height and his long stride and swinging arms were familiar, but he believed the villagers would not betray him.

They had never marvelled at his rebellious words, for he was the son of a rabbi long-remembered among them, who had been executed for sedition. The former king had ordered his men to cut out the rabbi's tongue and hang him to a tree as a warning to those who dared speak evil of the hated Herod dynasty. The wife of the rabbi had died of plague in the same year, and their only son, known then as Jeshua, had been taken by a kinsman to live in Jerusalem. Having rebelled against the life of a drudge in his uncle's house, he had been sold as a slave to a camel trader, and when he was freed after seven years, according to the law, he had fled the city and returned to his native place. The people of Bethabara, hearing of his unruly talk and violent acts, said of him that he was the true son of a rebel, and so he came to be called Bar-Abbas, "son of his father".

Proud, headstrong, bitter, yet with a great pity for the oppressed, the robber-prophet of Perea had become a creature of legend. His height and strength had been magnified by the dwellers beyond Jordan, even to the edge of the desert. It was said that he had the stature and the spirit of the ancient men of valour of whom all Israel sang. In daylight he appeared terrifying to the caravans he halted, but in the starlight, as he came up out of the shadows of the gorge, clothed in the skin of a white antelope, he looked like a figure of myth, a Nimrod reborn. The beauty of the ash-coloured fur gave the unshaped tunic a wild elegance. A belt cut from the hide of a leopard he had killed in the winter served as his sole ornament. In a pilgrim's basket over his shoulder he was taking the Baptist a cruse of oil, a measure of meal and a press of figs, gifts of thankfulness for the care the hermit had given him.

The prophet and the robber had found a common bond while Barabbas had remained in hiding. Both were fond of solitude and silence, and in the evenings they had stretched themselves out at the mouth of the cave without speaking, looking up at the stars and thinking their own thoughts. Both were men of lowly birth who aspired to greatness ... John as the forerunner of the Messiah, Barabbas as a leveller of men who would lead the world toward brotherhood.

Despite their deep understanding of each other, they disagreed strongly on the attainment of their beliefs. Elsewhere Barabbas was feared or revered, but the Baptist regarded him as a man of headstrong folly who would come to a violent end, while Barabbas put no faith in John's prophecies. He was convinced that God would not change the course of the world by a wrathful judgment out of heaven. Man, he believed, would have to change and save himself.

As he approached the pools again Barabbas had little hope that his gift would be accepted. Finding the Baptist lying on a camel skin outside the cavern, he set down the basket and stretched himself out on the rock. To his surprise, John did not spurn the food he had brought. Instead he promised to share it among the poorest of the pilgrims who came to hear him preach. He began to speak with pride of the many followers who had gathered about him as the forerunner of the Messiah, preparing themselves for the new Kingdom. Barabbas, angered by the thought of these penitents passively awaiting their salvation, burst out:

"Do your disciples never grow impatient?" There was a hint of mockery in his tone, and when John did not answer, he leaned forward and pressed his questions. "When will your kingdom come? Where is your Messiah? What delays him?"

The hermit answered in a tone unusually calm, "A prince of Jerusalem came to me from that adulterer, Herod; a soft-spoken man, a scholar and a prince of the Maccabean line. This is the second time he has come. I know my king is near when the kings of the earth tremble."

"Who trembles?"

"Herod Antipas!" John spat out the name. "This man he has sent is the youngest member of the Sanhedrin. He came at first with another of the Council, a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus."

"But surely this prince was not of the Pharisees?"

"No. The few princes that are left in Israel are all Sadducees. These Sadducees hope to die in their flesh so that they will

not see God. But from afar off God has seen them and judged them. They shall be purged as chaff is purged, from the glorious floor of His kingdom."

Barabbas frowned. A scoffing grimace puffed out his cheeks as he glanced angrily at the Baptist, but John's fanatical eyes were shadowed. In the starlight his hanging tangle of hair made him look like a man with a head of double size, and without a face.

The two men fell silent until a meteor fled across the sky with the speed and brightness of lightning. The long blaze, flashing on the rocks around them, brought them out of their reveries, gasping with wonder.

"An angel with a flaming sword," said Barabbas, mockingly.

John turned with a retort on his tongue, but the robber spoke in a different tone. "This prince, you say, came a second time?"

John grudgingly answered. "The second time he was sent by Herod Antipas, who has married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, and a grand-daughter of his own father. It has come to his ears that I have spoken openly against this incestuous marriage. The beds of all the Herods have been defiled with adultery and incest. But this prince who came, a distant cousin of Herodias, said nothing of the accusations I brought against her. He is a true Sadducee. He speaks softly. I despise his kind, but no one could hate him. He has a sorrowful face."

"What is he called?" asked Barabbas, surprised at the other's mildness.

"He is a prince of the tribe of Ephraim. Joseph, of Arimathea. I doubt not that Herodias sent him, but he said he came from Antipas. He told me that Antipas had heard of my prophecies, and desired greatly to hear more from my own mouth concerning the new kingdom. Antipas would send his own chariot for me, he said, and had sworn an oath that not a hair of my head should be harmed."

"What did you answer?"

"I told him I had no faith in the oaths of a whoring son of a monster."

"Blood of the prophets!" burst out Barabbas, admiringly.

"He pleaded that I send a kinsman with him if I would not come myself, that I might be assured that the king bears me no ill will. Predictions of the end of the world have come to Antipas, from the astrologers of Chaldea. All the kings of the world, and not only kings, are in dread of a catastrophe that will shake the earth, he said. He is a man of words. I listened to him a long time. He speaks no evil. Antipas, he said, like many another, is in terror of what is to come and that I speak as one having authority. He asked me to return with him and tell the king what has been revealed to me."

"And will you neither go nor send a kinsman?" Barabbas asked with a sly glance.

"I have no one, except a family in Nazareth who are kin to me," said John, and for the first time that night Barabbas heard a warmth and restfulness creep into the bitter voice. "One is a man of my own age, born within a few months of me. His mother and mine were with child at the same time. They were cousins. She was a much younger woman than my mother. Her babe was born miraculously at Bethlehem, and at first she believed her child would inherit the throne of David, but now that he has begun to preach and work miracles and gather disciples about him in Galilee, they say she is afraid for him, because he offends the rabbis, and has been accused of blasphemy."

"I have heard of this man, not knowing he was your kinsman," said Barabbas. "Have you seen him since he has grown?"

"A year ago he came to Jordan and I baptized him. And some of those who were there asked me if I believed him to be the Messiah, the king who is to come. Then I recalled the prophecies of Isaiah that a holy one should be born who would bear our griefs and be bruised for our iniquities, and be brought as a lamb to the slaughterer. And when I looked on my cousin's face I knew that his kingdom was not of this world. He is too gentle for this world."

"Is this kinsman of yours still in Galilee?"

"Yes."

Barabbas suddenly saw again in his mind the swift flight of the burning meteor. Turning quickly toward John he said in a controlled voice:

"I will go into Jerusalem and see whether Antipas is to be trusted or not."

John faced Barabbas with flashing eyes and answered:

"Go, if you will, but I shall never trust him."

"Give me a message to deliver to him."

"If you gave him the message I would send him, he would have you killed for carrying it."

"Nevertheless, give me the message," the robber persisted.

"Remember, I have warned you against this, but if you seek death so anxiously, tell him that I will not come to any king. I am the voice of the new kingdom. Let him put away Herodias, who is an abomination before the Lord, and let him come across Jordan in sackcloth, with ashes on his head, and be baptized of me in penitence. But, if he hardens his heart and will not come, his soul is in danger of everlasting fire."

"I will go. I will go tomorrow," said Barabbas, leaning forward to stare across the valley at the road which led to Jerusalem.



Barabbas reached the river before it was fully light. The great valley, twelve miles wide at Bethabara, descended in a series of precipices far below sea level. The deep volcanic cleft, splitting the land from Lebanon to the Dead Sea, had given Jordan its importance as a boundary through the centuries. Except during the great rains, it was no more than a turbulent yellow brook, and now although it was still the dry season, hordes of tiny insects whirled over the surface of the water and along its banks. It was too shallow for a boat, and in all its length not a bridge had been built across it.

Removing his sandals, Barabbas sought a pebbled spot, and walked across through the cloud of insects into the ankle-deep water that had been cooled by the long night. It was refreshing to his feet, which were already stinging from the rough passes of the mountain road.

The ascent was more gradual on the western side, and by the time he reached the crest of the bank, the sun was flooding the whole vast plain of Jericho with light.

On his right the far-away mountains of Ephraim looked as insubstantial as a purple veil stretched across the horizon above the early morning haze. On the left were yellowing barley fields, and in the distance the village of Gilgal. Farther south the white salty shore of the Dead Sea marked the edge of the wilderness of Judah. Ahead lay the highroad, with the palms of Jericho showing as a mere smudge of green on the shimmering skyline.

There was not a traveller in sight. Barabbas watched his shadow going before him, the only moving thing in the desolation of the plateau. The silence and the cool sweetness of the morning air gave him a feeling of exultation. He looked up at the sky, and the cloudless blue seemed to be trembling with hidden events, ready to move out of the invisible into his life.

He walked swiftly, his body swaying with his stride, like a true creature of the open. Except for the recent scar, which gleamed through his beard like a taut crimson cord, he was without blemish, a well-favoured man of splendid strength. His head was proudly poised, and his eyes were constantly roving and alert. The strong curve of his nose marked him as a man of passionate curiosity and courage. His nostrils swelled with his breath, scenting excitement at every step.

It was little more than an hour's walk from the river to Jericho. Already the walls and tufted palms of the oasis-city gleamed white and green in the strengthening sunshine. On the road, now, there was the tinkling of camel bells as the earliest caravans came threading out of the gates. Bullocks were lowing in the market-place. The harsh cries of ass-drivers carried far through the still air. The city was awake. Flocks of rock-doves rose from their night perches among the ruins of the ancient outer walls.

As Barabbas drew nearer, a light breeze brought the familiar scent of resin from the great balsam groves stretching northward from the city.

At the first well inside the gates Barabbas dipped water in his cupped hands and drank thirstily. For a time he rested on the rim of the well, watching the women carrying their jars, while he ate a few dried dates from his wallet. Arising refreshed, he strode through the winding streets to the southern gate which faced Jerusalem.

The highroad beyond descended precipitously into the rocky gorge of the Kerith.

Barabbas had not been beyond Jericho for years. Memories sprang forward in his mind as he crossed the ravine and made the steady uphill climb of seventeen miles over a steep white dusty road. Since he had left Jerusalem at the end of his enslavement, he had never returned, and now as he drew near, his old loathing of it and everything in it filled his soul with bitterness. In the house of Kepha, his mother's kinsman, his life had been that of a drudge. He had missed everything that sweetens the days of a child, and later as a bondman in the house of Meshech, who hired out camels to pilgrims, his yearning to fondle and speak softly to some living thing had been lavished on such creatures as a dozing dog in an alley, a lamb tied in the market-place, a dove coaxed down from a stable roof. In all those years only one youth had become his friend; a stooped, sickly, studious youngster named Judas Iscariot, who had been studying to become an apothecary. He began wondering if he would find Judas in the Alley of Spices. It would be good to see him again.

But then, as if his decision had subsided, he pondered over the reason for his return. A shadow crossed his features as he thought of his approaching audience with Antipas and the message he had to deliver.

He started to climb again, still musing, but as he looked ahead toward Jerusalem, his thoughts grew clearer and the realization came to him suddenly. He had come to look on the face of Antipas. A day might yet appear when he would want to know that face, to pick it out of a hundred or out of a thousand and fight his way toward it and stamp it in the dust.

Reaching the last rise on the stony crest of Olivet, he halted and stared across the valley of the Kedron at the walls of the city he hated, anchored in the solid rock of the four sacred hills. The sun blazed with dazzling brilliance on the marble and gold of the gates and pillars of the temple. Beside it stood the grim sombre fortress of Antonia.

In spite of himself a nostalgic pang mingling with his childhood dread of the invisible presence in the Holy of Holies, held the robber in a moment's reverence. But his eyes narrowed immediately in bitter resentment as he stared at the mass of masonry, laboriously chiselled out of great cliffs of rock, hauled through steep streets and hoisted with back-breaking effort into place to wall the priests and rulers in, and wall the people out.

At that moment the familiar threefold blast of the rams' horns, announcing the early evening sacrifice, reverberated through the temple porches. The blare carried faintly across the valley to where he stood, dying away in a low humming sound which seemed peremptory to the last murmur.

Barabbas hesitated no longer. The trumpets had fired his blood and he began the descent into the valley with resolute steps.

The late afternoon shadows of the hills and walls of the city stretched across the Kedron, to climb the Mount of Olives on the opposite side.

After his long dusty walk Barabbas felt refreshed by the cool air rising from the depths of the valley. The calm of early evening was settling down over the whole rounded brow of the Mount as though tender invisible hands had been laid on it in blessing.

Presently the robber of Bethabara caught a glimpse of the river, and thought with pleasure in his mind of the exhilarating feeling which awaited him when he dipped his feet into the shallow water. But he had forgotten that at the hours of sacrifice the blood sprinkled on the temple altars was drained into the tiny winding stream.

When he reached the bank he saw that the water was thick with a red scum, and the unexpected sight gave him a twinge of nausea. He had no vigour left for the precipitous climb to the Sheep Gate. Instead, he took the valley road toward the southern corner of the great wall, where an easier ascent would take him into the Lower City.

On his left a myrtle grove screened the sickening flow of blood-streaked water, but a familiar stench jolted his memory. He had reached a bend in the Kedron where the servants of the high priest washed the hides of the sheep and oxen slain each day for burnt offerings. When he came close enough to hear the splashing and the cries of the slaves he wanted to burst through the bushes and spring on the men, driving them away from the stream they were defiling with blood-sodden hides that would be sold to profit the priests. But instead he hurried past, his whole soul revolting against the tradition of a deity who desired the slitting of throats and the burning of carcasses.

His thoughts leapt forward to deeds that would lay waste the proud towers and palaces and disperse the priest-ridden people into green spaces where they might feel around them the presence of peace.

His weary shoulders drew back as he took a deep fierce breath. His hands clenched and his stride grew stronger, as though a draught of fiery wine had revived him.

A few paces brought him to the path which led upward to the Fountain Gate, set between two watch-towers. It was nearing the hour when the massive wooden gates would be closed. The crowds surging in and out were hurrying to get their beasts through in time, for at sundown only the "Needle's Eye" would remain open, a door too narrow for a camel or even a burdened ass.

On his left as he climbed lay the valley of Hinnom, a long ghoulis pit where infant sacrifices had been burned in ancient days on the altars of Moloch. Fires still blazed in this place of abomination, for it was here that the refuse of the city and the dead bodies of animals were brought to be buried.

The smoke hanging like a mist over the smouldering embers reminded Barabbas again of his youth and his slavery. Every day of his life at Meshech's house he had driven an ox-cart out of the Dung Gate with a load to be scattered on the foul heaps of cinders. He recalled how he had peered through the suffocating smoke at the caves of the lepers on the farther hill, and how at night his dreams had brought him echoings of their piteous cries: "Unclean! Unclean!"

Wrenching his glance away from the smoking valley, he pressed through the swarm of men and beasts shuttling through the gate. His heart seemed to be stifled with ugly memories.

Once inside the wall he hurried to the stone arcade surrounding the pool and fountain of Siloam. His thirst had become unbearable. Stepping over the legs of beggars sprawled beside the columns, he bent over the gushing water, letting it pour into his mouth and over his face and neck until he felt cool and clean.

He began the descent by familiar cross-streets into the steep ditch which ran from north to south through the heart of Jerusalem; another of those volcanic clefts wrought by ancient earthquakes. For centuries it had been called the Dung Valley, but the Greek-speaking Romans had given it the name *Tyropoeon*, the Valley of the Cheesemongers, for it was in the grassy stretches between cracked and tumbled rocks that they were permitted to graze their goats.

Narrow alleys, swarming with the poor of the city, ran down steeply into this ravine. Every few feet there were steps, and the squeezed houses were often buttressed across the slit of thoroughfare by arches which supported added rooms.

Everywhere children and goats and ancient wrinkled crones squatted or romped among a litter of refuse.

Meshech's camel yard lay at the foot of one of these streets, immediately below the Alley of Spices, where Judas had lived with a widowed mother who sold doves in the temple courts. His father, Simon Iscariot, after serving for years as a gardener on a great estate in Arimathea, had set up as a spice-grinder in Jerusalem, but a fever had stricken the whole household soon after their arrival and Simon died. Judas hovered for a long time between life and death. His mother, Hezebel, threw off the sickness in a few days and nursed the others. She was the sort of woman the Romans called a *virago*; a female with the virility of a man. Her body was monstrously fat and her voice had grown harsh from shouting: "Buy my doves! Doves without blemish! Doves for the sacrifice!"

Barabbas recalled how he had mimicked her in secret, and also her aged father, who lived with them, a veteran of many battles. Old Jakim had lost one eye and walked unsteadily on a withered leg, injured in Herod's time.

The whole household rose clearly in Barabbas's mind as he approached the familiar corner—the old man limping along on his crutch or nodding in the doorway, the incessant cooing of the doves, the strident voice of Hezebel crying out from the dark interior, and Judas running like a rabbit when his name was blared above the noises of the alley.

A few paces more brought Barabbas within sight of the house. There was old Jakim squatting on the step with his crutch leaning behind him against the open door. His straggling wisp of beard had grown whiter. A drop of moisture from his sunken eye-socket lay in a furrow in his cheek. His skin was wizened into a myriad of tiny wrinkles, like a frozen apple.

Barabbas stopped in front of him.

"He will not remember me," he thought.

The old man did not raise his head. He was half asleep.

Somewhere nearby, an unpractised hand was plucking a *sabbeka*, and a sweet high voice floated over the twanging. Women were leaning out of the lattices of upper balconies, calling across to their neighbours. At a closed door a few paces away a child was whining and stamping his feet. The cries of an aged fish-seller, loitering homeward in the dusk, rang against the walls as he came down the steps.

Moving closer to Jakim, Barabbas said sharply: "Is this the house of Judas?"

The old man's head bobbed. His one eye opened. He stared and blinked.

"Sir," he said, stirring himself and reaching behind for his crutch, "this is the house of Jakim."

He hoisted himself upright and thrust out his chest. He was standing on the step, and did not seem to notice Barabbas's height.

"Jakim," he repeated. "Once a captain of archers. The king's archers. Here lives also my daughter, Hezebel, a seller of doves, and her son, Judas, by trade an apothecary."

"You have forgotten me," said Barabbas.

The old man peered into the bearded face of Barabbas.

"Yes, yes, yes! I know you," he muttered. There was a halt in his voice at times, and he had to click his few teeth together before he could go on. "You are the son of ... no!... I remember ... you were Meshech's slave. A tall boy ... but ... Jeshua!... that was your name. Yes. But you've been in battle yourself since then."

"My name was Jeshua, but now I call myself my father's son."

"Your father's son!" exclaimed Jakim. "We are all our father's sons. Why do you call yourself that?"

"Because my father was a rabbi who was hanged as a rebel, and I have become ..."

"Yes, yes, yes. I've forgotten ... where did your father fight?"

"He was not a fighting man. He was a rabbi who spoke against Archelaus."

"In what battle was he killed?"

"He was not killed in battle. He was hanged."

The old man gulped excitedly and wetted his lips. "It is a great time since I have seen a man hanged. In my youth I saw ten men hanged in the oak forest as you go toward Gath. I lost my eye there. An enemy drew his bow in a tree and the arrow put out my eye. I was a captain of mounted bowmen at the time, and Archelaus himself took me in his chariot and drove like Jehu ..."

"Archelaus?" cried Barabbas, smiling, for he had heard old Jakim's stories before. "Never in his life did Archelaus ride into battle."

"Who spoke of Archelaus? Did I? Did I say Archelaus? It was Achiabus, the king's cousin, who drove me out of the battle."

"Achiabus!" laughed Barabbas. "Achiabus fought against his cousin, desiring his crown."

"True! I was with him with the rebels. For all I know, my son, your father and I may have fought side by side. I seem to remember a man ... a rabbi ..."

But at that moment there was a hoarse shout from inside the house, and from the darkness over Jakim's shoulder appeared a man who, despite his apparent youth, was pitifully hunch-backed. There was a silence as the two men gazed searchingly at each other.

"Judas!" cried Barabbas, warmly.

"As my soul lives! It is you, Jeshua!" Judas thrust his familiar face out of the doorway into the fading light and stared closely at Barabbas with eyes that had been weakened by his childhood fever. Without a word they embraced. Then, stepping back, the misshapen man stared at the ash-coloured antelope skin.

"God of Sinai! You are magnificent!" he exclaimed. Although his throat sounded parched, tiny bubbles formed at the corners of his mouth when he talked. His pale eyes which Barabbas remembered as being quick to flinch with timidity, seemed larger, bolder, and in their speckled depths he seemed to sense a gleam of pride.

"I!" said Barabbas, and there was irony in his voice as he surveyed the other's carefully combed hair and the red beard curled and divided in the manner of the Greeks.

"It is you who are magnificent, Judas," he said, as his eyes wandered to the robe of fine white linen the other wore.

Judas did not seem to detect the ironic note in Barabbas's voice and he asked in compassionate anxiety, "Have you been in battle? You are scarred, Jeshua."

"I am a robber now. East of Jericho I am known as Barabbas. But here I doubt if they have heard of me."

"You!" Judas gasped, as though his breath had been driven out of him.

Judas sent a swift glance through the falling dusk. "Come in!" he whispered. "Come in at once!"

Barabbas allowed himself to be dragged by the arm into the house. It was dark inside and at first he could see nothing. The sweetish smell of spices made him twinge with repulsion.

"Ointments for women ... and the dead," he thought. "A trade for the timid."

Judas was standing close to him in the dark, so that Barabbas could feel the other's breath stirring the hairs of his beard.

"What do you fear?" he asked.

"The name Barabbas," said Judas.

It was strange to be back in the familiar room. For a moment Barabbas felt that he had never been away. He watched absentmindedly as Judas began knocking two flints together. In a moment a spark was smouldering in a scrap of oily rag. Judas bent over, blew it into flame, and held it against the lamp. The wick, lying in the neck of a boat-shaped vessel, spluttered at first, but at length a steady plume of light rose higher and higher, casting long shadows across the floor.

Then Judas poured water and left Barabbas washing his feet while he went out to fetch cups and a wineskin from a back room.

"Now that I know it is you," said Judas haltingly, his old affection mingling with pride and anxiety, "it is still strange. To think that the Jeshua I once knew is Barabbas the robber." His voice quavered and his eyelids twitched as he met the other's gaze.

He reached up and his fingers gripped the robber's shoulder, as though to make sure he was real.

"There are those who say Barabbas is a monster, a giant, a demon," continued Judas in an awestruck voice. "But others say he is a man of pity, a preacher, a prophet, who gives all that he steals to the poor. I have heard men say they would like to fall into your hands. They are eager to hear your prophecies from your own mouth, for here your words are garbled."

"What do they say that I prophesy?" Barabbas was curious.

"Some say you talk of a fearful day of judgment, not of fire from heaven, but of fires lit by vengeful men. Others say you do not point to the world's end, but to a beginning, a new day, a new kind of life, a day when there will be no judgment and no judges, no priests, no governors, a world without rich or poor," he paused breathlessly. There was a frenzied look in his speckled eyes.

"You are another man, a new man. Tell me, then, Barabbas! Is this that you prophesy, is it to come by miracle?"

"You know me, Judas. You know I put no faith in miracles."

Judas flung his hands together and Barabbas looked down at him, pity and wonder mingled in his face.

"Why have you come, then?" cried Judas, standing on tiptoe to peer into Barabbas's face. "Why have you suddenly come?"

The robber drew his heavy brows together in a frown, as if the question displeased him.

"I have been directed by the stars, perhaps. Do you believe in the leading of the stars?" He spoke mockingly, as he thought of the flashing meteor he had seen with John at the mouth of the cave.

Judas said, gravely: "I have not studied the stars."

"Yet you are looking for a sign."

"Yes. But not in the stars."

"In man, perhaps. In man's heart."

"Ah, you have not changed, Jeshua. That is how you spoke in the old days. Always man! Man alone! Man omnipotent!"

"And you have not changed either, but you have grown stronger with some new truth," said Barabbas with a severe glance.

"Yes."

"What do you believe, now?"

"Let us go up on the roof," said Judas, with impatience. "Bring the figs, and let us take the wine with us."

Judas lifted the lamp and held it high to light the stairs. Barabbas picked up the wineskin. It was flat, almost empty. He put it under his arm, took a handful of figs, and followed Judas.

They went up the stone stairs to the upper room where Judas slept. It was scarcely changed, except for a stoutly built table with shelves underneath. The shelves were heaped with scrolls.

Judas set down the lamp and moved toward a corner where a ladder was fastened upright against the wall, the rungs nailed with wooden pegs. He went up first and lifted a heavy door, sliding it aside on the roof. Barabbas handed up the wineskin and clambered out, vaulting at once to his feet.



It was one of those cloudless oriental nights, when the stars lose their remoteness and become like bright pulsing beings, near enough to the earth to hear its faintest sounds. Barabbas sank noiselessly on to the mat of woven palm leaves near the parapet of the roof. He unwound his head-cloth and dropped it beside him. Little gusts of wind from the valley stirred his thick black hair.

In a low voice, Judas said: "As soon as I saw you at the door, I thought, 'Here is Jeshua ... the one man I can tell. He will believe me.' Now, I am not sure you will believe me."

"Believe what?" said Barabbas.

"In a miracle. I am perchance the only one who believes in it, who has conceived it. Every other man I know accepts death. I reject it. The dominion of death is to be ended. God has answered me. I have waited for this all my life. Before I ever saw you, on the night when I saw my father die, that is when I began to believe. I believed then that in my lifetime a man would be born who would never see death, a man who would wrestle with God for everlasting life for all mankind. This man is alive, now, perhaps, waiting for some sign, gathering the power of his spirit. He must be alive now, for this will happen within the year, before the next Passover."

Judas had grown breathless. Barabbas had to listen intently to catch his whispering voice.

"I am not a soothsayer. I have told only one other, only one. Not a man. A woman. If I told others, they would call me a soothsayer. But this is not perceived by divination, or by reading the stars."

"How, then?"

"I have seen it written."

"Falling Satan!" exclaimed Barabbas, under his breath. He did not move his head, but his eyes veered into a quick sidelong glance.

Judas seemed to feel the other's eyes on him. He rolled still nearer and leaned close to Barabbas's face. "I have seen it written. He will come. He will destroy death. And when he has conquered, the whole earth will know his name, *Im-ma-nu-el! God with us!* for then God will be with us, every day, every minute for ever. Not against us or hidden from us, but with us and in us!"

Barabbas drew in a deep noisy breath. He sat up and grasped his knees. Looking straight ahead, he controlled his voice with difficulty, for Judas's words always started a ferment in his mind. It needed all the force of his will to ask calmly the question that had come into his mind.

"The one you look for, is he not the Messiah?"

"Jeshua! Our people have waited, generation after generation for an 'anointed one', a king anointed of God. I know you never believed before. You were the bitter one then, but now ..."

"I have not changed. I said, then, that our people, every people, had their fill of kings long ago."

"The man who will come will not be a king or a ruler of men. He will be a new perfect man and the pattern of all men to come. His life will be like living water, an everlasting spring, and out of him will grow the new vine of mankind."

Barabbas thrust out his feet and leaned back on his hands.

"Whether or not it is a vision," he said, "it possesses you."

"You think I am possessed?"

"Not by a demon, unless death is a demon. It all comes from that, Judas, from too much thinking on death."

"You never think of death, perhaps," said Judas. He sounded discomfited, and yet there was something like insolence in his tone. "You are like everyone else. You accept death."

"A man cannot live without death," said Barabbas. "Does it sound foolish? Folly, or not, Judas, it is true. Life and death are entwined. They grow on the same bush. Just now, on my way here, I stepped across a bramble and the thorns scratched me. I looked down, and on the same shoot with the thorns were delicate blossoms, lovelier than stars."

"And you accept cruelty. You accept death."

"I accept life! I have lived in the wild. And the moments when I seemed to be most alive were those when death was closest. I have fought with men. I have killed lions and leopards. And those moments when your blood is up, when you call on all your strength and strain your last fibre, when your eye must judge a hair's-breadth and your arm must be swifter than the darting of a snake, swifter than the pounce of talons, then life is at its height! A man feels, then, the power and glory and beauty of life. Yes, beauty! The striped coat of a mountain cat bristling, what is more terrible? What is more beautiful? And when it leaps, with the ferocity of fire, what flame can match it? What jewel is brighter than the fierce yellow of its eyes? Where will you find on earth such burning gold?"

Judas stifled in his throat a shuddering laugh.

"You have become a psalmist," he said bitingly. "A singer of death."

"Since I left Jerusalem," replied Barabbas, "I have embraced the earth and her quietness. For you, death is the curse of the world. For me, the curse is misery ... hunger, poverty, sickness, wretchedness! If I could find a death that would somehow lift that curse, then I would sing of death."

He sprang up and flung around him a furious glance at the abject leaning houses and the streets as narrow as gutters, ending abruptly in the tumble of rocks at the bottom of the valley, where the reek of goat's dung and rubbish fouled the air.

"Why *did* you come?" asked Judas, searchingly, as he stood up beside him.

"To see! To kindle fire in my heart. To challenge misery. To discover ... yes, Judas, I have come to discover a death that will shame the world!"

Barabbas moved nearer the parapet, and Judas followed him. After their recent wrangling they wanted to make peace with each other. The two men rested their hands on the stone ledge and looked down into Meshech's yard. It lay at the foot of the hill, and the crooked mud walls straggled down to the rock-strewn bed of the valley.

Lost in memories, they fixed their gaze on the stone stairs and the jog in the wall where they had whispered together in their youth. In the yard the ghostly grey forms of sleeping camels lay huddled together, their legs doubled under them. Whenever one of the great beasts shook its head a sound of bells chimed faintly with a falling cadence. A lamp was burning in the house Barabbas had known as a prison. Someone passed between the lamp and the latticed window; Meshech perhaps, or his wife.

"Is Meshech living?" Barabbas asked, without turning his head.

"Yes," said Judas.

"And his wife?"

"Yes."

"More children?"

"Three since you left."

"You have not married, Judas?"

"I? No."

"Nor thought of it?"

"No. And you, you have not taken a wife?"

Barabbas swung his body sideways and sat on the parapet, overlooking the steps.

"In the desert, marriage is not as we know it. There is no betrothal, no wedding. The women are no more than servants all through Arabia. The men do only the herding and hunting, while the women pitch the tents and bake and weave. They milk the goats and camels. They live in the *hareem* ... two or three or more together ... in their own quarters, apart from the men."

Judas sat down on the stone ledge beside Barabbas.

"Did you buy any of these women?"

"I did."

"Where are they, now? What has become of them?"

"They have returned to the tent of their father as is the custom."

"Did you have no love for any of these women?"

"No, Judas. What do I know of love? I have no remembrance of my mother."

"I was thinking of a man's love for a woman, a wife."

Barabbas watched Judas's face closely. "Do you love a woman?"

"Can you imagine me in love, or a woman looking at me?" Judas spoke the words with difficulty.

"A woman *has* looked at you," said Barabbas, with certainty. "You curl your beard, now, like a bridegroom. And just now you admitted having told one other about your vision, a woman."

A sheepish look came into Judas's face. "A rare woman ... as my soul lives, unbelievably rare." He averted his eyes and his words came haltingly, "A woman I have known since childhood."

"She loves you?"

"Do not mock, Jeshua. Who would love me?"

"But you love her."

"As one loves a precious stone," said Judas, a note of hopelessness in his voice.

Barabbas puffed his cheeks and blew out a long breath. "Who is this priceless gem?"

"If you mock, Jeshua!..." Judas wrung his hands together, and his shoulders shook.

"I will not mock."

Judas jerked his head in the direction of the jog in the wall below them. "I told you, in the days when we used to sit there, of my boyhood, of how we lived then, on the estate of a prince, and the young prince, the son, was about my own age. As boys we played together. The young prince had no brothers, and I had none. His mother treated me as an adopted child. When they brought a tutor from Greece, I was given lessons, too."

"I remember," said Barabbas. "That was where you learned Greek. And there was a little girl."

"The young prince's sister, nearly ten years younger than we were. They went to live in Rome. They would have taken me with them for they regarded me as a son. But my father was a rigid Pharisee and Rome was an abomination in his eyes. He would not let me go, and he moved, then, into Jerusalem. I said good-bye to the young prince and his sister, never expecting to see them again."

"And now they have returned?"

"Two years ago. They live in Jerusalem, outside the wall, on the hill of Bezetha. They call it, now, the New City."

"You have seen them? They are your friends, still?"

"Yes," said Judas.

"And the little princess, what is her name?"

"Jerith."

"A lovely name."

"No name could be lovely enough for her."

"And her brother?"

"His name is Joseph. He has changed greatly. They were terribly bereaved. Two years ago when the family was returning from Rome, having fled there to seek safety from Archelaus, Joseph's wife and their parents were drowned. It is only lately that he has recovered from his loss. He rarely sees anyone but old friends. I am one of the very few he honours in this way. I go very often and he speaks to me as to a brother. If you had not come, I should have gone tonight. There was a meeting of the Sanhedrin today, and I was going to learn from him what the Council had decided."

"Is he a member of the Sanhedrin? A man so young?"

"Yes. He is the youngest."

"The youngest!" exclaimed Barabbas. "Then he is the man I have come to see."

"You! You have come to see him?"

"Is he not Prince Joseph of Arimathea?"

"Yes, but why have you come to see him?"

"John told me he would get me an audience with Herod Antipas."

"What? You have a message for the tetrarch?" cried Judas.

"Is that what they call him?"

"That is the Greek for his title. He is king only of Galilee and Perea."

"A quarter of a king," said Barabbas contemptuously.

"Do not say that loudly," Judas warned.

Barabbas grunted and stood up, stretching his arms wide. "If I had not come, you were going to see Prince Joseph tonight?"

"Yes," said Judas, jumping down from the parapet.

"Then you will save me the trouble of finding him."

"Yes, yes. They will welcome you because you are my friend. In our frequent talks I have told them about you, about our arguments down there on the wall. We have talked of Barabbas, too. It would astound them if they knew you had become, that you are, Barabbas. But we must keep that secret."

"In Jerusalem no one has seen me. Tell them who I am."

"Barabbas!... the robber!" Judas whispered, his voice shaking.

"Call me Jeshua, then, but let us go."

Neither of them spoke for some time as they began the long climb to the temple level, leaving the miserable hovels below. They turned northward and passed under the great arches of the Royal Bridge which spanned the Tyropoeon valley. To the left, as they emerged from the lower level of the city, the dark mass of the Maccabean palace rose above the colonnade of the Xystus; on the right loomed the towers and porches of the Temple.

Many times in the past Barabbas had inwardly raged when he had compared the mean houses under the bridge with the magnificent structures above it. But, now, as he flung up his glance at the encircling pomp of masonry, the sublimity of the mounting walls and the thrust of countless turrets into the moonlit sky seemed to chime with his uplifted mood.

As they approached the gate of the temple, they saw on either side of the colossal porch piles of marble stacked in orderly rows beside a wooden ramp which sloped upward to a scaffolding.

"Blood of the prophets!" cried Barabbas aloud, breaking the long silence between them. "Is the temple still not finished?"

Judas was startled. "They say it will take eight years more to complete the cloisters," he said.

"It must be forty years since it was begun."

"Nearer fifty."

"What new monstrosity is this?" asked Barabbas, a moment later, as they came alongside a huge buttress-like structure jutting out from the main wall of the temple.

"That is the Hall of Hewn Stones, where the Sanhedrin sits. The chamber is circular. Half of it lies within the wall, and half without, so that princes of the house of David may be seated within the sacred enclosure. Councillors of lesser rank sit in the western half that projects outside the wall."

"These priests and princes!" scowled Barabbas. "How I despise them! I suppose this prince of yours is of the line of David?"

"No. But he is of Maccabean blood. His line descends from Salome Alexandria, the only queen who ever ruled our people. Her daughter, Mariamne, became the first wife of Herod the Great ..."

"And Mariamne was the grandmother of this adulteress Herodias, who has now married Antipas ... her own uncle," broke in Barabbas. "I have heard all about this from John the Baptist."

When they had walked on in silence several paces, Barabbas said: "Do not expect me to bow down to this prince, Judas. I despise princes, especially this one who carries messages for his cousin Herodias."

"What?" cried Judas, in amazement.

"He came across Jordan twice, first to spy for the Sanhedrin, and the second time to lure John into Jerusalem, so that Herodias could have her revenge on him for speaking evil of her."

Judas grasped Barabbas's arm and stood in his way. His eyes glistened with disbelief and denial. "He is not a spy!" he cried out. "And he would not stir one pace for Herodias."

"Yet he came twice."

"Not from Herodias ... that I swear."

"He said he came from Antipas, but it is all the same."

"It is not the same. Listen to me, Jeshua. I know of these journeys across Jordan." He stepped out of the way, and they went on, and Judas began to speak in a calmer voice. "When Antipas heard that the Baptist was openly condemning his marriage, he began wondering if the entire kingdom of his father would come to him, provided he put away his wife. He begged the prince to persuade John to come to the palace, believing the Baptist might prophesy what lay in his future. He

knew that Joseph had gone to Bethabara at the command of the Sanhedrin."

"Command!" cried Barabbas.

"Yes. Not to spy! To question ... to seek!" declared Judas, vehemently.

"It is all the same."

"It is not the same. The chief priests heard of John's prophecies, and said among themselves that if a king is to come, they should seek him out, and if he were truly their king ..."

"A king would disturb their rule," said Barabbas, savagely. "As it is they can bribe Rome to keep them in office, so that they may extort tithes and taxes from the people. If a king were to come he would denounce them as thieves, and put an end to their plundering. But a king will not come."

"No," said Judas ominously. "But a man will come!"

Barabbas lifted his head. "Yes. A man will come!" he retorted.

For several paces neither spoke. They had passed out of the city wall through the Damascus Gate. The gently rising road to Bezetha went up between the fortress of Antonia and the cave tombs of the kings carved in the limestone cliffs beyond the knoll of Golgotha. Barabbas's roving eyes were drawn that way, but there were no crosses visible. The bald skull-like shape of the little hill gleamed like a mound of chalk in the moonlight.

Barabbas turned to Judas and his deep voice rang against the trunks of the trees which now lined the road. "You believe in the Messiah. Believing as you do, how can you stomach this prince who truckles to Herod's spawn and sits in the Sanhedrin?"

"Wait until you see him. He is not as you think. They would like to use him to gain their ends, or to untangle their quarrels, but he shuts himself up. He is a man of peace. He speaks no evil of anyone. He has suffered much."

The ascent was steeper, now, and Judas was out of breath, but he began speaking again, brokenly, as though he were hastening to finish before they reached the prince's house.

"They have a house in Jericho, and they locked themselves up there when they first returned after their bereavement. At Jericho there is a community of Essene monks, who live like hermits. Joseph almost joined them. He wanted to give up his estates, his rank, everything. He would have joined them, if it had not been for leaving Jerith alone in the world. But he built this house in Jerusalem, hoping that when their grief diminished she would marry, for she is past the accustomed age. She is not yet twenty, and seems even younger. She was an unexpected child, born ten years after Joseph. In Rome, as she grew up, they guarded her like a precious toy. Since their return, she has lived for Joseph. She has drawn him out of his sorrow. And now that she is fully grown, she is like a young bird taking its first flights, unsure of herself, but eager for a life of her own."

Barabbas was astonished at the note of worship in Judas's tone. His voice had taken on a chanting cadence, as though uplifted in a psalm.

At that moment a wide-tiled roof became visible between the trees, supported by a row of pillars on which the moon was shining. As Barabbas bent his head to look, he felt a touch at his elbow. Judas was turning off the road toward a tall bronze gate.

"A palace!" thought Barabbas, bitterly.

PART II

Through the bronze bars Barabbas glimpsed a double row of white columns striping a marble wall with leaning shadows. They passed beyond the gate into a courtyard where a fountain was playing, the moonlight sparkling in every drop of spray. As soon as they stepped from the grandeur outside into the square hall within, which Judas called the "atrium", Barabbas felt enclosed in an alien atmosphere.

The rich hangings on the walls of the corridors, the mosaics on the ceilings, the marble and gold and silver everywhere, heightened his resentment against the pampered ones of the world. Everything about Prince Joseph's house, built in the Greek style, seemed strange to him and bewildering and hateful. Its costliness astounded him. His glance swept ahead, gulping down unbelievable luxuries at every step.

Judas, who had given the steward a message for the prince, was leading the way, and at last he turned into a room where Barabbas's eyes fell with delight on the first natural thing he had seen since entering the doors. On a divan, heaped with cushions, a Persian cat with glossy fur the colour of smoke, lay curled in sleep. He bent over it, and when it awakened with his stroking, he thrust his finger in and out of range of its sharp claws.

Behind him came a quick footfall, and he heard a quiet penetrating voice speaking to Judas in Greek, which Judas answered in the same strange tongue.

Barabbas straightened as Judas said, in Hebrew: "This is Jeshua, the friend of my youth. I have told you of him. He has come across Jordan today with a message for the tetrarch from the prophet John."

Turning, Barabbas found the earnest glance of sorrowful eyes on him, as Judas added: "This is Prince Joseph of Arimathea."

Barabbas looked with wonder into a pallid delicate face which seemed at first glance as gentle as a woman's. The bony whiteness of the bridge of his nose, and the taut blue veins in his temples, added to a sensitiveness which lay far back in the prince's solemn eyes. His nearly bloodless lips were drawn in a wide line, as though frozen in grief. Although he was not yet thirty his hair was streaked with grey.

Joseph looked from one to the other, surprised that two men so unlike in appearance should have become friends.

"Judas has told us much concerning you," he said, slowly, as though groping in his memory. "You have come from the Baptist?"

"He did not send me. I have come to see for myself and speak for myself," Barabbas answered, a grim smile stirring the black tuft under his lips.

He felt the eyes of the prince fix themselves steadily on the scar in his beard.

"But you want an audience with the tetrarch," said Joseph, with grave patience.

"It was not John's intention that I be his spokesman but I came so that I may some day know that whoremonger's face ..."

"You have heard him," cried Judas, hoarsely. "He scorns kings. He will speak foolishly, because he is without fear. If he is taken before the tetrarch he will speak violently. He will curse the whole line of the Herods."

When Judas stopped, the prince turned to Barabbas. His brows arched upward in unbelief. "Surely you are not eager for death?" he said.

"But he is," Judas broke in again. "He has become even more fearless and strange than when I knew him. He has just now told me that he seeks death."

"Is this true?" asked the prince.

"Can a man full of fears judge a fearless man?" said Barabbas, looking scathingly at Judas.

"I have never met a man wholly without fear," said Joseph.

"You have not met a man, then, whose heart is full."

The prince leaned his head on one side, as though listening. "That is a difficult saying," he murmured. "You believe that a full heart casts out fear?"

"Yes, a heart full of hate. How can it hold fear? When I see misery and luxury side by side as it is in a city ..." he cast an insinuating glance about him.

"God of Sinai!" Judas gasped.

The prince reached out and put his hand restrainingly on Judas's arm, while his dark eyes searched the face of Barabbas.

"I had never thought of hate wholly possessing a man. You believe that hate can so fill the heart that ... yes, I see ... a heart so filled would have no room for fear. Yes, it would be true, but how could a man live, if he knew nothing but this?"

"Such a man is not concerned with living. Such a man is eager to die for his hate."

The prince drew his fingertips along the deep lines in his forehead. "I marvel at this," he said, speaking almost to himself. "Your hate is akin to love. It is for love of the oppressed you hate."

"When you look at the world's wretchedness do you wonder?"

The prince shook his head and said in a tired voice, "I have been all day at the Sanhedrin, where we have been listening to two rabbis from the north who brought news of a young preacher in Galilee. It seems that he speaks of love casting out fear. And you speak of hate making a man fearless. You hate wretchedness, but that is a kind of love. I can see that it could be a great love, a consuming love. That is what I marvel at, the thought that if love is wholly present, all else must be absent. *Presence and absence!* It astounds me. It has the power that belongs to all that is simple. You say to a man, the simplest man, fill your heart with love for everybody and everything, let there be no room for anything else! *And there will not be room for anything else!* Think of a world of men with every heart filled with love! We have never thought of love as a presence. The whole secret is in that. We have spoken of men being possessed, filled and driven by some demon of evil. We have believed in possession. But only by evil. Now I can see how this prophet of Galilee casts out devils. Many have testified that he has done it. He does not empty the heart of evil. He fills it with another presence. This Nazarene teaches, they say, by parables. I am going to Galilee to hear him. I am eager to learn more of his sayings. I have studied the Greeks, and in Egypt with Philo, but this—its simplicity astounds me. The simplest man can grasp it. The whole world can grasp it!"

He ceased, but his lips remained half open, as though he were far from finished.

"Jesus Bar-Joseph!" said the prince. "Have you heard of him?"

"He is a kinsman of John of Jordan. A blood kinsman," said Barabbas. "John has spoken to me of him."

"I must hear what he said," murmured the prince. He glanced frowningly around at the stools and the divan, and said, quickly: "Here we are standing, forgive me. When you came I had just returned from the Council, I was changing my robe. I hurried down. Shall we stay here, or ..."

He broke off, staring at the scarred side of Barabbas's face. To hide a gleam of recognition in his eyes, he turned to Judas. "It will be better in the garden," he said. "It is not cold tonight. There is a moon. Zimri will bring us wine."

He motioned to the door, but let his hand drop, turning again with eagerness to Barabbas. "You knew that the rabbi Nicodemus and I were sent by the Council to listen to John."

"He told me of both your visits," said Barabbas.

"They want us to go now to Galilee. We have been talking all day of the teaching of Jesus. Have you met him? Have you talked with him?"

"I have never seen him."

"What does John say of him?" said the prince, lightly touching Barabbas's elbow and leading him to the door.

"He says he is an unearthly man, a man too gentle for this world. He prophesies that he will suffer. It needs no gift of prophecy to foretell that he will die. He is accused of blasphemy already."

"He will be punished because he preaches that a full heart will cast out fear."

"Fear will never be cast out," said Barabbas, severely, "until we have a world without want."

"True," said the prince, glancing with compassion at Judas, who was moving in step with him, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"You are silent, Judas. But no wonder. I have a long tongue. Take your friend into the garden. I will go and call Zimri."

As they went out together, Barabbas said: "You were right, Judas. And John was right. It is not easy to hate your prince."

They stepped from the shadow of a porch, descended three steps and halted on the grass. The moon had risen to the zenith. They were facing a glory of light.

To Barabbas it was like taking a deep breath of eternity to come out from the crushing luxury of mosaic-covered ceilings into the vast air, freshened by the leafy scent of spring. His ears murmured like sea shells as the enormous silence seemed to rush past him. Lifting his head, he surveyed the sky from east to west. His arms spread widely. He grasped the night and held it, as though it were a fruit he had picked.

The palace stood on the highest knoll of Bezetha. Seven terraces of grass sloped gently to a wooded ravine. A white limestone cliff marked the edge of a precipice which went down in a sheer drop to the bank of the Kedron. Across the valley the full glow of moon and stars silvered the tapestry of orchards which rose in a mounting pattern to the bald crest of Olivet.

At the lower end of the garden a familiar rounded shape, lying against the cliff, drew Barabbas's gaze. It was a chipped slab of rock, resembling the stones commonly rolled in a groove to seal the entrance of sepulchres.

"Is that a tomb?" he asked, in astonishment.

Judas started, withdrew his hands from his sleeves, and said in a dreaming voice: "Yes, his. Joseph's."

"A new tomb ... so near a dwelling?"

"When the prince built this house," said Judas, "the death of his wife and his parents lingered in his heart like ashes. If it had not been for Jerith he might have died. He built himself a sepulchre, in the hope, perhaps, that he would soon lie in it."

Judas broke off, hearing a footfall behind him. It was Prince Joseph coming from the house. He came near and stood beside them.

"It is better here," said the prince softly.

"Yes," said Barabbas. "This is a better roof which God provides."

The prince lifted his head. "Nothing can excel it on such a wondrous night."

"Every night is wondrous in its own way," said Barabbas, "but in the cities men come and go without seeing the sky or feeling the secret of birth and growth and death in the soil under their feet. I myself was like that before I embraced the earth."

Joseph's eyes kindled. "That is well spoken."

"It is more than words. It happens in the heart."

"An experience, as the Romans say," murmured Joseph.

"I know little Latin," said Barabbas proudly.

"You have seen and felt something that is strange to me," the prince said.

As he spoke he led the way toward a circle of slender trees. Barabbas cast a glance behind him at the house and then saw ahead of him a wide crescent-shaped seat of white marble partly encircling a pool. The sound of splashing water came clearly through the warm windless air.

"You speak as one who lives in a sort of Paradise," the prince was saying. "Your joy is like that of the birds of the air. You have discovered what I consider a sense of lost power in mankind. Tell me how you have found it, Jeshua."

"What I have found cannot be encompassed in words," said Barabbas, impatiently. "It is something felt in the heart."

"I believe it," cried the prince, eagerly. "But there must be a path for us to discover it. There must be steps."

"There is only one step."

They had reached the circle of young acacia trees. In the rippled pool, stirred by the fall of water from the mouth of a sculptured dolphin, the reflected stars were dancing like tongues of greenish fire.

Barabbas spread wide his hands to include in one gesture the pool, the terraces, the turreted house, and the strong walls of the garden. "The one step," he said, "is to turn your back on all this. Sell all that you have and give the gain among the poor. The day of kings and princes is over."

Judas took three rapid steps to Joseph's side. "You hear him? And yet you say you will take him to the tetrarch?"

"Antipas has need of him," the prince said, calmly. "What he says has often been in my thoughts."

The prince motioned Judas to the carved semicircular seat, and sat down himself. Barabbas dropped down beside the pool and stretched out his legs.

At that moment Joseph saw the steward coming from the house, and waited until Zimri had put down the tray of fruit and wine beside him on the seat.

"We will help ourselves," he said.

The old man bowed and disappeared through the trees.

Joseph poured wine into three goblets and passed them. Then he set the bowl of fruit on the grass beside Barabbas.

"Tomorrow I will get you an audience with Antipas," he said. "He is more anxious than ever to send a message by someone John will trust. John would not trust me. Like you, Jeshua, he puts no trust in princes. And at the time I went, Antipas did not trust me fully, either. He has been in some sort of terror ever since I have known him, but now he has become pitiful. He has brought himself to believe that John is the risen spirit of one of the innocent babes his father slaughtered."

"It is a pity John did not come," said Barabbas, with bitter humour. "The sight of him would give Antipas the palsy. He looks like a risen skeleton."

"And he lives east of Jordan," added the prince. "Antipas has a great dread of whatever comes out of the east. When he was a boy he saw a fiery star that came out of the east, and he has told me of his father's fear at the sight of it."

"This Antipas!" broke in Barabbas, roughly. "Is he not the son of a Samaritan and an Edomite? And yet you, a prince of Judah, call him your friend! You speak as one who knows him."

"I have known him all my life. He is a pitiful man. In Rome I could not avoid him. Here, it is different. He comes to Jerusalem only for the feasts. I see him rarely. I have no love for him."

"Nor for his wife? Is she not your cousin?"

"She is my cousin. God gave me my cousins. I did not choose them."

The prince lifted his wine cup and bent over it, sipping silently. "I was saying that Antipas has a great fear of evil coming upon him out of the east," he said, after a pause. "Now he fears invasion from that quarter. He is in terror of the Arabs."

"He may well be," said Barabbas.

"You have heard then that he affronted the Arabs when he deserted the princess Thamias, the daughter of their king, to marry my cousin, Herodias?"

"That I have heard, and much besides. They have not forgotten his father, or his bloodthirsty brother, Archelaus. He, and all of Herod's breed, may well fear them."

"Antipas has a strong fortress at Machaerus. Nevertheless, he is in terror of calamity from that quarter. He is afraid of John because his threats of judgment come from east of Jordan, and of late he has grown to fear another man who lives

east of the river, a robber, named Barabbas. He is the son of a rebel, and a rebel himself, they say. He despises kings and princes. He threatens to dethrone them, remove all governors, and divide the earth's possessions equally among all men."

The prince had raised his voice so that every word could be heard clearly over the noise of the water splashing into the pool. His brows arched and he smiled inwardly.

Barabbas smiled back at him. "I have heard of this robber," he said evenly.

"He is half a head taller than the majority of men."

"That is what they say."

"He has a scar which runs the whole length of his left jaw."

"You have seen him?" asked Barabbas.

"When I went across Jordan a second time, I heard that this man was a friend of John's, and I hoped I might meet him at the Bethabara pools, or even fall into his hands on the highroad. I wished to hear from his own mouth how he plans to change the nature of man, so that the lion will lie down with the lamb, so that the wolf and the sheep will eat grass together."

"And sip wine together," said Barabbas, challengingly, as he lifted his cup.

Judas sprang up with a warning gasp, but the prince said smilingly: "Yes, Barabbas. Let us drink."

Barabbas sipped and set the heavy silver goblet down beside him in the grass.

"The prince has recognized you!" cried Judas. "What will happen tomorrow in the streets?..."

"Will you denounce me?" taunted Barabbas, looking from one to the other.

"Stay here, will you not?" said Joseph. "No one will look for a rebel who despises princes in the house of a prince."

Judas drew his hands down over his cheeks in a doleful gesture. "But how can you take him to the king?" he mumbled. "You say yourself the king has heard of him. When he looks on his face ..."

"Antipas will not know you," said Joseph. "You will be carefully disguised."

"In the presence of the king he will mock," cried Judas. "He will do more than mock. I know his old hatred."

"Surely you will listen to what Antipas has in his heart to say to John. When Antipas came here at the Passover," said Joseph, "he heard that I had talked with John, and he sent for me secretly, and told me that there was a plot against John's life."

"No doubt he has heard in his own palace, that Herodias has sworn to silence the Baptist's tongue," burst out Barabbas. "We have heard it, even across Jordan."

"I know little of the plot, and that little I cannot reveal," said the prince. "All I can tell you is that he fears for John's safety. My part in all this was to persuade John to come to the palace ..."

"Where he could be charged with some crime and put to death," pounced Barabbas, savagely.

"That would make Antipas accountable for him," said Joseph. "Whereas if John should be found dead in his cave, of poison or a dagger stroke, who could be accused? No. Antipas wants to make him some offer. He urged me to go, and I went, believing John's life was in danger, but I could not tell him of the danger. Neither could I persuade him even to send a kinsman. He said he had no kin. But you have come, Barabbas, and tomorrow, if you love John, you will listen to the tetrarch. You will not enrage him. Let him say what is in his heart. Let John judge whether or not he can trust him, from what you will witness."

He broke off, seeing Judas suddenly spring up, and peer through the trees.

"Jerith is here," Judas breathed in an excited whisper.

Barabbas stared across the marble rim of the pool. A figure in white had reached the lowest terrace.

She was unlike any woman Barabbas had ever seen. He had never given thought before to what a palace woman would be like. He was not prepared for such fragility, which seemed to him like the preciousness of a nurtured flower, growing in a sheltered shady spot. And yet her mouth was generous. Her dark warm eyes seemed to dance mischievously. Her black hair was drawn upward, bound in the manner of the Greeks.

Silently he watched her throbbing liveliness as though she were a rare creature of the woods whose capture would delight a hunter's heart.

"The Princess Jerith," Judas said, interrupting his thoughts. "My friend, Jeshua."

"You are welcome in our house," said Jerith. "Judas has often spoken of you."

Barabbas bowed his head. Jerith looked long at Judas's friend. She had heard much of him, and had built in her mind an image of a tall rebellious youth, a slave who had burned not only for his own freedom but for the liberty of all. His disappearance for years had added mystery to Judas's praise of him, giving the name Jeshua a heroic ring in Jerith's youthful ears. Regarding him almost as a creature of legend, it had always seemed strange to her that a youth of such strength and fierceness could ever have been the friend of poor ailing Judas. It seemed unbelievable that he had ever been a slave. He had the appearance of a *sheykh*.

She felt his measuring gaze linger at her throat, and for a moment she was abashed, thinking that the low-bosomed stola she had worn to the governor's had struck him as being shameless. Then she remembered her jewels, a rare necklace of Egyptian emeralds which had been her mother's. It had caught his scornful glance. She suddenly felt vexed that Joseph had prevailed upon her to attend a reception for Pilate, for it meant that she was formally attired and laden with jewels she seldom wore.

Fumbling with the emeralds at her throat, she became aware of the intense silence that hung in the air between them. Her blood leapt, sending a flush of frightened joyousness tingling in every vein. "How quiet you are," she murmured.

There was a stir in the grass beside her. It was Judas stepping close. His upward worshipping glance sent a pang of pity through her. But she moved quickly away to the farthest end of the seat. As she sat down Joseph came toward her and she saw wonder in his eyes.

He laughed softly. "Strange!" he murmured. "We have talked without ceasing since Judas and Jeshua came." He directed them to be seated with a gesture which betrayed his impatience to go on.

Jerith motioned to the place beside her and looked up at Barabbas questioningly.

"I am a lover of the earth," Barabbas said shortly, stretching himself out on the grass so that the disfigured side of his face was hidden.

"Judas has told us of you," Jerith returned, lowering her eyes. "You have been away a long time."

Barabbas gave no indication of having heard.

"Six years," burst out Judas. "But he has come, today, with a message from John of Jordan."

"Tomorrow I hope to procure him an audience with Antipas," said Joseph. "He will stay the night with us."

Jerith leaned forward, her clasped hands sliding over her knees.

"May I ask you, Jeshua?..." she began, but seeing in the strange eyes a sudden resolve which clouded their gleam, she broke off immediately.

"My name is no longer Jeshua!"

"No, no!" exclaimed Judas, jumping up. "There is no need to tell her."

"I am not the man you have heard of from Judas."

"Why tell her?" entreated Judas.

"Because I abhor lies. My name *was* Jeshua," the deep voice broke out again. "But my father was a rebel and I have become a rebel. My name is Barabbas."

Jerith leaned forward and clenched her hands.

"The robber?" she cried in astonishment.

Barabbas nodded.

Bending forward, she said in a wondering voice: "You are both Jeshua and Barabbas?"

"Yes."

"You are the Barabbas we have heard of who preaches against possessions?"

"And princes," said Joseph, with a smile.

"Have you been talking of this to my brother?"

"Your brother was lamenting the sense of lost power in man," said Barabbas, his glance lifting to hers. "He has not seen that his possessions have robbed him and chained him, and that the loss every man senses is that of one who grasps the fragment and loses the whole. That is what we have lost ... the sense of oneness with the earth ... which gives a man the joy and innocence of the creatures of the wild."

Jerith was scarcely listening to his words, but her whole heart seemed to open to the rhythm and resonance of his voice.

Barabbas continued, "Your brother has been seeking something in far fields that is under his feet; for some great change to come ... beyond man as he is now. But he has sought too far. Man as he is can change himself with one step!"

Judas sprang up from the seat. "Man as he is! Man alone!" he cried out. "He believes that man can be changed by a gospel of folly and force and death!"

Jerith turned in astonishment to stare at Judas's blazing eyes.

Joseph was saying, calmly: "Whereas you, Judas, you believe in what?"

"Man cannot be saved by any gospel. Only a miracle will save us," muttered Judas, in a faltering voice; he had covered his face with his hands and the last words were lost in mumbling. He sank back on the seat.

Barabbas looked scoffingly at Judas.

"What is the one step you speak of?" Jerith broke in expectantly.

"The one step," Barabbas said, "is to turn your back on all this. Sell your possessions and give what you gain to relieve the miseries of the poor. Then you will be free."

The strange eyes had lost their wariness. They were open and glowing with an overwhelming faith in the richness of the freedom he was offering her. His ardour seemed to be reaching up to her, encompassing her.

She wrenched her glance away from the burning pools of his eyes. Turning, she sought the calm of her brother's face, but his thin lips were drawn in an anxious line. His eyes were sorrowful. His fingers were knotting and unknotting in the lap of his robe between his knees.

"How did you answer, Joseph?" said Jerith in a low voice.

"I have not answered."

His head was held in an attitude of listening which Jerith knew well. It meant that he was wrestling with himself.

She spoke quickly. "Why have you not?" she asked. "Jeshua speaks truly. You have felt chained here and robbed of your freedom, because of me. Is it not true? You were thinking of me."

"I was asking Jeshua," said the prince slowly. "I was wondering what we could do, how we could begin."

"Let us begin now," said Jerith, abruptly turning toward Barabbas; and lifting her arms behind her neck, she loosened the clasp of the necklace. Three glistening strands of emeralds tumbled into her cupped hands, and she held the sparkling heap of stones within Barabbas's reach.

Barabbas leapt to his feet, shaking his head.

The prince laid a restraining hand on her wrist.

Turning to her brother she said meaningly, "Let us rid ourselves of our chains, Joseph."

Judas leaned toward her muttering and gesticulating.

She faced Barabbas again and thrust the necklace nearer. "This will feed many," she said.

Barabbas shook his head a second time. "No!" he uttered with finality.

"You think I am hasty?" said Jerith.

Barabbas said: "I do not quarrel with haste."

"But you think I will regret it?"

Barabbas did not speak.

"If you had come upon us on the road, not as the friend of Judas, but as the robber Barabbas, who befriends the poor," said Jerith, "you would have taken it from me. There is a sense of guilt in possessing so much, while others starve. I have felt it. And my brother has felt it. We have given alms, but we have been chained by luxury all our lives. Were it not for me, my brother would have fled from all this long ago."

"Jerith!" cried the prince, in a warning voice.

Her glance fell and lingered a moment on the necklace in her hand. Turning to Joseph at last, she said: "Let us part with the things that are most precious first. The rest will be easier."

The prince protested. "There is much to consider, Jerith. We must talk. We must think of what this means."

"Have you not sought long enough?" said Barabbas. "Your sister sees the path you were seeking."

"Ah! but what will become of her?" murmured Joseph, uneasily.

"You said that you seek a change," said Barabbas. "But you do not seek it in yourself. You look beyond man, because you are not truly on the side of men. While you remain a prince you are an enemy of man."

Judas took a step forward. He was trembling. "You shame me," he cried, stamping on the ground. "Remember, I brought you to this house ... the house of a friend."

"But not the friend of man," said Barabbas.

"You have grown like a thorn since you have lived in the wild," cried Judas. "You speak only to prick and wound. Take the thorns from your mouth and speak to my friends as ... as ..."

"I told you I was not fit for the presence of a prince," said Barabbas with a derisive smile.

Jerith said, softly: "He jests, Judas."

"I will not stay! I will not listen to his jests!"

Judas raised his hands in a fretful gesture. Flinging a despairing look at Jerith, he turned and stumbled away through the trees toward the house.

"Wait, Judas!" cried Joseph, gathering up his robe and hastening after him.

Barabbas watched Judas moving with rapid steps across the terraced grass. He was almost running, but the prince soon caught up to him and threw his arm around Judas's shoulders. The sleeve of his other arm rose and fell like a bird's wing as he gestured constantly all the way to the house.

Every moment, while he had been watching, Barabbas had grown more restlessly aware that he was alone with Jerith. Now that the two men were out of sight he had to turn and face her. He had been overwhelmed at first by her delicate beauty, but her jewels and finery had set up a barrier between them. Now, however, he once again marvelled at her loveliness. He felt all his animosities melt in a feeling of kinship and tenderness. He was astonished that a tiny delicate woman could so disarm him by one impulsive generous act.

"Poor Judas!" she murmured. Somehow through the air her severity reached and entered him. Her eyes were probing into his and in his heart there was a strange stirring unlike any he had ever known.

Her head scarcely reached his shoulder. He felt like a giant beside her, and all pride in his strength and height was driven from him as he gazed down at the swanlike whiteness of her bosom. The fragility of her body made him aware of his own heaviness. There was a deep-shadowed dimple at the base of her throat which had been covered by her necklace and the softness of it held his gaze.

She turned her head and looked toward the seat. Then she moved softly toward it, his glance following her. The innumerable folds of her garment made a mystery of every movement of her body. He sank on the grass at her feet.

"There is a bitterness in your eyes that burns like a flame—as though your heart were on fire," Jerith said softly, looking at him with a tenderness and understanding that aroused his wonder. "Has it been kindled by pity for the world?"

"No," replied Barabbas abruptly, shaking off the numbness which had kept him silent. "Loathing has kindled it—loathing of the evil lessons one learns from man."

Jerith's voice was clear and unfaltering as she said: "Surely they cannot all be evil. Have you forgotten love?"

For the first time since she had seated herself he raised his head. She was facing the great glow of the sky, and the splendour of the moon fell upon her so that the shadows under her brows and chin and bosom gave her the allure of marble. His dazzled eyes dropped.

"I know nothing of love," he muttered.

"You believe then that one man alone can change mankind—without pity—without love?" Jerith asked quietly.

"After hate of evil has done its work," he said sombrely, "after the tares are uprooted, after the fire has levelled the useless stubble and the chaff has been blown away, then the sower will come. In a world cleansed of shame the new seed will be sown, seed that will spring up straight and strong and good to behold."

"But you," she said, "you will not live to see the new shoots ..." Her voice trembled and stopped, as though a vague premonition of evil had silenced her.

"No. But the fire I bring, and the death I die, will hasten their growth," he declared, earnestly.

She came nearer still, so that he could have touched her. And when she spoke her voice was sorrowful like her brother's.

"Surely there must be another path," she said.

"No," he answered, bitterly. "But there are quiet cages for doves."

A deep sigh broke from her. "Joseph is ready to escape," she said. "It is I who have held him back. You did not know that."

"Yes. I knew it."

"This necklace," she was saying, "was meant as a sign to you, as well as to him, that I would chain him here no longer.

But it was more than a sign. It is a beginning, a first step from the cage. Take it, Barabbas. It is for the wretched," she said, looking steadily into his face.

His voice sounded stifled. "I will not take it."

She shook her head at him and smiled strangely so that a dimple appeared in her cheek. Then she took a quick step, and before he knew what had happened she had slipped the necklace into the wallet he wore at his waist.

He caught at her hands and held them, thinking to oppose her, but the wild pulse beating in her wrists, and the smell of spice in her hair quickened the beat of his heart. Her nearness emptied him of strength.

"You make me forget the wretched of the world," he cried hoarsely.

Her fingers quivered in his grasp and she began to tremble.

"Why do you tremble?" he asked, but she lowered her head.

She swayed giddily and he caught her shoulders and held them. Drawing her gently closer he laid her head against his breast. Marvelling at himself, he stared down at the moonlit grass at her feet.

"I came here to this garden knowing nothing of love," he whispered, almost against her lips.

For a moment he let himself think of her as a jewel to be prized, a precious possession, but a sudden question thrusting through his thoughts quelled the waves of unaccustomed emotion that had been sweeping through him. "What have I to do with possessions?" he demanded of himself.

"I entered Jerusalem with hate in my heart," he said, half aloud, but she lifted her head to catch his words, and he held her face cupped in his hands, watching the anguish of bewilderment clouding her eyes. "In one hour I have learned what love might be like, but how can I speak of love, Jerith? If I were another man I could desire nothing more than to spend a lifetime at your side. But I am the man I am, and my lifetime is not my own. I must remember the wretched, and forget this meeting. Tomorrow I must go alone to Antipas and speak for myself."

He took a step backward, away from her, and added: "Tell Joseph to deny all knowledge of me. Forget me, Jerith."

"Will you not stay and tell Joseph yourself?" she urged.

"No. If I stayed ..." With an effort he silenced his voice and moved toward the shadow of the trees.

"But some day you will come to us, here or in Arimathea," she implored.

"No," Barabbas answered, in a voice tightened by inner torment. "It is not in me to pray, but if I ever pray it will be that our paths do not cross again."

He faced her a moment longer, shaken by the anguish in her eyes, then he turned and disappeared into the shadows.

The next morning, in the Maccabean palace, which Herod Antipas used as a residence when he came down to the feasts, there was more than the usual stir. Everyone in the king's household, from Chuza, the chief steward, to the lowest slave in the stables, had been hurrying hither and thither since daybreak. An arrival and a departure, both of consequence, had caused the lofty halls and corridors to echo with a ceaseless rumble of steps.

Elikah, governor of the king's fortress at Machaerus, had clattered into the courtyard during the night at the head of a hundred horsemen. No one but Chuza knew what had brought him.

Earlier, the mistress of the bedchamber had made it known that the princess Salome, the tetrarch's step-daughter, was to leave the following day for Joppa, to take ship for Rome.

This news had disturbed no one more than Herod Antipas himself. When Herodias had deserted Philip for him, two years before, he had insisted that Salome, his brother's child, should be left behind in Rome. But Herodias had brought her, nevertheless, and now she was sending her away again in haste.

In the two years Salome had grown from an awkward, spiteful child into a woman of sixteen, the age at which many girls were married, and her mother had learned that Antipas was seeking occasions to look upon her nakedness when she came from the bath. As a gift on the girl's birthday he had secretly given her a slave, an Abyssinian woman to teach her the lewd dances of her country. Herodias had confirmed these reports by torturing two of her women, and at once had determined to get Salome out of his sight.

Having raged against bringing the girl from Rome, Antipas was now in a fury at her mother's haste to be rid of her. On waking late in the morning, after a night of ugly dreams, his first thought was of the growing defiance of his wife. His lust for her daughter had given her a further weapon against him. She had become the tyrant in his household, and he began to fear that if he stood out against her, she would not hesitate to bring about his death. He had learned, too late, that she was a true grand-daughter of his father.

As soon as he opened his eyes his whole body began tingling with the sting of his resentment. He sat up in his great bed. Feeling himself thwarted and smothered, he gripped the heavy festooned curtains which closed him in and tore them down. The prolonged ripping sound made him shudder.

Flinging himself on his side, he struck at a brass gong beside the bed, but the sudden effort brought on a spasm of pain in his legs, and he sank back again, gasping. His lower limbs were afflicted with sores that constantly reminded him of the maladies which had brought his father to a hideous death.

At the sound of the gong a slave entered the bedchamber, halting at once to stare at the wreckage of the curtains. Antipas ordered him to send in Joheleth, his cup-bearer, Nashash, his barber, and Chuza, the chief steward. A stir of people around him helped to scatter the lingering horror of his nightmares, and took his mind from his pains.

Joheleth began preparing at the bedside the tetrarch's favourite cordial of wine, honey and the freshly pressed juice of pomegranates.

Nashash brought oils and dyes and new cloths to bind up his legs.

Chuza, who was longer in appearing, would distract his thoughts by discussing the audiences arranged for the day, the visitors expected, the pleasures that could be contrived for the evening.

The chief steward, a man of humble birth, had grown in the king's favour during one of his voyages to Rome, and had been set over the whole household on his return. But of late Antipas had begun to distrust him. It had come to his ears from Herodias that Joanna, Chuza's wife, had become a secret follower of Jesus of Nazareth. She was said to have aided his disciples with gifts of food and money.

Herodias resented Chuza's authority, and sought to bring him into disfavour by saying that he and his wife were supporting two men, Jesus in Galilee, and John in Perea, of the same kin, who were exhorting the people to look for a new kingdom.

When Chuza entered, the tetrarch threw him a suspicious glance. The man had lately assumed great dignity of bearing,

attiring himself with extravagance. He was tall, with a thin head which thrust all his features forward into a sharp wedge of a face. His little black eyes were like those of a bird, continually darting glances from side to side. His beard, which was black and glossy, hung from his chin, like a pointed ornament of jet. There was an odour of spices about him. His bow, when he entered the tetrarch's presence, was a wonder of servile elegance.

By this time Nashash had bound up his master's legs and was dressing his coarse Edomite hair.

The tetrarch, reclining on a divan, took the cup from Joheleth and sipped it. Nashash leaned and dried the royal beard with a napkin.

"Who seeks audience with us this day?" Antipas demanded, with the air he had learned from his father.

"The governor of the fortress of Machaerus craves immediate attendance," said Chuza, his glance gliding from Joheleth to Nashash and back again to the eyes of the third Herod, which were shot with blood.

"Immediate? Elikah!" roared Antipas. "The fatted swine will be snoring till noonday."

"He arrived in the night, but roused himself with the sun, awaiting the king's pleasure."

"Pleasure! Does he believe we take pleasure in the sight of his cask of a belly?"

Chuza fingered his girdle nervously. "He has news of the Arabs who again threaten your majesty's province of Perea. They are burning villages, poisoning the wells, stealing the flocks and herds."

"What brings him across Jordan with such tidings?" scowled Antipas. "He should have set his pig's face eastward. What hinders him from driving these pillagers into the desert?"

"He has come to beg your majesty to make an appearance beyond Jordan with an army, so that the scum of Arabia will know that the king has not forgotten his province of Perea, but will pursue his enemies and punish them."

"By the hair of Esau!" raged Antipas, pushing Nashash away so that he dropped a cruse of oil on the stone floor where it smashed into fragments. "What has whitened the liver of the mighty man of Kanatha? Command him to saddle his horses and be gone before I have broken my fast, or as the Lord lives I will have his ears roasted as a treat for my dogs."

Chuza's thin nose wrinkled as though he had stared too long at the sun. "Who is the king's servant that he should carry my lord's wrath to the captain of the host?" he asked in a shaking voice.

"What? Do you tremble at a rumbling cask ... at a bladder blown up with wind?"

"I am but a steward," said Chuza, meekly, "whereas the mighty Elikah is governor of a province."

"Governor! Who calls him governor?"

"He speaks of 'my province of Perea,'" said Chuza, his little eyes glittering.

"Ah!" cried Antipas. "The fatted fool swells himself up with a governorship? You shall see me prick him, Chuza. You shall see him flatten like an empty wineskin. Let him stamp and fret until the evening. At meat tonight place him below Nashash at the table."

Chuza bowed very slowly. He could not trust himself to speak.

"Who else seeks audience with us?" said Antipas.

"Phanuel Ben-Phabi, chief of the scribes of the temple, awaits with a message from Annas, prince of the Sanhedrin."

"What does that son of a fox want with us, now?"

"The Council has determined to send two of their number into Galilee to question the prophet Jesus, a man of Nazareth, who preaches in your majesty's province. They have heard it said that he blasphemes against the law."

Antipas, who had let his head sink back with a sign to Nashash to continue the curling of his beard, sat up again and shot a searching look at Chuza.

"Have you yourself heard the words of this prophet?"

"I have not, my lord."

"But you have knowledge from others of how he speaks?"

Chuza fastened a steady glance on the hot iron in the hand of Nashash. "In the household of the king there is little talk of such a man," he said. "But tidings spread, and for that reason two councillors are being sent to learn the truth."

"Who are they?"

"Prince Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus, a rabbi of the Pharisees."

The tetrarch's bloodshot eyes were suddenly glazed with fear. "The same who were sent to question John of Jordan?"

"The same, my lord."

"And what have I to do with this?"

"Prince Annas craves the king's hospitality for the two councillors in Tiberias, so that it may be known that they come, not only with the authority of the Sanhedrin, but also with royal sanction."

Antipas dropped back his head again and spoke into the air. "You may say to Phanuel Ben-Phabi that we shall welcome these councillors so long as they remain in our province of Galilee. The prince is an old friend. I know nothing of the other."

Chuza shuffled his feet noisily. "Who am I to carry the king's words to Phanuel Ben-Phabi? He is the chief of the scribes, and your servant is but a steward in my lord's house."

"He is a worm, and a son-in-law of a creeping fox. Do you tremble at worms?"

"I step aside so that I do not tread on them," said Chuza.

"Let him wait. I will speak with him. Who else desires our ear?"

"There is a man below from beyond Jordan. His name is Jeshua. He says he is a kinsman of John who baptizes at Bethabara."

Antipas flung Nashash aside and sprang to his feet, his eyes staring. But he began to groan at once with the pain in his legs and sank back again.

"By the cliffs of Carmel!" he cried. "This is of more consequence than a score of scribes and a caskful of governors. Why did you not speak of this earlier? What manner of man is he?"

"He is a fierce man and a mocker, my lord, and of great height and strength. I have not seen him but this much I know of him. The guards have kept him below, fearing he might attempt some evil."

Antipas was quaking. Only half of his beard was curled. Three of the seven ringlets he wore were finished on one side of his face. His swarthy skin had paled to a muddy yellow. He began chewing his lips, but immediately spat on his bed-garment, muttering curses at Nashash.

When he had recovered he said to the steward: "Have this man brought up and question him. See that he is well guarded."

He flung out his hand in a peevish sign of dismissal and Chuza bowed himself out.

Passing the doorway of his own chamber, where Elikah was fuming with impatience, Chuza called along the corridor to a page at the stair-head. The youth came running on tiptoe.

"Go below to the captain of the Gauls," ordered the chief steward. "Tell him to bring up the man Jeshua to my chamber for questioning. With a guard. A strong guard."

Then he went in to a further room where the Chief of the Scribes had spent almost an hour. It was customary to make obeisance to the chief priests, but Chuza's bow was scarcely more than a nod.

"The tetrarch regrets that matters of state will not permit him to grant the Chief of the Scribes an audience until later in the day," he said.

His tone made the delay appear so indefinite that Phaniel Ben-Phabi flushed with resentment. Speaking as though to a person several paces behind the chief steward, he announced that he would send one of the temple guards to await a clearer understanding of when the tetrarch would receive him.

Chuza turned without ceremony and entered his own chamber, a large reverberating room in one of the towers of the palace. He found Elikah, who had the girth of a horse, waddling from one window to another, snorting repeatedly like an old battle-charger. The captain's bejewelled belt, looted from a Seleucid palace forty years before, heaved and shook with every step. On his right hand he wore an enormous ring. It was set with an onyx on which was carved the name of Herod the Great, who had given it to him for bravery at the battle of Kanatha. He often stroked his bristling white beard with the hand bearing this ring, to remind his listeners that he had once been a man of prodigious deeds.

When Chuza entered, his eyes dark with malice at the thought of the humiliation awaiting the pompous captain, Elikah peered at him from under frowning brows.

"What says the Son-of-Nobody?" he demanded at once.

Chuza stood a moment, his wedge-shaped face thrust forward, inwardly gloating over Elikah's anxiety.

"It is well for you," he said, biting, "that your ears are not as big as your belly, or you might have heard words that would have flayed you like whips."

"What said the Son-of-Nothing?"

"It would tear my tongue to repeat what he said."

"The sage of the bedchamber is jesting," growled Elikah, his voice resounding against the walls of polished stone.

"I am not jesting."

"Then you are lying."

"I do not lie, Elikah," declared the steward, scornfully, "not even to those who are no more in my sight than a dried millet seed."

"A fig for your sight! Your hearing should be better. It has been sharpened at closed doorways. What message do you bring me from the one we know?"

"I bring no message."

"Give me the message and have done."

"His words were too sharp. I refused to carry them."

"You! You refused?" Elikah sneered.

"I said to him, 'Who am I to carry wrath to the captain of the host?'"

"And what said he to that?"

"He asked me how long I had trembled at the sound of a rumbling cask."

"Enough!" bellowed Elikah, lowering his head like a bull. "When will the Son-of-Less-than-Nothing see me?"

"His day is filled with a multitude of matters, and so is mine," said Chuza. As he spoke he stalked across the chamber, almost brushing against Elikah as he passed him.

Flinging open the door, he glanced impatiently down the corridor. The Gauls had just mounted the stairs and over the heads of the guards who surrounded the tall prisoner, Chuza caught sight of a dark scowling face. He assumed an air of cold scrutiny when Barabbas was marched into the anteroom, and asked loftily what errand had brought him to the palace.

"My message is for the ears of your master," Barabbas said with a grimace of impatience. "Go and tell him that a man has come from one who acknowledges no kingdom on earth."

The speaker was wrapped from head to foot in a gay striped mantle. Seven crimson tassels hung from his girdle. His head-cloth, stiffened with three rings of goat's hair, added to his unusual height. It had been tucked into his tunic, so that the scar was hidden and only the blunt point of his beard could be seen. His body, even his neck, was hidden, yet it was plain that he was built like a gladiator.

"Is this the man Jeshua?" asked Chuza, addressing the captain of the Gauls.

"Who is this scented fellow?" demanded Barabbas, sniffing the odour of spices as Chuza approached him.

"Quiet your tongue!" warned the captain. "You are speaking to the chief steward of the tetrarch."

"What have I to do with stewards?" Barabbas scoffed. "Bring me before the tetrarch immediately, or tell him I have returned whence I came, and that John of Jordan will not send another."

In an attempt to overawe the prisoner, Chuza raised his thin head and looked down his nose at Barabbas.

"Address yourself to me," he said, in his iciest tone. "Are you truly a kinsman of the prophet of Jordan?"

"We are akin," said Barabbas.

"We must have some assurance that you are sent by the prophet," said Chuza, patiently. "Have you any of your own blood in the city who will vouch for you?"

"None."

"Friends?"

"None."

"Not one?"

"I know a man here, an apothecary. But what has he to do with this? I would not call him to vouch for me."

"What is his name?"

"I will not give you his name."

Chuza brought his feet together and continued doggedly. "Do you know no one of rank?" he demanded, folding his arms in his sleeves.

"Yes. A prince," said Barabbas.

"What is his name?"

"Joseph of Arimathea."

"Ek!" exclaimed Chuza, astonished and exasperated. "You know the prince?"

"Yes. But I would not ask him to speak for me. I have come alone from John. If the son of Herod will not admit me, let him say so, and I will return. Does this mighty king fear a man unarmed, surrounded by swordsmen?"

Chuza moved at once toward the corridor to the king's bedchamber. "Why did you not say before that you knew Prince Joseph?" he flung angrily at Barabbas as he passed him.

Barabbas did not answer, and Chuza, with a warning nod to the captain of the Gauls, went in to the king.

He found Antipas not at all amazed that the man from beyond Jordan should know Prince Joseph. He seemed only astonished that the man had come alone to seek audience with him instead of having the prince intercede for him.

Chuza was ordered to send a messenger to Joseph's house, and within an hour the prince arrived at the palace, disturbed by the word brought to him that "a man named Jeshua" had presented himself in the early morning, had resisted all questioning, and had become violent when put under guard.

Conducted at once to the royal bedchamber, Joseph told the already trembling tetrarch what he knew of Jeshua, offering to see him and bring assurance to the king that the man would attempt no harm.

The prince was shown into Chuza's chamber, while Nashash helped to complete the king's robing, and Chuza himself went below to prepare the Hall of Aristobulus for the audience.



Barabbas had reached the end of his patience. He was eyeing the captain of the Gauls, calculating his weight and strength, wondering if he could seize him in his arms, use his body as a shield, and hold off the others until he could reach the corridor.

But even while he was rocking on his heels, readying his muscles for the spring, the door opened and Prince Joseph came in. His face was grave. He stepped close and said at once: "Why did you come alone?"

"Because I cannot lean on another," said Barabbas. "I must be free to speak whatever comes to me. Tell the son of Herod that I am alone, and that you know nothing of me except that I come from John."

"I must take him your oath that you will not attempt harm."

"I will not give you an oath. If he fears me, let him double his guard."

Joseph's eyelids dropped and he rubbed his small pale hands together, as though carefully kneading a crumb of patience between them.

When he looked up again his eyes were sad, as they had been the night before when he had talked of love, and the full heart, and the driving out of fear.

"I was astonished last night," he said, softly, "when I came out again and found you gone."

Barabbas steadied his breath which had begun to quicken with the passage of memories through his mind. "It was time for me to go," he said, deliberately.

"Will you come to us again when this is over?" asked Joseph.

"No."

"I beg you, Jeshua ..."

"Forget me, Prince. I am not of your clay."

"It is not the vessel that matters, but what is in it," said Joseph.

"My heart is full, but not as yours is," Barabbas murmured, his voice softening as the image of Jerith seemed to stand in a tiny space in the prince's eyes.

Joseph turned away to hide the injured look that had enveloped his face. Without looking back he went out and returned to the king.

It was not long before Chuza came and led the way down the wide staircase to the Hall of Aristobulus, where the king of that name had held his audiences.

Antipas was seated on a raised throne, dressed in a heavy robe brocaded with gold wire, with a golden chain around his neck. Close behind him stood two enormous negroes, a gift from the king of Cush, with spears which stood seven cubits high in their hands.

Prince Joseph was standing beside a chair placed below the king's.

At a nod from Antipas the captain marched his guard out of the chamber, and Chuza bowed himself through the doors, closing them quietly outside.

Barabbas had made no obeisance. He stood several paces from the throne and through narrowed lids sated his eyes with the sight of the tetrarch's face. His hate of all the Herods flamed in his mind as he stared at the swarthy skin, the oiled beard, the flattened nostrils, the flowing mass of coarse Edomite hair.

Antipas stared back and the silence in the broad chamber hummed ominously.

"You are from east of Jordan," said the king at last, his eyelids cringing as he waited for a reply.

"From Bethabara, where John baptizes," said Barabbas.

"Then you are a subject of mine."

"I am no man's subject. I am a man of the earth."

"But I rule the earth in Perea," frowned Antipas.

"Like John, I acknowledge no master," said Barabbas, challengingly. "I rule myself according to the unalterable laws of the earth which swallows up rulers, even when they become as mighty as those of Rome."

"Ah!" pounced Antipas, "You are an enemy of Caesar's?"

"Is this a trial?" demanded Barabbas, raising his voice.

"No. But you should take care how you speak of Rome."

"I am not a careful man."

"No. I see you are not," said the tetrarch, drawing his shoulders together as though to conceal a shudder. For a moment he plucked at the fringes of his sleeves, then he leaned forward and said in a different tone: "Are you a kinsman, also, of Jesus of Galilee?"

"I am not," said Barabbas.

"He is of John's kin, I am told."

"Yes, but not of mine."

"Is his preaching like John's?"

"No. You need not fear him," Barabbas answered, scornfully. "He neither preaches eternal fire, nor does he wish to be a king. He will not incite the people to take up arms against you."

"These men do not need arms," muttered Antipas inaudibly. "They overcome without fighting."

He turned suddenly to Joseph. "Is this Baptist a man of strength?"

"He fasts without ceasing," said the prince. "He looks like a skeleton."

"Like a skeleton!" cried Antipas, writhing in his chair. "Are his eyes sunken, with an unearthly blaze?"

"They are," said Joseph. "But I thought you had never seen him."

"In my dreams ... in my dreams!" groaned Antipas. "I know he must look like a dead man, for he has risen out of the earth."

"He is a bony man," said Barabbas, "but there is nothing deathly about him. He is full of life, fiery life."

"Yes. The life of a demon," the tetrarch groaned and grasping the arms of the great chair tried to still the trembling that shook him from head to foot.

"I came for this. I have seen it," thought Barabbas, keeping his eyes fixed on the incessant quivering of the tetrarch's beard, as though he desired to remember the moment all his life.

Antipas suddenly beat his clenched fists together, and somehow steadied his voice. "Tell this to John, that the offer I make him was given in the presence of Prince Joseph of Arimathea, who knows that when a Herod makes an oath, he keeps it."

"Spare your oaths, son of Herod. Your fear will keep you from breaking your word," said Barabbas.

"By the hair of Esau, I could have your tongue out for this," cried Antipas, grasping the chain about his neck as though he would break it.

"In the presence of the Prince of Arimathea?" said Barabbas. "He knows, as I do, that in Jerusalem you have no more power than I have. You come here only on the sufferance of Pilate. Forget your oaths and threats. If you have a message for John, speak as man to man."

Antipas twisted violently in his chair and tried to erect his sagging body into some semblance of dignity.

"Hearken, then, man!" he scowled. "It is true I have no authority here. But I have power in Perea. I have a fortress there at Machaerus, where I can protect John from those who seek his life. Have you heard of the daggermen of Mizpah?"

"I have not."

"These men are assassins, a remnant of the Sicarii who were driven out of my province of Galilee. A slave in my stables who knew them in the north was drinking in a wine shop during the feast, and from one of these dagger-throwers he learned they had been hired to put John to death."

"You learn this from a drunken slave?"

Antipas opened his mouth as though about to let out a roar, but he gripped the chair again and calmed himself. "I learned the names of the two men who were hired. They are dead now. I learned also who hired them, and I have set a watch, but my spies can be bribed. John's life is not safe."

"Why are you so eager to protect a man who has spoken evil against you?"

"If he is killed the deed will be called mine. The people across Jordan, who are his disciples, will call the Arabs to their aid and rise against me in Perea. My fears are not for the battle. I have beaten the Arabs before, and I can beat them again. What I fear is that another war against them will anger Rome."

"This is not his real fear," Barabbas thought. "He is afraid that if John is killed he will rise from the grave to trouble him all his life."

Antipas had closed his eyes wearily. At last he lifted his thick lashes and said: "While John lives in a cave alone, without arms, I cannot protect him. But if he will deliver himself up to me at my fortress of Machaerus, I can save him. I will surround him with trusted guards. His disciples may come and go and carry his words to the people. I will not hinder them or him. And I will forfeit a half of my kingdom if a hair of his head is harmed."

"He will be your prisoner."

"Yes. But he will be protected. Otherwise, nothing can save him."

Barabbas looked up and stared fixedly at Antipas. "And now that you have given me your message for John, let me not leave without telling you John's answer to your envoys. He says that he will not come to any king; that he is the voice of the new kingdom. He warns you to put away Herodias who is an abomination before the Lord; to come across Jordan in sackcloth with ashes on your head and be baptized by him in penitence. If you harden your heart and will not come, your soul is in danger of everlasting fire."

Antipas sank back heavily on his throne clutching at the golden chain around his neck, breathing heavily. He seemed to be in a swoon and he tried to speak, but no sound came. Growing calmer at last, he said to Barabbas:

"Give my message to John, nevertheless. When he hears of the threatened attack on his life, his heart may be changed toward me."

Barabbas stood still, a smile of contempt on his lips.

Antipas, his eyes cast down, waited for him to speak. The stubborn silence angered him. Raising his voice, he said: "If you will carry my message to John, as I have spoken it, you may ask anything you will. As token of our good faith, ask what you will."

For the first time since he had faced the king, the derisive curl left Barabbas's lips. A challenging light grew in his eyes.

"I desire no gifts," he said, smiling at himself. "But I will accept a token. A sword. A straight sword with a blade of Damascus tempering. There are evil men in the world, and they are armed. I would have a worthy weapon when I meet them."

Antipas struck a gong beside him and Chuza appeared.

"Send in ten of our Gauls with their captain," said the tetrarch.

Chuza bowed himself out.

"Five would have been enough," murmured Barabbas.

No further word was spoken until the captain of the Gauls entered with ten men. Antipas said to him: "Go to the armoury and select a fine, straight sword from those that came lately from Damascus. Bring it to me."

While the man was gone, the tetrarch said: "This will be a worthy sword. The steel comes from the forge of Ubbabel, who is known even in Rome."

When the captain returned, Antipas made a sign to him with a sweep of his eyes. The Gauls made a half circle behind Barabbas, and lowered their spears.

"Give him the sword," said Antipas.

The captain offered it to Barabbas across his arm, and Barabbas took it and examined the embossing of the scabbard. Then he drew out the blade and tested it with his thumb.

"I swore you could ask me for whatever you wished," declared Antipas. "Tell John that when a Herod swears an oath he is bound by it, even though it should threaten his life. You are a man of evil spirit, Jeshua. Your thoughts are violent. Violence will surely overtake you."

"Evil be to him who sees evil in others," muttered Barabbas under his breath.

"Conduct him to the palace gates," commanded Antipas to the captain.

Prince Joseph rose from his chair and stepped close. "You will not come to lodge with us tonight?" he asked, in a low voice.

Barabbas looked past the prince at a slit of sky that could be seen through an arched window.

"Tonight I shall reach Jericho," he said. "Tomorrow's sun will see me beyond Bethabara, breathing the air of God."

Without a further glance at Antipas he marched out of the great hall between two files of Gauls.



Looking down through the parted curtains of her balcony, Jerith saw old Lod, the gatekeeper, bareheaded in the sun at the rear of the house feeding the birds. The old man's palsied head was shaking, as always. The crumbs of bread were falling in a thin sweeping rain as he swung his arm like a sower. Sparrows were hopping between the plump white bodies of the rock-doves from the cliff.

The scene was sharply defined before her eyes as she leaned and watched, but her mind was elsewhere. The swinging arm, the falling scraps, the birds, the grass, and the glorious morning light, seemed to form a tiny fragile pattern behind her thoughts, like a reflection in the glassy roundness of a bubble. Her thoughts were somehow foremost, but at last the movements of the old man and the birds stirred in her an impulse that seemed to spring from her childhood.

Her feet were swift and her body light as she ran down the stairs, calling as she went to the old nurse: "Haggitha! Haggitha!"

Too impatient to wait at the foot of the stairs, she ran to the rear of the house and burst in among the startled maidservants.

"Give me scraps for the birds, Meheleth," she called from the door.

"Do they eat nothing but crusts?" she thought, when Meheleth gave her a few stale scraps from the end of a loaf. She hesitated to ask, feeling ashamed that she knew nothing about the ways of birds.

She stood beside old Lod, and listened with only half an ear to what he was saying while she watched the sparrows darting off with a whirr of wings, carrying fragments of the crusts out of sight.

At times she forgot the bread in her hand as she bent to follow the straight flight of a sparrow under low branches until it vanished over the wall. She wondered where their nests were, and if they had young ones awaiting them in the woods beyond the garden.

"How free they are!" she thought. "How free and beautiful and wild!"

She knew nothing of their wildness or their freedom. She had never wandered in the ravine outside the wall. All her life she had lived within call of Haggitha.

Suddenly Haggitha was beside her. But the little toothless old woman had come from the house as usual before mid-day with a flat wicker basket on her arm and a sharp pruning knife.

"What flowers shall I cut for the table, Highness?" she asked.

Looking at the cloudy eyes of her old nurse, and then at Lod's palsied head, Jerith said to herself: "Is it because Jeshua was once a slave that he is so bitter against riches?"

Haggitha and Lod and Zimri had been waiting on them since childhood. They had been freed long ago, but nothing could have driven them from the household. What would become of them, if she and Joseph gave up all they possessed?

"Give me the knife, Haggitha," she said, taking the basket from the old woman's arm.

"She bends her back a hundred times a day for me," Jerith thought, smiling at the astonishment in the squeezed little eyes of the nurse.

They moved toward the rockeries on either side of the pergola which covered the walk down through the garden.

"If you expect a guest," mumbled Haggitha, "the larkspur, Highness. It is early to cut them, but they stand so pretty in the vases."

Jerith was silent, trying to come to a decision about the flowers, when she saw Joseph coming toward her from the house. With a feeling of relief she said hurriedly: "Leave the basket here, Haggitha. I will come back."

Turning to meet Joseph she saw that his eyes were dark with some inner disturbance, his lips drawn in a wide line. He

put his arm through hers and drew her silently toward an ancient stump which had been fashioned into a seat with an arbour of flowering vines arching over it.

For Haggitha's ears, as they moved away, Jerith said: "We were wondering what flowers would please our guest."

"We shall have no guest," said Joseph, gloomily.

Jerith's elbow tightened against his arm. "Was he recognized?" she asked.

"No. He had dressed himself like a driver of camels."

"What, then? Did he rail at Antipas?"

Joseph nodded solemnly.

"What passed, Joseph? Is he in prison?"

"No, no!" answered the prince, as though the thought had not entered his mind. Her head was bent, but she felt him glance down at her. "No. But he has gone."

"Where?"

"Back to the desert."

"Did you tell him," said Jerith, "that last night, after he had gone, we talked about our possessions till the moon went down, and about what we might do with them?"

"No," said Joseph, wearily. "He is impatient of words."

"And he has gone."

"He said he would be in Jericho by nightfall, and by tomorrow in the desert breathing the air of God."

"But he leaves us in the city, without a word to guide us. He uproots us and leaves us with only a gospel of hate."

"What he has seen in Jerusalem has deepened his resentment of riches," said Joseph, dejectedly. "He came filled with pity for the poor. He departed filled with hate for the powerful. I saw it in his face."

Jerith said quietly: "He hates cities. And so do you, Joseph."

The prince groaned, striking his hands together. His gesture was not vehement, but the little clapping sound echoed against the cliff at the lower end of the garden, and there was a flurry of white wings as the rock-doves flew up and circled over the valley.

"Let us leave the city," said Jerith. "Last night, after he had gone, when you spoke of breaking up the estate in Arimathea, and working in the vineyards ourselves, I began to dream of a humble life there, without slaves, and with few possessions. It will be hard for me at first, but I shall learn."

Joseph stirred uneasily and rubbed his hands together slowly. "He is a violent man, and impatient. 'Walk out!' he cries. 'Take the one step.' But we have many things to think of. What would become of Haggitha or Zimri or Lod and the others?"

"I had the same thought today."

Joseph clenched his hands together tightly. "It angers him that I believe as he does, yet I do nothing to change my life."

"You *would* have, Joseph, long ago, had it not been for me. When we returned, so heart-broken, I could see that you longed for solitude. I even thought of going to Rome, although I should be wretched there alone."

"Why should you leave me?"

"There will be no need, if we go to Arimathea," said Jerith, excitedly. "Is it not strange that Barabbas should have come when he did? Our hearts were ready."

Joseph turned and held her gently by both shoulders, while he slowly searched her eyes. "Is your heart sure?" he demanded, gravely.

"Are there not thousands who love the earth and live by its fruits?" asked Jerith. "I was only a child when we left Arimathea, and I have lived in cities ever since. I have never walked in the ravine beyond our wall. When have I ever breathed the air of God?"

Joseph looked tenderly at Jerith and encircled her shoulders with his arm. "My little sister," he said.

The morning following his audience with Antipas, Barabbas reached the corner house at the foot of the Alley of Spices. Through the open doorway he could hear the whirr of Judas's pestle, grinding dried herbs in an earthen mortar. For a moment he stood still on the upper step, sniffing the familiar smell of mingled spices.

For some reason he wanted to watch Judas and recover the sense of the old days. He had come to make his peace with him before leaving the city. The impulse seemed strange, for since he had left the tetrarch's presence fierce thoughts had been blaring like trumpets in his head.

Through a mist of revengeful passion, he saw that the path he had chosen must end in battle and bloodshed. He had talked wildly to Judas of dying a death that would shame the world. It was no longer a boast. From the moment he had grasped the sword in the hall of the Herods he had known that his destiny lay in deeds. An avenging torrent had swept through his veins, the roar of it mounting in him like a shout of battle: "Blood for blood! Death for death!"

As he stood in the doorway, looking at Judas's stooped shoulders, he felt that this would be a deliberate break with his old life; his last peaceful act.

On the high bench where Judas was working, and on shelves against the walls, were scores of vessels of all heights and shapes. From a rack of canes suspended from the ceiling hung clusters of strangely twisted roots, shrivelled pods, and bunches of withered herbs. A faint prolonged hiss came from a metal censer, hanging by three chains over a charcoal fire, in which a mixture of blackened stems was scorching and sending out a sharp acrid odour.

Barabbas knocked on the doorpost with his knuckles, and cried: "Come out, apothecary!"

Judas turned quickly and blinked at the strong sunlight pouring through the doorway. He dropped his pestle and came forward. His weak eyes widened with surprise, and then began twitching in confusion.

"It is you," he exclaimed, his thin voice hoarser than usual from the dust of the herbs he had been grinding.

"The son of my father," said Barabbas, smiling, although his tone was grim.

Judas glanced with bewilderment at the sword Barabbas had buckled to his belt. "You are armed?" he said, timidly.

"Yes."

"Are you going armed to the palace?"

"I have been to the palace."

"You have seen the tetrarch?"

"The tetrarch has seen me," said Barabbas, with mock bombast. "Behold what he gave me."

He drew the sword from the scabbard with a flourishing sweep and slashed twice at the air between them, chuckling with fierce glee at the whistle of the blade. "A sword of Damascus!"

"Did the prince go with you?"

"I went alone."

"What? Did you not stay the night with Joseph?"

"No. I fled from there. I lodged last night at the inn of Jacob Three-Sheaves. I borrowed the clothes of a camel driver and went to the palace. They sent for the prince, but I would not let him speak for me. I was taken into a great hall, and I saw the son of Herod tremble. I have seen what I came to see."

Judas stepped back a pace and then forward again. "Did you quarrel and insult my friends?"

"After you had gone ... she made me take her necklace. 'For the wretched,' she said. She expects me to sell it and give alms to the poor. Alms! How many thousands of years more will the rich scatter their scraps to the starving?"

He began searching in the bottom of his wallet, and drew forth the necklace of emeralds. His fingers were searching gently for the clasp, so that the three strands of jewels would fall in loops as they had on Jerith's throat. "For a time they weakened me. I could have loved them. Do you hear me?"

He laughed deep in his throat, and suddenly snatched up the emeralds into his fist, grinding them gratingly together.

"Barabbas ... talking of love!" he scoffed. "I have learned, at last, what love might be like. To sit still. To speak softly. To turn your eyes from wretchedness. But I am no lover, Judas!"

"I can believe that. Love does not mock," said Judas, in an injured tone.

"No. It neither mocks, nor denounces, nor strives to right anything. It is for women and the timid and the talkers."

"Get you gone, Jeshua!" burst out Judas, sweeping both hands widely before his face as though ridding himself of some swarming pest. "Your talk sickens me. Why have you come?"

A grimace of irony twisted Barabbas's lips. "I came to make peace with you, Judas," he said, with a rueful shrug.

"With war in your heart and a sword at your side?"

"And with these in my hand," said Barabbas, opening his clenched fist and letting the looped gems spill over his fingers. "I want you to sell them. With the money I will buy not bread, but swords. Bread lasts but an hour in the bellies of the unfortunate. But swords will deliver them from misery. I shall need a thousand swords. Then let the son of Herod come against us in our caves with a hundred or two men. I will lead a thousand swordsmen against him, and drive his archers into Jordan."

Judas suddenly stretched out his hand as though to snatch the necklace, but he shrank back, muttering: "She gave it to you in a moment of impulse, and not for this."

"What is this string of gems worth?" cried Barabbas. "That is what matters. How many swords will it buy? Go out to the goldsmith, Judas, and sell it for all you can get. Go to a man you know. If I went as I am they would think I had stolen it. Sell it at a high price. Tell them it belonged to a princess. Make them bid for it. Go, Judas. Take it!"

"I will not touch it! If you sell the gems she gave you for the poor to wage war on the rich, then it is a theft! Be gone from my sight, before I deliver you up as a robber."

"What?" roared Barabbas, in amazement. "You! You would betray me?"

"Go, before I cry your name in the street ... Barabbas, the robber!" shouted Judas, his feet shuffling as though with eagerness to run to the door. As he was about to turn, a broad shadow from outside fell across the threshold, and the familiar voice of Hezebel, hoarse from crying out to buyers in the temple courts, blared behind them.

Barabbas spun round as she trudged in. Six wicker cages of doves were slung over a pole resting on her shoulder. He dropped the necklace in his wallet and helped her set the cages down on the floor. For a moment the cooing and flapping of wings drowned out her mutterings, and in one glance Barabbas saw that her hips were broader and her bosom more mountainous than ever. Her head had sunk into rolls of fat which concealed any former semblance of a neck. Her chin had disappeared, but where it had been there were a few straggling hairs. Squeezed between her bulging cheeks and bushy brows were two spiteful blood-streaked eyes, dulled with wine and drudgery. Her lower lip hung slackly askew, worn out with years of shouting.

She turned and her glance climbed the height of Barabbas. Her only greeting was a glowering look. Her body was trembling like a jelly with rage, and she burst out at once: "Robbers! What do you know of robbers? Holy Father Moses! Have you heard how they are robbing us, now?"

Barabbas laughed and said: "Who robs you, Mother Hezebel?"

"That son of abomination, Annas! God whiten his bones!"

"The high priest?"

"Where have you been wandering?" she jeered. "Know you not that he is higher than the high priest, now? Caiaphas, his

goose of a son-in-law, wears the ephod ... a dumb sheep ... a rabbit who jumps at his bidding. Five of his sons have worn the robes and robbed us, and now he has married his daughter to a worse robber than them all. The others bought doves from the breeders in Galilee and sold them to us at a price that left us barely a copper. But, now, by the rod of Moses, even that does not satisfy their covetous souls! Now they are going to breed the birds themselves, the sons of Belial! And we shall be forced to trudge up the Hill of Fire and buy doves at their booths. Birds that are not of their breeding will be rejected as 'blemished' by the temple priests. They are building runs and cages for thousands of doves, so that Annas and his misbegotten sons will make a bigger profit from every sacrifice. And a poor old body like me will have to toil up there every time I sell out ... down to the Kedron and up again ... and less for our pains than ever!"

"Be assured, old mother, this will not go on much longer," said Barabbas, moving impatiently toward the door. "These tyrants shall be thrown down from their high places. I swear it by this sword of reckoning. Mark me, Judas, if you live, you will see this sword again."

"Neither of us will live beyond the Passover," said Judas. "They who plunder, and they who plunder the plunderers will pass away."

"Hush, you!" cried Hezebel. "You will bring the eye of the evil one on us!"

"Back to your pots, Judas! Grind spices for the dead! There will be a great cry for them when I come again!" said Barabbas from the doorway.

Hezebel's voice was raised raucously behind him as he stepped into the street, but he did not heed what she was saying. With long springing strides he ascended the Alley of Spices. At the summit he turned into the passage of the Citron Sellers where he bought fruit for his journey. Outside the gate, he stood still for a moment to breathe in deeply the unpolluted air. The afternoon shadow had already crept half-way up the slope of Olivet. A fresh leafy smell rose from the river below. Frowning grimly, he set his face toward the desert.

PART III

Barabbas reached the pools of Bethabara before nightfall, ready to pour into John's ears the threats against his life. On the way he had told himself that the prophet's inevitable denunciations of Antipas would cause the people of Perea to rise, and in his quick imagination the robber saw himself at the head of an army, ending the rule of the Herods in the lands beyond Jordan.

But John listened to his story with scornful silence, and when Barabbas urged him to accept a guard of a few men, lest an assassin should come by night and attack him, he brought down the hermit's wrath on his own head.

"What demon possesses you, that you hold yourself mightier than the Almighty?" the Baptist demanded. "When my time is come, who shall say nay to my passing? Who shall protect me in the hour when the Lord God shall require my soul?"

Accustomed to John's stubbornness, Barabbas said no more. As in former times the two men fell silent, lying at the cave mouth until the stars came out, but the calm night did not quiet the seething in Barabbas's soul. At daybreak he joined his men in the gorge, and from that day he began to unite under his leadership small bands of desert nomads, offering them greater spoils and security.

For weeks he was absent in the desert and heard nothing of John, but on his return in the month of Elul, at the time of vintage, he learned that there had been an attempt on the hermit's life. John had been saved only by the presence in his cave of a disciple named Sheth.

A daggerman had come alone by night, but Sheth, awakened by a loosened stone, had snatched up the camel skin on which he was sleeping, and when the stealthy steps came close he flung the hide over the assassin's head and bore him to the ground. Before John was fully awake, Sheth had wrenched the dagger from the man's hand and driven it between his shoulders. Then he took the body on his back and carried it to a precipice outside the cave and heaved it into the chasm. When he had washed himself in the upper pool, he came back and said to John: "I have slain a wild beast and thrown the carcass to the vultures. It will be said that you killed him. By tomorrow at this time you must be far from here."

Nevertheless, John would not leave.

Sheth then went to Barabbas in the hills and besought him to come with a company of his men, and between them they prevailed upon John to leave the territory of Herod Antipas and go into Samaria, a Roman province.

John had heard of the springs of Salim, near Aenon in the valley of Shechem, and thither Barabbas escorted him with a few mounted men in the first days of the season of heat. John began to baptize there in a pool shadowed by Mount Gerizim, and it was rumoured abroad that a prophet had come up out of Bethabara to preach.

Prince Joseph and the rabbi, Nicodemus, who had been sent by the Sanhedrin to question Jesus, came down through Samaria from Galilee after a sojourn of many days with the prophet of Nazareth.

At an inn in Asher, where they spent the night, it was told them that John had come into that district of Samaria. Many who had seen him pass through the village had marvelled that the holy man should have been accompanied by a robber, a giant of fierce visage, riding a black Arab horse like a *sheykh*. It was said that he concealed his name by calling himself simply: "My father's son".

"I have heard of this Barabbas," said Nicodemus to the prince. "He is perhaps a prophet himself."

"I know the man," said Joseph, and when they had set out again on their journey, the prince told of meeting Barabbas in the spring, when he had come to Jerusalem for an audience with Herod Antipas.

"He believes himself to be the champion of the humble, yet I never saw a man so proud," said Joseph, uneasily. "He is on the side of the meek, yet he is fierce, and speaks of burning the cities with fire."

Nicodemus wagged his head, dragging the thin wisps of his beard to and fro across his chest. "My synagogue," he said, "is in the lowermost depths of the city, and they who worship there are for the most part goatherds who tend and milk the flocks in the Valley of the Cheesemakers. Many of them are crowded into crumbling evil-smelling hovels. And it has sometimes come to me, prince, that good might rise out of evil if a fire should sweep through that valley and destroy their habitations, where thousands of children are born into filth and misery. It chills the heart to dwell on it, yet I have dreamed at times of such a fire, and of leading the people up out of the ruins. They would be like lost sheep, but perhaps then they could be shepherded out of the afflictions of the city to some green valley, where the sun and air would strengthen their sickly bodies, and they could start life anew there with a plough and an ox, and in the abundance of the earth they could find their fill. I say I have dreamed of it, prince, but it requires more than dreaming."

The prince's glance turned in astonishment on the shrivelled, reticent little man, who looked far older than his threescore years. His cheeks were cavernous, as though he fasted often. His shoulders were bent from spending much time over his loom, for although he had become a doctor of the law, and sat with princes in the Sanhedrin, he continued in his trade of weaving so that he could give the cloth to the poor of his synagogue.

Joseph said: "I have no doubt, master, that your dream has become a prayer."

"It is even so," replied Nicodemus. "I pray daily that the misery of my little flock will be lessened."

A long silence fell over the two men as Joseph pondered. At last he turned to Nicodemus and with grave deliberateness said: "Your prayer is answered. I will provide the ploughs and the oxen and instead of a valley I will divide among your people the hillside that is mine in Arimathea. What you have dreamed shall come to pass without the scourge of fire."

The rabbi was deeply moved and tears of gratitude rose to his eyes. He stared speechlessly at Joseph.

"I knew not until now," said Joseph, humbly, "how stubborn I have been, and blind. First, Barabbas came to me, a stranger who spoke of embracing the earth, and called me an enemy until such time as I should sell my possessions and share with the unfortunate. Then, in Galilee, I went secretly one night and found Jesus alone on the shore, and said to him: 'Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may ease the longing of my soul?'"

"Ah, you also went to him alone," smiled the rabbi. "So did I."

"But he knew me for a prince and a man of great possessions, and believing that my heart was not in my question, he counselled me nothing, save that I keep the commandments. 'I have kept the law from my youth up,' I said. 'What lack I yet?' Then Jesus said to me: 'If you would be perfect, go and sell whatever you possess, and give to the poor.' But I came away, sorrowful, for I saw no way to divide my wealth so that it would benefit the poor. I have talked of this with my sister, and we had decided before I left Jerusalem that we would portion out our estate among the husbandmen and vinedressers who worked for our family in my father's time. Nevertheless, we saw that such a step would rid us only of our land; not of our riches. I was perplexed and troubled, but now, master, you have shown me a way. Now I can see how our riches can become a blessing to the wretched."

They had left behind the wooded plain of Samaria and began the long climb into the arid mountains of Ephraim, where the oppressive heat made it difficult to speak. They journeyed only in the early morning, and again toward sundown, yet by the time they reached Jerusalem their eyes were giddy with the brilliance of the sun and their ears tingled with a shrill twitter as though a myriad insects swarmed about their heads.



Joseph had expected that he and Nicodemus would be called before the Sanhedrin to report what they had heard in Galilee, but he was astonished and alarmed when they were summoned instead to the palace of Annas, the former high priest, who retained the office of *Nasi*, or prince, of the Great Council.

Mounted on white asses from the prince's stable, Joseph and the aged rabbi descended to the Kedron, crossed the Valley of Hinnom, and ascended the Hill of Fire—so-called because it was here that Solomon, in the days of his idolatry, had built for his alien wives an altar to Chemosh, the fire god of the Moabites.

To the left, as they began to climb, stretched the highway to Hebron. The ancient Pools of Solomon, which Pilate was restoring, could not be seen, but even at that distance Joseph could make out the gleaming white arches of the aqueduct the governor was building to bring water into Jerusalem. It was his first sight of the project which had caused hostile rioting in the city, for Pilate had taken money from the sacred treasury of the temple to finance it.

Knowing the resentment of the priests, the prince said to Nicodemus: "This must be a sight that rankles in Annas's eyes whenever he climbs to his palace."

"Latterly he has gone down but seldom to the meetings of the Sanhedrin," answered the rabbi. "How long is it since you have seen him? You will find that his dropsy has grown swiftly worse. He is so bloated with water that he can scarcely squeeze into his litter. Doubtless that is his reason for summoning us."

"He will cling to power with his last breath," said Joseph. "I am told that the protest to Rome concerning this aqueduct was the strongest the priests ever sent to Caesar. It may mean the recall of Pilate, who has made many enemies since he came here. If it were not for Claudia, his wife, who has powerful friends at the court of Tiberius, Pilate's term as governor might have ended before this. Even when we knew them in Rome, Claudia more than once saved him from disgrace, by appealing to the emperor. It is beyond me, how some women turn their helplessness into strength. Did you ever see a woman so full of fears?"

"I do not know her. Nor her husband. I am a humble man," said the rabbi, with a touch of Pharisaic pride in his tone.

"I see little of them now," said Joseph. "I have no love for Pilate. But Claudia was most kind to my sister Jerith as a child, and since they have come here Claudia begs her to visit them and plies her with questions about our customs and attitudes, hoping, I think, to curb her husband's blunders. She speaks with great openness to Jerith. Lately she took her to see the Pools of Solomon, and after Pilate had shown them the restored reservoirs and the quarry where the limestone is cut, Claudia said to my sister: 'Behold, how happy he is, like a child with a few blocks. He was not born with the temper of a governor. He can handle stones; but men strike back when they are struck.'"

The rabbi shook his head, sadly. "Our people have struck back at him more than once, from the day of his first entry into Jerusalem with the forbidden eagles of the Caesars on his banners; but how can a few rioters prevail against swords and javelins?"

While they had been talking, both had become aware of a pounding of hammers on the summit of the hill above them. Joseph raised his voice. "You have heard of this dove-farm Annas is building?" he asked.

"Ah!" moaned Nicodemus. "This saddens me more than many things Annas has done, for the dove offerings are the sacrifices of the humblest worshippers ... those who are too poor to offer a kid or a lamb. In this house we are going to, prince, there is no colder stone than the heart of the man who built it."

They were close to the gates by now and could not hear each other speak for the din of the hammers. Through a tall hedge of cedars they saw scores of carpenters, stripped to the waist, labouring in the heat. The smell of new-sawn timber was wafted toward them, mingled with the resinous scent of the ancient balsams, as they rode into the courtyard.

A stable-boy led away their asses, and the doorkeeper, noting the long blue fringes of their robes which marked them as Councillors, signalled to the slaves within the porch, who came running to rinse their feet.

Joseph felt his back stiffen as he and Nicodemus entered the long chamber on the shadowed side of the palace. He was astonished that the sight of the three men who were awaiting them should so instantly disturb him. His glance fastened at once on Annas. Since he had last seen him he had changed greatly. The wretched man was stretched on a couch, his body swollen to a monstrous size. His legs and arms were like bulging wineskins. In the midst of his bloated head his features seemed to have dwindled down to a tiny space.

Close to his father-in-law sat the high priest, Joseph Caiaphas, and beside him, at an ivory table, leaned Phanuel Ben-Phabi, chief of the temple scribes.

"The three most hated men in Israel," thought Joseph, feeling the warmth of love he had carried home from Galilee ebbing from his heart.

Caiaphas greeted them with extreme formality. He was a man of mean stature, his rich robes covering a small flabby body. His short fingers, covered with rings carved with mystical symbols, roved up and down the embroidery of gold wire at the edges of the ephod which draped from his shoulders. His bald head was concealed under a tightly wound turban which formed a sort of nest for the mitre he wore when entering the Holy of Holies.

As soon as Joseph and Nicodemus were seated, Caiaphas rolled his round eyes into their corners toward Annas.

"The prince of the Sanhedrin," he said, jerkily, "has been sorely stricken. Yet behold his zeal for the faith. He has roused himself from his bed of sickness to give ear to your report of this disturber of the Galileans."

Phanuel Ben-Phabi raised his elbows from the table and sat upright. He was younger than Caiaphas, yet his skin looked as yellow and fragile as an ancient scroll. His eyes had been dulled by years of copying of the sacred writings. His voice had dried up to a whisper.

"The chief of the scribes," said Caiaphas, "is here in pursuance of his office. He is keeping a record of the accusations brought against Jesus of Galilee."

Words sprang to Joseph's tongue, and he could not halt their utterance.

"We do not come to accuse," he said.

A tremor ran through the mountainous body of Annas. He was lying on his side, and with an effort he raised himself slightly on his elbow.

"The son of Jamin is a pleasant prince and gentle," he uttered in a tone of irony. "He speaks no wrong of any man. Ask him not to tell us of the evil he heard in Galilee. Let the words of the disturber condemn himself. Say on, Joseph."

"Nay," said the prince. "I will speak in my turn. First let the honoured rabbi bear witness to what he has seen and heard in the north."

Nicodemus lifted a wisp of his beard and drew it out from his chin. For a moment his eyes closed. Then, in a slow, aged voice, he began: "The man we went to hear is a man of the poor, the son of a carpenter of Nazareth. He has studied the ancient law. He is himself a rabbi. He is a man of lowly speech. He seeks no power for himself, nor does he seek to arouse the fears of the people. Indeed, he preaches the casting out of fear through love."

The sick man propped himself up and demanded with unexpected energy: "Do you say that he preaches against the fear of God?"

"He preaches the love of God," said Nicodemus, simply.

"You do not answer my question," pressed Annas, his frail voice sharpening with suspicion.

Joseph said quickly: "The sum of his preaching is in two commandments. The first ..."

But Annas silenced him with an outcry: "By the living God! Is this man a second Moses that he should give commandments to the people?"

Joseph spoke with more deliberateness. "He sums up the law and the prophets in two simple commandments, love God, and love your neighbour."

"What?" cried Annas. "Do you say this, or does he ... that his commandments are to be set above the law and the prophets?"

"It is his way of preaching," declared Joseph, quietly. "He speaks in the language of the humblest. He makes it plain that a man who truly loves God will not bow down before images or take the name of the Lord in vain. And a man who truly loves his neighbour will not kill, or commit adultery, or steal, or bear false witness, or covet what is another's."

"This should be recorded," said Annas, nodding significantly to the high priest, who glanced sharply at Phanuel.

"Write this," said Caiaphas, dictating with great distinctness. "That Jesus of Galilee makes himself mightier than Moses ... mightier than the Almighty. For the Almighty himself, through Moses, gave our fathers the Ten Commandments. Yet this man offers in their stead, two commandments of his own conceiving. And offers these as the whole duty of man, which is to blaspheme against the law ..."

Joseph stretched out his hand in a warning gesture: "This is not the truth," he protested.

"And write, furthermore," went on Caiaphas, without heeding him, "that this is the testimony of a witness. A witness no man would accuse of falsehood. Prince Joseph Ben-Jamin of Arimathea."

Joseph stood up. Without a glance at the high priest, he took a step toward Annas. His face was as white as the linen of his robe.

"If this is written," he said, accusingly, "you will never hear me speak or see my face again, either here, or in the Council, or in the temple of the Most High. For if his priests falsify ..."

"Strike it out, Phanuel!" Annas commanded, with a scathing look at Caiaphas. Then, turning to Joseph, he spoke with slow gravity.

"They differ little, these lawless young men," he declared, contemptuously. "When I was a youth they sprang up like tares, and now there is a new generation of rebels. This prophet of Galilee is a cousin of John of Jordan, and the robber, Barabbas, they say, is also one of the Baptist's disciples. They preach the same doctrine. They begin by rebelling against the law and against thrones. They rail at kings. But you will see. One of the three will presently declare himself to be the true king of the Jews. The others will support him. Multitudes will flock to them with swords and staves, and there will be war again, unless we stop the mouths of these men before they gain power."

Joseph leaned forward, his heart warming again as the words and the gentle eyes of Jesus grew clear in his memory.

"The rabbi Nicodemus spoke truly when he said that the preacher of Galilee seeks no power for himself," he attested.

"From all we have heard, he is not a violent man," agreed Annas. "But when the time comes ... if it comes ... those who now follow Jesus will join with the robbers and nomads across Jordan, and Barabbas will lead them. He will strip your house in Jericho, prince, and many another, before the Romans halt him. His loot will attract thousands. And when, out of his gains he has armed a number of them, he will march on Jerusalem. This Barabbas is just such another as the rebels who lured the people into violence in my youth."

It distressed Joseph that even in his own mind he could not answer these accusations against Barabbas. He remained silent, and Annas sank back, as though exhausted by his vehemence.

"This robber is more to be feared than the Galilean or the hermit of Jordan," ventured Caiaphas, throwing a cautious glance at Annas.

Nicodemus, who had been lost in thought, said abruptly: "You need not fear the rabbi, Jesus. He condemns violence. And he seeks no power."

"This man," Annas burst out again, "declared that he has the power to forgive sins and save penitents from the wrath of the Most High. If he had this power, would there be need of a temple, or of the sacrifices ordained by Moses to purify sinners? We, the anointed of the Lord, would be held of no account."

"I say to you," said Joseph, with solemnity, "that he does not save sinners by the exercise of power, but by filling the hearts of his hearers with love. That is his only power and it is not power. It opposes power. Yet it is not weakness. It is strength. It is not helplessness, for if all loved, all would help one another. It washes away sin. It makes men anew. And yet who will believe it?"

"Ah, if you, a prince of Judah, and one of the great Council, have become his disciple," frowned Annas, "how much more easily will he sway the multitude! You have condemned him, son of Jamin, out of your own mouth. Now, we must not hesitate. We must have witnesses of his blasphemies. You shall go into Galilee, Phanuel, and bear testimony of his words."

"If you charge him with blasphemy," warned Joseph, "the people of Galilee will rise."

"We shall wait until the next feast, when he comes into the temple courts. Priests will be there to question him and lead him into rebellious talk. Then there will be a murmur of 'Blasphemy!' The temple sellers, who hate him for decrying their trade, will echo it. Stones will be thrown. And the people, who make a holiday of a stoning, will drag him out of the city. The lives of these rebels are short."

The prince sprang up, and would have flung out a violent denunciation, but the sick man somehow propped himself up until his huge body seemed to dominate the chamber.

"You are a young and pleasant prince, Joseph," he said chidingly. "A dreamer of dreams, like Joseph of old. The rewards men bring on themselves disturb you. You shrink from violence."

"And murder!" burst out the prince, in a trembling voice.

"Who will hear you, if you cry abroad what you have heard here in secret? You speak no evil of anyone. Who would believe you? You are a pleasant man, and harmless. What? Are you in haste? Yes, the young are so often in haste. Go in peace, Joseph."



Many young men in the neighbourhood of Bethabara had left their homes to join Barabbas, for it was becoming known that he aimed to liberate the province of Perea from the yoke of the Herods. Nevertheless, now that the Baptist had left the pools, no voice but that of Barabbas was raised against Antipas, and the people paid little heed to his words, for he had been born among them. Moreover, since the spring he had armed himself and his men so that they could attack greater caravans crossing the desert from the East, and sometimes blood was shed when the alien merchants defended their precious freight.

The name of Barabbas came to be feared in all the country east of Jericho, and because he now divided little of his booty among the poor, needing all that came into his hands to feed and arm a growing force, the villagers began to revile him for inciting their sons to violence.

His army grew slowly. Some of the youths who had been stirred by his talk of levelling rich and poor, had no heart for fighting. Others were discouraged by the hardships he expected his men to endure: lying in wait for hours in the desert sun, and at night only the rocky floor of a cave for a lodging. Many deserted him. His hope of arousing the people of Perea dwindled. He saw that a bold stroke was needed.

"In their eyes I am no more than a robber," he brooded. "Only a triumph of arms will raise my stature. If I could take Machaerus they would flock to me and put their trust in me as a leader devoted to their deliverance."

But to capture the fortress he needed more men, more horses, more weapons.

"I must seek support from the Arabs of Nabatea," he said to himself, remembering that two years before there had been rumours of war on the border. Herod Antipas, first married to the Arabian princess, Thamís, the daughter of Aretas, one of the proudest kings of the East, had taken Herodias to wife, without troubling to divorce Thamís, who, it was said, had been treated like a concubine. For months, while Antipas dallied in Rome, she had been held a prisoner at Machaerus, but had contrived to escape, fearing for her life.

Believing that the grudge against Antipas must still be rankling in the breast of Aretas, and that the shamed Nabateans could be inflamed into a war of retaliation, Barabbas set off to the Arabian court at Elath. Accompanying him was one of his captains, called Margaloth, a Nabatean robber he had found wounded and deserted by his companions on the Damascus Road. Aretas received him haughtily, addressing him as though he were a common herdsman. But when he heard his mission he ordered his steward to give Barabbas three sacks of silver to be used for arming against Herod Antipas.

In a secret place in his cave, behind two pieces of granite which fitted together so closely that the crack could not be seen, Barabbas hid the sacks of silver which he and Margaloth had brought from Elath.

Having hid the silver, Barabbas was washing his feet after the journey when he heard a youthful voice outside. Although the lad was panting and gasping out his words excitedly, Barabbas knew the voice to be that of his cousin, Zibeon, the youngest son of his mother's sister; a youth who more than once had begged to be taken into his band. Each time Barabbas had sent him back to Bethabara to his mother's house.

Angered that the boy should have come again, Barabbas stamped across the floor to the cave mouth, splashing water from his bare feet.

Zibeon, who was not yet eighteen, and beardless except for dark patches on either side of a deep cleft in his chin, ran past the sentry who was questioning him and began to stammer out something in a high, breathless voice.

Barabbas put his hand over the lad's mouth, and said to the sentry: "Have I not forbidden the men on the lower ledge to pass this youth?"

"Hear his tidings, master!" cried the sentry, the veins standing out on his temples.

Zibeon wrenched himself loose from Barabbas's grasp and cried: "An army is on the way hither from Machaerus!"

"An army?" scoffed Barabbas. "Where are they?"

"Even now they are passing through the village, I saw them come over the hill, and I ran ..."

"How do you know they will not turn off across Jordan?"

"They have passed the pools."

"How many men?"

"When I looked back, at the mouth of the gorge, they blackened the road for half a mile."

Barabbas kicked a few clinging drops of water from his feet. "Blood of Beelzebub!" he roared.

For a moment he let his glance flicker over Zibeon's twitching face. Then cupping his hands he trumpeted the name of his youngest captain: "Jehoida!"

Fiercely gripping his beard in both hands, Barabbas felt his shocked blood mounting in him like wine. His mind grew wary, and while his glance roved over the uneven floor of the cave he called up in his imagination every snare and stratagem that would be needed to spare his small force.

At Zibeon's first words the belief had come to him that Elikah, and perhaps even Antipas, had learned of the growing strength of his band since the spring. The garrison of Machaerus had been ordered out against him, to drive him from Perea. Elikah himself would not be in command. He was aged and heavy. Doubtless he would send Ajalon, a captain who had ambushed Barabbas and his men a year before on the Jericho Road.

Barabbas knew Ajalon as a fierce fighter, but when he considered the distance from Machaerus, which meant that the fortress troops must have been marching for six hours, he felt that the timing of the attack had been given little thought.

He knew Ajalon to be a man of pride who doubtless felt confident of dislodging the band of robbers as easily as a nest of vultures.

Barabbas knew every rock himself, for he had wandered in the gorge as a boy, and had lived there for seven years. The ancient river had long ago diminished to a brook running between flat mossy stones that were covered with rushing water during the rains, but the rocky sides of the gorge rose to a great height, cleaving the hills eastward for more than half a mile. At that point the valley curved like a shepherd's crook, and in the walls of this narrow chasm the former rapids had carved out caves at five different levels, marking the height of the torrent in successive ages. Barabbas and

his men inhabited the caves on the uppermost level, approachable only by one path, a ledge of rock scarcely wide enough for two men to pass. Their hiding-place was impregnable.

Jehoida had come running and halted before Barabbas, awaiting orders. He had been a warrior from early youth, a former archer in the army of Archelaus. He claimed descent from Joshua and said that he came from the brooks of Gaash, in Ephraim, where his mighty ancestor was buried. His mouth was full of falsehoods, but his aim with a bow was unerring, and he had trained fifty of the men in archery. He and his fifty were the huntsmen who killed game for the rest.

"The garrison from Machaerus is entering the gorge," said Barabbas, grimly. "If they have left a bare hundred to guard the fortress, their force will number seven hundred men. You and your archers will hasten to meet them."

"Fifty men!" grimaced Jehoida.

"Fifty men," echoed Barabbas. "You will send a man before you and at his warning you will conceal yourselves before the enemy sees how small your company is. Lie in wait among the rocks and hold your arrows until they are no more than ten paces from you. Not one arrow must be wasted. Every arrow must kill or wound. And no man must tarry to fight. Every man of your fifty must run. And when you are more than a bowshot distance, conceal yourselves again. Wait for the enemy to come on, and when they are again ten paces from you, cry out for another volley. Do this repeatedly, and do not lose a man, Jehoida. We cannot lose a man before dark. After that ..."

He broke off, gripped Jehoida's shoulder, and added: "You will hear no sound from us, son of Joshua, until you have drawn them as far as The Crook. If you kill ten with every volley of fifty arrows, and if you shoot only twenty volleys before we join you, there will be two hundred men less for us to meet. Go! Hasten! Take your fifty and bring back fifty."

Walking with Jehoida to the cave mouth, Barabbas saw Nahari, another of his captains, talking excitedly with several men who had already snatched up their spears. Nahari had come from beyond Rabbath-Ammon and spoke the languages of many desert tribes. He was a taut, wiry man, given to wine-bibbing, but fearless and cunning in an encounter.

"What is the number of your men, Nahari?" called out Barabbas.

"Seventy, master," said the Elamite captain, hurrying forward.

"Take forty of them. We can spare no more. Send ten of them at once behind us into Nimrah, and have them hire asses there and load the asses with all the oil and pitch the village can provide. Meanwhile, take the remaining thirty men with axes into the cedar forest beyond the lesser falls, and cut trees until I send a messenger. I will send Zibeon here, my kinsman, who is swift as a hart. Do you know the cedar forest, Zibeon?"

"Yes, cousin," said the youth, his voice trembling with sudden joy.

"When Zibeon brings you word, Nahari, drag the trees you have felled up the goat path to the height on the north bank of The Crook. Command the men you send to Nimrah to meet you there. And when they have come, pour oil and pitch on the trees, and stand in readiness until half the enemy have passed beneath you. When you judge that half their number have passed, give two blasts on a ram's horn, as a signal to us. Then topple the trees into the chasm at the narrowest point. I want a rampart of trees there, three times the height of a man. When this is done, fling down lighted torches into the trees so that they become a barrier of fire, and feed the fire with the trees you have left until not one remains. Then, when your fuel is gone, join us to the east of The Crook." He beckoned Margaloth, who had just shown himself, to come nearer. "Hearken to me, Margaloth, for the greater part of the men, with you leading them, will be at the front of the battle."

Stretching his arms out to their full length and slowly clenching his fingers, Barabbas stood for a moment with closed eyes, as though gathering the enemy into his grasp by the strength of his will.

"Jehoida will kill a hundred, peradventure two hundred," he said, opening his eyes and flashing a fierce glance at Margaloth. "But when they reach The Crook they will still outnumber us. Moreover, they will be better armed. Therefore, we shall divide them. When half their number have passed into The Crook or beyond it, fire will descend from heaven among them and part the two halves asunder."

A mocking smile stirred the black tuft under his lower lip. With a nudging gesture toward Nahari, he went on: "The Lord of Hosts will send down flames from heaven, Nahari. See that you do not fail. And when the barrier of fire has cut off half of their army from the other, then we shall fall on the foremost half and drive them back into the wall of fire and

utterly destroy them. And if, when that is done, those that remain on the other side still itch for battle, it will gladden me to scratch them, for then they will not outnumber us and it will be dark. In the dark they will stumble among the stones, and we shall pursue them, and if so many as fourscore of them escape to tell Elikah of the flaming swords falling upon them out of heaven, if even threescore escape us, Margaloth ..."

"Not so many," said Margaloth, the black fringe of his brows descending fiercely over his eyes.

"Let us grant them a few who will trust in their legs," said Barabbas. "They are paid fighters. They will run."

Turning to Nahari, he said: "Go, son of Elam. This youth, Zibeon, will bring you word."

To Margaloth, when Nahari had gone, he added: "Jehoida has taken his fifty. Nahari will take forty. Leave ten slingers with me at the foot of the cliff. The rest ..."

"Three hundred," said Margaloth.

"Take your three hundred and hide yourselves in the farther caves, and let no man show himself or raise his voice until I come. When I am ready I will give you a signal. I will cry, *Makkah!* which in our tongue means to smite. Let your men echo it as they come from the caves. Make it a great shout that will stun the ears of the enemy and surprise them. Then run upon them with your spears with a great rush, as if you had three thousand men behind you, and drive them back. Shock them with your swiftness, so that those in front will mistake you for a host ... and by that time the trees will be blazing behind them."

"If you are killed before you can give us the signal?..." questioned Margaloth.

"I am not easily killed."

"But a chance arrow, master."

"For the first time in my life I shall bear a shield."

"A javelin may drop from the air."

"I will dodge it."

"But if you do not come ..."

"I will come. Be gone! Arm your men, and take any weapons that are left and stack them in the farther caves."

With Zibeon and ten slingers, Barabbas stood at the base of the cliff below the caves, armed with the sword he had taken from Herod Antipas. On his left arm he bore a studded round shield of brass. He had removed his long garments and had wrapped himself in the ash-coloured hide which he wore at times, so that his legs and arms were free for fighting.

From time to time he glanced upward at Akkabish, an Edomite who had earned the name of "Spider" because he could climb the face of a precipice, using his arms and legs like a scorpion. Perched astride a crag, his head thrust forward, his keen eyes fixed on the lower stretch of the gorge, Akkabish was motionless and silent.

Barabbas ground his heel impatiently into the thick moss under his sandal. For a moment he turned and watched Margaloth's men moving in twos and threes down the steep path from the caves. They were hastily forming into companies and marching eastward.

At last a cry came from Akkabish. "I do not see the enemy, but Jehoida has halted his men. They are taking cover behind the rocks. The man who went before is running back. The archers are fitting arrows to their bows. They are waiting twenty or thirty paces from a sharp bend. Now, two or three of the enemy show their heads. They step into the open. Now they signal to the others to come on. They are slingers. There are six of them. They are putting stones into their slings. Ah! Here is the main force!"

Barabbas called up eagerly: "How do they march?"

"Four abreast. But they cannot keep to their ranks for the unevenness of the stones."

"How are they armed?"

"With swords and spears. The first company numbers perhaps a hundred, and behind them are fifty archers. And now another company of spearmen has turned the bend."

"What of Jehoida?"

"He is waiting. The foremost of the swordsmen are within fifty paces of where he is hiding."

Barabbas began to count, nodding his head in the rhythm of a marching step.

"Thirty paces!" The voice of Akkabish grew shrill with excitement as the moment neared for the ambush to release their arrows.

"Twenty paces!"

A faint and distant cry rang out, reverberating against the cliffs like the screech of a startled bird. "*Yara!*"

It was followed immediately by the shout of fifty voices, muffled by the enclosing walls of rock.

Barabbas threw back his head and fastened his glance impatiently on the crouching figure of Akkabish, who was too intent on the outcome of the volley to call down what was happening.

"How many have fallen?" cried out Barabbas.

"Twenty. Perhaps thirty. They have halted. They are dragging the dead and wounded out of their path. Jehoida and his men are running. The slingers are aiming their stones at them. Two of them fall. Now the foremost company is making way for their archers. They stretch their bows, but most of Jehoida's men are in shelter again. A flight of arrows falls harmlessly. One of our archers is struck in the leg, but the arrow was almost spent, and he crawls behind a rock."

"Is the enemy advancing?"

"They are halted. They are pointing and shouting among themselves."

"Do you see their captain?"

"There are three men in helmets, standing apart. One has drawn his sword and has come forward. He is ordering

swordsmen with shields to form a close line, shoulder to shoulder, and behind them is a rank of archers. Now another close line of swordsmen is forming, holding their shields high, and behind them another line of archers. He is arraying his men in alternate lines. They are ten abreast. He has raised his sword. They march. Their tread is slow. They are wary. Our men are making ready their aim."

Jehoida's screeching voice was heard faintly again. "*Yara!*"

A resounding shout followed.

Akkabish, leaning perilously forward, cried out without turning his head: "Many of our arrows fell on their shields. With that volley no more than ten of the enemy were struck. Their foremost swordsmen are pursuing Jehoida. Their archers are taking aim carefully, lest they wound their own men. They shoot. Three of our men have fallen. The others outdistance their swordsmen, who fall back."

"What now?" Barabbas called up, when Akkabish was silent.

"They are halted. They are lifting their dead aside."

Barabbas waited only a moment or two. "What now?" he cried again.

"They are coming on again. Jehoida raises his bow. His men steady themselves. They wait. The enemy is thirty paces off. Twenty paces. Ah! Their swordsmen dash forward before Jehoida calls. He calls. This time the volley reaches their archers. Many fall. But their swordsmen are rushing upon our men. They cut down three ... four ... another ... another! Jehoida stumbles, rises, runs, but he is limping. Our men find shelter again. Ajalon's men are forming hastily, treading over their dead. Three more companies have turned the bend and are closing up."

All this time Barabbas had been standing immediately below Akkabish in the sharpest twist of The Crook. Now, with a sign to the ten men and Zibeon, who stood beside him, he started off along the slimy edge of the brook, rounded the corner, and stood waiting for Jehoida's men to show themselves around the nearest bend. He was trembling with fury and impatience.

Barabbas turned to the ten men, who were slingers. "They have not delayed the enemy as long as I hoped, but they are brave men. We must give them respite. When I call, show yourselves behind me boldly, but I will wave you back, so that Ajalon will believe you are the foremost of a force we have here in reserve. As soon as Jehoida's men start running send a volley of stones over their heads. Fill your slings speedily and send three swift volleys to cover their retreat."

He went back again into the narrow chasm where he could see Akkabish, and called up to him:

"What of Jehoida?"

"You will soon see him around the last bend. The enemy is growing wary. They are thinning their line, advancing slowly and taking cover."

"How many have they lost?"

"Almost a hundred dead, besides many who have fallen out of their ranks. Ah! Another volley. Twenty arrows brought down ten men."

One of the slingers, standing at the turn, called to Barabbas and pointed up the gorge.

"They are in sight," Barabbas told the "Spider". "Come down, now, and join us."

Immediately the Edomite slid from the crag, and with his hands and feet spread widely to catch a hold in every crack of a broad flat rock, he began to lower himself down the sheer precipice.

Barabbas hastened back to the turn and saw Jehoida and his men making their bows ready.

"Turn back, Jehoida!" Barabbas bellowed, and at the same time he swung his arm as a signal to his slingers to show themselves.

Stepping into full sight of the enemy, he called again: "Turn back, Jehoida." And as the archers turned and ran toward

him, he rasped out a command to the slingers. A shower of stones fell among the pursuing swordsmen.

Meanwhile, panting and limping, Jehoida reached Barabbas's side.

"Well done!" cried Barabbas. "How many do you number?"

"Nineteen," said the man of Gaash, when he had counted his exhausted archers.

"Nineteen, out of fifty," said Barabbas, ruefully.

"Ah, master, but their dead number above a hundred."

"It is well," said Barabbas, clapping the other's shoulder. "Go now swiftly through The Crook to the farther caves. You will find Margaloth there. The slingers, who are fresh, will stop them here with stones until you are beyond their arrows."

Barabbas leaned out from behind a protecting rock. In the gorge there was a shout, a murmur, and the sudden thud of feet on the stones. "*Yara!*" he cried. "They are upon us." Ajalon's force was charging forward.

The slingers let go a volley, and at Barabbas's command, they turned and ran through The Crook. He followed, with Zibeon leaping rather than running, beside him. As they ran, Barabbas said to his cousin: "Now is the time. Go swiftly to the forest and tell Nahari to fetch hither his trees. Stay with him until the battle is over."

The Crook was so twisting that they were in no danger as they ran. The attackers were still far behind them.

Zibeon sped up a path on the north bank toward the forest. Barabbas overtook Jehoida and his men, and at the caves, some three hundred paces from the last twist of The Crook, they found Margaloth, his brows twitching with impatience at the long delay.

Barabbas looked up for the sun. It was out of sight behind the cliff. Twilight would fall swiftly.

From where they stood Barabbas could see the narrow opening of The Crook. The gorge ran straight from that point past the caves where Margaloth's men were hidden.

Moments passed. Each one seemed endless.

Margaloth was stamping about, fidgeting with the hilt of his sword.

Barabbas stood rigidly, legs apart, eyes narrowed, his head slanted to catch the first blare of the ram's horn.

"They come," he said, as the heads of a few enemy slingers projected from among the rocks. Without turning his head, he said to Margaloth: "Hold your men back until I cry *Makkah!*"

He stepped closer to the cliff, out of sight of Ajalon's men who now appeared in force.

Above the tramp of the approaching force the ram's horn suddenly sounded and immediately the distant cracking of branches could be heard as Nahari and his men hurled down the oil-soaked trees.

Barabbas leaned out to watch for the flame of torches, but from where he stood they could not be seen. He listened for an expected roar when the fire took hold, but the feet of Ajalon's men were noisy as they drew near. They were marching in lines, confidently, Barabbas thought.

"They believe they have routed us," he said to himself.

Turning to Margaloth, he whispered: "Send out the archers and slingers first. Give them one volley. Then move aside for the spearmen and javelin throwers. Bring them out shouting."

He gave Margaloth time to repeat his commands. Then, when the foremost rank of the enemy was forty paces away, he cried in a loud voice: "*Makkah!*"

Immediately the gorge was filled with men surging past him. The whistling of stones and arrows shrieked in his ears. The archers and slingers sprang to one side and three hundred spearmen came howling from the caves.

Barabbas leapt on to a rock and saw the shock of the onslaught.

Ajalon's men, bewildered by the suddenness of the attack, were already turning and crowding back on those behind, crying out for them to make way. They were stumbling over the bodies of the few who had been killed by stones and arrows, and Margaloth's men were thrusting spears into their backs as they ran. In a few moments the river bed was blocked with a struggling, screaming mass of the enemy, some trying to press forward, while others sought to escape.

Barabbas leapt down, drew his sword, and joined the fray.

For some time he could not reach the front of his men. They were packed so thickly in the narrow space between the cliffs, and driving forward so fast, that minutes passed before he confronted an enemy. By this time most of Ajalon's troops had been pressed back into The Crook, and the licking noise of flames among crackling branches sounded over the incessant clash of spears and swords. Flickering gleams flashed from peak to peak, and a tremendous uproar rang through the chasm as the men behind cried out in their struggles to escape the fire. They were crushed by those who were retreating, and now to the odour of wood smoke was added the smell of burning flesh.

Barabbas had shouldered his way forward, but when he reached Margaloth's side he saw nothing but the backs of men turned in flight. The spearmen were pursuing them, but no one faced him to engage his sword. He felt cheated, and was about to roar out a remonstrance in Margaloth's ear, when a loud cry drew his glance to a man who had sprung up on a rock and was trying to rally the fleeing mercenaries.

"That must be Ajalon," he decided, and he began shouting to the spearmen behind him to follow as he made way toward the Gaulanite captain. A few of the enemy within the reach of Ajalon's voice had been shamed into turning, and Barabbas found himself facing a score of desperate faces. His heart leapt. His sword was in a constant quiver as he parried, lunged, and at times dealt fierce sweeping blows which cut down two men at once. His shield, thrust out before him, rang with innumerable blows as he pressed forward. His height and his long reach balked his maddened assailants. Save for a few scratches on his sword-arm, and a wound in his leg from the blade of a man who had fallen, he was at the height of his mettle when at last he crossed swords with Ajalon.

The Gaulanite delivered his first blows from a rock which raised him to Barabbas's height. He was a skilled swordsman and in parrying one of his thrusts Barabbas received an ugly wound in the fleshy part of his arm. Stung by the pain, Barabbas recklessly rushed forward, throwing all his weight behind his shield to dislodge Ajalon from the slab of stone. The Gaulanite was forced to yield, but as he leapt to one side his sword flashed under Barabbas's guard and stabbed his groin. The injury was slight, but the prick of it increased Barabbas's fury. Now on level ground he towered over the enemy captain. He had little knowledge of swordsmanship, but the strength of his blows prevailed against the Gaulanite who slowly gave ground, his arm numbed by the shock and weight of the cleaving, downward strokes Barabbas aimed at his head.

Unhurt, but tiring swiftly, Ajalon called to his men for aid, but Margaloth had driven them back. He found himself fighting alone against his terrible adversary among the writhing bodies of the wounded. The stones, slippery with their blood, made his foothold unsure as he steadily retreated. Barabbas, weakened by his wounds, gathered all his strength to end the encounter with a swift death-stroke, but as he raised his sword for an overpowering blow, one of the wounded men thrust from the ground at his legs. Barabbas kicked the weapon out of the man's hand, but his own sword was high in the air, and Ajalon seized the moment of his downward glance to leap forward and wound him severely in the shoulder. Barabbas took one giant step and crashed his shield into Ajalon's face. Half-stunned, the exhausted captain's knees gave way.

With an agonizing effort, which sent the blood spurting from his shoulder, Barabbas lifted his shaking sword and pierced the Gaulanite's neck as he tottered forward. Ajalon fell, stiffened and expired.

Faint from loss of blood, Barabbas glanced dazedly around. He was alone among the dying. Margaloth had driven the enemy out of sight into the narrowest bend of The Crook.

It was almost dark, but the blaze of the barrier of cedars illumined the sky, flickering among low clouds of smoke which drifted over the gorge. The roar and crackle of the fire drew Barabbas forward. Each step drained him of strength, but he was fiercely eager to see the trap he had set for the attackers.

A gust of heat struck him in the face as he turned a sharp corner of rock and gazed with a shudder of horror on the

frightful scene. The flaming barricade was still being fed by trees falling end over end from the height above. They dropped with a hiss into the hottest embers, sending up a shower of sparks. The seething sound of the fire and the uproar of frantic cries were deafening. Ajalon's men were no longer fighting. Those nearest the flames, whose garments were already alight, leapt on the backs of those ahead and tried to scramble over their shoulders, setting fire to their hair and their tunics as they clambered madly forward. The few who still faced Margaloth's spears were throwing down their arms, dropping to their knees and begging for mercy. Many flung themselves on the ground, hoping to be trampled, rather than be driven back into the barrier of fire.

Barabbas halted, almost suffocated by the smoke. He leaned against the cliff and closed his eyes against the searing blaze.

When he opened them again. Margaloth's men were retreating swiftly from the heat, leaving the river bed heaped with smouldering bodies.

Barabbas could scarcely stand. His sword hung like lead at his side. He was about to sink down when he felt his arm grasped and Akkabish stood beside him, shouting in his ear: "I ran along the height and circled the fire. The others have fled."

"Satan's blood! Have they escaped us?" Barabbas cried.

"By the time Nahari had flung down the barrier," gasped Akkabish, "more than half of their number had passed. When he dropped the torches, the others fell back from the heat. They stood watching for a time, and then by twos and threes they turned and ran. Their captains tried to halt them. I could see them in the glow of the fire, threatening the men with their swords, but nothing availed. They ran. They have gone, every man of them. The gorge is empty."

Barabbas slammed his sword into its scabbard. Hate and triumph lifted him for a moment out of the daze of his weariness.

Lifting his face to the smoke-hidden sky, he cried out: "Antipas! Antipas! Build yourself a sepulchre."

Jerith had spent a long, lonely summer at Jericho, for Joseph had been often away, in Jerusalem or in Arimathea, carrying out the plan of settling destitute families on their ancestral estate.

The great house in Jericho had been sold, and it had saddened Jerith to stay there and see it slowly dismantled, hearing the steps and voices of strange men in the emptying corridors as the rich furnishings were carried away.

During the last few weeks she had moved with Haggitha into the gardener's lodge. She could have kept her rooms in the palace to the last, but the noise and bustle had disturbed her, and although she was wholly willing and even impatient to begin a humbler life, it wrenched her feelings to see the things they had prized from childhood heaped on the backs of asses and camels in the swarming courtyard. Moreover, in the lodge she had thought to accustom herself to the surroundings that would await her at Arimathea, but she was not in the least prepared for the great changes Joseph had wrought, when at the close of summer she journeyed to Arimathea.

The ancient palace, which had been the home of the sons of Jamin since the return of Israel from captivity, more than four hundred years before, had been sold to a Syrian merchant, with a portion of the great park. A new wall had been built around the surrendered grounds which was on the summit of one of the twin hills of Ramathaim. The wooded slopes, which had once been a preserve for wild game, had been ploughed and portioned into plots. Already on the gently rising hillsides, more than a hundred families, brought from the most wretched quarters of Jerusalem, had flung together huts of mud and branches. Some had begun sowing winter barley in the freshly turned earth. Others were planting vines or groves of fruit trees. Many of the men worked a few hours a day in the quarry behind the lesser hill, cutting the soft sandstone into blocks for more solid homes. Potters and smiths and tentmakers from the city were busy at their trades under rough arbours of evergreen boughs. Many women were helping their husbands to clear the ground of stones, while others sat at doorways spinning and weaving. Children waded or fished in the two shallow brooks which began as gushing springs among the rocks of the valley between the hills.

Jerith was astonished that so much had been done in the few short months of the summer. She marvelled, too, at her brother. All his life he had been a student and a recluse, but now he had become ardent and active, flinging himself into this enterprise with all his heart. She rejoiced to see that the days of his grieving and solitary seeking were at an end. He had gained something far more precious than possessions. He had found an aim in life and a field of work that would absorb all his energies.

It was Nicodemus who had provoked her brother's decision to provide small holdings of land for sickly and destitute families. The sale of the two palaces, at Arimathea and Jericho, had enabled Joseph to set about the moving and settling of these unfortunates without delay. A large sum had been placed in the hands of five rabbis whose synagogues were situated in the worst sections of Jerusalem. Nicodemus was one of them. It had been their task to seek out those most deserving of help, and they had been astonished at the reluctance of many starving wretches to accept an escape from the heat and filth of the city. Some were so dispirited that they were content to live on the charity of their neighbours, or on what they could beg at the gates and fountains from passing pilgrims. Those who had sunk to the lowest depths of misery seemed least willing to begin a new life in the open.

Joseph went often to Jerusalem and many who hesitated to go were drawn by his gift of words. He talked tirelessly and with warmth of the beauty and fertility of the plain of Sharon and of the twin hills rising from it and of the shore of the Great Sea within a short day's journey. Each time he returned with a party of settlers, and as soon as they had chosen their land and made shelters for themselves he would leave again for the city, often unattended, riding an ass, and dressed like a countryman. He renounced the rank of prince and allowed no one to call him Highness. His councillor's robe lay in the house in Jerusalem, which had not yet been sold. He wore it only when he was called to the meetings of the Sanhedrin.

"You have become a true man of the earth," Jerith said to him, when she first saw him in his coarse garments, his sandals caked with mud from the rain-soaked terraces ploughed out of the hillside.

Joseph's eyes widened at the words and he glanced at his sister searchingly. "Yes," he laughed. "Jeshua, if he saw me now, would call me a disciple. I have embraced the earth."

"I wonder," sighed Jerith.

"What do you wonder, my sister?"

"If he came and saw, what would he say?"

"I know what he would say," ventured Joseph, quickly. "I can hear his voice. 'Friend,' he would say, 'you have done well. You have taken a few helpless ones out of the abomination of the city, but how many remain! What of the others? The millions of the world!'"

"You are right," said Jerith. "To see what you have done would only spur him against others who will never give up their possessions willingly. You have heard how violent he has grown?"

"Only that he sent a defiant message to Antipas and took John with a strong escort into Samaria out of his reach," said Joseph.

"He has made war against Antipas. There was fearful news of him before I left Jericho."

"War?" cried Joseph, unbelievably.

"He is no longer a mountain robber," said Jerith, with a quick shudder. "He has won many Arabs to his cause. It is an army he commands, and now they attack even the great caravans from the East. Soldiers from the fortress at Machaerus were sent against him lately, but he ambushed them in the gorge and routed them in one night."

"Ah!" cried Joseph, sorrowfully. "I can see him, exulting in the midst of battle."

"I can imagine his voice in command," Jerith shuddered, "like the roar of fire or flood. I felt it even when he whispered."

"What more did you hear in Jericho? Did they send out another host against him?"

"After the battle in the gorge he moved to the caves of Mount Nebo on the edge of the desert, which is within three hours' march of the Machaerus fortress. They say that Elikah, the governor, who is an aged man, will not risk another fight in the mountains until more troops are sent from Galilee."

"We shall hear more of him," Joseph declared, and again Jerith felt his glance bent enquiringly upon her. "He is a valiant man. A valiant fool!"

"We shall not hear of him long," she murmured, turning away to hide the quivering of a nerve in her forehead.

"Why do you say that?"

"Did you not say yourself that he is in haste to die?"

"You remember too much, my sister. Let us forget. There is no place here, nor time, for the past. We have ploughed up the past. We are making a new place and a new time. The future will be full. Do you feel you can be content?"

She hardly knew what she replied, but within three days, when she had grown accustomed to the cottage, which had once been the gamekeeper's, and when her loom had been set up in the outer room so that her hands could be busy, she began to feel content.

On the fourth day, after Joseph had left on one of his journeys to the city, she sat at her loom silently. Haggitha was beside her, skeining wool.

"Are you happy?" Jerith said suddenly to the old nurse.

"Where my little highness is, I am ever happy," said Haggitha.

"I am nobody's 'highness'," said Jerith, severely.

"You will always be my precious highness," Haggitha replied, with reproof in her voice, as though speaking to a child.

Jerith said, "Have you seen all they have done? Have you been up to the new wall? The trees have grown to a great height since we were here last. You cannot see even the turrets of the palace."

"From the lesser hill you can see them."

"Ah! You have been up there?"

"Yes, highness."

"And what have they done to the watch-tower? Do the owls still roost there? They used to frighten me as a child."

"They have built up the walls and made a granary of it. It is filled with seed barley for winter sowing."

"Let us go up there, Haggitha."

"Why should we go up there? Nothing is the same."

"You are not pleased with what is being done?" Jerith asked in surprise.

The old nurse brought her hands together in a sort of ecstasy of memory and tangled her wool. "When your father and your mother were alive it was a grand place. There were pretty woods all around this cottage, then. And the gamekeeper used to lift you up and show you the wild birds' nests. A fine man he was. He used to let you stroke the skins of the foxes he had caught in the vines."

"Where is he now, I wonder?" Jerith asked, sighing at the remembrance of her youth.

"They say he has gone to keep the woods of a prince of the south, in the ancient country of the Philistines. The master offered him land of his own, but he did not desire it. All his life he has worked for princes. And now he is old he has no heart for change. He has gone to another prince. The women tell me that when the master reproved him for calling him 'highness', the poor fellow began sobbing and beating the air with his hands, and crying out: 'Rasha! The world is going wrong!'"

"Going wrong!" cried Jerith in astonishment. "Surely it is going the other way. Joseph has freed all of our slaves and given the tenants land of their own. Surely the world would be better if all were free to prosper by the toil of their hands."

"That is the way the master talks," said Haggitha, chidingly. "There are many who say he is gone wrong in the head. No one knows where a prince could learn such unseemly ways. It is the Greeks who have taught him their abominations, they say."

"It was not the Greeks," Jerith declared, her eyes roving thoughtfully above her loom. "It was a man of our race. A man whose heart is filled with pity for the poor."

"He cannot know the poor. Without masters the poor are lost. They become beggars. The slave who is freed lives on the husks that are thrown to the swine. He cannot know the poor, this man."

"He was once a slave himself," declared Jerith, sadly.

"Ah, little highness! Is the world to learn from slaves? Surely the world is going wrong when the masters sit at the feet of slaves. Have you seen this man yourself, my precious? Is he driven by a devil?"

"He is driven, indeed," said Jerith, "but not by a devil. Unless there be a strange devil of pity. He is a violent man. Violent, Haggitha, but valiant. Full of fierce folly. A fool to marvel at. A fool men follow, even to death," she said, using Joseph's words.

"What?" cried Haggitha in amazement. "Is it from such a man that the master has learned to turn things upside down, making the small great and the great small?"

"From him Joseph learned that men should be levelled, should be made equal. You must have heard of him. He is known as Barabbas."

"Barabbas!" breathed Haggitha. "Is that the man? The robber? The murderer?"

"He is not a murderer, Haggitha. And he is not evil. And it is not his ways that Joseph has learned. Only his beliefs."

Many others hold the same beliefs. Jesus, the prophet of Galilee, believes also that the dream of the psalmist will come true, that the meek shall inherit the earth."

"Another of these young hotheads!" cried Haggitha. "I heard this Galilean once in the temple porch at Jerusalem. A man who is against all authority. Ah, precious, these young men! What would your father have said if he could have seen his park ploughed up and his son going hither and thither like a hired labourer?"

"It is a new gospel, a gospel for the humble and the weak," said Jerith. "You, and all who have served masters, should rejoice that slavery and oppression are to be ended."

"The world has lasted as it is from the beginning of time," the old nurse declared. "There have been masters and slaves. The strong hold their own by their strength, and the meek learn the little pleasures of the humble. It will always be the same."

"It has been the same for ages," nodded Jerith, "but there are ages beyond us. We are in the middle of time. There may be even more time beyond us than we can look back on. And the great change is beginning. In time the whole world will be changed."

Haggitha shook her head hopelessly. "You are young, my precious," she mumbled. "The young never cease to seek change. But nothing changes. I am old. I heard young hotheads in my youth. This one was for fighting the Herods. Another was for fighting the Romans. Another was for murdering all the princes and priests. But the rulers remain and the masters remain, and it is well that they do. The poor would be lost without them."

"Ah, Haggitha!" sighed Jerith.

"Ah, highness!" murmured the old nurse, picking up her tangled wool and lapsing into silence.

After the battle of the gorge, Barabbas and Margaloth rode into Jerusalem, high on the burdened backs of a pair of sand-coloured camels. In the packs, covered by sackcloth wrappings, were the spoils of many robberies; rare dyes and oils from the East, costly fabrics, jewels in profusion, amulets and horns of ivory.

Margaloth sat his camel haughtily. He had been a warrior and a robber since boyhood. His clouded, secretive eyes hid all his thoughts. His skin was so darkened that beside him the browned face of Barabbas appeared pale. His robe was broadly striped with dull shades of ochre and grey, so that on his sand-coloured camel he could pass from sight at a thousand paces in a flight across the desert.

Barabbas wore a similar caftan, dyed red with the juice of wild madder. His head-cloth was clasped under his chin to conceal his scar. He wore a sheathed dagger in his girdle, and close to his right hand under the sackcloth lay the sword Antipas had given him. His height, added to that of his camel, enabled him to see over hundreds of heads.

The swift camels brought them to the Mount of Olives in late afternoon, but their progress was stopped at the bridge over the Kedron by a multitude of people crowding on either side of the road from Bethany, as though waiting for a procession. Over the expectant murmur of the throng came the distant sound of pipes and cymbals.

Margaloth turned to Barabbas. Without speaking he conveyed a question by an upward twitch of the black fringe of hair which met between his brows. At the foot of Olivet he saw a marching band of pilgrims threading through the trees.

"This you have never seen, perhaps," Barabbas said to Margaloth. "The elders of some village east of the Mount are bringing to the temple the firstfruits of oil and wine."

"All the customs of your country are strange to me," muttered the Nabatean.

"We shall have to stay here until they pass," said Barabbas, leaning toward his captain and speaking in a low tone. "If we try to make way through the crowd there might be a disturbance. Let us dismount. We are too much in the eye of these onlookers."

As he spoke he leapt down, turned his camel aside from the road and made the beast kneel in the shade. Margaloth followed him.

Among the people near them a slow murmur arose as many stood on tiptoe and others lifted children onto their shoulders to see the advancing company.

From the river came the sound of joyous cries, singing, and the clatter of many sandals on the timbers of the bridge. Barabbas heard clearly the familiar, "Arise ye!" chanted by a powerful voice over all the din. It was followed by the irregular muffled response of the marchers: "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of Jehovah."

At once Barabbas felt his thoughts flowing back to his boyhood in Bethabara when he had seen the villagers gathering outside the synagogue for the firstfruits procession. He recalled how he had stood, clinging to his mother, waving good-bye to the rabbi, his father, who would be absent on the journey many days. His remembrance of his father's face had grown dim with the years, except his last sight of him, hanging dead from the tree. The dead face remained alive in his mind.

Now the crowds at the roadside were murmuring the familiar greeting: "Ye come in peace, ye bring peace, and peace be upon you!" There were smiles of welcome on every face as they leaned and stretched to catch a first sight of their kin from the country in the oncoming band.

At last the pipe-player came into view, and immediately behind him the sacrificial bullock, his horns gilded and his back festooned with garlands of olive-twigs. Beside the beast strode the elected head-man of the district, a white-bearded broad-chested ancient, in full flowing robes, ornamented with fringes of many colours. Then came the wealthiest villagers, each carrying an amphora of wine or oil, and behind them the poorer folk with wineskins under their arms or earthenware jars on their heads. In the rear were many women with wicker baskets of grapes, and from each basket hung the bodies of a pair of turtle-doves, tied by the feet, their necks swinging jerkily as the pilgrims marched by.

A sonorous voice among them cried: "Praise ye, Jehovah!"

The response came quickly in a murmurous outburst: "Praise God in his sanctuary! Praise him in the firmament of his power!"

Then Barabbas felt his eyes moistening with remembrance as both the pilgrims and onlookers broke into the chanting of the ancient Psalm of Ascent:

*"When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,
Then were we like unto them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongue with singing ...*

With singing!

*"Then said they among the heathen,
The Lord hath done great things for them.
Yea, the Lord hath done much for us, already,
Whereof, we rejoice ...*

We rejoice!

*"Turn again our captivity, O Lord,
As the rivers of the south.
They that sow in tears
Shall reap in joy ...*

Reap in joy!

*"He that goeth forth weeping,
Bearing good seed,
Shall come again rejoicing,
Bringing his sheaves with him ...*

Bringing his sheaves!"

Now the road filled up behind the pilgrims with a pushing, dancing, cheering crowd. Already the youth with the pipe had started the steep ascent to the sacred hill. His shrill notes and the chorus of voices were thrown back from the rocky face of the cliff as another of the songs of David was begun:

*"Behold, he that keepeth Israel
Shall neither slumber nor sleep ..."*

Barabbas turned to Margaloth, who had never before crossed Jordan, and said with a strange smile: "These are my people!"

In their gaily coloured robes the climbing crowd, moving at a snail's pace up the side of the cliff, looked like a bright caterpillar flecked with sunshine. At the summit they dwindled, so that when they began to disappear through the Sheep Gate it was like seeing a gaudy variegated thread drawn into a shuttle.

The piping and chanting could no longer be heard, but with a sudden reverberation through the whole valley the rams' horns trumpeted from the temple a blaring welcome to the early evening sacrifice.

Barabbas felt his heart hardening. His jaws clenched. He closed his eyes for a moment and stared into the red mist under his lids.

"The God of Israel is not my god. I serve the world!"

He remembered that the phrase had come to him in the presence of Antipas. The echo of it elated him.

"Your people have hearts for singing," said Margaloth.

"Yes," said Barabbas, harshly. "They sing and rejoice at the spilling of blood. I also believe in the spilling of blood, but

not uselessly!"

Then he turned, settled himself on the pack of his camel, and began slapping its neck, calling on it to rise: "*Nasa! Nasa!*"

The beast swayed and slowly raised itself. Margaloth mounted also, and they rode up the steep incline side by side.

Inside the gate Barabbas went ahead, leading the way through the descending narrow streets of the Lower City to the Inn of Jacob Three-Sheaves. It was situated in a mean quarter of the city between the Pool of Siloam and the eastern wall, at the dead end of an alley swarming with drovers and beggars. Here they intended to stay until they had disposed of their booty.

When they had washed and refreshed themselves with meat and wine, they carried their packs up an outside stairway to an upper room. Barabbas threw off the sackcloth from one of his bundles and took out a clean robe.

Margaloth sat on the stone curb of the window, looking out over the city westward. Above an expanse of flat roofs where thousands of prone bodies lay in exhaustion after the heat of the day, he watched the flattened sun sink in a haze of smoky purple.

When he turned, Barabbas had changed his robe.

"You go to the house of a rich man, master?" the Arab asked.

"No. A poor man. An apothecary."

"Do you put on your best robe for a spice-grinder?"

"In the other I have travelled four days," said Barabbas, fastening his kidskin wallet to a girdle about his middle.

"Is this the man you have told me of, called Judas?"

"The same."

"And is he not the friend of the princess you spoke of once, when we were camped at Minnith?"

"What? I spoke to you of a princess?" demanded Barabbas, defensively.

"You showed me a necklace of emeralds and said a princess had given it to you, but that you had no mind to sell it."

"I have not sold it. I am going, now, to return it."

The cloudy eyes of the Arab had a glint in them. "Is this why you shun the women of the desert?" he said, drawing down his heavy brows to increase the intentness of his glance.

Barabbas jerked at the knot in his girdle and stood up to his full height, looking down fiercely at the Nabatean.

"You are my guard, Margaloth. Not my guardian," he frowned, moving to the door. "Go out and look at the city."

"I can smell enough of it where I am," said the Arab.

Barabbas did not look back. He went out and down the stairs in the falling dusk.

At that hour, during the heat, the streets were deserted. Laughter and singing, and sometimes a quiet moan from the house tops, accompanied Barabbas as he strode downhill toward the Alley of Spices. It was strange to hear the continuous gabble of voices from the roofs floating over his head again as it had on hot days in his youth. Now and then, at echoing corners, it sounded as if the whole chattering population of the city had been removed into the air and was buzzing like flies above a waste of refuse.

Every doorway that he passed breathed a different stench, and when he reached the house of Judas the sweetish reek of spices made him gasp with disgust, bringing to his senses the odour of death mingled with the perfume of embalmer's ointments.

The door stood open, but Barabbas stopped still and stared into the darkness of the house before he knocked. A twinge of guiltiness assailed him as he remembered how Judas had resented his mockeries in the garden at Bezetha, and had threatened later to denounce him as a robber if he bartered Jerith's necklace for weapons.

He started to withdraw, but a feeling of friendship for Judas swept through him. From a nearby roof came sounds of singing that reminded him of the psalms he had heard an hour earlier beside the Kedron, and his thoughts flew back to the time when he and Judas had gone out in the calm of evening to watch the bearers of firstfruits entering the city in the years of their youth. For the second time that day his heart was softened by lingering memories, and the bitterness of his last meeting with Judas was lost in the pleasurable recollection of their wanderings and whisperings together before their beards were grown.

He knocked, and while waiting for an answer it came to him that if he found the family together on the roof there would be no opportunity to talk intimately to Judas; but at once he recollected that Hezebel was too fat and Jakim too lame to climb up the ladder from Judas's room, and there was no outer stairway. The wall of Meshech's yard had left no space for it.

It was Barabbas himself who had thought of the hole in the roof, so that Judas could escape at night from the upper room and bring him bread and fruit without his mother's knowledge. They had worked at it secretly, and he could still remember Hezebel's wrath when she had discovered the ladder.

He knocked again, and without waiting for an answer lowered his head to enter the doorway. The heat inside was stifling as he groped his way through the dark shop and called aloud up the stairs.

There was no sound from above, but when he had mounted a few steps he could see that the hole in the roof was uncovered. He called again, and before he reached the ladder a head appeared in the opening, a dark round shape against the square of sky.

"Is that you, Judas?" he said.

"Yes, it is I, Jeshua," came the reply.

"Ah, you know me, even in the dark."

"I know the voice. Come up."

Barabbas clambered up the ladder. Judas gave him his hand and he leapt out onto the roof.

"You are alone," said Barabbas, glancing about him.

Judas had cast aside his clothing, except for a loin cloth, and for a moment Barabbas stared at the hunched and wasted body with a frown of compassion. Judas made no move to embrace him. He even stepped backward and crossed his arms over his shrunken chest.

The sun had gone down and the two men stood facing each other in the descending darkness.

"It does not surprise you that I have come?" asked Barabbas, at last.

Judas said: "I thought you would come. But it surprises me that you have come now. You must know there is a price on

your head."

Barabbas eyed Judas keenly but made no reply.

Judas unrolled a mat of palm leaves and laid it beside the one on which he had been stretched. "It is three months since you left?" he said, as he straightened himself. "Soon after Pentecost, you went away a man of the earth and you come back dressed like a prince."

Barabbas replied, "I have come with an abundance of precious stuff to barter for weapons. When I bargain with merchants I array myself like a merchant. They would offer much less if they took me for a robber."

"Is this your only errand?" asked Judas, his speckled eyes widening inquisitively.

"What makes you think I have another?"

"Because I think that in respect to the other you have been disappointed, and that is why you have come to me."

Barabbas took a step nearer. "You read minds now, it appears," he said, scornfully, "but not well."

"Then you have not been disappointed?"

"No," said Barabbas, with a quick frown.

"Have you not been up to Bezetha?"

"No."

"Then I was wrong. The disappointment is to come."

"What disappointment?" demanded Barabbas, anxiously.

"The prince and his sister are in Jericho. They go there every year at this time."

"What is that to me?" said Barabbas, sharply, but a sudden weariness took hold of him. He dropped down on the mat and stretched out his legs.

"Is it nothing to you?" Judas probed, squatting down close to him and peering with sudden eagerness into his face. "Have you not given them a thought since you went away?"

"I have been gathering men and arms," said Barabbas, haughtily. "I have talked with the *sheykhs* of many tribes. In the caves of the Bethabara gorge I have eight smiths forging weapons. Twice I have journeyed to Damascus for tempered steel. I have been bartering spices for corn in Gilead. I have four hundred men to feed. And when the rains come I shall have three hundred more, not counting the Arabs who will join me when we are ready."

"And all this has driven Jerith from your mind?" said Judas, in a demanding tone which astonished Barabbas.

"What have I to do with your precious princess?" he countered, hardening his voice with scorn as he remembered Judas's worshipping glances.

"Why then did you flee from her?" Judas asked.

Barabbas disdained to reply and began plucking idly at the plaited palm leaves of the mat. His gaze roved along the parapet as he became aware again of voices up the hill and the bleating of goats in the valley. A harsh shout and a jingle of camel bells floated up from Meshech's camel yard. He thought he recognized Hezebel's hoarse voice raised in raucous altercation on a neighbouring housetop. His thoughts wandered as the multitude of surrounding sounds drifted through his mind ...

Judas was so quiet beside him that at last Barabbas felt a sense of stealth in the other's deliberate stillness.

"Are you reading my thoughts again, Judas?" he said, mockingly, in a low tone.

"I imagine you have been thinking that to break a journey at Jericho in this heat ..."

"Enough!" Barabbas puffed out, startled and chagrined at the accuracy of the guess. From his wallet he suddenly drew out the necklace Jerith had given him, and held it up in the faint light of the stars which were beginning to appear.

"If you had asked me, I would have wagered you had not sold it," said Judas, sitting up and clasping his hands over his bony knees.

"As you see, I have not sold it," scowled Barabbas. "I have brought it here so that you may return it to her, when you see her again. It was a sudden impulse that made her give it to me. Before I left that night I tried to make her take it back. I tried to refuse it ..."

"But the next day you wanted me to sell it for you," Judas interrupted, raising one finger remindingly.

"Yes," said Barabbas, sharply. "I wanted to be rid of it. And now I have brought it to you. Take it."

"Will you not be passing through Jericho?" asked Judas, without moving.

"Yes."

"Why do you not halt on your way and return it to her yourself?"

Barabbas frowned through the darkness at Judas, as at a tempter. "No!" he gestured violently. "Take it!"

He thrust the necklace out at arm's length and at last Judas took it, holding it in his open hand so that the three strands hung from his fingers.

Breathing more easily, Barabbas watched the light play on the brilliant facets of the gems as they turned and twisted. Many a time he had held them before his eyes, letting their shimmer remind him of a slender arm thrust out from a white sleeve. More than once he had stood alone at night at the mouth of his cave, striving with himself to fling them into the gorge. But always the memory of Jerith's anguished eyes had defeated him.

Barabbas drew in a deep breath. He had given up Jerith's gems, and with them all hope, all desire, to see her again. He made himself believe it. She belonged, now, only to remembrance. He could still dream of her, but she stood in the past, now, not in the way of his future.

"Put it away!" he burst out, fiercely.

Judas was startled. His hands shook and he hastily poured the emeralds into one cupped palm and closed his fingers over them. Then he leapt up and said: "I will put it in a safe place."

In his voice and his lingering glance, as he looked down at Barabbas's averted head, there was compassion and the kinship of one who had suffered equal torture.

"I will put it safely away," he repeated, "and then we will drink together from a new skin of wine. I have had it hidden away for your coming."

He had to raise his voice so that he could be heard over the echoing sounds from nearby housetops.

While he waited for Judas to return, Barabbas stretched himself out, crossed his arms under his head, and gazed up at the brightening stars. He felt at peace with himself and the world, but the feeling was so alien to his restless nature that he could not lie long in utter quiet without probing and questioning.

A sound from below broke across his memories. It was the noise of Judas's sandals on the stairs.

Suddenly a twinge of jealousy assailed him. Judas seemed much calmer than usual, and Barabbas began wondering if the other's hopeless worship of Jerith, which had seemed so pitiful in the spring, might have been requited during the summer. Yet it seemed beyond belief that she could ever feel more than a tender pity for Judas.

He heard Judas on the ladder and sprang up to help him out onto the roof.

"How quiet he is!" Barabbas said to himself as he watched Judas pouring wine into two earthen cups. He could remember the time when Judas would have been impatient at a silence falling between them, and would have begun babbling at once in his timid searching fashion; but now he had settled himself on his mat and was crossing his legs without a word.

Barabbas lifted his cup, sipped it, and set it down again. "You are changed, Judas," he said.

"Yes, I am changed," acknowledged Judas, in an earnest tone.

"Have you given up your miracle?"

"I no longer look for it. He has come."

"Who has come?"

"The man I looked for has come, the man who will conquer death."

"You have seen him?" Barabbas demanded, in a tone of disbelief.

"I have seen him."

"In the flesh?"

"Yes."

"And you believe he will never die?"

"He will die, but his death will destroy death, and he will live for ever to be the pattern of all men to come."

Barabbas sucked in his breath. "This is not one of your psalms ... your imaginings, Judas?" he asked, searchingly.

"No. I have seen him. I have talked with him."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Can you keep your tongue from mocking?"

"I will not mock."

Judas slowly drew his sleeves back to his elbows, and crossed his arms. "It happened more than a month ago," he said. "I was going to a place where I have gathered herbs for years ... an old olive orchard on the westward slope of Olivet. There is a wall around it that has fallen into ruins. Because it has been enclosed for hundreds of years certain herbs that are rare elsewhere have multiplied there. When I first discovered the place, years ago, there were still signs of a path leading to it from the Bethany road. But it has long been overgrown, so that the wall itself is hidden in a thicket."

Barabbas sat up and took a sip of his wine to convey his impatience, but Judas did not heed him. He went on with great deliberation.

"On this day that I speak of, as I drew near to the place, I was astonished to find that someone else had discovered it. The grass and nettles were trampled down. The old leaning gate had been mended and was tightly shut. I wondered if the owner, who had so long deserted it, had come back to take possession. Then I grew afraid that it might have become the hiding-place of robbers. Even though the wall had crumbled in many places, I could not see in. The gate is of heavy, solid wood. I knocked at it. There was no answer. When I lifted the latch I was trembling. But no one was within. I could see that the shelter over the oil press had been repaired. Near it there was a fireplace made of stones piled high with a blackened cauldron resting on it. Someone had made of the place a dwelling. 'I must hasten,' I thought, 'and gather a few herbs and depart.' But as I was plucking them I heard a voice outside the wall ... a man's voice, singing quietly to himself. I had left the gate open. He entered and stopped. 'Well met, friend,' he said. I remember his first words because although his voice was neighbourly, it was also strange."

"In what way was it strange?" Barabbas asked.

"He spoke like a man from the country, but the strangeness was not in that. It was something beyond his voice."

"Go on, Judas."

"He asked me then if I were the owner, and when I told him my errand, he asked me what I knew of the place. I replied that only the name of the orchard was known to me, that it was called Gethsemane after the eight olive trees which grow there, barren with age. The name means the press of oil from eight trees, but even the name is ancient and is not as we now would say it."

"You draw out the story," Barabbas complained. "I am eager to know what manner of man he was."

"You shall hear. His next words astonished me. I said to him, 'Your speech is not like ours. Are you perhaps from beyond Jordan?' And then his voice and eyes changed. They did not lose their friendliness, but I felt suddenly that he was unearthly. Unearthly!"

"Can you not be plain, Judas?"

"I will be plain. He did not hesitate to answer me. He said, 'I am a stranger; but I am a man!' At first I did not marvel at the words, but his voice, and something other than his voice, thrilled me indescribably. With great power he said again, 'I am a man!' And I knew at once that his heart had conceived a height of manhood that was new to the world! In a little while the whole earth will know his name," declared Judas, with fervour. "It was foretold that he should be called *Im-ma-nu-el*, 'God-with-us.' And now it has come to pass that God will be with us every hour ... with us and in us for ever!"

"This is the name you gave him when he was a dream in your mind, Judas. You told me your dream on this roof when I was here in the spring."

"Ah, but now it is reality. Many who know nothing of his newness have seen him. Many follow him, not knowing his destiny. He is a man of flesh and blood. He was born in Bethlehem, but he is known as the Prophet of Galilee. His name is Jesus."

Barabbas drew in a deep breath, feeling with relief that Judas was still in his senses. "Yes," he nodded. "He is a kinsman of John's. I have seen him at John's cave. Have you joined his disciples?"

"His disciples do not trust me," said Judas, bitterly. "They call me a man of the city. They hate Jerusalem. Even Jesus rails against it."

"Yes, we talked of it one night in Bethabara, sitting beside the pools. He hates it as I do."

"He does not hate."

"Must we be so careful of words?"

"He does not hate," Judas repeated, stubbornly. "Not even Jerusalem."

"No. He laments over it. His heart bleeds for its evil and its misery."

"He sees it as it might be."

"Yes," agreed Barabbas, in a humbler tone. "That is his power. Few men before him, perhaps, have had the power to see good where others see evil. He has power; but I cannot follow him. I disputed with him one night until the cock crew. Not with bitterness. He makes men love him. I say no longer that I know nothing of love. It dwells in him. You feel its presence. It comes forth from him as warmth pours from the sun, melting all that it touches."

"If he has melted the ice in your heart, Jeshua, then indeed he can perform any miracle."

"It is fire that is in my heart. I am not like him, Judas. I see evil, and rage at it. I have tried to believe that his power, the power of love, can change the world. But I cannot believe it. The world must be swept clean."

"Is it out of the chaos of desolation that you see a new world rising?" muttered Judas, his eyes staring as though fixed on a frightful vision.

"Only when men see their folly in ruins," said Barabbas with fervour, "the fruits of their greed shrivelled to nothing, their pride crumbling before a thousand defeats, only then will they say among themselves, 'Let us begin again as we began, close to the earth. Let us have done with bowing ourselves down before gods and priests and kings. Let us be as we were meant to be, creatures of equal stature. Let us be men!'"

"Men again!" murmured Judas, with sad resignation.

"But you yourself, Judas, have put your faith in a man. Did you not just now declare that Jesus is a man of flesh and blood?"

"Ah, but I do not put my faith in his mortal flesh, which will die," answered Judas. "It is the immortal in him that will live, and from him all men will learn to put on immortality."



The great rains were falling over the length and breadth of the land. Low clouds, rolling in from the sea, shed themselves in a steady downpour along the coast from Carmel to Ascalon. Springs that had been dry throughout the heat began to flow again, watering the wilderness of Judea and running in rivulets across the cracked soil of Sharon. The streets and alleys of Jerusalem became rushing gutters of refuse as the rain washed downward past thousands of doorways to the goat pastures in the valley. The trickle of Jordan had swollen to a torrent. Beyond Jordan the grey mountains of Abarim were lost to sight for days in descending curtains of sleet.

It was in the foothills of these mountains that Barabbas had found a natural stronghold. Ten miles to the north of Machaerus there existed a network of caves, occupied in ancient times by a fellowship of lepers. An avalanche, which had changed the whole westward face of Mount Nebo two centuries earlier, had driven a deep chasm between these caves and the only ascent from the Dead Sea. Later, in the memory of men still living, an earthquake had partly filled in the deep crevasse, so that by a tortuous road, easily defended from above, the caves were again approachable.

Here Barabbas had hidden his band since the battle of the gorge. One of the deepest caves had become a stable for more than fourscore horses tethered in niches cut out of the limestone walls. Another sheltered a herd of sheep and goats which provided flesh and milk. Three smaller caverns had been fitted up as forges in which a dozen smiths and their helpers fashioned weapons and plates of armour. Storehouses for grain and fruit, sleeping-quarters, and a common hall where the men sat down to eat, had been hewn out of the soft rock, so that by the time the winter rains began, the Bethabara robbers, grown to an army of five hundred men, were housed in a small community tunnelled into the mountain side a mile above the level of the Dead Sea marshes.

Barabbas himself occupied the foremost cave, which opened on to a flat ledge of rock projecting over the chasm.

Toward the end of the month Kislev a blast from a distant horn, reverberating against the sheer sides of the crevasse, brought him to the mouth of the cavern. Six strides away a young man stood on watch. Torrential rain was spattering noisily on the rocks around him. A woven mat of cane and palm leaves, hanging like a hood over his head and shoulders, shed water as from a slanting roof.

Barabbas parted the hangings of patched hides which protected his chamber from wind and rain, and peered through the downpour.

"Who comes, Zibeon?" he called.

The youth rested his spear against the wall of rock beside him and dashed water from his eyes with both hands.

"It must be Margaloth," he said, "but it is hard to see."

His head swung round and he stared down again into the jagged pass ascending from the highroad which wound around Mount Nebo.

"Why must it be Margaloth?" demanded Barabbas.

"I know the sound of his horn."

"Are there not ten thousand rams' horns in Perea?"

"He sounded three blasts."

"A man with less wind than Margaloth can blow a horn three times."

"But there was a pause after the second blast, before he sounded the third. And the third rose to a screaming note at the end."

"You have a good ear, Zibeon."

"And good eyes, master, but down there in the pass the rain is like a curtain of mist."

"How many riders?"

"There might be ten, but perchance there are more than ten. There seem to be more men than horses."

"Are some on foot?"

"No. But behind some of the men there is a shadowy shape like another man, and yet not like a man."

"Have you had much wine, Zibeon?"

"None, master, I swear."

Barabbas smiled. His young kinsman pleased him. When they had moved to their new stronghold, Barabbas had put the youth on watch outside his cave, permitting him to carry a spear.

"Ah, I see now, master," Zibeon shouted, suddenly. "They are making the turn at the white rock where you found the injured eagle. It is Margaloth. I can tell by the way he sits his horse. And behind four of the riders there are men sitting, bound, facing backward, captives! They are undersized, and their faces are dark ..."

"Captives!" burst out Barabbas, and with quick strides he reached the brink of the ledge. For a moment he stood in the drenching rain, staring down at the horsemen.

"Send Margaloth immediately to me when he comes up," he ordered.

Flinging aside the curtain of hides, he re-entered his cave and shook the raindrops from his hair and beard. A brazier was burning in the half-darkness, and beside it, stretching out her hands to the embers, sat a young woman. She was comely, with dark docile eyes. Her skin was unusually pale.

"Say on, Tirzah," said Barabbas. "You were speaking of Elikah."

"He will not move against you until after the rains," said the damsel in a low reluctant voice. "They say he has sent for troops from Galilee."

The girl was Zibeon's sister. After the battle in the gorge, Barabbas had persuaded her to take service in the fortress of Machaerus as a maid, hoping that she would be able to learn in advance the governor's plans against him. On the pretence of visiting a sick mother in Bethabara, Tirzah had twice brought news from the fortress. This was her third visit, and it was plain to Barabbas that though she was in awe of him, she seemed less willing than before to speak plainly of what she had seen and heard.

"How many troops has he demanded?" asked Barabbas, sitting close over the brazier so that she could not avoid his eyes.

"I cannot say."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not know."

"How do you know he has sent for any at all?"

"I learned it."

"From whom?"

The girl's dark eyes clouded. "Do not ask me, Jeshua."

"I must know."

"Why must you know?"

"If it is just gossip among the maids ..."

"It is not gossip."

"Did you learn it from a man?"

"Yes," said Tirzah, pressing her hands together protectingly under her bosom.

"What man?"

"The governor's armour bearer."

"What is his name?"

The girl shook her head and stared stubbornly away from him into the darkness under the shelving roof of the cave.

"You will not tell me, cousin?" urged Barabbas.

"No."

"Is he your lover?"

The trembling girl met Barabbas's gaze and said, simply, "I love him, Jeshua."

Barabbas got up and turned away to hide a smile. "I should have expected this," he told himself.

From a heavy casket, hidden under a pile of skins, he picked out a jar of precious ointment scented with myrrh.

"This is for you, Tirzah," he said, opening the lid and bidding her smell the sweet perfume.

But she shrank back, shaking her dark curls. "I cannot take it," she said in a dejected whisper.

"Why not?"

"Hadad would wonder how I came to possess it."

"Have you no secrets from him?"

"Only one. That I come here."

Barabbas held up the marble jar in the light of the brazier so that its pink veins glowed like streaks in a sunset.

"I will keep this for you, Tirzah," he said, lingeringly sniffing the spice. "You shall have it on the day I take Machaerus."

"It would be a great folly for you to attack the fortress," the girl shuddered.

"Why, cousin?"

"You should see the walls, the great stones, the thickness ..."

"There are hearts that are stronger than any stones," declared Barabbas, smiling a little at his own bombast as he put away the box of ointment.

Tirzah had risen, when he turned, as though anxious to escape from his presence.

"Do you know nothing more, cousin?" asked Barabbas, standing close to her and holding up her face so that she would have to meet his glance.

She trembled in his grasp and her eyes rolled a little, but her set lips did not quiver.

"It is those eyes, Tirzah," he said, patting her cheek. "They would soften armour itself, let alone a bearer of arms."

She stood away from him, drooping her head, and he knew she was struggling with the thought that she was being false both to her cousin and her lover.

"There is another thing," she said, as though the words were dragged out of her. "Hadad did not tell me this. A stone-mason told me. He was drunk with wine. I asked Hadad if he knew of it, but he was angry that I should have talked with the mason, and he would tell me nothing. I heard the chisels myself. In the tower on the right hand of the great gate they are preparing a strong chamber for a prisoner. The dungeons are deep below. I have never seen them. But this is a room in the tower. They have changed the door. It is the thickness of three. There are five bars across it, the breadth of a man's

arm. And the mason said the governor himself knows not who is to be imprisoned there."

"For me, perhaps, if they ever take me," said Barabbas.

"No," said Tirzah, tears spurting into her eyes. "I asked Hadad. He would tell me nothing. All he would say was: 'It is not for that robber. He will not be taken alive. Herod Antipas has made it known that he will pay three gold talents to the man who brings the head of Barabbas to him at Tiberias.'"

"Do not weep, cousin," said Barabbas, mockingly. "It will take three men to sever my head from my body. They will get only one talent apiece."

His lips twisted in a smile, but his eyes were grim. He did not look at Tirzah again. Peering out of the curtains, he called to Zibeen:

"Put a man on watch in your stead and take your sister back to the fortress when the rain abates," he said. Then, with impatience, he added: "Where is Margaloth?"

"I told him you had asked for him," said Zibeen, "but he would not enter while you had a woman here."

Barabbas frowned. Turning to Tirzah, who stood close beside him, eager to escape, he held her for a moment by the shoulders and kissed her forehead. "Go in peace, cousin," he said. "And when the new dungeon in the tower is occupied, bring me news of the prisoner."

He held aside the curtain for her to pass out, but when he heard the spatter of the rain, he took from a peg his own cloak and with a gentleness that made Zibeen stare, he draped it over her head and shoulders.

As though ashamed of his momentary tenderness, he gave the girl a little push.

"Send Margaloth to me," he said, and turned away, stretching his hands out over the brazier. He was not cold. He warmed his hands unthinkingly. His mind was seething with dark, puzzling thoughts.

When Margaloth entered Barabbas swung about sharply. The Arab had changed his drenched clothes, but his hair was wet and glossy. His heavy brows were twitching. His eyes sparkled with some hidden elation.

"Man of many secrets," said Barabbas, "what have you to tell me?"

He lifted his arm, as though intending to drag the Arab closer by his beard, but instead he fingered the heavy chain the dark-skinned captain wore about his neck and let it fall with a little thud on his chest.

"We came upon a woman, a rich widow of Jericho ..." began Margaloth.

"Must I tell you again that we do not war upon women?" roared Barabbas.

"But she was rich, master."

From his broad folded girdle the Arab brought forth a handful of loose rubies and spread them before Barabbas's eyes.

"She was returning from the hot springs at Callirrhoe, east of Jordan, with only a steward and her litter-bearers," Margaloth went on in an exultant tone. "Her belly was as big as a cauldron, and she had a great wrinkled neck like a bull."

He had been staring down at the glitter of the stones in his hand, but the silence of Barabbas seemed to bore into him like a blade. He glanced up and his eyes clouded with humiliation as he flinched from the other's frown.

"Fling them into the chasm!" ordered Barabbas.

"But, master!..." the Arab groaned.

"Since you scorn my words, let this act teach you that we do not persecute women. If ever again you pursue and terrify a woman I will take from you with a knife the parts that make you differ from a woman. Throw the gems away!"

Barabbas drew back the hides at the cave mouth and watched the Arab hasten through the rain to the brink of the

precipice. With a sweeping movement of his arm, Margaloth flung the rubies in a scattering shower down the mountain side. For a moment he stood still, his head cringing in the downpour, as though listening for the rattle of the stones when they struck the rocks below.

Barabbas called to him peremptorily. "What more did you take from this woman?"

Margaloth turned and ran back into the cave. "Nothing more," he mumbled, wiping water from his eyes to hide his confusion.

"You lie, Margaloth!"

"Nothing more," the Nabatean repeated, without meeting the other's glance.

"You were seen as you came through the pass with four captives bound behind your men."

"Ethiopians. Slave-boys. Her litter-bearers," spluttered Margaloth. "I thought to please you, master. They are comely boys."

A lustful gleam flickered for a moment in his eyes, but he gulped at the fierce gathering of Barabbas's brows, and fell back a pace.

"When I saw your displeasure," he muttered, "I lied to you, thinking to free them and send them away."

Barabbas moved past the Arab to the cave mouth, brushing roughly against his shoulder so that he staggered aside.

"Zibeeon!" Barabbas shouted, and when the youth came running from one of the many caves nearby he was given angry orders to feed the four Ethiopians, and send them back with an escort to their mistress in Jericho.

Margaloth stood still where he had staggered, his head shrinking into his shoulders as it had under the torrent.

"Hear me, and remember!" Barabbas burst out at him. "If you do not hear and remember what I tell you now, you will have no ears to hear me with again. We do not rob women! And we do not countenance slaves! We are the enemies of slavery!"

Margaloth did not look up.

"Have you heard, son of the desert?"

The Arab's shoulders writhed.

"Will you remain and fight for this, and this only, or will you return whence you came?" Barabbas demanded, in a relentless voice.

"You are a mighty fighter, a great chief, master," Margaloth said at last, but grudgingly. "As long as you fight, I will fight. As long as you rob, I will rob. If a day should come when I can take the thrust meant for you, I will take it, and rejoice to see the blood run from me. But I have no heart for this folly of the levelling of man. Are you not greater among us than I? Have I not, until now, been a captain over such youths as Zibeeon? What would become of us, if all were equal? Who would command? Who would obey?"

Barabbas was about to roar out a reply, but there was a warning cry from outside. The curtains stirred, and Zibeeon thrust his head and shoulders into the cave.

"A man has come in haste, master," stammered the youth. "A disciple of that John who baptized in Jordan. A man named Sheth. He begs you to hear his news."

"Send him here," said Barabbas, motioning Margaloth with his eyes to stay.

The man called Sheth came in, his bronzed skin dripping. He wore only a coarse tunic of woven camel's hair. His broad feet slapped the stone floor of the cave as he entered. His arms hung in exhaustion. There was a white streak through his beard and a broader one in the wet tangle of his hair.

Barabbas had seen the man before, at the pools. His eyes seemed always to be fixed in wonder, as though he had

suffered a shock of inner lightning.

"Speak, Sheth," cried Barabbas, impatiently.

Although raindrops were trickling down his face, the man moistened his lips and gulped down several breaths before he spoke.

"My master, John, the man of God, has been taken by the accursed one, Antipas, and is even now a prisoner in the fortress of Machaerus."

"Blood of the prophets!" cried out Barabbas, gripping his beard in both hands. "I should have known. It is for him they have built the dungeon in the tower. Bring your sister to me, Zibeon."

Taking a step closer to Sheth, who stood like a mute, Barabbas shouted as though to a deaf man: "How do you know this to be true?"

The man swallowed many times, and said: "The accursed one sent five hundred men from Tiberias down through Aenon and took the man of God as he was baptizing at the springs of Salim. This was told to me by one who fell out of the ranks last night in the dark, wounded and foot-sore. I found him at daybreak beside the pool at Bethabara, half dead. I gave him honey and milk and he revived and told me."

Barabbas fastened a stern glance on Tirzah who had just entered the cave.

"Did you know that the dungeon you described was being made ready for John of Jordan?" he demanded, harshly.

"Master, I did not. It was told me that even the governor himself ..." the girl began in a terrified whisper.

"John was taken there in the night."

"I knew nothing of it, Jeshua. I left Machaerus before sundown."

"You know now, girl," Barabbas thundered, his eyes flashing on the others around him. "And if you would have your Hadad alive when we take the fortress, make a meeting-place with your brother outside the walls, and come out every third night on some excuse, so that I may know what they are conspiring against John and against myself. And if between any three nights there is immediate danger threatening John, hasten here alone, on foot if need be. It is a long journey. It is near to twelve miles. But you may save two men's lives ... John's and Hadad's. Take her at once behind you on my swiftest horse, Zibeon, and discover a place near the walls where you can meet in secret."

As Tirzah turned tremblingly away, Barabbas threw out a finger at Margaloth. "Find the *sheykh* of your tribe," he ordered. "Tell him that the time I spoke of has come. Bring five hundred men on the best mounts he possesses. I will weigh out the gold we promised him. Prepare yourself for the journey."

Only Sheth was left.

Barabbas pointed to a lion's skin on the floor. "Lie down, Sheth. You are half dead yourself. I will bring you meat and wine."



PART IV

In mid-winter, at the time of the Feast of Lights, an urgent message was brought to Jerith at Arimathea, from Claudia, the wife of Pontius Pilate. It was almost a summons.

A little before noon, Haggitha came stumbling in from outside, crying out in a shaky voice: "Romans, highness! Romans!"

Running to the doorway in astonishment, Jerith saw a litter and a score of legionaries, headed by an officer, ascending the winding road from the plain. It was clearly a woman's litter, and for a moment she believed that perhaps Claudia had come to see for herself what manner of life she was living, for Jerith had not moved from Arimathea since the early rains. But at a second glance she knew the litter was empty by the way the bearers were carrying it, swaying carelessly, as they came up the hill.

The sun had come out that morning and the snow which had fallen lightly over the fields during the night was slowly melting. Snow was rare so close to the sea, and on rising from her bed Jerith had delighted in the appearance of the twin hills, lying like two giant bodies under wraps of wool.

But now, as she watched the sunshine glinting on the helmets of the approaching Romans, a twinge of foreboding put an end to her lightness of heart. It disturbed her still more when she recognized the officer. He was a young tribune named Quartus, who had gained some knowledge of Aramaic since coming to Jerusalem. Claudia had seized upon this as an excuse to keep him close to her as an interpreter when she bargained with the merchants in the bazaars. Many women found him handsome, but Jerith had learned to shrink from his bold eyes. During the previous winter he had conceived an infatuation for her, ill-concealed even in his wife's presence. She had repulsed his secret advances with outspoken abhorrence.

His first words gave a deeper thrust to Jerith's anxiety. After an astonished glance at her plain garments, Quartus announced in an official tone and with the utmost brevity that the wife of the governor had sent for her because she was alarmed concerning Joseph.

"Joseph is in the city," she faltered. "Has something befallen him?"

But Quartus evaded her questions. His orders were to escort her into Jerusalem. He would give no explanations, and at last, after a few hasty preparations and a bewildered farewell to Haggitha, Jerith stepped into the luxurious litter and was carried away.

In Jerusalem the governor used as his headquarters the magnificent palace built by Herod the Great, and in one of the three great towers lavish quarters had been furnished for Claudia in the Roman style. Jerith was familiar with the apartments. She had visited there many times. And there was nothing unfamiliar in Claudia's appearance; yet because Jerith had grown accustomed to the simplicities of outdoor life, the extravagance of the rooms and the immodesty of Claudia's embroidered stola seemed repugnant to her.

As usual, Claudia's garments were fashioned to give the utmost allure to her plump breasts and well-shaped shoulders. Her curled red hair was piled high on her head in a cone, interwoven with braids of glittering stones. Her face was painted and her eyelids dyed in the Roman fashion, although the size of her glossy wine-coloured eyes and the thickness of her lips stamped her as a woman of southern Italy.

Only her smile of greeting was strange, but it flickered quickly from her lips as she stared at Jerith's plain garments and sunbrowned skin.

"My poor little jewel!" she exclaimed, and her voice conveyed a mingling of compassion and contempt.

Jerith was too impatient to greet her. "What has befallen Joseph?" she burst out at once. "Is he ill? Is he in danger?"

"What have you heard?" asked Claudia, turning to put down her mirror of polished silver on a table beside her.

"I have heard nothing ... nothing but your message," Jerith gasped.

"One of my stratagems. Three times I have invited you since you went into hiding, and each time you have made excuses. I thought a little fright about Joseph would bring you."

"Claudia!" cried Jerith, in a choking voice. "Is it true? There is no danger?"

"Danger? What made you think of danger?" asked Claudia, with a searching glance.

"Quartus said you were alarmed."

"Quartus!" puffed Claudia, derisively. "He magnifies everything. By this time you should know him. I asked him to say that I was concerned about Joseph. That was all. Do you like my hair?"

Jerith murmured something, she hardly knew what, as Claudia picked up the mirror again. Peering into it and swinging her head slowly from side to side, the governor's wife began talking of a new hairdresser who had lately come from Rome. At last, yielding to the impatience of Jerith's anxious eyes and clasped hands, Claudia sank into the deep cushions of a divan, keeping her mirror in her hand to toy with. Staring up at Jerith, she said with a taunt in her voice: "I used to believe that you could foretell the future, or at least that what you said would come true. But assuredly you have no second sight, my precious one, or you would have seen what Joseph's folly would lead to."

"Tell me what it is you fear," begged Jerith, leaning over her. "Joseph's heart has been so light. He is greatly changed. At last he feels his life has an aim."

Claudia's lips drooped in an unhappy relenting smile. "You poor child," she sighed. "It did not enter my head that he had kept you in ignorance."

"Of what?"

"Of his being summoned before the authorities."

"Summoned!" exclaimed Jerith. "Before what authorities?"

"A month ago he was called before the Sanhedrin for questioning."

"Oh, I knew of that summons. They are trying to gather evidence of blasphemy against Jesus of Galilee...."

"Ah!" cried Claudia, her eyes rolling in voluptuous excitement.

"Twice now," Jerith went on, "they have tried to snare Joseph into acknowledging that the prophet of Nazareth speaks blasphemy against our God and his commandments."

"This terrible god of yours, Jerith," whispered the governor's wife, with a shudder which she prolonged by squeezing her naked shoulders together, as though she enjoyed the tremors that ran through her. "It seems too barbarous to me that you should have only one god, and such a horrible one. Caiaphas, your high priest, was here talking to Pontius two nights ago, and everything he said about this deity of yours and his bloodthirstiness and his jealousy and his thunders and lightnings ... it all sounded so monstrous—monstrous! At home we have our gods. You know all about them. Jupiter is supposed to thunder, too, but who believes it? The poets have made legends about them, but here, if you utter the word 'legend' you are straightway accused of blasphemy. It is very confusing to me, my jewel. Caiaphas said that this prophet of Galilee was a blasphemer ... do sit down, Jerith!... but I could make nothing of it. All I could understand was that he thinks your brother is conspiring with this man, who is a disturber and a rebel against your own laws."

"The priests fear Jesus," said Jerith calmly, "because he speaks of a loving, tender God instead of a monster who demands offerings of blood. The priests profit by the spilling of blood. They put a tax on every sacrifice. And the whole city thrives on the trade in lambs and doves and bullocks that are sold to pilgrims."

"Do you not fear this prophet?" demanded Claudia.

"Fear? He preaches against fear."

"But what do you see in his future?"

"I do not read the future, Claudia."

"Ah, but you do, Jerith. The day we went to see the aqueduct you prophesied a wind, and there was a wind."

Jerith smiled. "How you catch at things, Claudia. The day before you said you had no doubt the heat would be frightful, and I said that there was a west wind which could not be felt in the city, but that if it blew from the west on the morrow the journey would not be unpleasant."

"And it blew from the west."

"Yes, but I did not prophesy that it would."

"Diana bless you! You are strange, Jerith. You have the gift of prophecy, yet you will never own to it. Many a time you have told me that if Pontius did a certain thing, a certain thing would surely follow. And many times it did."

"That is only because I know our people and their laws and their attitudes."

"Tell me, then," said Claudia, with more genuine anxiety in her voice, "do you see evil surrounding this prophet Jesus?"

"Evil?" exclaimed Jerith. "He is the least evil of men."

"Then perhaps the evil will fall on Pontius because of him."

"He is a humble man," Jerith replied, ardently. "He lives in the open and preaches to the poor and the meek. It is not likely that Pontius will ever see him, or that their paths will ever cross."

"Ah!" moaned Claudia, letting the sound linger rapturously in her throat. "Is it I, then, who should fear him and avoid him?"

"Why should you? He speaks only of love and peace. What evil have you heard of him?"

"Except for Caiaphas, who calls him a blasphemer, I have heard only good of him. It is said that he is a man of great beauty and gentleness. He draws multitudes to hear his voice. Chuza, the steward of Antipas, is disturbed because his wife goes out from the palace to hearken to him, and is known to have given food and money to his disciples. They say that many women follow him. A harlot of Magdala is among them, but he does not rebuke her or send her away. I am eager to see the man myself. It is said that his voice makes women worship him, and his eyes are unfathomable."

Jerith glanced at Claudia with youthful severity. "Why are you eager to see him?" she asked distrustfully.

"When we were in the city at the time of your Pentecost, a soothsayer told me that within a year I should be sorely troubled by a man who would come from the sea."

"From the sea!" echoed Jerith in astonishment.

"At first I thought he meant someone coming from Rome, but when I heard that this prophet preaches for the most part on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, I began to wonder if he might be the man. And since then I have dreamed of him."

"How did he appear in your dream?"

"It was only his voice I heard, calling me by name. When he comes to Jerusalem again I shall dress as a maidservant and go and hear him preach in your temple cloisters. Will you go with me, Jerith? I am afraid to go alone."

"What do you fear?"

"I am afraid I might be drawn to him. They say his eyes are beautiful and his voice strikes one dumb. Diana help me! I fret myself, thinking of him. Imagine it, Jerith? The wife of a governor casting everything aside to follow a village preacher!"

For a moment Jerith did not trust herself to speak, but at last she summoned her voice. "It is true that many women follow him," she acknowledged. "And he speaks to women as men of our race rarely do. But he speaks also to the hearts of men, and to children, and to those who are possessed of devils. I have heard him. He speaks as simply as a child, and as innocently. His eyes are as full of wonder as a child's. And the secret of his wonder and his innocence is that he sees no evil!"

"How can that be?" asked Claudia, doubtfully.

"He sees people as if they were not evil, nor blind, nor lame, nor leprous. He sees them, not as they are, but as they would like to be ... whole and good and sound of body and mind. He speaks to them, and those who are healed somehow learn to see no evil. They cast out their belief in evil. And they are cured."

"Ah!" cried Claudia, jubilantly. "More than ever, then, I must meet him. Pontius thinks I complain about my ills without cause. But I am never free of ills. You know that, my gem. Such a man could cure me of all my pains, by miracle."

"He does not cure as soothsayers pretend to do, with potions, or mystic words, or the steam of herbs. He speaks as one having authority over evil, to cast it out."

"Tell me, Jerith," said Claudia, her large, glossy eyes suddenly narrowing with suspicion. "What fortune do you see for this prophet? Herodias is troubled, I am told, fearing that the people will make him a king, who will depose Antipas."

"I have no gift of prophecy," said Jerith, shaking her head firmly. "But from what Joseph tells me, I cannot believe that Jesus seeks a crown. He is the friend of the humble. He teaches meekness."

"But is it not true that your people are seeking a new king?" asked the governor's wife, in a frightened tone. "I know nothing of these things, but I have heard Pontius say that one of these rebels who lead the people may cause him more trouble some day than all the plots of the priests."

Jerith swallowed chokingly. Her thoughts were suddenly wrenched from the mild prophet of Galilee to the robber of Bethabara. She heard Barabbas's words echoing in her mind, as fiercely as when he had uttered them: "The cities will be laid waste."

Turning to Claudia, she cried falteringly: "Never, never say again that I can see what is to come."

She covered her face with her hands and a chill went through her as she thought of Barabbas, rather than Jesus, some day crossing the path of Pilate, in chains, a prisoner!

She felt Claudia moving beside her and looked up.

Quartus was standing in the doorway. At a nod from Claudia, he announced: "Your excellency, the spice merchant you sent for is here."

"Bring him in," said Claudia, her eyes betraying excitement.

She lifted her mirror, but put it aside again without looking at herself. "Now we shall hear something at first hand of the prophet of Galilee," she whispered, and Jerith could sense in her tone the superstitious fear which so often before had driven Claudia to ply her with questions concerning the Jewish faith.

"Is it true," asked Claudia, leaning closer, "that this carpenter's son regards himself as a descended god?"

Jerith scarcely heard the question. "Who is this man you have sent for? Is he called Judas Iscariot?" she asked, with growing agitation.

"He is an apothecary. Quartus says that being a merchant and a man of the city, he can be more easily corrupted than the fishermen and simpletons who follow the prophet. Perhaps a reward will persuade him to tell us his master's plans."

"But, Claudia!" burst out Jerith in sudden disquiet. "I have often spoken to you of Judas. Joseph and I have known him since childhood. You had me purchase a precious spice from him last year."

"Yes," whispered Claudia, but with great distinctness. "He is an old friend of your brother's, and now he is a disciple of Jesus. Yet you wonder that Joseph is suspected of conspiracy."

Jerith clasped her knees tightly and tried to swallow down a wave of heat that seemed to be drying up her throat.

Quartus took three paces into the room and stood aside. Then Judas came in with four guards behind him, and when Quartus called on him to halt, he came to a tottering standstill. His head and arms swayed as though he were faint with exhaustion. His weak eyes stared. At sight of Jerith a sudden flush reddened his face and neck. His mouth opened, but no sound came.

Jerith, who could hardly get her breath, saw him fix a feverish glance on the ceiling above her head. She had not seen him since the summer. Twice, at Bethany, in company with Jesus and the other disciples, she had rejoiced at finding him greatly calmed. He had seemed less moody. His skin looked healthier, his eyes steadier. He had not given up his belief in a "miracle", but when he had spoken of it, his tone sounded exalted, as though he had touched the hem of fulfilment. In Jesus he appeared to have discovered the remedy for his despair, the complete and perfect answer to all his fretful puzzlings.

But, now, she saw at a glance that his former gloom had deepened. Moreover, he looked ill and shrunken. The bones of his legs shone through taut sun-blackened skin, for he was clothed only in a short seamless garment of coarse wool such as the Galileans wore.

"He has been wandering with them, eating little, and sleeping in the open," she grieved within herself, thinking that the others were strong, robust men, whereas he had been wretchedly weak through all her remembrance of him. But he was more than ill. Inner frenzy had hollowed his cheeks and gouged his brow with scowling furrows.

Thinking he had been brought there by force, she had at first mistaken his faintness and his desperate look for signs of a struggle with Quartus's men. But she saw, now, that he was sick in body and mind. Although it seemed plain that he had come unwillingly, he was not hostile. His flush at the sight of her she understood. She was aware of his hopeless worship, and had grown accustomed to the shyness which often plunged him into awkward silence on entering her presence.

The governor's wife, crouched with her legs under her on the divan, had been examining him callously, as if she were staring at a strange beast. Unable to bear the silence, Jerith leaned impulsively toward her, but at that moment Judas found his voice.

"Speak, highness!" he cried, his tone pitched high with anxiety. "What affliction has overtaken you?"

"Affliction?" echoed Jerith, with an accusing look at Quartus.

These words, spoken in Aramaic, brought Claudia upright with a frown between her brows. "What are they saying?" she demanded of Quartus in Greek.

But before he could reply, Jerith said to her in her own tongue, reproachfully: "Is this another of your stratagems?"

Claudia did not answer her. Glancing up at Quartus, with a secret gleam under her lowered lashes, she said: "Did you exceed your orders?"

"The man was loath to come," he said, and Jerith heard the smooth familiar note of cunning in his voice. "I used the word 'affliction'. In Greek it could indicate a trifle, but he knows little Greek. He took it to mean that the princess had suffered some sorrow or misfortune. Then he came readily."

"Send your men away, Quartus," said Claudia, abruptly. "This man is not a prisoner. But you had better remain, to interpret."

"He needs no interpreter," broke in Jerith, quickly. "He speaks Greek. If there is need, I can make his meaning clear."

Claudia ignored her. With her eyes she signalled to Quartus to stand closer to Judas. Jerith saw the glance, and felt that he was ordered to stay, not only for protection, but also as a witness.

"If you are not in distress, highness, why was I brought here?" Judas suddenly demanded.

Claudia leaned forward with a deceitful air of candour, and said: "The princess and I were talking about your master,

and we thought that being close to him, you could explain to us some of his parables."

Jerith stirred and in moving struck her sandal sharply on the tiled floor. At the same time she gave Judas a troubled, warning glance.

"It was not I, Judas, but Her Excellency, the wife of the governor," she said, with cautioning emphasis, "who sent for you."

Claudia gave her a hasty, impatient glance and settled herself with her hands locked between her knees.

"Is it true," she said, with a false smile that stretched her painted lips, "that you have given up your trade to follow the prophet, Jesus Bar-Joseph of Galilee?"

"I have given up all!" declared Judas, with an air of despondency.

"I am told that twelve disciples have been chosen from among his followers. Are you one of them?"

"I am one of them," said Judas.

"You are seen with him everywhere. You must have heard all of his prophecies."

Judas made no answer.

"Is it true that he prophesies the end of the world?" The tremor of superstitious dread which Jerith had so often heard in Claudia's voice gave the words a startling ominousness.

"He prophesies the beginning of a new world, a reign of peace," said Judas, hoarsely.

"Whose reign?" Claudia demanded, her eyes clouding with fear. "Does your master believe that he will become king of the Jews?"

"There will be no kings," answered Judas, violently. "There will be but one kingdom ... the kingdom of God on earth."

"One kingdom! Do you mean that Judea and Samaria and Galilee and Perea will be united again under one king, who will succeed Antipas?"

"I have said, there will be no kings."

"Will Herod Antipas be killed, then?"

"He will die. All men die."

"Does your master prophesy that Herod Antipas will die a violent death?" asked Claudia, her voice growing shrill.

"My master does not prophesy concerning death. He prophesies concerning life. Nevertheless, he himself will die for the world as a lamb dies, for a sacrifice."

Jerith felt a tightening across her breast as she recognized the demented fervour she had heard more than once in Judas's voice.

"Does your prophet, say that he will die for the world?" pressed Claudia.

"No," said Judas. "But it is written."

"Where is it written?"

"It is in the book of the will of God."

"What book is that?" For a moment Claudia turned to Jerith, but she did not wait for her to reply. With an agitated glance at Judas, she demanded: "Who wrote it? Did your master write it?"

"He does not write."

"You, then?"

"It is not inscribed on parchment or stone or marble. It is not a book. It is a word ... the one word ... which issues out of the infinite and becomes all that there is. And all men, great and small, the beggar, and the leper, and the outcast, and even Caesar, all will know the one word when it is revealed. It will change the whole earth and the nations of the earth, and the reign of peace will begin."

"What is this word?"

"It has not yet been uttered," declared Judas, with a secretive gleam in his eyes.

"Then how do you know it?"

"I do not know it. But my master hides it in his heart, and in the moment of his death he will reveal it."

"Does he say he will reveal it?" demanded Claudia.

"No."

"But you say so?"

"I have said it."

"How can you know?"

"I have seen it in his face."

"But if it is a word how can you have seen it in his face?" cried Claudia, with impatience.

"Because it is not a word that any man has ever understood. It is not a word at all."

"Are you mad, fellow?" Claudia exclaimed. "First you say it is a book. Then you say it is a word. And then you say it is not a word. Is this some stupid riddle you are propounding? If it is not a word, is it a living thing? And if it is not a thing, what sort of thing is it?"

"It is not a thing, unless you call the wind a thing, or the waters moving, or the blood—yes, blood! It is more like blood!"

"Ah!" shuddered Claudia. "I have read your riddle. I have seen your awful word in my dreams. It is calamity. It is death for all and for everything and forevermore."

"No!" cried Judas, with an agonized smile that distorted his face. "It is life! Not life as it is ... as we know it. The word 'life' did issue forth once, but it has become a tangle. No one can read it. It has become like an ugly meaningless scribble over all the face of the earth. The word is bespotted. My master has come down from heaven to cleanse and renew that word with his blood. His blood will be like wine to the generations that are to come. He has prophesied that he will drink the new wine of love with the whole world in his father's kingdom."

"The new wine of love!" muttered Claudia, in a shaking voice, as she glanced in panic from Quartus to Jerith. "This man is mad. Now he speaks of wine and love. What new riddle is this?"

"All life will be a riddle, and meaningless scribble, until the new wine is poured into the world," Judas answered.

"Does your master speak in riddles like you?"

"The Son of God needs not to open his mouth. He is the new wine. He is love itself. And through him the love that no man has ever known will be spilled into the hearts of all living."

Claudia beat her two hands on the divan, making a great jingle of her many armlets, and leaned close to Jerith. "Has this man always been so? He is mad, surely. Are they all mad?"

"He is a man of strange visions," whispered Jerith.

"Are they all like this?"

"No, Claudia. He is ill. He is in a fever. I have heard him speak strangely before, but you can see he is not to be feared. And in so far as he speaks of love and peace ... that is his master's message."

"Love seems to have driven him mad," faltered Claudia, clasping Jerith's hand in her own, which was as cold as ice.

"Not love, but longing for love," Jerith murmured, slanting her head away to hide the tears that suddenly blinded her. "He is a wretched man, Claudia. No one has ever loved him, and he cannot imagine what the new reign of love will be like."

"Can you?" said Claudia, wonderingly, all her callousness gone.

"Yes," murmured Jerith, but as she spoke she sobbed and shook her head.

"Why are you crying, my jewel?"

"For all the hearts that thirst for love," wept Jerith. She tried to hide her grieving face in her hands, but the tears spurted between her tiny fingers and slid down her wrists.

"I will send this man away, Jerith ..." Claudia began, in a comforting voice, but Jerith stretched out one hand blindly and clutched at her knee. "He should not be sent away. He should be cared for." She controlled her sobs. "Send me in your litter to his house. He needs food and wine. He is in a fever."

"Presently, little one," said Claudia, leaning close to Jerith's bent head. At the same time she signed to Quartus to take Judas away.

Hearing the noise of steps, Jerith raised her eyes. Quartus had taken Judas by the arm, for he was tottering and could scarcely put one foot before the other. At the doorway he lurched against the wall. For a moment his glazed eyes cleared and over his shoulder he sent Jerith a long, strange glance which ended in a sly smile. Then he staggered upright and bowed toward Claudia with a contemptuous jerk of his head.

"Send for your soothsayers!" he hissed at her.

Jerith had covered her face shudderingly. When she looked up again, he was gone.

Judas did not breathe easily until he had passed through the archway in the massive wall surrounding the Praetorium. Turning eastward on to the broad Street of David, he filled his lungs deeply and began smiling to himself as he thought over every word he had said to the wife of the governor. He had not uttered a single falsehood. He had not denied his master or distorted his message. Yet he had deceived her completely. He had confused her with a maze of words, so that she had taken him for a madman, and let him go.

"They all believe I am mad," he jeered within himself. "No one sees what I see, but when the Passover comes they will see, they will all see. Until then, let them believe me mad. It is better so."

Although his body was weak and his blood feverish, his thoughts had never seemed clearer. The miracle itself he could not foresee, but the premonition of it was like a blinding light in his head. He could not contemplate it for long. It dazzled him. At times, when he tried to penetrate the frightening light, his heart seemed to stop beating, and he felt himself hanging in nothingness, as though he had passed out of his body and out of his mind. At such times he believed it possible that the first signs of the miracle might come, not in the heavens, but in the heart. Perhaps the heaviness of the heart would be cast aside like a burden from the shoulders, and the lightness of the heart would go forward, beating with a new rhythm that would lift men up into a rarer air of spirit, where there would be eternal rejoicing.

Glancing from right to left at the people he was passing, he marvelled at how blind and deaf they were. "They do not see," he said to himself with mingled scorn and pity.

His body felt strangely light and exalted. With only a little effort of will he felt he would have been able to rise and walk in the air above the heads of the throng, which was thicker now as he approached the bridge to the temple.

It was here that he turned off unthinkingly and began the descent to the valley. As he started downhill he grew aware of the weakness of his legs. At each step his body swayed forward, and it was with great difficulty that he kept himself from pitching headlong. It angered him that he had to take such care, for he wanted his mind free. He wanted to puzzle out the answer to a question that kept eluding him; but at last it came clear. He wanted to know why he had turned homeward. Every nerve in his body was crying out for rest, but his mind was stubborn. And the house was stubborn. His mother's house stood stubbornly still, blocking his thoughts. And in the house was a stubborn man, whose face rose before him, as he trudged on. But he could not remember why Barabbas had come, or when, or why ... and the why and the when repeated themselves endlessly ... until through the noonday crowd at the foot of the Alley of Spices he saw the house itself. He saw through the walls. He saw the upper room, and Barabbas in hiding there. The why and the when started again, but before he could answer, his body suddenly stopped. A cloud rolled away from before his eyes.

In front of the house stood a litter, fringed and ornamented with the holy colours. In the doorway stood one of the rulers of the temple. On the breast of his ephod the twelve stones of Israel were embedded in rich embroidery.

"Judas Iscariot!" exclaimed an unctuous voice. "Do you remember me?"

Judas did not answer. His mind crouched warily.

"I came to you once for a precious spice for my wife."

Judas remained silent. Knots tightened in his body.

"My wife is the sister of the high priest."

"I have no spices to sell," Judas heard himself saying through the incessant throbbing in his head. "I have given up my trade."

"So I have learned. At first I could make no one hear, but when I continued knocking, a voice from the upper room called down to me, saying that your shop was closed. I enquired further of you, but the man, a kinsman, perhaps, cried out, 'I am sleeping. Do not trouble me.' Nevertheless, I waited, hoping that when your mother came she might have news of you, where you were, or when you would return. Your mother is known to me. I see her daily in the porch of the temple. But you do not remember me?"

"I remember you. You are the Chief of the Scribes."

Phanuel Ben-Phabi stood aside from the door and motioned with his hand for Judas to enter.

"My shop is empty," said Judas, without moving.

An impatient gleam lit the dull eyes of the scribe for a moment. The tip of his tongue slid between his thin lips. "This time I have not come for spices," he said. "But I have with me many pieces of silver."

"For what?" demanded Judas, harshly.

"For a reward, shall we say?" said Phanuel Ben-Phabi, his yellow skin wrinkling in a stealthy smile which spread along the many lines in his face like a breeze ruffling a field of grain.

"Do you mean a bribe?"

"We cannot talk here, man, in the doorway."

"I have no need of money."

"Come in, Judas," pleaded the scribe. "Your neighbours are listening."

Judas was suddenly aware of prying eyes and gabbling voices behind him. He stepped in and closed the door, darkening the room so that a lamp was needed, but he did not kindle one. He sank down on a bench and his mouth gaped in a great yawn that was almost a groan.

"You seem ill, Judas," said Phanuel Ben-Phabi, softly. "When have you had meat or wine? Your body is lean. You have given up much to join the Galileans."

"Out of Galilee has come the light of the world," declared Judas. "In the kingdom to come we shall dwell in that light, and there will be no more hunger or thirst. We shall not want."

Phanuel Ben-Phabi searched in the dimness for a seat. He found a low table, which he mistook for a stool, and sat down on it. "It is concerning this that I have come ... this new kingdom," he said. "What is it you look for?"

"Why do you come to such a one as I am?" said Judas, wearily. "My master speaks openly to all who will hear him."

"Ah, but I have never happened to hear him. And I am told that he has not come into the city since there was an attempt to stone him during the Feast of Tabernacles, I believe."

"You are the Chief of the Scribes," burst out Judas with twitching lips. "If my master offends against the law you can bring him before the Sanhedrin. I am the humblest of his disciples. Leave me. I am ill."

"More than once we have sent messengers, begging him to make clear his doctrine to us, for the Pharisees in the Council accuse him of blasphemy. But he sends back words that are deep and puzzling, so that some call him a mocker. We have been loath to bring him before us by force, for fear of arousing the people. Moreover, he hides himself in caves and desert places, and is hard to find. That is why I have come to you, Judas."

Darkness was descending in Judas's mind. He waved his hand before his face to ward off the voice of the scribe which was like a hornet circling about his head.

"If it had not been for us Sadducees," the voice droned on, "he would have been dragged before the Council for trial. But we are more tolerant. We are against violence. The Pharisees even accuse us of truckling to Rome. They accuse Annas and Caiaphas and others of encouraging the Roman yoke. And there is a grain of truth in it. Until our people learn to govern themselves without violence and revolts, it is better that we should be ruled by Caesar."

Judas steadied his swimming senses until he could make out the precious stones gleaming in the half-darkness on the breast of the scribe's ephod.

"Leave me," he muttered. His lips moved, but he could not hear his own voice. He gathered strength for a shout. "Be gone!" he roared.

"Hear me, Judas. We do not say that your master preaches revolt. But the people are so eager for a Messiah that they

mistake him for the one who will overturn the world. Many are ready to rise behind him, and there will be bloodshed. He is a mild man. He will not have the force to prevent them. At the next Passover there will be agitation in the city against Herod Antipas for holding John of Jordan in prison. The robber, Barabbas, is gathering an army against him. Your master, without evil intention, may add fuel to that fire. It is for this I have come. That you may warn him. Do you hear me? Are you asleep, Judas?"

"Cease! Cease!" pleaded Judas, holding his head in his hands.

"Listen, man! I have with me thirty pieces of silver," said Phanuel Ben-Phabi, leaning forward impatiently and jingling the purse in his belt.

"Curse your silver!" croaked Judas through his fingers.

"Ah, but your mother ... and her old father ... now that you have left them," prompted the scribe in a penetrating whisper. "They must have little to live on."

"Be gone with your silver!" cried Judas, opening his red eyes, and trying to lift himself from the stool.

"Wait! Quiet yourself! You have not heard my offer. It is not a bribe," Phanuel Ben-Phabi protested. "We ask you to serve us for a reward. A small service to us, but a greater one for your master. You may save him."

"Save him from what?"

"From the stones of the Pharisees. If he is brought to trial they will call false witnesses and condemn him and stone him to death. But if you will persuade him to enter Jerusalem by night and come alone to the house of Caiaphas, so that the high priest can talk to him privily, and show him his danger ... and if he will give assurance that he will take no part in any uprising at the Passover when the city is thronged ... then the high priest, and Annas, will go before the Council and say that they have questioned him, and find him innocent of blasphemy, and of any desire to incite the people. Such a report will forestall the Pharisees, who want to charge him with breaking the law. Caiaphas will declare him guiltless."

In Judas's swooning mind the hated names of Annas and Caiaphas hovered like the wings of vultures, shadowing his thoughts.

"Do you hear me, Judas?" urged the insistent voice.

"I hear you."

"Bring your master to the house of Caiaphas ... you two, alone. And for that we will give you thirty pieces of silver, solid Roman silver."

With great effort Judas raised himself. The thought of the Passover throng had aroused him. He saw Jesus in the midst of a great multitude. He heard thousands of voices shouting Hosannas. He saw the gentle face transfigured for a moment, becoming godlike, but only for a moment; the light was blinding.

Strength poured into him. He stared down at Phanuel Ben-Phabi, who seemed to be shrunken and far off.

"Think you," Judas cried, pointing his finger scornfully, "that the Son of God can be hindered from entering into his kingdom at the appointed hour by a handful of paltry silver?"

"Again you speak of a kingdom!" pounced Phanuel Ben-Phabi, springing up.

"There will be no kings or priests or alien silver in the kingdom to come," shouted Judas, rejoicing in the power of his recovered voice. "Go back to Annas and Caiaphas ... those traffickers in the people's sacrifices!... cheats and extortioners! Tell them I spit on their silver!"

He licked the saliva from his lips and suddenly spat among the twelve stones of the embroidered ephod.

The Chief of the Scribes stood astounded, unable to speak. Before he could utter a word there was a clatter at the top of the stairs, and the voice of Barabbas was raised in a challenging shout.

In a panic, Judas ran to the foot of the staircase, and began bellowing: "Get out of sight, fool! Go up and hold your

tongue, you drunken son of nothing! Lie there and wait for Jakim. Where did you find that sword? What do you want with a sword? Give it to me! Give it up!"

He staggered up the stairs and snatched the sword from Barabbas's hand, hissing at him to keep still.

The Chief of the Scribes hastened to the door, his face whitening with amazement and fear.

Judas followed him with the sword thrust forward awkwardly at arm's length, stamping his feet, shouting at him to be gone.

Phanuel Ben-Phabi hurried through the door, pushing aside the curious onlookers who were crowding about the step, drawn by the shouting.

Judas lurched across the room and flung the door shut in their faces. Then the sword dropped from his shaking fingers.

Flames of passion had been leaping in his head. Now, a frightful chill gripped his spine. His jaw gaped open. His legs gave way under him. He reeled toward the stairs, and if Barabbas had not darted down in time to grasp him under the arms, he would have fallen heavily.

As he plunged into blackness a sound drenched his senses ... a shower of sharp silver coins seemed to be beating on his head until he was battered into unconsciousness.



An hour later Jerith leaned out of Claudia's litter at the foot of the Alley of Spices. She had heard Quartus call on the bearers to halt. As she drew the curtains, he pointed to a low doorway in what looked to her like a hovel. It shamed and troubled her that she had seen so little of the poor, and that in all her days in Jerusalem she had scarcely thought of how they lived.

"Is that his house?" she asked, in shocked astonishment.

"Have you never been here?" replied Quartus, helping her to step out.

"Never."

"I will go in with you, highness."

"No, Quartus."

"You are stubborn, as always," he murmured. It was an intimate whisper.

Leaning into the litter for the basket of provisions she had brought, Jerith pretended not to have heard.

"The alley is crowded here," said Quartus, "but there is a camel yard beyond the corner. We will wait there."

It crossed Jerith's mind at once that he was well acquainted with the district, and her distrust of him deepened as she realized that Claudia was using him as a spy.

Feeling his bold glance bent on her, she hastened over the uneven stones of the alley and rapped at the door. The wood was old and sodden, and her tiny knuckles made little sound, but before she could knock again, the door opened slowly, making a slit no broader than a man's hand. She peered in, looking for a face. There was a movement where a head should have been, but a gasping breath from inside made her raise her glance. At a height she had not expected, a bearded face looked out.

"You!" she cried, with what little breath remained in her.

Barabbas, who could see over her shoulder the litter and a Roman officer watching her, put his finger to his lips. He hid himself behind the door and opened it a little wider.

Jerith lifted the basket and quickly passed into the half-darkness of the house. A lamp had been lighted, but it gave only a feeble glow.

It seemed to her that Barabbas was taking a long time to close the door behind her. She stood still, waiting for him to speak. It had been hard for her to believe what she had seen, for she had thought of him as being in the mountains, far beyond Jordan. She waited, now, for the deep tones of his voice to convince her that she was not dreaming.

He moved beside her and without a word took the basket from her arms. He was so close that she could hear him breathe, and she knew he could not yet trust his voice.

"He has not forgotten," she said joyously to herself.

Looking at the span of his shoulders and the suppleness of his back as he bent to put down the basket, she recalled her first glimpse of him in the white antelope skin, like a carved god, by the rim of the pool. But now his body was hidden in a robe that reached to his heels, and only his hair, falling in black profusion around his neck, reminded her of the shock his height and manhood had given her when she saw him standing beside poor, bent Judas and her pale brother.

He turned, and on a low table the lamp sent dancing shadows upward over his face.

"You did not know I was here?" he asked. His voice was firm, and she wondered if she had deceived herself.

"No," she whispered. "I followed Judas here from the governor's. He seemed ill, on the verge of collapse. Has he not come home?"

"He did collapse," said Barabbas. "But now he is sleeping like a child." As he spoke he glanced down sideways at the floor.

Following the movement of his head, Jerith saw, beyond the light of the lamp, the figure of Judas stretched out on a mattress by the wall. He was lying on his side. His face was turned away.

She ran and knelt and touched his forehead timidly with the tips of her fingers. It was icy cold.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously. "He has no fever."

"About an hour ago he came home," said Barabbas. "I was in the room above. I have been in hiding here several days. Suddenly I heard him shouting, but when I ran down he snatched my sword from me and drove the man who had angered him out of the door. Then he fell down, groaning, and later fell into a deep sleep. Since then he has been quiet."

Jerith got up from her knees and sank on a bench, trembling.

"He looked starved," she said. "I know he has been in the wilds with Jesus and the Galileans. No doubt they have been living on roots and locusts."

"He has been fasting," said Barabbas. "When he fasts he has visions, and he has come to live on visions."

"Poor Judas," sighed Jerith. She had been staring at the slow rise and fall of the sick man's shoulders, her heart filled with pity, but suddenly she leaned her head back and sent an anxious upward glance into the darkness. The grave, bearded face, so tenderly remembered, seemed unbelievably high above her and almost lost in the gloom under the ceiling.

"But you!" she cried, softly. "Why are you here? Are you in danger?"

She saw him moisten his lips. "No," said Barabbas, holding himself erect as though he welcomed the mask of shadows flickering across his face. "But I dare not show myself. I came here for weapons."

He paused, and added, as though eager that she should accept him as a man whose fate compelled him to violence: "I shall have need of them soon. I had planned to attack Machaerus before this, but now we shall wait until the new moon. At that time Antipas is giving a great feast in the fortress. We shall catch him in his cups."

It astonished her that she did not cringe with dread. There had been nights, since she had heard of the battle of the gorge, when she had been awakened by visions of him striding through fire. But in his presence his defiance seemed to issue from him as his very breath, and she felt that foolhardiness would be in the heart of a man who tried to withstand him.

Her shoulders shook.

"You shudder at bloodshed," he murmured, bending forward on one knee so that his face was close to hers.

"Not as I did when I first saw you," she said, and her voice sounded strange, even to herself.

"I have changed?" he asked, unbelievably.

"Or I," she said. "This time I do not feel afraid."

"You were afraid before? Of what?"

"Of your fierceness."

He sank down and stretched himself at her feet, and his upward-tilted face was as she had long remembered it. And his silent gazing was the same.

"Have you ever thought of our garden?" she asked at last. "I have not been there since the summer. We have moved to Arimathea."

"I remember every leaf on every tree," he murmured, his voice suddenly unsteady.

"Is that all you remember?... Do you remember nothing else?" she said demanding.

"I remember you ... you!" he burst out. "What more can I say? You and the night are joined in quietness in my soul. I ran away because I knew it was the night; only that one night. There could never be another like it. That was what I was afraid of."

"Why were you afraid?"

"I was afraid of the dawn after such a night. In all my life I had never wanted anything on earth as then I wanted you. And I began to wonder, I began to persuade myself that for that one night, if there had been no dawn to come, you, too, Jerith, perhaps ..."

He suddenly raised himself on one knee and crushed her clasped hands in his, whispering with urgency: "Was it like that ... for you?"

"Yes," said Jerith.

"And since?" he begged.

"Ever since."

She felt his arms sweeping her against him, and his face bent over hers, but immediately the same thought came to both. They leaned forward to glance at Judas. He lay toward the wall and was breathing slowly and quietly.

Then they turned and read in each other's eyes, as in an unrolled scroll, the secret of a wasted year.

There was a sound at the door, and then a knock.

"It must be Quartus," whispered Jerith, springing up. "Keep out of sight, Jeshua. I will go."

Barabbas lifted a curtain which shut off the half of the room where Judas's bowls and vials and crumbling herbs lay neglected. He stooped his head and stood beyond the curtain in the darkness. He heard Jerith speaking in a hushed tone at the door, then heard the creak as she closed it, and he stepped out.

"He is waiting with the litter," she said, breathlessly. "He thought some harm had come to me. I must go."

Her glance wandered across the room to where Judas was lying.

"I will send tomorrow to see how he is," she said. "We must get him to come to Arimathea ... where we can care for him."

After a pause, she added: "Will you be here tomorrow?"

"I leave at nightfall." His tongue was dry as though shrivelled in his mouth.

She lifted her face and whispered:

"Go with God, Jeshua." The words came from her lips in a breath of blessing.

There was a knock at the door more insistent than the first and Jerith broke away with a sob, leaving Barabbas in the gloom.

On that same night Herod Antipas entered the fortress of Machaerus. With him were Herodias, his wife, and Salome, his wife's daughter. The entire household of menservants and maidservants from Galilee rode in the company, with Chuza, the chief steward, at the head of the long caravan. A troop of Gauls surrounded the camel which carried the ruler of Perea and Galilee. Mounted archers protected the long train of asses bearing the royal vessels of gold and silver, baskets laden with food and fruit, and wine enough for a great feast on the new moon of the month Shebat, which was the king's birthday.

Machaerus had been built as a stronghold against the Arabs, but with all the splendour of a palace. The enormous turreted mass of stone was perched among the barren mountains of Abarim. From its towers could be seen the whole long oval of the Dead Sea, its shores edged with the whitish scum of salt marshes which lay like spittle on the stagnant evil-smelling water. Eastward it was less than a day's journey to the border of Arabia. In that direction the mountains dwindled, and on a clear day the fringe of the great desert seemed to rise in the air and lose itself in a haze of sand and sky.

The caravan rode into the courtyard a little before sunset. Outriders had been sent ahead to notify Elikah, the governor, and all evening the fortress was noisy with hurrying feet. Orders were shouted down the quiet corridors. Bales of clothing and bedding were carried up into the towers and down again and round about. It took hours to get the household settled and ready for the guests.

Antipas, whose legs had to be stretched and rubbed with oils after the long journey, kept the big-bellied governor standing while Nashash and Joheleth worked over him. Elikah rolled his weight from one numbed heel to the other as he answered the tetrarch's anxious questions about the Arab tribes and the reports that many were joining the robber, Barabbas, in the caves and passes of Mount Nebo.

Elikah was at last dismissed, and at the end of a long day of turmoil his first thought was for food and wine. He was almost tottering when he reached the bedchamber occupied by Chuza. The chief steward was already dozing on a most luxurious mattress, brought from Galilee; so soft that his curled-up body had sunk almost out of sight. He had taken care that his glossy pointed beard was free of the covers.

"O Son-of-All-That-Shines!" Elikah bellowed, with a bow of mock servility. "I will have somebody's head for this!"

"For what?" muttered Chuza sleepily.

"For allowing your honour to go to bed hungry," growled Elikah. He was eager for talk with the chief steward, and was clumsily trying not to show it.

"Hungry?" exclaimed Chuza, opening one eye. "My belly is too weary to rumble. And if it did rumble, my body is too weary to carry my paunch to the table."

"Ah, how we differ! My paunch is too empty to carry my body to bed."

"Yes," jeered Chuza. "We differ greatly. Your paunch has far greater emptiness than mine."

Elikah made a loud smacking sound with his lips. "I have a dish put aside below that would tempt the leanest paunch in Perea," he said.

"My friend, I would rather sleep," groaned Chuza.

"Is that possible?"

"It is more than possible. It is unavoidable."

"How we differ!"

"Leave me in peace, Elikah. From tomorrow until the night of the new moon I must think of nothing but food ... mountains of it. Do you know how many guests we shall have?"

"The Son-of-Nothing tells me little," muttered Elikah.

"Then your head matches your belly. You have a void above and below. Be gone and fill yourself, my friend."

"You scorn a dish made freshly only today by the hands of Hushim?"

Chuza opened his other eye. "Who is Hushim?" he asked.

"Have you forgotten Hushim ... my concubine?"

"Ek, a concubine! You?"

"Why should I not have a concubine?"

"Now I remember. This Hushim is your baker."

"Yes."

"The woman with a nose like half a moon."

"Her nose is curved, your honour."

"And one eye stares at the nose continually."

"Doubtless."

"And her bosom is like the twin hills of Ramathaim."

"She is not lean, assuredly."

"But she can bake."

Elikah drew in a sucking breath. "Her baking is beyond any in the province of Perea."

Chuza closed his eyes. "I will go to sleep and dream of her," he muttered, wearily.

"Ah, you would not sleep, my son, if you had but one smell of the dish she has baked herself today only for me."

"What is it?"

"A baked dish of eels."

"Eels do not tempt me, my friend."

"Doubtless you have never seen such eels as these."

"Why? What sort of eels are they?"

"Salt-water eels."

"What? From the Dead Sea?"

"Holy Abraham! No, no, no!"

"Well, I have eaten fresh-water eels from the Sea of Galilee, and they do not tempt me."

"Ah, but these are salt-water eels from Joppa, from the Great Sea. And when Hushim bakes them!..."

"I thought eels were stewed in a broth."

"A common dish," protested Elikah, his swollen nose wrinkling with disdain. "No, no! Hushim bakes them with a golden crust of pastry. First, she skins and cleans the eels, and cuts them into pieces. Then she puts the heads and tails and fins in a pot and makes a broth. And while the broth simmers on the fire, she takes the tenth part of an ephah of fine flour and kneads it into a dough. Then she lays the eels in the dough and seasons them with salt and cloves and bay leaves, and covers them with more of the dough, and bakes them until the dough is the colour of the moon at the grape harvest. And when it is baked she makes a hole in the top of the crust and pours in the hot broth through a hollow reed, and there you

have a dish, fit for greater kings than His Nothingness upstairs. Fit for Caesar himself, if the palsied old bastard could lift a spoon."

"Let us go," grumbled Chuza, suddenly rolling from his bed. "You have watered my mouth."

Elikah hastily waddled off to prepare a spread for the two of them, leaving the steward to clothe and purify himself before eating.

The cold baked dish of eels, washed down with precious Cyprus wine, kept the steward and the governor too busy to talk until they began slapping their paunches with a feeling of repletion.

At last, after a prolonged gurgle in his throat, Elikah leaned forward unsteadily and asked: "Can you tell me why the Son-of-Nobody has come to my fortress for his birthday feast?"

"He keeps his own counsel," said Chuza, his little eyes drawing together secretively, "but after long years I can read his heart like an unrolled parchment."

"You do not surprise me," said Elikah. "If he had made this journey without your knowledge, sage of the bedchamber, it would have raised the hair on my head."

"I said nothing of knowledge, Elikah."

"Doubtless, Chuza."

"Doubtless! What does that mean?"

"It means 'without doubt,' my son."

"Then you have no doubt as to why he has come?"

"Let us drown all doubts," said Elikah, raising his cup.

"I have no doubts. On the other hand, I say nothing of knowledge."

"But you can guess," urged Elikah.

"And so can you."

Elikah raked his beard with his horny black nails and ventured: "He has come to my fortress to ... to escape his new wife."

"But he brought her with him."

"True," admitted Elikah, wagging his head tipsily. "But perhaps he hoped she would stay in Galilee."

"He did."

"Then I guess well."

Chuza nodded, to conceal the contempt in his eyes.

"Shall I guess again?" leered Elikah.

"Do so. Certainly."

"He came to my fortress because ... because he has two-score concubines here."

"But his wife is with him."

"Yes, but perhaps he hoped that she would not come."

"You said that before."

"Doubtless. And I adhere to it."

"Guess again. That will be three, and a three is lucky."

"This time I will leave out his wife."

"Very well."

Elikah played with the huge onyx on his forefinger, holding it up to the light and rolling his eyes at it.

"He came to my fortress ... so that he need not ask the governor, Pilate, to his feast."

"An excellent guess," mocked Chuza, "except that he never does invite the governor to his feasts."

"So I am wrong again?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, then, O sage of the bedchamber, who reads the hearts of the mighty, why has he come to my fortress?"

"I will guess only once, my friend," said Chuza.

Elikah bowed stupidly and raised his goblet, spilling wine over his wide belt which was sewn with beads in intricate patterns.

"My guess," said Chuza, "is that he has come here so that on his birthday, in accordance with the custom his father learned from the Romans ... he will release a certain prisoner ... as a sign of his clemency."

"One of my prisoners?"

"Yes."

"Any prisoner?"

"A certain prisoner."

"Are you thinking of the prophet they call 'the Baptist'?"

"The same."

"What makes you think he will release him?"

"He has been making many enquiries about him."

"From whom?"

"From everybody," said Chuza.

"Is that all?"

"No. There is another sign. When he began to prepare to come here, he commanded me to discover when the ships sail from Joppa to Cyprus. He wanted to know how soon there would be a ship leaving for Cyprus after the new moon of Shebat."

"What? Is he going to Cyprus?"

"No."

"Then why does he enquire about the ships?"

"Because I think he intends offering 'the Baptist' a safe escape to Cyprus, if he will leave the country."

Elikah stared across the table, but his eyes swam so that he could not control them. "As God lives, Chuza, you outshine everything," he roared at the ceiling.

"You think I am right?"

"Doubtless."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because he told me all this himself an hour ago, and moreover, my son, I am to have an escort ready on the night of the feast, to accompany 'the Baptist' to the coast."

"By Herod's worms!" burst out Chuza, jumping up and knocking over his goblet. "You knew all about it?"

"Yes, my son."

"Then, why ... why?..." cried the discomfited steward, spreading wide his hands.

"How was I to know what *he* had told *you*?" said Elikah, draining the last dregs from his cup.

Chuza staggered to the doorway.

"I am asleep on my feet," he said, yawning.

"But you have enjoyed the eels?" asked Elikah, propping himself up on his hands and slowly raising his huge bulk until he was upright.

"Ek, yes. A delightful dish," said Chuza.

Two days before the new moon, under a threatening sky, Joseph set out from Jerusalem alone, on the best of the few horses left in his stable. His face was toward Jordan, and by noon he had reached Jericho. After resting his horse he forded the river, and before nightfall the village of Beth-Jeshimoth came in sight on the rise of land eastward from the Dead Sea. There he put up at an inn, and early the next morning was in the saddle again, keeping to the shore until he came to a fork in the road. Turning off in an easterly direction, away from Machaerus, he soon found himself in the foothills of Mount Nebo. He had stopped at Bethabara on his way and had learned from Sheth, John's disciple, how to discover Barabbas's mountain retreat.

During the morning he rested his horse after each steep ascent, coming at last in mid-afternoon to a spot where a spring tumbled down in a double waterfall.

While his horse drank from the foaming water in the gully beside the road, Joseph glanced around him at the steep sides of the mountain, ridged with shelving ledges at irregular levels. On many of these levels were caves which had been the habitations of robbers and lepers in ancient times.

The road was itself one of these ledges. On one hand was the sheer mountain side, with the waterfall splashing down. On the other was a precipice. Nothing obstructed the view in that direction. Across the valley, which went down sharply almost at his feet, Joseph could see the plateau of Abarim rising from the chalky limestone hills.

Every way he looked there were mountains, and between them, far below, he could see the white winding ribbon of road that led to Machaerus. It disappeared behind an enormous shoulder of rock and reappeared at the level of the plateau. The last strip of it was lost behind three jagged peaks, their edges veiled in a cloud of mist. In clear weather the towers of the fortress could be seen on the highest of the crests; but the sky had been overcast all day. The season of great rains had not yet passed. Low heavy clouds rolled over the mountain tops, threatening thunder.

Joseph turned away from the magnificence of soaring granite and recalled what Sheth had told him: "Take a stone as big as a man's head and cast it down the cliff. That will bring the outpost."

He found a large stone in the gully and carried it in both hands across the road. Lifting it high, he threw it out over the edge of the precipice. The clatter of its fall reverberated all around him.

Joseph's mount, startled by the noise, reared up on its haunches and spun around with its front legs pawing. The prince grasped the bridle, and by the time he had the horse calmed, there were sounds on the road. In a few moments Margaloth with three other horsemen came in sight around a sharp bend.

The Nabatean, who sat his horse like a *sheykh*, pulled up, and gave Joseph a swift glance from under the hedge of black hairs which met between his brows.

"Sir," he said, suspiciously, "do we find you in trouble?"

"My horse took fright," said Joseph.

"Ah," said Margaloth, "he shied at the noise of the waterfall."

"What makes you think so?"

"We heard stones rolling over the precipice."

"One stone, friend."

"A noisy stone, then."

"It was meant to be."

"You kicked it over yourself."

"It was too big for that. I threw it over."

"To hear what noise it would make?"

"No. I was hoping someone other than myself would hear it."

Margaloth bowed. "Sir, we have heard it," he said.

Joseph said: "I have come from Jerusalem to speak with a man I once met, named Jeshua, called by some, Barabbas."

"Does he expect you?"

"No."

Margaloth grunted, his brows lowering again, and his shoulders resuming their rigid straightness.

"If you will take my name to him," said the prince, "I think he will give me an audience. He will remember me. I am called Joseph of Arimathea."

"Your highness is alone?" the Nabatean asked in surprise.

"As you see."

"It is unusual for a prince to travel unattended."

"Why do you call me a prince?"

"My master has spoken of your highness."

"Tell your master I have come alone to see him."

Margaloth inclined his wide shoulders, then spoke in a low tone to the horseman next behind him, who immediately set off at a canter down the incline the prince had climbed. "To make sure I am unaccompanied," thought Joseph.

Then Margaloth spoke to the next man, and he, breaking at once into a gallop, returned the way he had come. "To warn the camp," Joseph said to himself.

The third horseman took up a position behind the prince, who by this time had mounted. Margaloth rode ahead.

Soon they came to the crevasse which led upward to the hidden headquarters of Barabbas.

Joseph's first glance told him that the "man of the earth" had changed. He had become a captain of men. The fiery rebel had learned discipline. In the eyes which Joseph had seen blazing with wild dreams of revolt there was now the steely gleam of a commander who had forged his will into an instrument as straight as an arrow. Pity had vanished from his face. The set of his lips under the thickening black beard bore witness to a nurtured hate.

"It was folly to come," Joseph thought, immediately.

Barabbas had met him in the curtained opening of his cave, wearing a heavy striped caftan belted with a scarf in which a dagger rested, the naked blade gleaming.

"Peace be with you," Joseph said, without thinking.

"We have prayed for peace and talked of peace long enough, prince," said Barabbas, with an unsmiling glance. "Here we talk of war. After the war ..."

He left the sentence unfinished. Joseph had raised his hand at the word 'prince', and Barabbas, understanding the gesture, opened his arms and said, quickly, and with a warmth of remembrance in his tone: "Your name is Joseph. You are a man. Now we can embrace."

Joseph felt the sinewy pressure of powerful arms holding him close. The two men saluted each other in the customary fashion between equals on both cheeks.

When they moved apart, Joseph said: "We have taken the 'one step' you talked of, Jeshua. We are with you on the same path."

Barabbas half turned away and at the same time gestured toward a couch near the flaming brazier.

As he settled himself, Joseph watched the rapid flicker of conflicting moods pursuing one another in Barabbas's eyes. Nowhere in any land had he come across a face that could be at once so guileless and so fierce.

With the heel of his sandal Barabbas drew a spotted panther skin close to the fire and sank down on it, hunching his knees.

"Have you news of Judas?" he asked.

"Yes, he is better," said Joseph. "I went to his house that night you left, when I learned from Jerith what had happened. I hoped to find you there, but you had gone. His mother was with him. He was eating and drinking a little, much refreshed by his long sleep. The next day we took him with us to Arimathea, and he is still there. He is regaining his strength. His collapse frightened him. He is afraid he might have another that would kill him, and he wants desperately to live until the Passover. You have talked to him. You know what he expects."

"Yes," said Barabbas, gravely. "It has turned his mind."

"I am afraid it has, although at times he seems to forget it. It gladdens him to see some of his old neighbours from the ugly depths of the city working on the land. He is abroad among them every day, and there is so much to be done that he forgets himself and his visions."

"This is a noble thing you have done, Joseph."

"It was you who showed us the first step," said Joseph, warmly. "From the moment we took that step we have been happy. All we wish, now, is that you could be with us, keeping us company on the way, for now that we have started we can see what a change it works in the wretched. Many of them are so sodden in misery that they are loath to leave their filthy homes, and at first some of them do not find the earth friendly. They do not 'embrace the earth', Jeshua, as you did. But slowly the sun warms them, and the winds refresh them, and in the long quiet nights they learn to rest without care. It heartens us to see the change in them, but when I go back to the city to seek out others who are living like vermin in those vile alleys, I wish that you were with me, Jeshua. You could fire them with eagerness for the open. You could cheer them on the journey, and in the first few days, when all seems strange to them, you could make them feel that the earth is their natural home. We need your voice and your spirit. For they are not angels, these destitute wretches. There is discontent among them. And though our aim is that they should share alike, there are many who are envious. You could make them see the blessedness of equity."

Even as he was speaking, Joseph began to lose heart. He had raised himself on the couch, and words rushed from his lips. The leadership he was striving to picture sounded dull and trivial even in his own ears when he measured it against the passionate deeds of an outlaw who had chosen a life of violent rebellion. Nevertheless, he plunged on, moulding a heroic shape which only the spirit of Barabbas could bring into being.

"Even though it is contentment we seek," he pleaded, "it needs a man of force and fire to arouse these starved souls, to waken in them a hunger for more than bread and sleep. I cannot lead them. They listen to me, but they smile when I turn my back. They know I was once a prince. I am not one of them. They believe I have lost my wits, or that this is a strange pleasure that I delight in. It needs a man of the people to convince them that there can be a new vision and a new way of life, and that the portioning out of our estate is only a beginning. You could make Arimathea a community that would become a pattern and a revelation, so that princes and men of riches in other parts would hear of the happiness their land might bring to thousands who live in misery. I can see the vision spreading, and the fulfilment. It is the path you pointed out to us. Join us and lead us. Return with me and become our shepherd."

Barabbas had not moved during this long pleading. His glance had been fixed on the reddening coals in the brazier. Now he lifted his head.

"First, I will say this," he murmured, as though still half lost in thought. "Never in my life until now have I met a man I could regard as a brother. If I were not as I am, I would rejoice to join you. I am as I have made myself, and as others have made me. I am a fugitive. An outlaw. There is a price on my head. Even if I would, I could not return with you and show myself openly in Arimathea."

Joseph's tongue leapt in his mouth. "I have thought of that," he said, quickly. "I have much influence with Antipas, and

Herodias is my cousin. I have been invited to a feast at the fortress on the occasion of the tetrarch's birthday. I have come a day earlier than I needed, so that I could get your answer. If I go to them, now, and tell them that you will disband your forces and return with me to Arimathea to engage in a work of peace, I believe I can persuade Antipas to grant you a reprieve."

A smile at Joseph's eagerness shone for a moment in Barabbas's eyes, but a sudden frowning cloud extinguished it. "He will not grant it," he declared. "And even if he did, I would not trust him. Moreover, you have divided your possessions, but what other prince would willingly renounce his riches. Enough, Joseph! My plan is bloodier and broader. A few heads will fall, but the sooner they fall the sooner will the sufferings of the many be ended. Antipas must die. He has no sons. The hated dynasty of the Herods will perish with him. Then the rule of the people can begin, under the guardianship of Rome. And I swear to you that the oppressed will not wait for this longer than the next Passover."

Joseph stared at him in amazement. "The next Passover!" he echoed.

"You are thinking of Judas and his visions, and the prophecies of soothsayers," Barabbas scoffed. "But I do not prophesy. I speak of the Passover because then Jerusalem and its surrounding hills will be thronged with pilgrims from the outermost corners of our land, and even from beyond our borders. You would know better than I the size of that host."

"I have heard it said that they number more than two millions."

"Two millions or more!" cried Barabbas, exultingly. "It is then that I shall appear, on the first day of the feast, and the multitude will acclaim me for ridding them of Antipas. The people will not want another king. They asked Rome to save them from kings when Herod died, and again when Archelaus was banished. I shall enter the city with an army that will more than match the Roman garrison, and when Pilate sees my forces, and learns that I speak for the great mass of our people, he will listen to me. I will gather together the head men of many villages and go to Pilate and say to him: 'Convey to Rome the will of this people to rule themselves, with no overlords save the Caesars, who have been our benefactors and have saved us from the over-running of our enemies.' He will see our might. He will not dare another massacre. He will not refuse. But if he refuses, we will take ship to Rome ourselves."

Barabbas's eyes, which had been alight with the audacity of his plot, now fastened with deepening gravity on Joseph's attentive face. "I had hoped, Joseph, that I could persuade you to become our ambassador. You know the Romans. You are acquainted with the emperor. No man could better plead our cause. But you would never countenance a revolution brought about by violence."

Joseph nodded sorrowfully. "If you become the murderer of Antipas, Jeshua, I cannot speak for you or for a cause that has its beginnings in blood."

"Yet you will go to this feast," Barabbas cried, "and sit at the table with Antipas and countenance his crimes and forget the seas of blood the Herods have spilled."

"I have come to attend this feast, hoping I could ask for clemency for you, and also to plead with Antipas for the release of John of Jordan."

"You need not go for my sake, or for John's," said Barabbas, with a flash of his old stubbornness. "Antipas has determined to release John already."

"What? It has come to your ears?"

"I have spies in the fortress."

Joseph stretched out his hand appealingly. "Does this not show that he never meant harm to John, and that he put him in prison to protect him, as he promised?"

"I do not trust him."

"But if he releases him at this feast, as I am told secretly he intends to do, will you not then abandon your attack on Machaerus?"

"He is planning to send John out of the country, either willingly or by force, under escort to Cyprus. In a far country he could die of poison, seemingly beyond the reach of Antipas, and seemingly of a natural cause. No! I shall intercept the

escort and take John under my protection. I know their plans. On the first night of the feast the escort is to be ready so that the moment Antipas announces his amnesty they will ride away. He is afraid of another attempt on John's life. Fifty of his best horsemen have been chosen and their captain named. They will come this way, intending to ford the Jordan above Beth-Jeshimoth, and then take the highway to Joppa. But I shall have two hundred men at the fork in the road below us. We shall overwhelm the escort and take John from them."

"It means nothing to you that Antipas is sending him out of reach of further attempts on his life?"

"I will see to it that his life is not threatened again."

"And even if you have him safe in your hands, you will still attack the fortress which is well nigh impregnable?"

"I shall," Barabbas declared, more sternly than ever. "And I warn you to leave the fortress on the second day of the feast, for on the third day, when they are all drunken and worn out with feasting, we shall attack, two hours before dawn."

Joseph rose from the couch wearily. "Are you not afraid I shall warn Antipas?" he said, with no hint of threat in his voice.

"No," said Barabbas, looking with severe challenge into Joseph's eyes. "You hate bloodshed. But you are on my side. You know that the Herods have been usurpers from the beginning, and that the people hate them with good cause. The Herods have been tried and condemned in the hearts of the people, and when I strike it will be as their executioner. When Antipas is gone, the rejoicing of the nation will reach you, even in your peaceful retreat. And I shall come to you, then, and ask you again to become our ambassador to Rome."

Joseph shook his head despondently and took two paces away from the fire. "If I am to reach Machaerus before dark, I must go," he said, "God heal your blindness, Jeshua, or I shall never look on your face again."

He heard the scrape of the other's sandal on the stone floor and turned. The fading glow of the brazier lighted the unscarred side of Barabbas's face, and for a moment Joseph's eyes rested on the splendid head and he thought of the great warriors and leaders of ancient Israel. Barabbas stood erect before him, and his height under the low roof of the cave seemed overpowering.

Glancing up into his eyes, Joseph said, dejectedly: "Then I must say to my sister that I have failed."

"Yes, Joseph," nodded Barabbas. "And tell her that I shall not!"

PART V

There had been a few false spring days, but on the night before the new moon of Shebat the road was white with fresh snow as Joseph rode up the last steep rise to Machaerus. He had never visited the fortress before, and as he approached it in the gloomy twilight his heart sank at the thought of Barabbas's folly. The black basalt walls projected in a half circle out of a sheer cliff, like an enormous cauldron, and four great towers, rising to a height which rivalled the peak of the mountain itself, gave the grim mass of masonry the appearance of a prison.

The severity outside made the magnificence within all the more astonishing. Pillars which startled the eyes by their height and thickness, supported the seven domes of the colossal inner hall. The banqueting chamber, columned like a temple, was ornamented with mosaics and strange tropical trees growing in vessels of stone that resembled crawling monsters of the sea. Beyond this was a courtyard with fountains and groups of statuary brought from a ruined garden in Athens, and opposite, under tiers of galleries, one wing of the palace was furnished as a library containing thousands of rolls of ancient writings.

It was to this long room that Joseph was summoned when he had refreshed himself after his journey. Herod Antipas was dictating to a scribe, and beside him sat a bald, undersized man, Nicolaus of Damascus, a famous Greek historian and philosopher. Antipas was the third Herod in succession to become his patron, and under his influence had turned from barbarous pursuits to writing the history of the Herodian dynasty.

When Joseph saw the two men together it entered his mind at once that the Sage of Damascus had urged the release of John as a gesture of royal clemency.

Antipas himself seemed to confirm this conjecture, for he began telling Nicolaus that the prince had been the first to know of his fears for John's safety, and had gone across Jordan with his offer of protection. The tetrarch then hinted that attempts had been made on John's life even in prison, and that he contemplated a further safeguard which could not yet be revealed.

"You will hear of it tonight during the feast," said Antipas, glancing with secretive meaning at Nicolaus, whose severe, noble face softened for a moment as he broke off his deep musing to listen.

"Now you will want to see Herodias," the tetrarch added in a tone of dismissal, his brow wrinkling as he turned to the scribe. "It may surprise her that you have come. She is greatly disturbed by the news she has had of you. I am astonished myself. But we can talk of that again."

Puzzled lines appeared around his eyes and he thrust his fingers upward into the fringe of coarse hair which grew low over his forehead. "She was asking earlier if you had arrived. What was it she said? My thoughts were on my history. It was to do with marriage. Are you thinking of marriage, Joseph? No? You are wise. No, I have it confused. She must have been speaking of another of her cousins. They are legion. I, alone of the Herods, have not cumbered the earth with progeny."

He flicked his hand before his face, as though impatient of his thoughts, and Joseph withdrew.

Chuza conducted him to an upper floor of one of the towers, and there he was ushered by a waiting-woman into the presence of Herodias.

A comely Syrian girl, kneeling beside a tray of dye-pots, was painting the queen's finger-nails a deep violet. Seated with his back to the wall under a narrow niche of a window was an Egyptian flute player. A succession of sweet bird-like notes came from his reed.

Herodias dismissed them both, offered Joseph a goblet of iced wine, and settled herself for talk, reclining in Roman fashion.

She was large-limbed, with strong features, like her grandfather Herod, but her enigmatic eyes were wholly feminine and the pallor of her skin, excessively white with a blue tracery of tiny veins, gave her shoulders and bosom an unnatural but tempting allure. She looked bloodless, as though tinged with the blue taint of death, and yet in the movements of her limbs and the frequent widening of her eyelids there was the spirit and stealth of a pouncing animal. Her outer garment floated over a sheath-tight stola of scarlet and gold, the colours rippling and changing with every shift of her body.

Joseph noticed at once the familiar hair-ornament she constantly wore. It was said to be a tiny dagger, but all that could be seen was the hilt, fashioned like a pineapple and encrusted with gems.

When her greetings and enquiries about Jerith had come to an end, she crossed her outstretched legs languorously and said with a note of sharp derision in her tone: "Of all our cousins I least expected that you would become dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Joseph echoed, noting the amber gleam which sometimes seemed to gloss the treacherous depths of her eyes.

"What has happened to you?" asked Herodias, her scornful glance roving over him as though she sought under his garments for some source of unsuspected strength. "You, the proudest one, who spurned the company of all but the most learned, who held your nose high, scorning all common frailties, what has brought you to this pass? How have you come to humble yourself and cast aside your riches and your birthright?"

"The answer is simple, cousin," said Joseph. "My heart has been changed by the words of two men."

"Words! I might have known. You! You who never unwrapped anything more enticing than a manuscript!"

"Ah, but these were not words written in books," answered Joseph, ignoring the sneer. "And the two men who uttered them are as unlike as a dove differs from an eagle. The voice of one comes like a breath of evening calm; the words of the other stab like javelins."

Herodias made a little hissing sound of surprise through closed lips. "You speak plainly, prince. It is easy to read behind your similitudes the names of the two men."

"Read them, cousin."

"The one you liken to a dove is the Prophet of Galilee. The one whose words wound is the croaking Baptist of Jordan."

"You are right as to the first, but I was not thinking of the second."

Herodias pursed up her painted mouth. "The second, then, is perchance Barabbas."

"Perchance, cousin."

"The robber who calls himself 'The Leveller'. Is that the man?"

"There is such a man, and he speaks of levelling."

"And you brought him once to Antipas, and spoke for him, saying he was a kinsman of John of Jordan," said Herodias, accusingly.

"That is not wholly true, but let it pass. I know the man. I deplore his acts, but his words have changed me."

"Do you deny that you have taken sides with these rebels ... you, a councillor and a prince, whose voice should be raised against such preachers of destruction?"

Joseph raised one knee and clasped it loosely, but his lips tightened in a taut line. "I did not come from Jerusalem to defend myself, your majesty," he said, with quiet defiance.

"Then why have you come, highness?" pounced Herodias, giving him his title mockingly, as he had used hers.

"I was invited."

"But you could have refused. You have stayed away from our feasts before this."

"I had never seen Machaerus. I was eager to see it."

"And even more eager to see the prisoner we hold here, I imagine. One of the squealing trouble-makers whose cause you have joined."

Joseph dropped his knee, and his sandal rang on the tessellated floor. "You astonish me," he said. "I can understand that

you should hold enmity against John, who has spoken evil against you. But you speak of a cause, and of rebellion, and destruction. Yet since I have known you, you have always been such a woman."

"Such a woman!" Herodias exclaimed. "What does that mean?"

"A woman ... a womanly woman."

"With all of women's frailties; is that your meaning?"

"With all of women's capacities, I should have said," Joseph answered, skilfully. "But now you are concerned about causes and calamities. Your ears are alert to rumblings. You seem to have smelled out conspiracy where there is none."

Herodias leaned toward him and spoke in a deep tone that was almost masculine. "Did you ever see my grandfather?"

"No," he said.

"They say I am like him ... as near as a woman can be like a man."

"I have been told you resemble him."

"They say I am more like the old fornicator than his own son, whom I have married," said Herodias, contemptuously.

Joseph lifted and sipped his wine.

"I have answered you," she said, when he did not speak. "You ask me why I have forsaken my womanhood. It is because I am more of a Herod than my impotent husband. He seeks the command of words, not armies. He is playing with soldiers, but dead soldiers ... telling over his father's battles, instead of waging wars of his own. He wanders far into the past with puny old Nicolaus. His eyes are closed to the present. He sees no danger. You yourself pretend not to see it. And Pilate, a governor who can scarcely ride a horse, is he a governor?... he cares for nothing but the stones of his aqueduct. But I hear the rumblings, as you call them. I have Herod's ears, sharp for evil. I have his eyes, watchful for danger. And now that you have joined the three most dangerous men in our kingdom—now that you have thrown aside a principedom to take up their cause ... now, indeed, the Herod in me wakes and sniffs the air for blood."

Joseph laughed. "Look at me, Herodias," he demanded. "Have you ever thought of me as a bloodthirsty man?"

"You are one of them. You may not see whither this will lead, but I can. And while Antipas amuses himself with Nicolaus, I shall end the threat of these three men to our throne. Annas and Caiaphas, during the Passover, will beguile the Galilean into blasphemy and have him executed. Barabbas will fall into our hands. We shall not fight him. But after the feast we shall surround Mount Nebo and starve him into surrender. And John ..."

"John will be banished," said Joseph, searchingly, when she paused.

"Ah, you have been in the fortress an hour and you have heard already."

"Is it not true?"

Herodias said in her deepest, ugliest tone: "He will not live to see a ship!"

A cold wave of horror swept over Joseph. He could not sit still. Striding to the window, he looked out into the darkness, for the night had fallen. Far away, under the stars, he could discern the fringe of the desert, whitened with snow. He calmed himself, and when he turned there was a smile of defiance in his eyes.

"And I ... the fourth," he demanded. "Shall I be smothered in my bed?"

"I have never been tempted to join you in bed," said Herodias, with an evil laugh. "You have always seemed too chaste to suit me, cousin, and never dangerous. Until now you have been a follower, not a leader. Whom have you not followed? In Rome you pursued the Greeks and their sophistries. Were you not in Athens for a time? And then you sailed to Egypt and sat at Philo's feet. Next, I heard you were joining the Essenes. And now it is the Galileans. It is high time that you found root, cousin."

"I have found roots at last, Herodias, real roots in real soil, at Arimathea."

"Another fancy! Another folly!" scoffed the queen. "By the womb of Sarah, do you not see what it is you seek?"

"What is it I seek?"

"You were married less than a year, and you have grieved for your wife beyond all measure. You have no children; no sons. And what is a Jew without a male child? You should marry, cousin. A woman would show you how to root yourself."

"Do not trouble yourself for my sake, Herodias."

"Ah, but I am troubled. They say you have cast aside your rank only that you may be chosen as the people's king."

"I am not a leader," smiled Joseph, remindingly, "yet you see in me a threat to your throne."

"You are the greatest threat," said Herodias. "Next to Annas, you are the most influential prince in Jerusalem ... and the whole land. You are a Sadducee, or were, and yet you number many Pharisees among your friends. You come and go in our house and in Pilate's, though he and Antipas are enemies. You are acquainted in Rome. The Jews of Alexandria honour you. If you would give up this folly, I would not oppose you. I would smooth your path to the throne."

"You?"

"You have never liked me, cousin," said Herodias, with bitterness. "And I have never concealed my disappointment in you. But if you will give up this madness of playing with the fires of rebellion ... if you will stand with me and with Antipas, and help us stamp out these fires ... then I will stamp out the rumours and accusations that are being voiced against you in Jerusalem. I can make you unassailable, cousin. I can offer you something that will make you beyond peradventure the first prince of Israel, and the natural successor to a childless king."

"What is your offer?" said Joseph, striving to conceal his contempt.

"I will give you my daughter," said Herodias.

"Salome?" he murmured, and his bewilderment was not feigned.

"Salome," the queen answered, flinging her legs from the divan and leaning forward to grasp his hands.

He stood up, astounded by her offer, and turned away to hide his repugnance. The thought of allying himself with the offspring of an incestuous marriage, a youngster he had seen growing up with all the vicious habits of the Roman court, revolted him so utterly that he could not speak.

"Antipas will not live long," whispered Herodias, rising and standing at his shoulder. "He has Herod's sickness in his blood. He has no child. What is more, he has no manhood. Someone must succeed him. With Salome you would unite again the Maccabean and Herodian houses, and Caesar, who trusts you and knows how you are regarded by the people, can be persuaded to return to you the entire kingdom that Augustus granted Herod the Great."

She pronounced the name with pride, and Joseph saw in her eyes that she had imagined herself as the queen-mother ... the successor of her infamous grandfather.

"I cannot answer you immediately, cousin. These are great issues," he said, with assumed timidity.

"True. You were never impulsive. There is no need for haste."

"And I have not seen Salome in many years."

"You shall see her tonight. Antipas has asked her to dance, and I have consented."

"Dance? A princess!" exclaimed Joseph.

"Have you never seen her dance? She used to even as a child."

"No, I have not seen her dance," said Joseph, watching a smile spread on the queen's face, a smile of evil and ominous triumph which he could not understand.

"An Abyssinian woman taught her," said Herodias, with a lewd wriggle of her hips. "You will see."

Salome, Joseph decided, knew nothing of her mother's proposal to him. When evening came and he entered the banquetting chamber, she greeted him only with a slanting, heedless glance. She was already reclining, chatting with a pale Greek youth, known to be the male favourite of her uncle, Herod Agrippa, who was absent in Rome.

Joseph saw at once that she had grown beyond girlhood. She was still slender, but the swelling of her bosom filled out two jewelled breastplates, fashioned like nests of golden wire. The voluptuous posture of her body was deliberate and gave her the look of a dissolute woman. Her bare shoulders were constantly curving in little crouching movements as she talked, and the writhing gestures of her white arms resembled the thrusting necks of swans. She was never still. When her limbs were quiet her eyes roved among the gathering guests with wanton restlessness.

Joseph, whose rank and relationship demanded that he should bring in the queen, relinquished her arm when they reached their couches, but Herodias pressed his hand under her elbow and held him close.

"I have said nothing yet to Salome," she whispered. "She regards you as a distant uncle, and she is a little weary of uncles. She knows that Antipas was spying on her nakedness before I sent her away, and his brother of Trachonitis has demanded her in marriage since she would not yield to him. My brother, Agrippa, desires her also. He prevented her from falling into young Caligula's clutches at Capri this summer by declaring that he himself had uncovered her at the age of twelve. Caligula believed him; but she is a virgin, Joseph. I swear it, by the womb of Sarah. She puts on the lascivious airs of older women, but I will take an oath that she is a virgin."

Joseph inwardly shuddered as Herodias pressed his hand confidently before sinking down beside the couch reserved for Antipas.

There was a blare of trumpets and the tetrarch came limping in on the arm of Nicolaus, whose gnarled bald head scarcely reached his shoulder. Behind them marched Elikah, his great belly shaking as he walked, and Chuza, whose pointed beard jerked with each pompous step. They took up positions, behind Antipas, who immediately stretched out his aching legs, acknowledging the cries and bows of his guests with a succession of drunken nods. He was already besotted with unwatered wine, and at once he ordered Salome's couch to be drawn nearer to his own. While two slaves were lifting it, Salome bent over him, offering him as a mocking reward a few grapes that remained in her hand. When she saw that he was staring at her bosom, she shook her breasts in a gesture of shameless insolence, and crushed the grapes into his mouth so that the purple juice trickled into his beard.

Only the guests reclining close at hand heard the girl's mocking laughter. Others, in a broad irregular semicircle around the tetrarch's couch, had begun murmuring as a procession of slaves entered, bearing on their heads in glittering salvers a multitude of dishes. First to be served were the small glistening bodies of fish brought in brine from Galilee, spiced with rings of garlic; fish from the Nile, sliced in long fingers; anchovies from Cilicia; rare shell-fish from the Gulf of Persia. Then came steaming platters heaped with the tender flesh of doves, ducks and quails, garnished in three different styles; the native, the Roman, and the Greek, to suit every taste. A course of darker meats followed, the guests exclaiming at the prodigality of the feast as more slaves appeared with haunches of antelope studded with cloves, boars' heads with jewels gleaming from their eye-sockets, morsels of lamb cooked in oil and wrapped in vine leaves, and an enormous pheasant pie, sliced for each person by a slave wielding a knife as long as his arm.

More wine was brought, and then the players on the lute and sabbeka who had been strumming softly, were joined by three Abyssinians with native drums. The three black men squatted under the foliage of one of the tropical trees, which almost concealed them and gave their bodies a greenish shine. They began tapping with their hands on the ends of the hollow drums, and soon all heads were turned as a noise of clanging brass from beyond the outer columns joined in rhythm with the strange hesitant beat. A group of dark Syrian dancers dashed out among the couches, circling and twisting their half-naked bodies in violent contortions. A hubbub of drunken cries resounded against the pillars when many of the guests tried to snatch at the floating garments of the girls as they whirled past.

During this noise and confusion, Joseph saw Herodias turn for the first time to Antipas, whose head swung tipsily to and fro as she whispered to him. The queen, reaching behind her as she talked, gripped her daughter's knee, and Salome, springing from her couch, leaned close; but Joseph caught the girl's muttered demand.

"What will the tetrarch grant me if I dance?"

Antipas, aroused by Salome's voice, seemed to stiffen himself, shaking off his stupor. His eyes cleared, as though something he had forgotten had quickly sobered him. Joseph saw sudden consternation on the queen's face. She leaned close to Antipas and snatched at one of his hands, but with the other he beckoned fiercely to Chuza. Although Herodias continued to whisper frantically within an inch of his ear, he gave the chief steward a command.

Chuza raised his wand of office with a peremptory sweep above his head, and cried out for silence. When the turmoil had dwindled to a murmur, he announced that the tetrarch of Perea and Galilee, on the occasion of his birthday, desired to make a proclamation.

Joseph, who had watched with misgiving the frenzy of Herodias, breathed deeply with relief. More than once he had looked at Antipas, while the feast had dragged on, wondering if the potent wine had caused the king to forget his reason for coming to Machaerus.

But now, with a great effort, Antipas clutched the arm of Chuza and tried to rise. A grimace of pain contorted his face as he put his weight on his legs. They slid from under him. Herodias, jumping up from her couch to help Chuza support him, cried in his ear: "This is not the time, Antipas. First let my daughter dance as you desired. You have taken too much wine. Your speech will fail you. First let Salome dance."

Nodding and groaning with pain and dizziness, the tetrarch fell back on his couch.

Herodias glanced hastily at her daughter, clenching her thin hands in a gesture of command.

"What will the tetrarch grant me if I dance?" Salome brought out in a parrot-like tone, as though she had learned the sentence by heart.

Antipas hauled himself up on one elbow and stared at the unsmiling girl, at first blankly, and then his eyes widened with mounting lust.

"Ask of me whatsoever you desire, my child, and I will grant it."

Joseph could not shake off the feeling that Herodias had bargained with Antipas beforehand, and that her evil magnetism was now swaying his mind, so that although he seemed stupefied and in pain, he was uttering words she had put in his mouth.

Salome's lips parted as though drawn open against her will.

"Will the tetrarch swear it?" she demanded.

Antipas stirred on his couch and sat up. The challenge seemed to waken in him some vestige of majesty.

"I swear to Jove and Jehovah!" he growled, besottedly. "Whatsoever you desire, my child, I will grant you, even to the half of my kingdom."

No one paid much heed to the fuddled oath. Every eye was turned on Salome. At a glance from her mother she bounded away, leaping between the low tables, and disappeared through the pillars.

A prolonged murmur arose as everyone stood up and watched while a space was cleared before the royal couch.

Salome reappeared.

She had stripped off her garments. Around her waist she held a veil of fine-spun wool which mistily revealed the fluent movement of her legs as she ran forward, giving a sign to the squatting black men.

The tom-tom-tom of their drums began again, but with a delayed, languorous, tantalizing beat.

Muffled ejaculations came from every corner of the chamber. Joseph felt an uneasy shiver ripple down his back. Antipas, his eyes rolling, feverishly thrust cushions behind him to hold himself upright in a sitting position. Herodias had returned to her couch and was gulping down a long draught of wine.

Salome brought her feet to rest and whipped the veil about her loins, clasping it with a jewelled clip which she snatched from her hair, so that she was naked from her hips upward. In her navel she had fastened with wax a sparkling amethyst,

glinting with violet fire. The shining stone drew all eyes to her girlish belly, writhing now in rhythm with the drums, while her head, moving as though her neck lacked joints, swayed from side to side like a bird gesturing to its mate. Her arms began curving, flowing down her hips with cupped hands turned inward, then rising and twisting over her breasts in caressing patterns of movement.

Now she began to turn on her toes and her shoulders seemed to revolve in her back as her elbows worked outward, one rising while the other carved a sinuous downward path through the air. Under the gauze of the veil, her thighs rose and recoiled, jerking spasmodically with the inward and outward movement of her buttocks, as she drove her thrusting body forward at a snail's pace, as though held back by dragging invisible hands.

Joseph had never seen such a dance, even at the corrupt court of Capri. It was incredible to him that a woman, even of the lowliest sort, could so coldly mimic the culmination of lust. The black woman who had taught her, he imagined, must have learned these degrading contortions in some savage ritual before an idol of fertility. But there was no savagery in Salome's eyes as the drum-beat quickened and the undulations of her hips grew more repulsively obscene. Joseph saw her glance secretively at her mother, and a sudden surmise gripped him that Herodias was using her daughter's viciousness to wring some outrageous reward from the gasping tetrarch.

Joseph averted his eyes. A premonition of evil drained the blood from his face, while spasms of angry heat shot through him.

At last, by the outburst of murmurs and applause, he knew the dance had ended. When he looked up Salome was standing before Antipas, her little pointed breasts thrust forward shamelessly within his reach. Her eyes were bloodshot, but they gleamed audaciously as she demanded: "Will the tetrarch keep his oath?"

"Even to half of my kingdom," he muttered, thickly.

Salome sent a swift glance at her mother, and said: "Then give to me on a golden dish the head of John, the prophet, who is in your dungeons."

"Ah!" Joseph groaned aloud, and from the crowding circle of guests came exclamations of horror.

Antipas tried to lift himself up, his arm shielding his eyes, as though frightful visions were already burning into his brain. But he sank back again, clasping his trembling head. From between his wrists he hurled a glance of unutterable hatred at Herodias.

"Tigress!" he moaned. "This is your doing."

"Will the tetrarch keep his oath?" pounced Herodias.

"Ask of me whatever you desire, save this," said Antipas, turning his wounded eyes on Salome. "Ask for whatsoever will please a maiden such as you."

He began plucking at his finger, and cried out: "I will give you this jewel, which Caesar himself gave me. It came from the crown of a great prince of the East. I prize it above all my gems. I will have cunning artificers make it into a circlet for your hair. Take it, Salome. Take it!"

He leaned forward with the ring and would have toppled over had not Chuza been quick to seize his shoulders.

"I will have only what I have asked," said Salome, her eyes fixed on her mother as though in a trance. "The head of the prophet, John."

"No, no!" groaned Antipas. "I will give you my two white Arabs, the noblest stallions in the world. Their pedigree goes back to the time of Solomon. Their sires were brought by Sheba's queen for a gift to the son of David. I will have a chariot made of ivory in Damascus ..."

"Give me the prophet's head!"

"No, no, no! I will build you a palace, my child, of white marble from the quarries of Trachonitis. I will set it on a hill ..."

"Give me the head of John!"

Antipas dashed his hands against his face, as though he were about to tear out his eyes. His legs shook and twitched, and he broke into an outburst of groans and choking sobs.

"The tetrarch has given his oath," Herodias flung at him.

Antipas raised his head and glared around him, heedless of the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Who will deliver me from these daughters of Beelzebub?" he bellowed; but no one answered.

Joseph, who had watched all this, numbed by utter revulsion, now groped for Herodias's shoulder and twisted her around to face him. "As God lives, cousin ..." he began, but she wrenched herself free, and cried out: "Beware, Nicolaus!"

The tetrarch had leaned toward his aged tutor and was frenziedly whispering to him. At the queen's warning, Nicolaus dropped his head on his breast in an agony of shame.

Antipas buffeted his forehead with clenched fists, tore at his garments, and suddenly kneeled up on his couch, shouting over the uproar of murmurings: "This prophet has haunted me since he was born! He has risen from the dead already. Can I put him to death again?"

Every voice stopped, and in the silence Antipas cried out in awful anguish of spirit: "By the hair of Esau, this must end! Bring his head, Elikah! Give that woman his head. Do you hear, Elikah? Not the girl. That woman! That wanton! His blood be upon her and her child. Go quickly!"

There was a great stir among the guests. Many women ran in panic to the doors. Others clung shiveringly against their husbands.

Salome caught up a linen cloth from the nearest table, flung it about herself and fled.

Herodias, her hands clenched against her bosom, her nose curling over her lip in a hawklike smile, stood staring with horrible expectancy toward the doorway where Elikah had disappeared.

Joseph was about to make a last plea to her, although his heart was like a cold stone in his breast, but Antipas, who had covered his face with shaking hands, began calling for Chuza. The chief steward quickly circled the couch and stood, his beard quivering, his back bent in a low obeisance.

"Harness my litter, Chuza!" cried the tetrarch. "Let us be gone from this accursed place. Never again will I spend one night, one hour, within these walls. My litter, quickly!"

As the steward hastened away, Antipas dropped his head on the knees of Nicolaus and burst into a fit of uncontrollable drunken weeping.

Herodias leaned over him. "It is done!" she cried. "He will haunt you no more."

Antipas flung out one hand and pushed her violently away. Then he raised his head and shook it madly, so that tears splashed from his face onto his shoulders. Joseph saw him look this way and that for help, but only old Nicolaus remained beside him.

"Support me, Joseph," begged Antipas, holding his arms up helplessly.

With the feeble aid of Nicolaus, the prince lifted the tottering, whimpering tetrarch to his feet, but they had gone scarcely three paces before Elikah appeared, preceded by a guard carrying on a salver a severed head.

Antipas gave a frightful cry, wrenched his arms free, and began running with lurching steps on the other side of the pillars. Joseph and Nicolaus stood staring after him, astounded that he did not fall.

The guard, with Elikah behind him, went on to where Herodias was still standing beside the royal divan. Joseph saw the soldier turn his head away as he thrust the salver toward her. Only a few guests, pale with horror, remained among the litter of overturned tables.

Joseph hesitated, his spine rigid, his jaws locked as though frozen, and in that moment he saw Herodias snatch from her hair the daggerlike pin and slash at the dead face with it, until the quaking guard dropped the salver and stumbled away.

Joseph clung to one of the columns, reeling with nausea. When he could trust his legs, he began to move with nightmare slowness, his feet dragging as though through mire.



Barabbas learned of John's murder within an hour. Tirzah had seen the prophet's head as it was carried through the hall, and had hastened to the stables where her brother Zibeeon was hiding. He had been expecting word from her of the prisoner's release, hoping for a few minutes' start before the escort left the fortress, so that he could warn the ambush lying in wait at the foot of Mount Nebo. Trembling with dismay, he grasped his sister's shoulders, leaning his head close to hear her breathe out in a stifled voice the disastrous tidings of the beheading. She knew of no cause for the tetrarch's sudden decision. All she had seen was the head in a blood-red dish.

Knowing that Barabbas would be maddened by the bare message that John was dead, Zibeeon pleaded with Tirzah to return and discover what had prompted the execution. But the girl was in a shuddering panic, and at last, yielding to her entreaties, he put her behind him on a stolen horse, and in less than an hour they reached the fork in the road where the ambush was concealed.

Shocked into fury by the news, Barabbas tried to shake from Tirzah the story of what had happened. At first he believed she was hiding something, but her tearful answers convinced him that she knew no more.

"You must go back to the fortress, cousin," he commanded. "I must know their plans."

At this the girl burst into frantic wailing, and he knew it would be useless to send her. Instead, he dispatched Zibeeon.

"First, you must learn what moved Antipas to this murder," he ordered, his voice cold with loathing. "Second, you must discover whether the feast will now continue to the third day."

Scowling, he watched Zibeeon fling himself into the saddle of a fresh horse and ride away. Then, with Tirzah whimpering and clinging to him, he led his men back to their caves.

He did not seek sleep. Burning with vengeful anger, he paced the ledge, straining his hearing for the first sound in the chasm. Two hours passed. He grew tired. At last Zibeeon came. The panting youth dropped from his horse and collapsed on his knees before his grim, overpowering cousin.

"Falling Satan!" burst out Barabbas. "Stand up, man! Why do you kneel?"

Zibeeon raised his clenched fists shakily over his head, but he could not master his voice. He snatched a dagger from his belt and thrust it toward Barabbas. "Take this, master," he gasped. "When I have spoken, slay me!"

Barabbas dropped the dagger between them. "Speak!" he said.

"Herod Antipas passed the place of our ambush within an hour after you left it. I met his escort on the road," groaned Zibeeon. "I went on to the fortress and found them harnessing litters for Herodias and her daughter. They have followed him."

"Blood of Beelzebub!" thundered Barabbas, kicking the dagger against the rocks with all his force.

"The men of the stables accuse Herodias," Zibeeon faltered. "She made her daughter demand the prophet's head as a reward for a dance."

"What tale is this?" cried Barabbas. Leaning over, he grasped Zibeeon by the neck and lifted him up and thrust him violently into his cave. There, in broken words, between gulping breaths, the youth told all he had learned.

When he had ended, Barabbas lashed forth at him for permitting Tirzah to leave the fortress. Warned in time of the tetrarch's intended flight, the ambush could have been strengthened, and the fleeing Antipas and his family might have fallen into their hands, without a costly attack on Machaerus.

To have come close to such an opportunity, and to have lost it, drove Barabbas to the brink of frenzy. His mind swarmed with wild thoughts, and lest he should lay hands on his cousin in his anger, he ordered the lad out of his sight. Then he sat down alone, grinding the heel of his sandal into the ashes under the brazier.

It overwhelmed him that the whole course of his nation's history might have been changed in one night, and with scarcely a spatter of bloodshed, if Tirzah had remained inside the fortress only a few minutes longer. Minutes! The narrowness of

the escape of the murderers filled him with fury.

Feverishly, he began to conceive an extravagant chain of events which might have followed their capture. He saw himself entering Jerusalem as a conqueror, at the head of a multitude who would flock to him as their deliverer from a bloodthirsty dynasty.

For the rest of the night he raged in his cave, brooding on schemes of vengeance. When the day broke, his mind was made up. As the first beam of sunlight pierced the mountain mist, he called his captains together and laid before them the audacious plan he had conceived. Not one of them questioned the rashness of it. They had been too long idle and in hiding. Eagerly they aroused their companies and the whole camp was soon astir.

Maddened by his conscience and the dread of seeing John's headless body flying behind and overtaking him, Herod Antipas rolled in agony from side to side of his litter, his whole body shaken by uninterrupted shuddering until he had put the Jordan between him and the fortress he believed was accursed. The darkness and the desolate road beside the ghostly whitish scum of the Dead Sea chilled him with unnameable fears.

Surrounded by horsemen, whose thundering hooves aroused the sleeping villages they passed, the tetrarch reached Jericho just as the sun was rising. At noon, with a small escort on fresh horses, he entered Jerusalem and shut himself up behind guarded doors in the Maccabean palace.

By night the news of the beheading was noised throughout the city. Palace slaves whispered it to the guards. The guards, going off duty in the evening, told the horrible story over their wine. From the inns distorted rumours spread into homes. Early worshippers, the next morning, brought the gossip into the courts of the temple. Soon the priests were talking of it as they prepared to flay the lamb for the morning sacrifice. By noon it had come to the ears of Annas, in his palace on the Hill of Fire, and the wretched aging man, after consulting with Caiaphas, ordered a meeting of the Sanhedrin for the following day.

Neither horror nor pity prompted Annas to act. It alarmed him that Antipas had wantonly made a martyr of a man whose violent prophecies had once drawn multitudes to Jordan. His only anxiety was that an angered populace might surge to the support of the prophet's kinsman, Jesus of Galilee, a mild and harmless man in comparison with John, but rebellious and the champion of the poor. The people might now thrust upon him a more belligerent leadership of their cause.

When Annas addressed the assembled Sanhedrin, three days after the execution at Machaerus, he wasted scarcely a word on the fate of John. He made it plain that his concern was for the future. Within a few weeks the surrounding hills would be swarming with Passover pilgrims. One spark, the eloquence of one man, might easily spread among them, kindling fires of revolt, not only against Antipas, but against the temple and the priesthood.

"We have witnesses who heard this Galilean swear that he will destroy the temple," Annas concluded, "and others have heard him revile the sellers of sacrifices and the changers of money, calling them thieves, and overthrowing their tables. We must stop the mouth of this blasphemer before the week of the feast, or there will be bloodshed in the sacred courts."

Annas could say no more. His voice weakened. His monstrous body sagged in the great chair that was set above the council, but Caiaphas caught a signal from the malevolent eyes before they wearily closed.

For a moment the high priest fingered the embroidery of his ephod, as though calling attention to the symbols of his office, while he stared over the assembled heads with the fixity of a visionary.

Joseph, seated at the end of the semicircle of princes, watched the false vision fade. He had seen Caiaphas employ the same means before to create an attentive silence. And more than once he had heard the harsh hesitant voice gather force slowly, speaking falteringly at first, as though groping for the words his father-in-law had rehearsed with him beforehand, but finally achieving by some inner mimicry the dominance with which Annas, before his illness, had swayed the council.

"The guilt of this man is proven. We have a record of his blasphemies," Caiaphas began, gesturing toward Phanuel Ben-Phabi who sat near him with a group of scribes, each with a roll of testimony across his knees. Joseph recognized two of them as men he had seen in Galilee writing down the sayings of the rabbi of Nazareth.

"For blasphemy we can condemn a man to be stoned to death," Caiaphas continued. "Our right to execute a transgressor is restricted to that charge and that penalty. But if we sentence this man for blasphemy, the wrath of the people will be turned upon the council and the priesthood. They care little that he breaks the law. He will draw to him those who rail at the 'oppression' of the law, and they are many. If we send him out to be stoned, the multitude will take him from the temple guards and raise him up as their leader. His threat to destroy these walls will become their rallying cry, and there will be bloodshed in Jerusalem between those who live by selling to the pilgrims, and those from without the city who murmur against the taxes and tithes and the cost of their sacrifices."

The high priest paused and spread out his hand in a gesture of prophetic warning.

"This bloodshed we must prevent," he cried, his voice mounting. "Is it not better that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should perish?"

He paused again and by his backward glance at Annas, and the guile in his eyes, Joseph divined that their schemes against Jesus had deepened since the day when they had spoken in Annas's house of bringing about his death by stoning.

"Some of you will say that this man is a gentle man, undeserving of death," Caiaphas went on. "But I say to you that the man we must silence is not the man who threatens with fire and sword, but the man who with empty hands speaks of mercy and the forgiveness of sins. This prophet Jesus teaches that God is love. See you not where that leads? A God who is love needs no Holy of Holies, except the hearts of men. A God who forgives sins without a sacrifice needs no priesthood. The teaching of this man will destroy the temple. He will not stretch out his hand to touch one stone of it. He will destroy it with the breath of his mouth. His mouth must be stopped!"

Joseph looked across to where Nicodemus was sitting, in the farther semicircle of councillors who were not of princely rank. The aged rabbi had pressed both hands agonizingly against his breast, and his head had sunk forward as though he felt already the weight of doom in the air of the chamber.

"This man must die," Caiaphas repeated with callous emphasis. "But his death must not be laid upon us, the council. You, the elders of Judah, must find this man guilty of speaking against Rome and against Caesar. Then he can be sent to Pilate, charged with sedition for having called himself a king, and the governor will execute him. We shall not exercise our authority. The people will have no cause to lay blame upon us for his death. Our hands will be clean."

There was much murmuring when the high priest ceased, but few voices were raised either to question or protest. Almost all of the seventy-three members of the council were men of great age, steeped in the study of the law, and impatient of the younger generation whose utterances flouted the ancient traditions.

Joseph, who represented that generation in their midst, was given a hostile hearing when he rose, pale and earnest to the point of passion in his defence of Jesus. He alone warned the assembled legislators of the danger of seizing another prophet, so soon after the martyrdom of a man who had attracted multitudes.

At first he argued purely on the grounds of policy, painting an ominous picture of the unrest that might be stirred up by taking Jesus before Pilate.

"Even if he had railed against Rome, which I do not believe," declared Joseph, "are there not thousands who have cursed Caesar aloud in the streets? Will not these haters of Rome clamour against the Sanhedrin, if we send before an alien governor one of our own race who to their thinking has committed no offence?"

Growing more heated and open in his argument, the young prince confessed that he had listened to Jesus on many occasions, but that he had yet to hear him call himself a king, or utter a threat against the established order.

At this there was a reproachful murmur and Phanuel Ben-Phabi interrupted with reported sayings of Jesus which could be twisted toward both blasphemy and treason. But Joseph only persisted in putting a different interpretation on such utterances.

"It is true," he agreed, "that Jesus at times condemns the Pharisees for concerning themselves with the letter of the law, while committing and permitting sins that cause suffering to others. Similarly he condemns us Sadducees because we have gathered the wealth of the nation in a few hands, and because we have degraded the worship of God in his temple. He condemns all who allow riches or pride to prevent them from worshipping in the true spirit of humility. But he does not urge the poor to rise against the rich and the powerful. Rather he points to us who have rank and wealth and office as wretched examples of men who have taken the wrong path and who will have great difficulty in entering the kingdom of heaven. Avoid the life and fate of such men, he preaches. Do not envy them. Do not seek to overthrow them and take their places. Remain as you are, humble, meek and pure in heart. He does not promise them riches. He scorns riches. He does not promise them power on earth. He tells them to scorn power. Blessed are the meek, he preaches. Blessed are the humble. And I say to you, now, O elders, priests and princes of Judah, that I, Joseph, have renounced my rank and given up my possessions. I am no longer a prince or a landowner of Arimathea. I have begun a new humble life in pursuit of the blessedness which this prophet Jesus teaches."

Voices were raised in cries of condemnation. Many of the elders rose from their seats and ran whispering here and there,

but Joseph walked up the shallow steps to Annas's chair and raised his hand for silence.

"At the proper time," he cried out over the lingering murmur, "I had intended to notify the prince of the Sanhedrin of my desire to resign from this assembly. But there could be no better time than this. I desire it to be inscribed on the records that I, Joseph of Arimathea, leave this council of my own will, and after much searching of my heart, and that I do this as a protest against the connivance of the high priest to condemn unheard an innocent man."

Old Annas, who had aroused himself during Joseph's outburst, could not conceal his delight that the only dangerous man in the assembly had removed himself of his own accord. He beckoned to Caiaphas and began muttering into his ear, while Joseph made his way toward the entrance hall which opened on to the circular terrace outside.

He had not yet readied it when the keeper of the door appeared, flinging aside the scarlet curtains. The man was very pale, but he walked with a firm marching step to the dais where Annas sat, and having whispered to him, he stepped forward and cried, in the trumpeting tone of an usher: "My lords, the city has been attacked by Arabs. They have surrounded the Maccabean palace and are demanding that the head of Herodias be thrown down to them from the tower."

Joseph reached the terrace before the panic-stricken councillors came rushing through the doors behind him.

"This must be he ... the great fool!" he gasped under his breath, his heart hammering as his glance darted here and there over the surging throng below, seeking the one face he expected to be raised above them all.

Men and women in a struggling, howling mass were swarming behind the mounted Arabs who were almost out of sight, the last of them turning into the square surrounding the palace as Joseph leaned dizzily forward to follow their progress. Worshippers were pouring out of the temple courts, adding their shouts to the roar as soon as they passed through the porches. One distant cry, repeated often and in unison, sounded clearly over the pandemonium:

"Down with the Herods!"

"Amen! So say I!" said Caiaphas at Joseph's elbow. "But a few hundred Arabs will not end the dynasty of these whoring Edomites."

The doorkeeper who was bending perilously forward over the balustrade, called back over his shoulder: "Some say it is the Lion of the Lord who has come. A giant with a roaring voice. Others call him the *Sheykh* of Jordan."

"He is no *sheykh*," said the high priest with a sneer. "He is a robber who is ashamed of his name, and calls himself Barabbas."

Turning to Joseph, he added, raising his voice over the din: "I heard last night that Antipas feared this attack and sent messengers to Caesarea two days ago, urging Pilate to reinforce the garrison. Two cohorts were dispatched at once. By now they will have reached the city. Tonight the populace will see this malefactor hanging on a cross on the hill of Golgotha."

As Joseph moved shudderingly away, the high priest touched his arm and said, maliciously: "This man is known to you, I believe."

"Yes, I know him," said Joseph, sorrowfully. "Doubtless before the sun sets he will be crucified for his violence. But Antipas, whose murder of John must have inflamed him to this rash revenge, will suffer nothing but the horror in his own heart."

Every street between the Water Gate and the Maccabean palace was blocked by a pushing, cursing throng when Judas came to a breathless halt at the top of the Alley of Spices.

He had arrived in the city only the night before. After a long journey on foot from east of Bethel he had slept most of the day. The clatter of sandals and the outcries of people passing his window had aroused him. Still in a sleepy stupor, he ran out of the house. Men he knew from nearby houses, and goatherds from the valley were hurrying up the hill. He spied Meshech among them and called out, but his surly neighbour only shook his head. No one knew what they were hastening to see.

Reaching the cross-street at the summit of the alley, Judas was forced into a doorway by a sudden rush of people who ran by, brandishing weapons and crying out: "Barabbas has come! Follow Barabbas!"

Judas could not imagine what was taking place, but he was caught in the jostle and carried along. All he could tell from the uproar was that a troop of Arabs, headed by Barabbas, were fighting in the palace square. Almost winded by the crush around him, Judas was brought to a standstill by the backward movement of those who had pressed too far and were now retreating in panic.

He heard raucous voices denouncing Herodias and was more bewildered than before. At last an old man, sitting dazedly in a doorway, told him of the beheading of John three days earlier, and Judas surmised that Barabbas must have pursued the tetrarch into the city seeking vengeance.

Now he was eager to witness the fighting, but as he approached the square the narrow streets were more densely packed than ever, and at every corner he was caught in cross-currents of struggling bodies, striving to make their way backward or forward. Cries of frenzied fear drowned out the maledictions of those who had armed themselves with knives and cleavers and were trying to join the battle. Sightseers, who had been driven forward by the weight of the crowds behind, climbed on each others' backs and clambered up on to balconies and rooftops to escape the trampling rabble. Men and women and even children were flinging down pots and stools on the heads of the Romans, whose grim, dust-stained faces spread fresh terror as they sought passage to the square through nearby alleys.

As Judas pressed forward, single cries came to his ears above the bedlam of noise. A woman on a roof near the palace, who appeared great with child, screeched incessantly: "Throw us down the head of Herodias! Cut the whore's head off!"

From a neighbouring parapet she was encouraged by a grey-bearded tanner who tirelessly waved a goatskin above his head like a flag and echoed her cries: "Throw us her head! Throw us down her head!"

In spite of danger at every step, Judas reached the corner of the square and ran up the outside stairway of a house onto the roof, where a few women and two or three boys were leaning over, hurling down tiles on the helmets of the legionaries below. Standing close, he could see that the fighting centred about the great archway into the palace courtyard. There, before long, he singled out Barabbas, on a black Arab stallion, dealing death-strokes with every sweep of his sword, and protecting himself by pulling his mount up on its haunches, so that its hooves battered the ring of assailants around him.

"O man of blood!" Judas groaned.

From the bodies heaped in the gateway he divined that Barabbas and his force had driven the palace guard into the courtyard, but had been forced to turn and meet the Romans at their rear; for the legionaries were still arriving and as they pressed to the attack the hand-to-hand carnage grew frightful. The clash of blades on breastplates, the cries of the wounded, the shrieks of frenzied horses, rose in a deafening roar. Judas shrank back, his shoulders cringing, his hands covering his ears, yet unable to close his eyes to the slaughter.

His senses seemed numbed, but a shout like a thunderclap from the watchers on nearby roofs shocked him as though he had been struck. For a moment he puzzled at the noise, but then he saw that hundreds of faces had been turned upward. Gripping the parapet, he giddily flung back his head, his glance climbing the wall of the palace. A gasp of horror emptied him of breath. The Herodian guards had hauled vats of boiling oil onto the battlements and scalding streams were splashing down on the Arabs who were fighting around the gate.

His chin dropped and his weak eyes searched frantically among the rearing horses and the bristling hedge of spears at the foot of the tower. A black horse sprang forward, and Barabbas, standing in his stirrups so that he seemed indeed a giant, cried out a command. It rang over all the clamour and echoed against the opposite walls. "*Makkah!*"

The Arabs that remained repeated it, leaning over the necks of their horses and bellowing it in their ears. The outcry acted like a spur. The beasts leapt forward, out of range of the flaming oil, and for a few moments Judas took heart, believing that they might break through the ring of attacking Romans.

The whole scene swam before his eyes like ripples on water, but his senses soon sharpened and his glance fixed itself on the single struggle Barabbas was waging at the fore-front of the Arabs. Perhaps, by a miracle, he could cut a path through the surging legionaries and escape. Judas found himself crying out hoarsely: "Smite them! Smite them!"

The next moment his eyes closed and he prayed frenziedly: "Deliver him, O God! Blind his enemies, that he may pass through them and vanish from their sight!"

He opened his eyes again. Barabbas had been cut off from the few survivors of his force. A circle of Romans completely surrounded him.

Faint and breathless, Judas clung to the corner of the parapet, trying to believe that Barabbas might be lifted into the air over all the heaving heads and disappear before their eyes. The effort to imagine such a miracle gave Judas a giddy sensation of floating, and his eyes were about to close in a wave of vertigo; but at that moment he saw a man leap from the ground and cling with both hands to Barabbas's left arm, using all his weight to drag him from his mount. At the same time two spearmen lunged together. Barabbas parried one blow and dodged the other, but the movement flung him sideways in the saddle. He seemed to lose his balance, and as he did so his horse reared. A whinnying scream burst from its nostrils. Battering its way with prancing forefeet, the glossy black beast dashed through the ranks of the Romans.

Judas saw several helmeted men plunge toward the spot the horse had quitted. Shuddering, he reeled back so that he would not see the spears raised to pierce the heart of his friend.

His ears were deaf to a sudden climax in the uproar below. A dappled blackness surged before his eyes. His wits left him. His heart thumped in his chest as in an empty pod.

When his senses returned, he found himself groping down the stairway, and instead of the hubbub of threats and curses, the first sound to reach him in the street was the wailing of the women on the rooftops:

"Woe! Woe! Woe unto us!"

The lamentation told him that the attackers had been utterly routed.

All around him as he pressed half-blindly through the crowds, men were shovelling up dust from the gutters with their hands and dashing it on their heads. Some were rending their clothes to tatters, while others stood with their finger-nails digging into their cheeks, staring stonily upward into the pitiless sky. Cries of defeat and despair reverberated against the walls as he edged his way along.

The crowd thinned as he drew near the Alley of Spices, after taking many turns from the palace square. Doleful cries issued from open doorways, but he heard nothing and saw nothing until he reached his own house, far from the area of the fighting. There he halted as though struck and his face blanched. The two worn steps and the door-posts were spattered with blood. Near the latch of the closed door there were bloody prints left by a clutching hand.

"Mother!" he gasped, and flung open the door, expecting to see her stretched bleeding on the floor.

But from behind the curtain which closed off his deserted shop he heard her voice. She was scolding in the loud hoarse tone he knew so well.

Tremblingly, he snatched at the curtain and looked in. Hezebel and old Jakim had their backs to him, bending over a body. He saw first a pair of blood-drenched sandals. Then long bare legs striped with gashes. High up the thigh near the groin there was a deep spear-thrust. Hezebel was washing away the dark clots at the edge of the wound.

The head of the injured man lay crookedly on one side. There were two dried scratches across his cheek where javelins had grazed him. Through the black beard ran the line of an old scar.

"God be praised!" Judas cried, moving close. "Will he live?"

It was unbelievable. It was a miracle. He had seen Jeshua fall. He had seen spears thrust at him as he fell.

"Is he alive?" said Judas, impatiently, bending over the motionless body.

"He lives," grunted old Jakim, who was holding a lamp shakily with both hands. "But they have slashed him to pieces."

In the flickering light Judas could see streaks of blood across the wide-flung arms from the wrists to the shoulders.

"Hold your long tongue!" Hezebel growled at her father. "And hold the lamp so I can see."

She twisted her heavy body for a moment to glance at Judas from head to toe.

"You are not hurt?" she said, with a sting of disdain in her voice.

"No, mother."

"This one is hurt. He has lost blood enough to fill a cistern. He reached the door and then swooned before he could open it. But the Evil One watches over his demons. He will live. He is as strong as an ox and as stubborn as a goat. He will live to make greater trouble. God send a mountain to fall on him. Nothing else will kill such a devil. He has been a son of adversity since he was born. It would have been better if his mother had dashed him against the stones when he was still bloody from her womb."

While she flung out these words in a voice quivering with scorn, her hands were tenderly bathing the wounds from which the dark rich blood continued to trickle.

"Here!" she suddenly rasped out at Judas. "Why do you stand there like a withered stump? Go to old Mother Miriam's, and borrow wine for this thief."

"Have you no wine in the house?"

"How would we have wine in the house?" Hezebel bellowed, rinsing her cloth in a bowl of bloody water. "An old woman and a crippled old man."

"But how in the name of heaven did he get here, mother?"

"Who cares who is wretched in this house, forsaken of God?" Hezebel went on grumbling, without heeding him. "A boy I had ... a stunted boy I have reared up from his miserable youth. And where is he, while his mother starves? Off in the wilderness with a pack of rebels. Be off with you, and go down on your knees for a drop of wine for your thief of a friend. Be off!"

From a tiny cruse beside her she was pouring oil onto the cloth to squeeze into the injured man's wounds.

"But how could he have got here?" Judas puzzled. "I saw him dragged from his horse ..."

"How would the son of evil get here?" raged Hezebel, while her gentle hands moved carefully along the edges of the deepest wound. "Be off, you big sheep! Get him wine, and wash the blood from the door. How do I know how he got here? He is too weak to open his mouth. But he is here, and we shall be in trouble for taking him in. If the Romans pass and see that blood, they will search the house. We must bring him to his senses and move him from here. There is no place in this God-forsaken house to hide the evil-speaking wretch. Run, you big sheep! Bring wine quickly. And you, old father, hold the lamp, and keep your big empty bladder of a head out of the light!"



It seemed to Barabbas that he had been battling upward through darkness for hours, mounting to life on wave after wave of pain. He felt shattered and desperate. Where the throne of his pride had been there was a void. His true self he had left behind, prostrate in the darkness, drowned in shame and chagrin. The struggler in him was a stranger.

"Who is this within me?" his mind groped with the first breath of awareness. "Who is astride me, driving me back to life?"

The man who had been himself had desired death, had grasped at death, but death had escaped him. Now the double failure, neither to win nor to die, smote his heart bitterly.

He felt his eyes rolling under his lids. Somewhere there was light. Needles of pain darted through his body.

As he shrank from the light and the pain, a long moan rose in him like a sighing wind, echoing in deep caverns of unconsciousness. It stirred his chest. The rattle of it shook his throat. The caged breath forced open his lips.

A voice outside himself whispered: "Behold, he lives."

His eyelids lifted. Hezebel was bending over him. Her face filled the misty space of his sight ... a flat, swollen, enormous face that walled out the world.

Over Hezebel's shoulder he saw the nodding scrawny head of Jakim, his one eye glaring, his withered hair hanging over his ears, his white beard stained with wine.

With every painful breath Barabbas drew in, the old man seemed to swell and diminish.

"Was he ever a warrior?" he wondered.

The question swam up out of the swirl of his thoughts, from his immediate memories of thrusting and parrying which had somehow carved slashing blows across his mind that he was still wearily dodging. And as he lay in a numbed haze, incapable of the effort to speak or to make a sign, he tried to imagine old Jakim in his youth, firm of foot, with a bold glance, stretching a bowstring.

But his sluggish fancies faded when he heard Hezebel crying out, harshly: "He is waking! Where is the wine? Give him more wine."

Jakim's cracked stammering old voice answered: "There is no more wine, child."

As Hezebel's face slid from his vision, Barabbas tried to raise his head, but there was no power in his neck. He heard the thump of a blow, and Hezebel's voice rasping out: "Ah, wretch that you are! Swilling behind our backs!"

He heard her fling down the wineskin in disgust.

"No wine!" she howled, her voice rising in a wail. "No oil left. And now no wine. *Oy alelai!* Only blood!"

Barabbas tried to speak her name, but the sound was no more than a croak at the back of his tongue. He lifted his arm to raise himself, but it dropped with a thud.

He saw blood on her garment and on her hands, and forced his lips open to ask: "Were you hurt, Mother Hezebel?"

"This is your blood, son of calamity," she grumbled. "You have been a great one to talk of blood. Now, perchance, you have had your fill of it."

"I am emptied of it," Barabbas whispered.

She bent down and lifted his head, rolling tighter the mat which she had put there for a pillow. "Are you in great pain?" she said.

"I am, Mother Hezebel," sighed Barabbas. "My legs. I wonder I have legs. They nearly hacked them off."

"They will have to hack your heart out before you quit the ways of evil," she muttered, but there was pity and even a grudging sort of homage in her voice.

At that moment the creaking of the outer door was heard through the curtain, and Hezebel called out, anxiously: "Is that you, Judas?"

"It is I, and the prince is with me," came Judas's voice as he held the curtain aside for Joseph to enter.

"Good, you have brought wine," exclaimed Hezebel, reaching for the wineskin under Judas's arm. "This wretch has licked up the last drop," she added, pushing Jakim aside with a thrust of her foot.

For a moment her glance lingered on the coarse clothes Joseph was wearing, and then she peered over Judas's shoulder. "Where is the prince?" she asked.

"This is the prince, mother," said Judas, meekly.

"You have come disguised, highness," Hezebel faltered, bowing awkwardly so that the wineskin nearly slipped from her hands. "Forgive me. When I last saw you, you were a child."

Barabbas did not hear Joseph's reply, for Judas had moved from behind his mother and was leaning over him, his haggard face twitching with excitement, asking in an eager voice: "How is it with you, Jeshua? I ran to Bezetha, and we have hurried back. The prince will hide you in his garden. But how did you escape? I thought they had killed you. I saw you fall. What a miracle! Tell me how, Jeshua."

Barabbas licked his dry lips, sighing to himself: "Miracles! He thinks of nothing else."

"Do not trouble him!" growled Hezebel. "Hold the cup. He needs wine. His veins are empty."

As she poured the gurgling wine, Barabbas looked at Joseph's white anxious face, remembering with a sinking heart that his last words to him in the cave had been: "Tell your sister that I shall not fail."

His body writhed miserably. "How you are fallen, Barabbas!" he lamented within himself, and to hide his humiliation he tried to force onto his tongue a mocking outburst. But the thought of Jerith had driven from him every word but her name. Even the unuttered sound of it in his head was like a breath of healing and hope.

He felt Hezebel lift his hand, pressing his helpless fingers against the rim of the cup. But when she saw him flinch with pain, she raised it to his lips.

As he sipped, his eyes roved through the dim lamplight at the four faces gathered around him in the tiny shop.

For a moment he closed his lids to shut them out, but the warmth of the unwatered wine swept through him, and resentment at pity began to give him angry strength.

He opened his eyes and saw that they were all staring at him in shocked silence, appalled at the sight of him ... humbled, helpless, a beaten, crippled blunderer!

But Judas, at least, had seen him fighting.

"You saw me?" he demanded, the wine restoring his arrogance.

"I saw them drag you from your horse," Judas shuddered. "I thought you would be trampled to death, or the spearmen ..."

"I am not so easily killed," boasted Barabbas.

"But you were surrounded. God alone must have delivered you out of their hands," murmured Judas, his eyes widening with fanatical awe.

"God was not there. My stallion saved me."

"How?"

"Did you see him bolt?"

"After you fell, yes, I saw the horse rear itself up and dash through the crowd."

"One of the Romans pierced my thigh, but the other spear must have struck the horse, for he leapt forward like an arrow loosed from a bow, and made a path through the crowd over sprawling bodies. A few of their swordsmen, seeing me clinging to his neck, slashed at me as he bolted through their midst. But he carried me through the ranks of the Romans who were pressing near the walls, and when I found myself outside the square, I dropped to the ground ..."

"Hold your proud tongue," cried Hezebel, offering him the cup to halt his outburst. "You will be swooning again."

Barabbas drank deeply, pushed away the wine, and went on: "I crawled among the wounded and from a dead man I snatched a head-wrap, smothered in blood, to conceal my face ... my scar. I ran through an open door, found my way out behind, and fled limping from street to street. With my last strength I reached your door ..."

Hezebel forced the wine-cup against his lips to stop him, and turning to Judas, she pointed through the curtain. "Did you wash the blood from the door?"

"I did," said Judas, "but there is blood at many a doorway throughout the city."

"Nevertheless, it is here they will look," frowned Hezebel. "Many know that he stays here when he comes to the city, and for Roman gold they will betray us."

"I have come to take him," said Joseph, quickly, moving out of the gloom. "My steward is hiring a camel from the man Meshech in the valley. We must make a load that looks like a pack, with Jeshua under it. The keeper of the Damascus Gate knows me, for I have taken many families out that way. He will not question me."

"Let us hasten, then," said Hezebel. "Bring down the bedding from your room, Judas."

She drew Judas by the elbow through the curtain and went out herself into the room beyond to seek whatever she could find to make a pack. Old Jakim hobbled after her, his head bobbing drunkenly.

Barabbas was left alone with Joseph, who had not yet addressed a word to him. "Out of pity for me he has not spoken," Barabbas thought, believing the prince's heart to be burning with abhorrence and impatience at his folly.

Joseph went down on one knee and offered the cup which stood near. While Barabbas sipped, Joseph said: "It will be a painful journey, Jeshua."

Barabbas dropped his head back on the mat.

"God is not with me," he breathed out, in anguish of spirit, not heeding what he said.

There was a knock at the door and the sound of Hezebel's heavy footfalls hastening to it.

It was Zimri. The camels were in the alley. With great care they lifted Barabbas, wound him in bedding, and carried him out.

As they approached the north wall Joseph stepped close to the camel which Zimri was leading. First he made sure that the pack did not reveal the form of Barabbas; then he spoke in a low tone: "We are coming to the gate. A guard has been posted. Do not make a sound."

He had seen flames from a brazier flickering on the armour of a group of Romans who were warming themselves in the great archway. Spring days were not far off, but there was a wind from the east and the air had a bite in it.

When he was challenged, Joseph gave his name and passed without questioning, for the gatekeeper knew him and even the centurion in charge of the guard had heard of so well known a prince.

Once through the gate, Joseph breathed more easily, but as they began the ascent to Bezetha a glow of fires and torches on the nearby hill of Golgotha told him that crosses were being raised there on which many of Barabbas's followers would die.

Chilled by the thought of crucifixion, and spurred by the danger which still threatened, Joseph suddenly remembered a place of concealment which he felt would be proof against the most vigilant search. On their property at Bezetha Joseph had ordered a tomb carved out of the cliff when the palace was built. It was a new sepulchre. No one had been laid in it. And if a search were made of the grounds, the soldiery doubtless would pass it by as an old tomb in which bodies were buried. The possibility of such a search had troubled him, for Herodias, who had believed him capable of conspiring with John and Barabbas, might suspect him of harbouring the fugitive.

As they neared the crest of the hill, Joseph's heart grew lighter, for he could see no likelihood of such a hiding place being discovered. They stopped inside the gate, unwound the pack and lifted the wounded man from the camel.

Leaning on the shoulders of Joseph and Zimri, Barabbas limped through the dark garden on one leg, swinging the other stiffly. Old Lod, who had come shuffling from the doorway on their arrival, followed them noiselessly.

At the tomb they halted. From the outside it appeared to be built after the common pattern. A sloping trough had been scooped out of the limestone near the ground, so that a great stone, hammered into the shape of a solid thick wheel, could be rolled either way to reveal or screen the opening.

While Joseph supported Barabbas, Lod and Zimri pushed back the stone and dug in a wedge to keep it from sliding. Four steps descended under a low arch into the underground vault, which plainly had been fashioned as a rich man's burying-place. At the foot of the stairs was an oval antechamber, the floor paved with marble and the curved walls covered with geometric patterns in mosaic. Two seven-spouted lamps hung from the ceiling. At either end of the oval were stone benches where mourners could sit during the singing of the funeral psalms.

Three more steps led down to the burial crypt, shut off from the antechamber by bronze doors which were closed and locked.

Here, when Zimri had brought bedding from the house, Barabbas stretched himself out with wine and food beside him and pillows of swansdown under his head.

"Are you in great pain?" asked Joseph.

"Only the wound in my thigh is deep," said Barabbas. "But here am I in luxury, knowing nothing of the fate of my captains or my men. By now many of them may be hanging on Golgotha."

No light had been kindled, and Joseph did not try to smooth the agonized frown from his brows as he answered. "Few were captured. Those who were not killed, escaped. I was told that fifty or more on horseback broke through the Roman ranks and fled the city."

"Fifty!" groaned Barabbas.

Zimri came down again into the tomb, carrying a bowl of warmed oil. Bending beside Barabbas, the old man soaked the oil into the linen Hezebel had wound about his injured legs.

"Tomorrow," said Joseph, "you will want fresh linen on your wounds, and that will be painful unless it is done by gentle hands. It is Haggitha we need. She has been our nurse all our lives. She will wash your wounds and bind them again, and she knows of herbs that will hasten the healing. You must go tonight, Zimri, and fetch her from Arimathea. Take the camel and bring your mistress and Haggitha tomorrow, when you have rested from your journey. So long as you return by nightfall it will be well, for we must not be seen entering here by day. Tell your mistress that our friend, Jeshua of Bethabara, was hurt in a riot in the city and is lying in our house. Do not speak of the tomb. Tell her his wounds are not severe. God go with you, Zimri."

The old man mounted the steps.

Joseph turned and looked down at Barabbas, but little light penetrated into the vault. He could see the shape of the dark head against the pillows, but the face was a blur in the darkness.

When Barabbas did not speak, Joseph said: "Your strength is spent, Jeshua. I will leave you to sleep."

"I have lost much blood," said Barabbas, "but sleep will not come easily. There is a scorpion that is gnawing at my heart. You see me helpless and defeated, but do you know what defeated me? Did you see the battle?"

"No. I could not get near."

"Twice, now, time has been my enemy," Barabbas declared, and Joseph sensed in the other's voice an attempt to grapple with an invisible adversary. He sank down and crossed his knees, eager to listen.

"Not the lasting of time, but its haste," Barabbas went on. "All I needed was an hour's warning that Antipas was leaving the fortress. I could have captured him on the road. Then I might have entered Jerusalem as the liberator of our people, and multitudes would have joined me. Even you, Joseph, might have joined me. But when I did come, raging at that murderer's deed and his escape, again time tripped me up. If I had struck at night, before the Romans came, the head of Antipas would now be adorning the gate of his palace. But the people know me now as their deliverer. When I come again in greater strength, they will support me. I must go back across Jordan and start again."

"At Judas's house I heard you say, 'God is not with me,'" said Joseph, gravely. "Do you believe he will be with you this second time?"

"I spoke carelessly. It was not God I meant. I do not look to God for help. Has the Jewish god helped our nation? What has come of all this bowing down to the invisible, all this reaching up for the unattainable? While man lifts his eyes to heaven, earth's miseries multiply. While he seeks the impossible, he misses the possible! Enough! Give me men who believe in men, and with the will to achieve the possible, and I will change the world."

Joseph was silent, all his thoughts muted by the headstrong power behind the other's words.

"How will you escape?" he asked.

"Tomorrow, when I am stronger, you must bring me a straight branch of an ash tree and I will fashion myself a crutch. At nights I will walk in the garden and regain my strength, and when my wound is healed I shall escape across Jordan."

"Do you think it wise? They will be watching every ford."

"I shall avoid the fords. I am a strong swimmer."

Joseph leaned closer. "Let us imagine that you escape, and raise a greater army, and even that Antipas falls into your hands ..."

"And is executed," said Barabbas, sternly.

"And is executed," Joseph sighed. "What, then? Will you send word to Rome, as you told me you would, asserting the will of our people to rule themselves, with no overlords but the Caesars? Have you imagined the answer you would receive? Rome is tyrannical and can rule the world only through tyrants, who oppress and tax the people. Rome gave the throne of our country to the first Herod, against the desire of the people. Why? Because he was such a man as you speak of, a man of strong will, a man who believed in the possible! It is always to such men that Rome leases thrones, and their sons succeed them, owing their crowns to the Caesars. Even though you kill Antipas, have you forgotten that there are

Herods still alive? Herod Philip rules Trachonitis, and Herod Agrippa, who lives in Rome, is a favourite of Caligula, who will be the next emperor. There is little doubt that Agrippa will be our future king. And some say he will not wait for his uncle, Antipas, to die."

Barabbas lifted his head in the dark and Joseph felt him staring into his face.

"You are a prince and a son of the Maccabees," Barabbas declared. "When we have made an end of Antipas, we will crown you as our king in his stead. The nation will unite behind you against the Herod breed. You are known in Rome. Caesar will listen to you."

Joseph scanned Barabbas's features sadly. "Jeshua," he said softly. "You who have preached and fought to end the reign of kings now wish me to wear a crown." He sighed. "But it is late, and you are tired and in pain; Let me say this. It will be dangerous for you to go eastward. The Jordan will be watched. If you went north into Galilee, or to Arimathea, your height and your scars would betray you. But if, travelling in the dark, you made your way south into Egypt, there you would not be known."

"Egypt!" exclaimed Barabbas.

"What have you heard of Egypt, that you despise it?"

"I do not despise it, but it is not my country," said Barabbas. "What I have to do, I must do here."

"But what can you do here, if you are captured? Whereas if you sojourn in Egypt a few years ..."

"I would be a stranger, knowing neither their language nor their customs."

"Have you not heard that in Alexandria there are more Jews than in Jerusalem? Thousands of them are crowded in wretchedness as they are here. But you could liberate them by building a community south of the city, such as I am doing at Arimathea. Jerith and I will purchase the land. We still have this house here to sell, and Jerith's jewels alone would purchase a great tract of the plain I am thinking of below Lake Mareotis. Your settlers could grow figs and many other fruits, as well as grain. You would be a great benefactor, Jeshua."

"You and your sister would be the benefactors," said Barabbas, wearily.

"Ah, but it needs a man like you ..."

"No," broke in Barabbas. "Not a man like me."

"You will not ponder it first?"

Joseph felt the other's hand reach out and grasp his arm.

"Forgive me," said Barabbas. "I owe you my life. If it were not for you I might be on Golgotha tonight. I will think of this. I shall have all day to consider."

Jerith reached Bezetha at dusk the following day. In Arimathea they had not heard of John's beheading, and it fell to Joseph to tell her what he had witnessed at the banquet at Machaerus and to climax it with the attack and defeat of Barabbas in the palace square.

Jerith was too benumbed to follow Joseph when he spoke of persuading Barabbas to escape into Egypt. Her only concern was to care for his injuries and to keep him in hiding until danger of discovery had passed. Her impatience to see him and to learn the extent of his wounds made it torture for her to wait until twilight had deepened into darkness.

During the day Lod had made a crutch, and as soon as Haggitha had bound his wounds with fresh linen, the fugitive had declared himself eager to escape the damp smell of the tomb and stretch his stiffened legs outside. The old nurse hastened in to say that he was limping to and fro in the orchard, where he was least likely to be seen.

At last Jerith went out to meet him at the lower end of the garden beyond the pool. The sky was overcast, and her anxiety was quieted a little when she found that nothing could be seen more than a few paces away. Wrapped in a warm dark-hued cloak, she moved like a shadow through the garden. In the overgrown grass her steps made only a slight swishing sound.

The fig orchard had been planted years before along the brink of a ravine, but it was now enclosed within the high surrounding wall of the palace grounds. The trees were fully grown. Peering between the rows of twisted black trunks, Jerith could see no sign of Barabbas. When she stood still the silence and darkness descended around her. The air itself throbbed with the strange, slow beat of a thousand night sounds which grew in her ears until the menace of it sent shudders creeping over her shoulders. The next moment she heard a stir in the darkness, and she began running toward the tall, limping figure which suddenly appeared.

A deep familiar voice cried out in a tone of challenge: "Who comes?"

"It is I," answered Jerith, and she heard a great sigh escape him as he flung out one arm to encircle her shoulders.

She lifted her face, but the crutch hindered Barabbas from bending over her. With a mutter of impatience he let it fall behind him, and she felt him clinging to her to keep his balance as he leaned down to meet her lips.

They clasped each other in a long embrace. His bandaged arms were stiff and his legs unsteady, but she felt a strange delight in the leaning of his weight against her. For a moment she rejoiced in his weakness. She held him tightly.

But when she sought for words to comfort him and assure him of her love, no word seemed tender enough to voice what she felt in her heart.

"O beloved, what can I say?"

"Say whatever you will, Jerith," he murmured, "as long as I hear your voice."

As he spoke she felt his lips brushing her brow.

"Speak! Speak again!" he said, and never before had she heard in his tone such a note of pleading. "Your voice will heal me."

He bent his head lower, so that her softest whisper would reach him, but she could not control the trembling of her mouth. With a muted cry she thrust her fingers through his hair, clasping him passionately as her tears flowed over the new scars on his cheeks.

She heard him murmuring her name, brokenly, timidly, as though it were strange to his lips. Giving way to her weeping, her hold on him loosened, and she felt him sway unsteadily.

"Jeshua," she cried in alarm. With a quick movement she snatched up his crutch and helped him fit it under his arm. "Let us go down to the end gate. There you can rest."

He put his arm about her shoulder, and limped beside her. When they were seated, he drew her close to him and said in a voice that was wholly new to her:

"Is it truly love you feel for me, Jerith?"

"Verily, it is love," she murmured, with adoration in her eyes.

"Has it not been from the first that you desire to save me? Search your heart, Jerith. Tell me, is it not that you seek in me a man other than I am, a quiet man you could love and live with, a tamed lion, a crippled eagle?"

"What folly, Jeshua!"

"Mine is not the folly," he answered, with doleful tenderness. "I am a fool, yes! But is it not worse folly for you to love a fool, a man who seeks death as others seek a bride?"

"No, Jeshua," she said, patiently. "Will you listen to me?"

"Your voice delights me," he answered, leaning to kiss her hair.

Jerith took her hands from his grasp, as though the pressure of his fingers somehow enslaved her thoughts.

"If you had been captured yesterday, you would have died last night on Golgotha. Your death would have been a warning, indeed. 'So dies a robber!' the people would have said among themselves. 'The violent man ends violently.'"

She felt Barabbas stirring restlessly beside her.

"These are your brother's words," he burst out.

"Yes, but hear me. You said you would listen," urged Jerith, grasping his arm. "Because I love you I repeat these words that wound you to open your eyes. They are not only Joseph's words. Whether you die in battle or on the cross, they will be spoken by all who hear of your death. It will be said, 'The man who combats evil with evil, magnifies the power of evil, and adds to its sum.'"

"I still hear your brother's voice," said Barabbas, impatiently. "Speak from your heart, Jerith, or have done."

"It is hard for me to tell you," she breathed, in a shaking voice, leaning her head against his shoulder as though to prop her strength. "You say that a woman cannot understand a man's thirst for death. When a woman loves, it is her love that sees."

"Say on. Speak of your love, Jerith. That cannot wound me."

"Ah, but it may. This is what my love sees. A man who has never found a place in life, seeks a place ... in death. And there is no place in your life for me," she despaired.

He was silent, stroking his jaws, and she began to hope, but when he spoke again she knew she had not shaken him.

"Jerith," he said, with a strange mingling of tenderness and renunciation in his tone, "I have no right to love you. I have earned your rebuke. I loved you at sight, but I did not seek love, or you. Three times, now, I have seen you, only three times, and not once of my seeking. That first night it was all wonder and bewilderment, yes, and pride, perhaps, that a princess would look at me ..."

"I am not a princess, now, Jeshua," she broke in, impetuously. "I live in a little house, a cottage, and I work in the vineyards or at my loom. And if you would but listen to Joseph there could be a place in life for you and me in Egypt."

Barabbas lifted the crutch that lay beside him and drew it under his arm.

"Joseph spoke to me of this," he said, dejectedly. "I told him I would ponder it today, and I have thought of nothing else. I knew that tonight you would come. All day I have sought in myself the man you love, but there is no such man, Jerith. I met you too late. I was already a rebel and a fugitive. And now there is blood on my hands."

She felt him trembling beside her.

"Ah, you are cold!" she cried.

She drew his cloak close about his neck. Then she sprang up and gave him her hand to help him raise himself.

As they moved away under the trees, he glanced at the gate of solid wood set in the thick wall. "What lies beyond there?" he asked.

"I have never been through that gate," said Jerith. "It opens on to a ravine and the ravine leads down to the valley of the Kedron. Would you like to see?"

"I would," he said, thoughtfully.

She stepped ahead of him and began struggling with the rusted bolt, but he put his arm around her and wrenched it open with one twist.

"Only old Lod comes through here," said Jerith. "He used to chop wood in the ravine for our fires."

Barabbas bent his head and limped through the gate behind her and when they came to a standstill facing Olivet she thought to herself that although it would be days before his wounds were healed, he was eager to escape already.

They stood side by side, silently, looking across at the faint twinkling of lights which spangled the solemn broad slope of the Mount of Olives.

Barabbas pointed down into the gloom of the ravine. "Which way does it descend?" he said.

"Northward."

"And below is the Kedron?"

"Yes."

He swung around and surveyed the crest of Bezetha behind them. Ascending the hill at a little distance was a glow of moving torches.

"Is that the road from the city?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and for some reason she felt afraid.

She laid her hand on his arm and found he was shivering.

"Let us go. You are cold," she urged.

The thumping of his crutch in the grass heightened her feeling of disquiet, but when they had gone through the gate and bolted it, she clung to his arm and held him still beside her.

"Were you thinking out there of how you will get away when your strength returns?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

Drawing him aside between two rows of the fig trees, she pointed upward and said: "Do you believe in omens?"

"I do not."

"Nor I, but when we were sitting here just now I looked up and saw those two branches, do you see them?"

"I see many."

"But those two just above us. On the one there are two pointing boughs, and on the other there are three, and the way they bend made me think of the word *Yasha*."

"Deliverance," said Barabbas.

"Yes. Deliverance."

"You think it a good omen?"

"I have no faith in omens, but it is strange," she murmured.

He put his arm about her shoulders and they began to move back through the orchard. Suddenly he stopped and bent his head to peer under the branches toward the house.

"Look!" he said.

Above the walls of the courtyard a red glow was flaring, and at once Jerith thought of the torches they had seen coming up the hill.

"They have come to search for me," groaned Barabbas.

At that moment they heard Zimri's voice in the garden beyond crying out: "Highness! Highness! Where are you?"

Jerith dragged at Barabbas's arm. "Come to the tomb," she urged. "They will never look there."

But he was turning and began hobbling back toward the gate.

"No," he cried over his shoulder. "They may see that the grass is trampled. If they found me there, I should be trapped. In the dark, in the ravine, they will never discover me."

As he laid his hand on the bolt she ran after him, calling out: "But you cannot get far. What of tomorrow in daylight?"

"God be with you," he said, hushing his voice. "Bolt the gate behind me. It will delay them a few moments."

She grieved, as she rushed to the gate to fasten it. "O heaven! Shall I ever see him again?"

Zimri staggered up to her, but as she was about to speak, a shout from outside sent a shock of panic through her. The cry was answered by other voices nearer the palace.

"Romans!" Zimri gasped out breathlessly. "They surrounded the wall before entering the courtyard."

Jerith shook with sobs. "What can we do, Zimri?" she begged of the old man, grasping his shoulder helplessly.

They stood listening to the tramping of feet in the long grass outside. The shouts grew fainter as the pursuers descended into the ravine, and when they could hear no more Jerith permitted herself to be led back to the house.



The rasp of a sword as it was wrenched from its scabbard, reached Barabbas's ears before he had taken three steps outside the gate. A helmeted Roman bounded toward him through the darkness, shouting a cry of warning to his comrades.

In an instant Barabbas jerked the crutch from under his armpit and parried three swift blows. Then he lunged with all his force at the belly of the Roman, who fell back with a groan, the wind driven from his body. Barabbas grasped the hilt of the man's sword, which had fallen point downward in the thick grass. With a quick thrust he ran the blade under the breastplate of the writhing soldier, who gasped and lay still.

Already there were sounds of others running and shouting on all sides of the wall. Snatching up the crutch he had dropped, Barabbas limped toward the deeper gloom of the ravine. The way was downhill, but the Romans were gaining behind him. There was nowhere to hide. The young bushes growing along the bank were not tall or thick enough to conceal him. Putting his injured leg to the ground, he made a running dash deeper into the little valley toward a group of trees, but a sudden stab of pain told him that the wound in his thigh had opened. He stopped as a wave of dizziness passed over him. Then he rushed forward again. The sandals of two of his pursuers were striking the stones on the path almost at his heels.

Gripping the sword in his teeth, he jumped and clutched with both hands at a low-hanging branch of a sycamore. Climbing desperately hand over hand, he braced himself against the trunk and swung himself upward into the concealment of the foliage, just as one of the Romans, sprinting forward with a savage oath, reached the foot of the tree.

They could not reach him without a climb. He heard them jabbering below, waiting for the others to come up, while he painfully ascended from branch to branch until he felt it would be safe to rest. Taking the sword from his teeth, he straddled a thick limb, panting and gulping for breath. He touched his leg and found, as he had expected, that blood was trickling from his wound.

Peering down through the branches he could see other Romans arriving. The light of a few stars, breaking through the gloom of the sky, touched their helmets with a dull gleam. Now and then, around the bole of the tree, he saw a face lifted, a pale blur against the blackness of the earth. Voices floated up to him, muffled and unintelligible. He understood little of what they were saying in their foreign tongue, but he could tell from their oaths and gestures that he was hidden from them, and that they hesitated to climb up to attack him.

The muttering below suddenly ceased and a fresh voice, young and commanding, spoke as though issuing an order. Barabbas surmised that the centurion in charge of the men had arrived, for the newcomer seemed to be questioning them and there was a chorus of excited replies. The centurion's voice rang out again, and Barabbas caught the word "Aurora". "A reprieve till dawn," he thought.

In a few minutes the soldiers had kindled a fire a little distance away in a grassy spot. The flames leapt and crackled among the heaped-up wood, throwing a ruddy flicker on the breastplates of the men as they settled down, some flinging themselves out to sleep at once, while others gathered in a ring and began casting dice. It was quiet in the ravine with no wind stirring, and Barabbas could hear distinctly the rattle of the dice in the cup and the occasional jingle of coins. He counted thirty men, with the centurion, around the fire, and judged that two more had been told to keep guard under the tree. From time to time he saw the tops of helmets passing to and fro immediately below him.

He began pondering how he could brace himself in a crotch of the branches to be out of their reach and yet to deal blows from above that would topple them when they thrust at him.

"This is my end," he thought, but somehow the danger of the encounter to come kept him from dejection. He could not bring himself to think of the past, of his long months in the mountains and his swift defeat in the palace square, or of Jerith, or of the future, except for the few hours left him, and a few minutes of desperate fighting before they killed him. He would make sure they killed him. If he were to live, they would crucify him, and he dreaded most the death of a malefactor.

Pride welled up in him and for a long time he thought of nothing but ways to outwit the soldiers who were besieging the tree. He considered whether he should blunt his sword by lopping branches to build a barricade, or keep it sharp for

killing.

"But it is I who must die," he reminded himself.

His shivering returned and as the night wore on he leaned back against the trunk of the thick sycamore, after wedging his sword between two branches, so that its sharp edge would awaken him if he fell asleep. But sleep did not come to him. His imagination was too active, attempting to foresee every strategy of the enemy and every counter-move of his own.

An hour went by, during which time he conjured up ways of killing four or five of the Romans before they could reach him for a death-stroke. A thirst for blood took possession of him. He felt like a trapped animal. His body was like a taut bowstring, awaiting the slightest sound or movement.

An hour before dawn, lulled by the silence and numbed by the chilly air, his eyelids grew heavy. In a half-waking state his thoughts veered into the past. The image of Jerith rose before him. Her last cry sounded in his ears. He recalled his first sight of her beside the pool and then the joy of opening Judas's door and seeing her there. The thought of poor ailing Judas reminded him of his years of slavery in Meshech's yard and the hate of the Herods he had carried in his heart since childhood, when he had seen his father's body hanging from a tree.

In the palace square for a few wild moments he had believed that his revenge on Herod's brood was within his grasp, but now, as he waited for the rising sun, the thought of his thwarted vengeance no longer rankled in his mind. He saw that it had embittered his whole life. Like a bristling nettle it had choked the nobler growth of his pity for the poor and his intention of levelling the humble and the proud.

For the first time he recognized in himself the division in his nature. Even when he had said to Judas that he would welcome a death that would lift the curse of the world's misery it had not been clear to him that his pity for the oppressed had withered in the heat of his hatred for their oppressors, and his desire to shame them.

In the east an ash-coloured haze appeared; the first sign of dawn.

"I am the one who will be shamed," he said to himself. "In an hour from now I shall die like a hunted animal."

As the leaden sky paled he began climbing, searching for a crotch of two branches that would enable him to lean forward and strike while keeping his legs out of reach from below. Finding a likely place, he thrust out his legs, with his head toward the trunk, trying one posture after another until he felt secure enough to swing both arms free. Ripping a strip from the sleeve of his mantle, he tied his sword to his wrist, then, as the light rapidly increased, he lopped off a straight bough as thick as his wrist and sharpened the end to a point. This he intended to use in his left hand. It was longer than his sword and could be used to parry blows or jab at an assailant on his left.

His fingers itched on the sword-hilt as he saw the Romans stir and stretch themselves beside the ashes of their fire. The first streaks of dawn were ascending behind Mount Scopus, the rosy shafts moving and crossing each other like giant fans.

For a moment he glanced eastward at the colour coming up over the great blue shoulder of the mountain. Then he leaned and looked down, his lips parting from his clenched teeth in a savage smile. The Romans were buckling on their armour, but they moved with irritating slowness. From above they looked like sluggish crabs crawling at the bottom of a pool.

"Aurora! Aurora!" he shouted defiantly.

Many heads were turned at once. The young centurion had plucked up two handfuls of grass and was dabbing his face with the dewy leaves. Barabbas saw his mouth open in a gasp of astonishment. Two of the soldiers shook their fists. Another, drawing his sword, advanced toward the tree. Three more joined him and in another moment Barabbas saw a climbing head moving upward through the branches. The tree shook perceptibly when three soldiers leapt at once and swung themselves astride the lowest boughs. Others, standing close, called and cheered them on.

The first man was almost level with Barabbas. He had looked up several times during his climb and now he paused a foot or so below where Barabbas was lying. With his sword ready for an immediate thrust, the man grasped a bough above his head with one hand and began hauling himself up, his knees hugging the trunk. He was more than a sword's length away when his lifted foot found lodgement, but he had reckoned without the wooden spear. Barabbas had kept it hidden beside him, but now his left arm lunged forward and the sharp point pierced the Roman's neck. Uttering an

unearthly screech the man lost his hold and fell headlong, crashing through the branches.

Two men now came up together on opposite sides of the trunk. When they were close they paused, whispered together, and one climbed out on a thick limb well beyond reach, while the other found a bough just below Barabbas which would give him a perch close enough to strike when he drew himself up. This man remained crouching. The other, half-hidden by the trunk, started to clamber up higher.

"Ah!" said Barabbas to himself, "at a signal one will attack from above and the other from below. That man must not get above me."

Quickly abandoning his prepared position, he dragged himself upright. The man below straightened and thrust upward, but Barabbas swung around to the other side of the trunk out of reach. He now faced the other Roman who had not had time to reach any footing higher up.

Barabbas came out on the thick limb, clutching at a bough over his head with his left hand, while he thrust forward with the sword in his right. The man parried the blow, but in doing so slipped and overbalanced. The slender branch he was holding broke off in his hand. He tottered for a moment on one foot. Barabbas drove a downward thrust into the falling man's groin as he tumbled into space.

As he turned he could hear the clatter of a sword within a few inches of his head. The other Roman had crawled close and now had the advantage of shielding himself behind the thick trunk which almost concealed him. He stood with his sword arm and his face exposed, waiting for Barabbas to attack.

Barabbas threw a quick glance upward, but the only branch within reach had been broken off. There was another a foot higher, but to grasp it would mean a perilous leap, and he doubted that the branch would bear his weight. He first made a feint at the Roman to drive him back, then balanced himself in an upright position for a moment, and took the leap. There was a splitting sound as he clutched the upper branch, but as it gave way he flung his feet toward the trunk and found support for some of his weight in a cleft in the bark. Relinquishing his hold on the splintering branch, he threw his arms around the trunk.

The soldier below began hacking at his legs, but Barabbas quickly climbed out of reach. Looking down he saw that the man had a firm foothold and appeared to be waiting for his comrades to come up.

"I must make an end of him before the others join him," thought Barabbas, but there seemed no other way than to drop on to the Roman's shoulders. It meant that both might crash downward, with little chance of his seizing a branch as they fell.

"I must risk it," Barabbas said to himself. "If I wait until he looks up I may catch him with his head back, and my weight may break his neck."

The thought had scarcely entered his mind when the helmet was tilted backward, revealing a grim, shaven, youthful face, anxiously looking up.

Barabbas let go his hold and dropped.

One of his sandals struck the helmet. The other slid over the man's shoulder. In his fierce haste to seize the moment Barabbas had given no thought to his wound, but the shock of the fall sent such a stab of pain through his leg that for a moment he lost his senses. Instinctively, he grappled with the Roman, who was half-stunned. The two men giddily clung to each other. Barabbas felt the weight of his sword on his wrist, but he could not loosen his hold to grasp it. The Roman's weapon had been jarred out of his hand, but as he recovered from his stupor he wrenched one arm free and drew his dagger. Before he could strike, Barabbas flung himself backward against the tree-trunk. His legs, kicking out blindly for foothold, jolted his antagonist's feet from under him. The man swayed forward. His raised dagger, with all his weight behind it, drove into Barabbas's right arm, striking the bone close to the shoulder and tearing a deep wound as the Roman slid down, clutching wildly for something to grasp.

Through a mist of pain Barabbas heard the snapping of boughs and the thud of the man's body striking branch after branch.

"Three!" he groaned, but dizziness seized him and he was in danger of falling himself. When he tried to raise his disabled right arm there was a lack of sensation in the numbed sinews, as though it had been lopped off.

He could fight no more. Propping himself against the trunk, he felt that there was nothing left but for him to give himself up. Even to climb down the tree was perhaps beyond his powers.

At that moment he heard the centurion calling out a sharp command. Two legionaries, who had found axes in a nearby woodcutter's hut, were hacking at the bole of the sycamore. Barabbas felt resignedly that the shock of every blow was a step closer to death.

The wound in his thigh was throbbing painfully. Blood was trickling from his torn arm. His eyelids drooped wearily, and yet he watched as in a dream the flash of steel and the chips flying from the deepening gash in the side of the tree.

"I must try to jump when it hits the ground," he thought.

It came to him that he should climb lower so that he would not fall so far, but a fog of lethargy stole over him. He could hardly keep awake.

There was a shout from below and the tree leaned slowly.

Rousing himself, Barabbas braced his feet for the drop. A sharp, splitting sound echoed against the hill and he felt himself hurtling through the air.

He had hoped to leap clear of the trunk into the foliage, but as the undermost boughs struck the grass he was thrown violently against a thick branch, which drove the wind from his body. Savage shouts rang in his ears as his fury faded into darkness.



PART VI

For more than two months Barabbas had been lying in the dungeons of the tower of Antonia. The ancient citadel, rebuilt by Herod and named for his friend Mark Antony, was commanded by a harsh dissolute veteran named Tullius, who had been in Jerusalem less than two years, and had learned little of the customs of the country. In consequence, an order which reached him four days before the Passover feast had puzzled him greatly. The officers under him were equally perplexed, and at last the chief jailer had been called. He was a man of Judea, a former captain of archers, now stooped and aged, named Azaniah.

"When does your Passover begin?" asked Tullius, abruptly, when the jailer stood before him.

"On the night of the full moon, commander," said Azaniah.

"I am no astrologer," frowned Tullius. "When will the moon be full?"

"On the night of the fifth day of this week."

"Which we call Jove's Day."

"The same."

"Then the first day of the feast will be Venus's Day."

"It begins the evening before, commander. We count our days from sundown to sundown."

"True. That is what we overlooked," Tullius growled at his officers. "We are ordered to execute Barabbas and his two captains, Zibee and Jehoida, on Venus's Day, to make a spectacle at the commencement of your feast. But we are told that the bodies must be taken down from the crosses before dark, because of your sabbath. The prisoners will be hanging only a few hours. They will not die in that time."

Azaniah shifted one foot after the other. "It is against the law of our nation that a man should be punished during the sabbath," he said, timidly.

"They will be only half dead. We shall have to slaughter them," growled the commander.

"That would conform with our law," said Azaniah.

Tullius glanced grimly at his officers, who nodded their understanding and left the chamber. The aged jailer was also about to leave, but the commander halted him with a question.

"What of Barabbas?" he demanded. "How is his strength?"

"He will be able to carry a cross," said Azaniah.

"With one arm?"

"His left arm is stronger than your right arm and mine together, even now."

"Has the stump of the other healed?"

"It was healed a week ago."

"What of his fever?"

"The fever has left him."

"It is well he did not die," muttered Tullius. "Pilate wants him crucified as a warning to other rebels of your race."

Azaniah wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "The governor reckons without the people," he ventured. "At the Passover it has become a rule to pardon a prisoner of the people's choosing. Last year none was demanded, for no prisoner of note was in chains at that time. Pilate, therefore, may be unaware of the custom. It was an edict of Caesar Augustus before his time."

"Thunder!" swore Tullius. "You believe Barabbas will be the choice of the people?"

"Assuredly, commander. It is the talk of the city."

"But is he not a robber?"

"He is more than a robber," said Azaniah, with sudden warmth. "He is a champion of the poor. Moreover, he came near to ridding us of the hated name of Herod."

"What? Did you not fight for Herod in your youth?" growled Tullius.

"I did," admitted the old archer. "But in those days we knew not what a monstrous murderer he would become. His sons have taken after him, and now his grand-daughter, Herodias, has inherited his vicious blood. It is said in the city that she has hired assassins already to slay Barabbas, should he be pardoned. If the governor knew of this, he might be the more willing to release a man who is her sworn enemy, for it is well known that the governor bears a grudge against the house of Herod."

"You esteem this robber?" said Tullius, searchingly.

"Sir," said Azaniah. "I have known him from his youth. As a lad he was friendly with the grandson of an archer named Jakim who was in my company in Herod's time. A great liar, is old Jakim, and his grandson, Judas, talks like one possessed. I permitted him to see the prisoner yesterday, but they quarrelled. He is a weakling, this Judas. Whereas Barabbas has grown like one of our mighty men of old."

"But now he has lost his fighting arm ..." said Tullius, pausing thoughtfully with a shrug of disdain.

"Ah, had we known in time that splinters of wood were poisoning the deep wound," lamented Azaniah, "his arm might have been saved. But he was in a raving fever. No one thought he could live ..."

The chattering old man was interrupted by the keeper of the porch who announced that Prince Joseph of Arimathea had come to see the prisoner Barabbas.

"Conduct him below," said Tullius to the jailer. "He is a gentle harmless man, this prince, and easily deceived. He thinks I have been lenient in consenting to the visits of his physician, and his provision of meat and wine. He has not suspected that I am as eager as he is himself to see Barabbas recover. Pilate wishes to see him die."

The commander turned away, but immediately swung back on his heel and asked: "Why does this prince concern himself with a malefactor?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Azaniah, his old eyes lighting up with pleasure at the chance of telling a tale. "The prince's father, sir, in the time of Archelaus ..."

"Enough!" Tullius burst out, impatiently. "I will hear this at another time. He is waiting."

Azaniah found Joseph standing in the hall. He was dressed in a plain robe without ornament or mark of rank. On his arm was a well-filled basket covered with a linen cloth.

The chief jailer led the way below ground through many passages hewn out of solid rock to the barred door where Barabbas lay. Since the prisoner was chained by one leg to a ring in the floor, Azaniah did not hesitate to unlock the door and let the prince enter, while he remained outside in company with one of the guards.

Barabbas roused himself and sat up. His deep voice as he called out a greeting sounded as firm as ever. His cheeks were sunken and there were dark caverns under his overhanging brows, but his eyes gleamed with their old challenging light. He was clothed only in a coarse prison shirt that was nothing more than a sack, with a slit at the top for his head and two holes at the sides for his arms. His legs and his left arm were shrunken, and where his right arm had been there was a scarred stump.

Joseph bit his jaws together to stifle the emotion which swept over him. Each time he had visited Barabbas his heart had been wrung by the gloom, the smell of sackcloth, the clink of the chain and the awkwardness of movement when the condemned man put his weight on his one arm to lift his body.

Sinking down on a bench, Joseph spoke hastily, trying to conceal his distress.

"You have put on strength," he said.

In the dim light he saw Barabbas send a lingering downward glance at the basket and the linen cloth which Jerith had folded so neatly and tucked in around the fruit.

"Yes, I am stronger," said Barabbas, absently.

"The figs are too young to be picked ..." Joseph began, but Barabbas, with a sudden shift of his weight, crossed his legs and drew in a noisy breath.

"I shall be strong enough to walk to Golgotha on the first day of the feast," he said, gloomily.

"Ah!" murmured Joseph, compassionately. "Here, in darkness and in chains, it must be hard for you to hope. But if you were outside, if you heard the talk of the people ... even your jailer believes you will be pardoned."

"It is not the darkness here that has destroyed my hope," said Barabbas, startling Joseph by the anguish in his tone. "My heart is dark. And it is not only the shadow of my death, and Zibeon's, and Jehoida's ... but yesterday Judas was here. I agreed with him that it can get no darker on earth. For a year he has been demented, and now he is utterly mad, but perhaps he is right. Perhaps, in this world, only a madman can be right."

Chilled by the bitterness of Barabbas's tone, Joseph said apprehensively: "What did Judas tell you?"

"How long is it since you saw him?" asked Barabbas, avoiding the question.

"Lately, Jerith and I have seen him often at Bethany, where Jesus is staying with Lazarus."

"Does he not appear to you mad?"

"He avoids us. And when I seek him out, he scarcely opens his mouth. He is hiding some secret."

"Do you know what has driven him mad?" said Barabbas.

"Some strange expectation," Joseph answered, uncertainly.

"Yes, strange it is, and evil. That is what appals me. For he is not an evil man. Whatever you hear of him, Joseph, do not believe he is evil. Has he told you what he seeks?"

"Once, when I asked him what he looked for, he answered in one word, 'Light'! And when I pressed him, he said, 'In a few days, Joseph, you will not ask, and I shall seek no more. All seeking will be over.' Has he told you more than this?"

"Yes," said Barabbas. "He has told me because I am chained here, condemned, as good as dead. Whereas you are close to his master."

"Why should he fear me after all these years?"

"Perhaps he is afraid that you will persuade him from his path."

Joseph thrust his feet forward and gripped his knees to control his agitation. "Do not keep this from me," he begged. "I have been his friend since childhood."

"This that has overtaken him began in his childhood, when he was stricken with fever," said Barabbas. "He bears the marks of his suffering outwardly, but there are deeper scars in his mind. He saw his father die in agony. His memory of his father is the same as mine. When we were youths together we talked of nothing but the cruelties and miseries of the world. I was rebellious. But he was weak and timid at heart. He felt hopeless. He brooded on it. When I returned to the city a year ago, he began scoffing at soothsayers, but he ended by talking like one. To him alone the end of the world's sufferings had been revealed. He had seen some sort of light. Light, Joseph! And ever since he has gone deeper into darkness."

While Barabbas had been speaking Joseph had rocked forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his face on his crossed wrists, bowed by a weight of grief that he could not support. A chain clanked in a nearby dungeon, and Joseph felt a shiver of dejection pass over him like a clammy hand at the thought of lying in fetters there himself, alone, underground.

Barabbas spoke again, his voice echoing dismally against the stony walls. "Judas and I went our separate ways," he brooded aloud. "And both of us have come to evil through seeking good! I went the way of violence, and violence has overpowered me. I should be blind indeed if I could not see, now, that fury does not conquer evil, but adds to it."

"Ah! if you have seen this and believe it ..." Joseph cried, hesitating to voice a sudden hope.

"I have come near to believing that my defeat is just," Barabbas went on. "But, at the same time, I see that the gentle way, the way of love, cannot prevail against evil either."

"Do not say that," pleaded Joseph. "The way of love is only beginning. You have no faith in Jesus, but those who have ..."

"I was thinking of Jesus," Barabbas interrupted him again. "Judas thought that Jesus had come to pour out a healing love that would save the world. It would be a miracle. Not the great resounding miracle he had expected, but a wonder of wonders, nevertheless. Now, he sees the powerlessness of love, and again he looks for a calamity out of heaven, a day of wrath and judgment ..."

"But you have said yourself, Jeshua, that he is mad," urged Joseph, astonished and perplexed.

"Yes. He is mad in what he looks for, but not in what he has seen."

Joseph rubbed his thin hands together impatiently. "What is it he has seen?" he asked.

"He says that Jesus himself has discerned that in his flesh he cannot save the world. He cannot change even the hearts of his chosen disciples. Only a few days ago Peter Bar-Jonas demanded before them all: 'Master, we have forsaken all to follow you, and what shall we gain?' A little earlier the mother of John and James, who are called the Sons of Thunder, begged of Jesus that her two sons should sit on either side of him when he enters into his kingdom. These three are the nearest to Jesus of them all. Yet they ask for power from one who preaches against power and despises it. And if he cannot change them, the men who love him most and call him 'Master' how can he change the world without miracle? Judas says that Jesus knows, now, that he cannot. He foresees that he must die as a man before he will be given power out of heaven to subdue the earth."

Barabbas paused and looked searchingly at Joseph. "Is it true that Jesus now speaks openly of his own death?" he questioned.

"He speaks of death," said Joseph. "He speaks of it as he does of any evil. He does not see it as evil. He knows that the priests are plotting to destroy him, and he has even said before all the disciples that one of them will betray him."

"What?" cried Barabbas, plainly astonished. "Has Judas told him?"

"He reads hearts," said Joseph.

"But you?" Barabbas burst out. "Did Judas tell you?"

"No," answered Joseph. "But I have known for a long time that he has been pondering some mad intent. What I feared was an act of frenzy. Judas seeks power, too ... not for himself, but his master. As you say, he has persuaded himself that Jesus must die, and I have been terrified that he might, in his madness, conceive himself to be the appointed instrument ..."

"No," declared Barabbas, with swift certainty. "He will not raise his hand against him. His heart is too timid for that. But he means to betray him to the priests, believing they will condemn him to death for blasphemy."

"That would be folly, not madness," said Joseph. "The priests have sent doctors of the law to dispute with Jesus, hoping to trick him into speaking against the law or against Rome, but he has confounded them all. If they took him before the Sanhedrin, he would not resist. They do not need Judas to betray him into their hands. He preaches openly in the temple, and if they desired to take him by stealth, for fear of the people, he could be seized at night on the road to Bethany, accompanied by a few disciples. No, Jeshua. This betrayal means nothing to anyone but Judas. No one can convict Jesus of speaking evil against any man or any thing. He speaks only of love, and love casts out fear. He has no fear, and I do not fear for him. The love he has brought to earth fills my heart like a presence! Do you remember that we talked of this, Jeshua, that first night at our house?"

"Everything that happened that night is clearer to me than my own hand before my eyes," said Barabbas, earnestly.

Joseph moved his head from side to side in bewilderment, wondering if he would ever understand this man who had become as near to him as a brother. "Your heart is a mystery to me," he said, baffled by the other's sudden tenderness.

"The mystery is not in me, but in Jerith, that she should love me," Barabbas murmured, almost to himself.

"Go with us to Egypt," Joseph urged. "Jerith and I have talked of it many times while you have been lying here. There you could make another beginning."

"Ah, but I cannot believe in this pardon," said Barabbas, his voice deepening.

"It is as good as granted. Pilate will not dare refuse, unless ... unless Herodias interferes. That is the only hindrance I can see. She may have sent already to her brother Agrippa in Rome, who has influence with Caesar. Through him Pilate may receive instructions to release some petty offender at the Passover. But if I assured Herodias that you had given me your oath ..."

"What oath?" burst out Barabbas.

"That you will go to Egypt and remain there and never threaten ..."

"No, Joseph," Barabbas broke in, passionately, "even if I could bring myself to journey into a far country and find happiness there, do you think I can turn my eyes away from cruelty? Are there not slaves in Egypt? Do you think I could stand idly by if I saw a man strike another unjustly ... if I saw a bondservant lashed with a whip? Do not tell me there are no whips in Egypt!"

Joseph stood up, despondently. Since he had listened almost daily to Jesus, his heart had been filled with peace. But Barabbas's words made him feel that the calm he had enjoyed was a sort of cowardice, and that his soul had been soothed only by closing his eyes to evil.

Before he could speak, Barabbas sank back wearily, stretching his cramped legs. "Even my talk drives you away," he murmured. "How much more, then, must my actions offend you? I cannot love in a world so evil. Go your way, Joseph. Say farewell, and forget me."

"Must you bear all the evil of the world on your shoulders?" cried Joseph, wringing his hands together in agony of spirit. "When your chains are struck off, Jeshua, and you see the sun again and hear the multitude crying out for your freedom ... perhaps, indeed, you will be born again. Come to us, then. Come first to us. If in the press of the crowd I do not find you,

come to Bezetha. Jerith will be waiting. Let me give her your word that you will come."

Barabbas rolled his head against his shoulder, crushing his cheek against the stinging sackcloth of his shirt.

"Give me your word, Jeshua," pleaded the prince, leaning over him with outstretched hands.

"I will come," replied Barabbas.



On the night of the full moon, soon after sunset, Hezebel went down the steps into Meshech's yard, with old Jakim limping behind her. A score of camels were sprawled on the cobbles, noisily chewing, with their packs and trappings in heaps beside them. In the falling twilight the beasts looked ghostly, but Hezebel picked her way between them by the light of lamps already glowing in her neighbour's house, where the Passover supper was being prepared.

Old Jakim, whose eyes were failing, had difficulty in keeping at her heels, but at last, wheezing and grumbling, he joined her at the door. At her knock it was thrown open at once and both were dragged in by Meshech and his sons who were eager to begin the festivities.

It was the tradition that the Passover lamb should be eaten by not less than ten or more than twenty people, and hence it was common for neighbours to sup together at the time of the feast. Yet Hezebel, as she entered the joyous household, began complaining at once that she and her father would not be troubling them if only Judas were at home to attend to his duties.

"You have sons that honour your name and your house," she muttered, glancing around at the grown young men standing smiling with their wives. "But mine! There's an itch in his foot and an itch in his head. A wanderer and a rebel he has become. Tonight, instead of eating the lamb with his own people, he and his fellows are sitting at meat with that upstart preacher from Galilee who has turned all their heads. And their hearts, too. He has turned my own son against me. My only son is ashamed of me. I have become a thief in his eyes."

"What are you saying?" demanded Meshech, in a shocked tone.

"Have you not heard that this Galilean drove the money-changers out of the temple courts and rebuked us who sell sacrifices, as though it were a sin to carry out the law? 'A den of thieves!' he shouted at us the other day. Thieves! By the rod of Moses! Such a man should be stoned. A disturber! A blasphemer! With no more respect for the law ..."

"Come, Hezebel," said the wife of Meshech. "Let us keep the law and forget these things. Say the blessing, father, and pass the cup of thanksgiving."

There was a chorus of cries as the children ran excitedly among the palm-mats that had been strewn on the floor around the low table, eagerly demanding where they should sit. The great moment of the year had come.

For the past four days the heads of every household had been preparing for the feast. With thousands of others, Meshech had gone to the sheep market to select a lamb for the sacrifice. The ancient law demanded that it should be a lamb without blemish, not less than eight days old, and not older than a year. From the market the lambs were led or carried bleating through the streets and tied up in front of each house, until the eve of the supper.

On the afternoon which had just passed into night, Meshech had joined the throng moving toward the temple, each man leading his lamb to the sacrifice. The temple gates were opened and closed, permitting only a certain number to enter at once into the Court of the Priests. Here each man slew the lamb he had brought, the priests catching the blood in bowls and spilling it at the base of the altar, while the choir of Levites sang the *Hallelu Jah*, with the people responding at the end of every line of the familiar psalm.

Meshech had come down the streets from the temple mount with a great crowd, bearing on his shoulders his slain lamb. His son's sons were prancing in the street, restlessly awaiting his coming. Then the whole household had crowded around the table as his wife prepared the lamb for roasting. It was required that not a bone should be broken, nor a drop of water touch the tender flesh. A roasting-spit of hard pomegranate wood was passed through the little skinned carcass, longwise from mouth to vent, so that it could be roasted whole and turned without touching the oven, which would defile the meat.

During the day three large, flat cakes of unleavened bread had been baked. Bitter herbs had been spread with oil and placed alongside the *Charoseth*, in which dates and other fruits floated in vinegar. Red wine, mixed with water, was standing ready. Four cups of wine were provided for each person, even in the poorest homes, where clothing or other things were sometimes sold to obtain it.

Meshech had stinted nothing, and when he took his place, half-reclining with his legs curled under him, the others

quickly sank down, lying on their sides on the skins or mats of palm around the table.

The ceremony began with the blessing of the first cup of wine, and after each person had swallowed the first cup, all dipped their hands in water. It was difficult for the children to perform this ritual of washing, for when the hands were lifted from the bowl it was not permissible to let the water run up the wrists, nor yet back again on the fingers. The boys were shown how to dry their hands by doubling their fingers into a fist and rubbing the opposite palm until no moisture was left.

By this time Hezebel had caught the jubilant mood of the others and watched as eagerly as any when the two eldest sons set the well-cooked lamb before their father. But before it was eaten, the second cup of wine was filled, and it was the father's duty to relate the early history of Israel from the time of Abraham to the deliverance from Egypt.

Meshech told the story haltingly, but the children listened with glowing eyes and the elders nodded gravely as he mentioned the great names and events of the ancient days of their people.

Mishael, the oldest son, now led the singing of a psalm, hands were washed again, and the lamb was eaten. Pieces of the broken cake, with herbs pressed between them, were dipped into the sop of *Charoseth* by each person in turn. The boys frowned and spluttered over the taste of the mixture, but their grandfather explained to them that this part of the supper was to remind them of the bitterness of Israel's bondage in the land of Egypt.

The third cup was filled, thanks were offered, and more psalms were sung. At last, when all were well-filled, hands were dipped again and the fourth cup of wine was poured. By this time the children were sleepy and the youngest were sent off to bed, while the older folk began talking merrily of events connected with feast days of the past.

Old Jakim, who had dozed during the singing, revived with his fourth cup of wine and launched into story after story of his youth and his might as a warrior.

"Tell the boys how you lost your eye," called out Mishael, nudging his wife.

"Yes, tell us! Tell us!" cried Mishael's sons, their drowsiness gone in a twinkling.

"It's a story you all know," said Jakim, feigning reluctance.

"No, no," cried Mishael. "I have heard you tell it, but I have forgotten. Was it in the battle against the Gaulanites?"

"He never fought against the Gaulanites," burst out Hezebel, rousing herself. "Leave him alone. He is too old to remember. Each time he tells it, it is a different story."

"Hold your tongue, child," demanded Jakim. "We grow old, and no one respects us. But in the old days, when we returned from the Syrian wars, the women flung down palm branches for us to walk on ..."

"The Syrians?" snapped Hezebel. "Last time it was the Samaritans."

"I thought it was the Gaulanites," said Mishael, greatly enjoying himself.

"He never fought against the Gaulanites," repeated Hezebel, hotly.

"What?" blared the old man. "It was before you were born, girl."

"Yes, but your memory's gone. You always told me you fought on the side of the Gaulanites."

"Never mind which side he was on," Meshech called down the table. "Let him tell us about the battle."

"I won't stay and listen to him," Hezebel grumbled, getting to her feet with an effort. "He has always lied about his scars, but now he is past making up a good lie any more. Leave him alone, Mishael."

"Where are you going, Hezebel?" asked Meshech's wife.

"I have to go to buy doves for tomorrow."

"Tonight? You have to go tonight?"

"Yes. I have not one dove left for tomorrow. I must tramp all the way up to the Hill of Fire to the house of Annas. No one can buy doves for the sacrifices now but from that son of Belial ..."

"Hush, Hezebel," pleaded Meshech's wife, glancing anxiously at the two boys. "You are talking of ..."

"I am talking of a ... never mind ... I must make haste."

"It is late to go," said Meshech. "One of the boys will go with you. Mishael, will you?"

"No, no!" protested Hezebel. "I will go myself. I have no son of my own to help me or protect me. A big sheep he has become, with no mind of his own. A lost sheep! At this minute, I doubt not, he is sitting at the feet of that mocker from Galilee. Stay with your people, Mishael. This is the night of all nights when a family should be together. But my Judas leaves his widowed mother alone."

"Have another cup of wine," said the wife of Meshech, rising and throwing her arm around Hezebel's fat shoulders.

"No, Miriam. I have had my four. I abide by the law," burst out Hezebel, turning away to hide the tears of shame and vexation that had spurted into her eyes.

There was a stir around the table as the family rose to crowd with her to the door. Although the wine had been well watered, she stumbled through the courtyard with giddy steps.

The night had deepened when Hezebel presently came out of her own house, carrying empty cages on each shoulder. The full moon was low in the sky, glowing like an enormous lamp at the summit of the Alley of Spices. She began climbing, facing its gleam.

Lights were twinkling at every window, and singing surrounded her, wafted out from balconies over her head. But as her feet dragged under her weighty body, she thought only of her straying son and of the long, lonely life that stretched before her. Her father's years were numbered, and unless Judas gave up his wandering life and returned to take up his trade again, what solace could she look for in her aging days?

In her misery she saw nothing and heard nothing until, reaching the Fountain Gate, the sight of a Roman guard awoke her numbed senses. Under the archway a few men were gathered in a group, apart from the soldiers, talking excitedly and pointing across the valley toward Olivet. As she passed under the arch she heard the word "Galilee" spoken with contempt, and a young man who appeared to be in haste, called back something about the temple guard as he sped away.

Hezebel drew close, hoping to hear more, but at that moment the group broke up. Most of the men went at a fast pace down the slope which dropped steeply to the Kedron. The others, whispering together as they passed her, returned into the city.

Outside the wall a Roman sentry, shouldering his spear, marched toward her.

"Has something happened, soldier?" she said.

"What do you think?" he answered, roughly. "If there were no trouble we should be making merry tonight."

"What has happened, then?"

The sentry gave her a keen glance. "Ah, you are one of those dove-sellers," he said.

"Yes."

"Where are you going at this hour?"

"Across the valley to buy doves."

"Where?"

"To the house of Annas."

"What? Does the noble Annas sell doves? Tell me something believable."

"As God sees me, it is the truth, soldier."

"Well, be gone, then. At Annas's house you will find out what has happened."

He marched on to the end of the rampart and Hezebel began to hasten down the hill.

The word "Galilee" had filled her with fears. There had been much murmuring in the taverns concerning the Galilean who preached against the trade of the temple courts. The man her son followed had become the enemy, not only of the priests, but indeed of everyone, down to the wretchedest beggar, who thrived on the pilgrim traffic.

Now, as she crossed the river and began the ascent of the Hill of Fire, a frightening thought grew in Hezebel's mind. Annas and his sons profited most by the sale of doves and corn and oil. Moreover, they had the power to accuse the Nazarene preacher of disturbing public worship. He and his disciples might even now be in the hands of the temple guard. Doubtless the Romans had been called out in case the arrests should lead to an uprising.

Slowly, as fear drove the fumes of wine from her brain, the mother of Judas began to piece together the few words she had heard at the gate. Throwing down her cages, she leaned her heavy body against a tree at the side of the road. Her heart was throbbing so quickly that she could scarcely breathe.

"Judas!" she wailed, for now in her panic she saw her lost sheep of a son standing with hanging head beside his upstart master, while an inexorable voice droned out words of condemnation that chilled her soul.

Harsh shouts from farther up the mountain made her raise her eyes. The moon was now high in the sky and the ascending road was like a broad stream of silver, with long shadows cast across it from the trees in the ditches. Eight or ten men suddenly appeared running downhill toward her. When they saw Hezebel they veered off into the bushes. She heard a terrified voice call out and recognized the country burr of a Galilean's speech. The running men were now only a few paces off.

"If you be Galileans ... where is Judas?" she screamed at them, but they dashed past her, groaning heavily. Not one of them spoke.

Turning, she watched them draw together again on the road, running side by side and shouting at each other to make their voices heard over the clatter of their sandals on the stones. They passed out of sight around a bend in the path.

Picking up her cages again, Hezebel began clambering at a faster pace than before until she reached the road that led off into the estate of Annas. Through the trees she could see that every floor of the palace was lighted. Torches were flickering around the gate. Before long she could hear excited voices reverberating against the inner walls of the courtyard.

The long rows of breeding pens ran northward from the main gate, but now she had no thought for doves. Hiding her cages in the shadow of a bush, she made her way through the murmuring crowd at the gate. A fire was burning in the centre of the courtyard and there the throng, standing in a circle around the logs, warming themselves, was thickest.

At last she burst through into the inner ring around the fire and stood gaping into the flame-lit faces.

A young woman who looked like a maid from the palace, resisted her as she tried to thrust past.

"Tell me, girl," Hezebel screeched over the noise. "What is the disturbance?"

"It's the Galileans. They caught them tonight in the orchard of Gethsemane. They have the prophet himself up there in the palace."

"Did they take the others?"

"No. They say his disciples leapt over the wall and ran for their lives. One fellow had his clothes ripped off when a guard grabbed at him. He fled naked. Another had a sword, and at first acted brave, waving it about and shouting, but when the soldiers went after him, he slipped away."

"You think they all escaped?"

"All except the one who betrayed him."

"Did one of them betray him?" faltered Hezebel.

"Yes. He was here," said the maid, flinging a quick glance around her. "I know them all to see them. I have seen the twelve of them in the temple with him. There is one over there. That white-faced fellow. Just now he swore he did not know the prophet, but I think he lied. See, he is all of a tremble. I'll swear he is one of them."

"Which one betrayed him? Did you hear?" begged Hezebel.

"Yes. A man of Jerusalem. The only one. The rest were all men of Galilee."

Although she could hardly speak, Hezebel clung to the girl's shoulder and forced out a question: "Do you know the name of the one ... the one who betrayed him?"

"He is a spice-mixer. Judas Iscariot, they called him."

"God be praised!" Hezebel burst out, when she could get her breath. "Then he has come to his senses."

"You know the man?" asked the girl.

"Where is he? Up in the palace?"

"No. They rewarded him and let him go."

Hezebel's huge shoulders began shaking with sobs. "Now he will come back to me," she whimpered, and she began pushing her way out of the crowd toward the gate.

"Judas! Judas!" she cried out, and her harsh voice, accustomed to shouting her wares, could be heard over all the noise. But she could see that the name meant nothing to those who were gathered there. Sobbing and laughing at the same time, she looked piteously into the angry faces that were turned on her, and her voice dropped to an imploring whisper: "I am seeking my son! My only son!"

All that night Jerith had hardly slept. She and Joseph had eaten the Passover supper with Nicodemus and his family, and after the fourth ceremonial cup of wine they had talked of the release of Barabbas the next day with great cheerfulness. But alone in the dark Jerith's burning expectations rose and waned, giving place to spasms of fear. Sleep came to her only in broken snatches.

At times, wide awake, she would stare at the shining strip of sky between her curtains, and eager tenderness would spring from the memory of how the moonlight had poured down its blessing on her first meeting with Jeshua in the garden.

For centuries the Passover moon had been a reminder of the liberation of her race from captivity, and now it promised freedom to the man she loved.

Once, long before dawn, she had wakened breathless and flushed. Tender outcries of delight had died suddenly on her lips as her groping arms discovered emptiness above her. For a moment she lay sighing, the whispered words and clinging caresses of her interrupted dream seemed more real than the tumbled pillows and the throbbing of her hot fingers against her cheeks. Then, as the sense of nearness faded, panic seized her at the thought that her love would never find fulfilment.

"Tomorrow! Tomorrow!" she cried to herself, trying to make the word ring with hope in her mind. But as she repeated it again and again the slow syllables became a dirge ... an omen of death which she hastened to banish from her thoughts.

At last the ashy-grey light of dawn spread through the room. When she opened her eyes the air seemed ghostly with half-formed shadows, and in her sudden terror there was a confused remembrance of what had startled her.

She had been dreaming of a long groping walk underground through a dark tunnel, then the door of a dungeon, on which she had been knocking, knocking!

She was sitting upright, shivering, her mind in a daze, with a noise of knocking resounding through the house. She heard someone stirring, footsteps in the upper hall and on the stairs, the sound of the bolts of the porch door being wrenched back in their sockets.

She sprang up, threw a woollen robe about herself and ran to the corridor leading to the stairs. Below, her brother's voice was raised, exclaiming: "Nicodemus! What brings you?"

When she reached the lower hall the prince and Nicodemus were standing a pace apart, staring into each other's faces, silent, as though turned to stone. They had not even closed the door.

"What has brought you so early?" she asked at once.

Nicodemus stood with trembling hands clasped helplessly in front of his thin stooped body, looking helplessly at Joseph.

"During the night," he said, falteringly, "we were called to a hurried meeting of the Council to question a prisoner charged with blasphemy."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Before the setting of the moon."

"It could only be Jesus," breathed Jerith, in horror.

"Even so. There was a trial," the rabbi added.

"What was the judgment?" Jerith demanded in a whisper as she clutched her brother's arm.

"Guilty."

Jerith flung her hands against her mouth. A scarcely audible murmur issued through her fingers. "Was he sentenced?"

"He was condemned to death," the old rabbi groaned. "Mine was the only dissenting voice."

Joseph encircled Jerith's shoulder with his arm and held her close. "It is not lawful!" he burst out.

"They threw aside all pretence of fulfilling the law," declared Nicodemus, gesturing widely. "Each man should have stood up in turn, beginning with the youngest. Had you been there you would have cast the first vote, and it might have delayed them. But no! They were like raging beasts, all shouting at once. Some of them even struck him. Others spat on him. And instead of waiting a full day before passing sentence, they condemned him to death at once. Then, instead of mourning and fasting for a day after condemning a prisoner, as the law sets forth, they were all of one mind to send him at once to Pilate, so that he can be crucified today!"

"Today!" cried Joseph in an agony that whitened his face.

"Today!" echoed the rabbi. "Tomorrow is the sabbath. If he is not dead by nightfall, he will be slain, so that his body can be taken from the cross before the sabbath begins."

"How could they think of the pollution of the sabbath alter such a deed?" protested Joseph.

"It gives them a plea to put before Pilate to hasten the execution. I have come here straightway from the Council. You must come with me, Joseph. Perhaps we can bring them to their senses; not in Council, the Council was dismissed. Besides, you are no longer a member. But come with me to Annas. If need be we will threaten to go before Pilate and accuse the priests of forsaking our own law. Perchance we can persuade Pilate to delay the execution."

"Yes, we must! Wait for me. I will make haste," said Joseph. He unclasped his arm from Jerith's shoulder and began hurrying away.

"Am I to stay here alone? How can I?" Jerith cried.

"Go to Claudia," Joseph called back. "Tell her that the sentence, the whole trial, was unlawful. Make her take you to Pilate and beg him to stay his judgment."

He raised his clenched hands despairingly above his head and ran up the stairs.

"Claudia will listen to you," said Nicodemus, as Jerith stood staring at him. "I will send you in my litter."

Nodding dazedly at him, she left him standing by the open door. With a sweep of her long robe over her arm, she followed Joseph to the upper rooms.

Joseph and Nicodemus accompanied Jerith until they came to the great bridge. There the two men turned toward the temple, to seek Annas in the Hall of Hewn Stones. Jerith was carried in the rabbi's litter across the bridge and along the Street of David to the Praetorium.

Although it was still early morning, crowds were pouring into the broad thoroughfare. All were moving in the same direction, westward toward the palace, and when Jerith arrived at the gate into the royal gardens, the roar from the thronged courtyard, hidden by the Mariamne tower, filled her with terror.

Only the night before she had cheered herself with the hope that a multitude would fill the streets the next day, crying out for pardon for Barabbas. But the morrow had dawned, and instead the gathering crowd was clamouring for the death of Jesus. She had timidly looked out at their threatening faces and had heard them calling for crucifixion as they rushed with murderous accord toward the seat of judgment.

The litter-bearers hastened through the gate and set their burden down at the eastern porch of the palace. The pale sun, just risen over the shoulder of Olivet, was throwing its first beams over the blossoming gardens as Jerith stepped out. The beauty of the scene sent a pang of bewilderment through her. On this side of the tower stood quiet, graceful trees and among the flower-beds drops of dew on thousands of petals reflected dazzling gleams of sunshine. Birds hopped and fluttered along the paths. A slow, faint, drenching sound came from the many fountains.

Beyond the tower there was a gabble of frenzied voices, and she could imagine a sea of bloodthirsty, bearded faces turned toward the *gabbatha*, howling for death.

In an outer room of Claudia's apartments the familiar face of a waiting-woman helped to calm her. When she had sent in her message she stood with her hands knotted and pressed against her bosom, trying to dismiss her expectation of seeing Barabbas freed that day.

"Now his release must wait," she thought. "In their fury at Jesus the people have forgotten him. There will be time to petition for his pardon when Pilate has declared Jesus innocent. How can he judge him otherwise? What law of Rome has he broken?"

Hope stirred in her as she considered that blasphemy was not an offence that concerned Pilate. Unless the priests could prove that Jesus was a threat to Roman authority, their charges against him would have no weight with the governor.

Moreover, she felt she could count on Claudia to prevent her husband from taking sides in a religious controversy. Claudia was aware that the priests had been seeking occasion to destroy Jesus. With her own ears, Claudia had heard the scribes attempting to trick him into dangerous utterances. She had gone with Quartus more than once to the temple, dressed in a maid's clothes, to see for herself the Galilean whose fame had spread so startlingly since the beheading of the Baptist.

At first Claudia had been astonished that a man so gentle, with the face of an angel, should arouse such violent antipathy. She had called Jerith to visit her, plying her with bewildered questions, and declaring that she had never seen a man of such imposing beauty. She had dreamed of him, and talked of journeying to Galilee so that she could sit at his feet on the seashore and hear his voice echoing over the water. But later she had been present when he had denounced and whipped the money-changers with a scourge of small cords and overturned their tables and the cages of those that sold doves. Claudia had understood then why everyone who profited from the temple worship should consider him an enemy and fear his prophecies of destruction. Again she had sent for Jerith, this time marvelling at his godlike fury. Dreams of him had troubled her and she had consulted soothsayers who had filled her with dread.

Because of all this, Jerith believed that Claudia would use her utmost wiles to prevent Pilate from executing a man of whom she was in awe, and whose future the soothsayers had said was crossed with hers.

These thoughts quieted Jerith's alarm, and when the waiting-woman returned to admit her, the last tremors of her panic had gone. But her fears were revived by Claudia's appearance. The governor's wife was dishevelled, haggard and shuddering, as she came forward gropingly to greet Jerith, thrusting long, loose strands of her dyed hair into place.

"How have you come so soon, my jewel?" she burst out, her dark, round eyes rolling as though they had just seen an

apparition floating through the walls. "My messenger has not long left the palace."

"I saw no messenger," said Jerith. "The rabbi Nicodemus sent me in his litter."

"Diana bless you!" cried Claudia, dragging her to a divan and dropping beside her. "You knew I needed you. You have the gift of second-sight, my precious one. I always said so. Tell me, Jerith. What will be the outcome of this?"

"I cannot divine what is to come," Jerith protested, clasping the frenzied woman's hands in her own to keep them from their ceaseless plucking.

"Ah! but that mad fellow, your friend, that apothecary," stammered Claudia, her glance roving as though she saw visions in every corner of the room. "He knew! He saw it written! Quartus has been searching the city for him, but he cannot be found."

"Judas?"

"Judas. I had him here with you in the winter, and he talked of blood," Claudia shivered. "First he spoke of a book, and then of a word. Then he said it was a mystery that would issue from the mouth of your terrible god, Jerith. Like blood, he said. He sounded like a madman, but did he not say then that his master would die?"

"I cannot remember," said Jerith.

"He did! He said his master would die like a slaughtered lamb to save the world."

"He has had terrible visions," Jerith murmured, impatient with Claudia's superstitious fears.

"And so have I!" shuddered Claudia, crossing her hands over her naked shoulders to still the tremors that crept over them. "But this man, it was known to him, then, and perhaps he knew then that he himself would bring it about."

"What are you saying, Claudia?" cried Jerith, apprehensively. "What has Judas to do with this?"

"Have you not been told?"

"Nothing concerning Judas."

"It was he who betrayed your prophet to the priests."

Jerith flung her fingers against her mouth, but an agonized moan escaped her. "Joseph was afraid of this," she cried, "but I could not believe it."

"It was he!" declared Claudia. "The priests rewarded him, but he flung their silver at them. He did not do it for money."

"How have you heard this?" asked Jerith, her mind still in doubt.

"From Quartus. Last night he learned from a centurion at Antonia that the temple guards had orders to seize Jesus in an old orchard across the valley. He accompanied them, for he knows that the man concerns me greatly. He went to the house of Annas and there he saw the madman he once had brought to me. Afterward he spoke to him and the spice-grinder raved as before about a new kingdom."

Claudia, who had ceased trembling as she spoke of what Quartus had told her, now sprang up with a more frantic look than before and beat her hands against her breasts. "The day has come, Jerith!" she wailed. "This is the day of wrath of your terrible god. Who knows but it may be the end of the world."

"Do not fret yourself, Claudia," said Jerith, rising and facing her. "That is only a vision in the mind of Judas. He has believed for a year that a new kingdom, a new world, will begin with the death of Jesus."

"He must not die!" Claudia screamed. "If he dies, we shall all die. I have dreamed it. I have seen an avalanche of fire falling out of the sky. Pontius scoffs at my dreams, but he is afraid, not as I am, of your malevolent Jehovah, but of an uprising, if he executes this man. Yet he feels helpless against the priests. He fears that Annas will complain to Rome if he does not carry out a sentence demanded by your law."

"But it is not according to our law," Jerith insisted. "The rabbi Nicodemus was there. He is a member of the Council. He

will testify that they defied the law."

"I cannot think, Jerith," said Claudia, her plump breasts heaving spasmodically against the edge of her robe. "I am on fire inside. For my sake and his own, Pilate intends to withhold judgment so that this ill-omened day will pass without calamity. But I tremble, nevertheless."

Claudia rubbed her bare arms which were prickly with cold and terror. "Why have you stayed in the city?" she asked, suddenly. "You spoke of returning to Arimathea. Why have you waited to this day? Peradventure it is only on the city that the wrath will descend. In the plain of Sharon you might have escaped."

"We have waited until now because of Barabbas," said Jerith. "We looked for him to be pardoned during the feast. There has been a custom ..."

"Ah!" exclaimed Claudia. "I reminded Pontius of that custom, and he went out and told the multitude he would release Jesus as a sign of Caesar's clemency."

An uncontrollable sob rose in Jerith's throat, and she sank back on the divan, hiding her quivering face in her hands.

"What has come over you?" demanded Claudia, bending above her anxiously.

Flinging her hands down helplessly beside her, Jerith stared into Claudia's startled eyes. With an effort she repressed the twitching of her lips. "But he has not released him," she faltered, listening to the faint sounds of shouting that hummed against the walls. "They are still clamouring for judgment."

"They cried out against Pontius. His offer enraged them. 'You are no friend of Caesar's if you let this man go,' they roared. Instead, they demanded pardon for Barabbas, the robber, who was to be crucified today. And now Pilate has sent to the Antonia tower to have this robber brought before them, so that they themselves may choose."

Jerith held back her breath, feeling that a knife-thrust had ended her power to sigh.

"It will be one life ... or the other," she cried within herself, as the terrible alternative was driven into her heart. Tears fell from her eyes, and she saw through a mist the two faces, the fierce and the gentle.

"Pontius will let the people choose," Claudia said in a steadier voice. "Then there can be no whisper against him."

Jerith brushed the tears from her cheeks and looked up into the glassy Roman eyes searching for a trace of pity, but there was none. "O what can I wish? What can I hope?" she cried inwardly.

"Pontius believes that if he releases Barabbas the people will make a holiday and carry him through the city in triumph," Claudia went on. "Should that happen he will put the Galilean in prison until after the feast and send him under escort to his own province, with a warning not to return."

"Then Barabbas will be released?" Jerith murmured half under her breath, her cheeks reddening with shame as she recaptured her hopes.

"The mob demands him," said Claudia.

"But ... but ..." stammered Jerith, slanting her head to avoid Claudia's searching gaze.

"What is this robber to you?" the governor's wife demanded in astonishment.

"We know him. Joseph sent his physician to him in prison," Jerith answered, her blush deepening. "He is a man who has sought nothing but good all his life, but violently. His pity for the humble has driven him to fury, yet deep in his heart there is love for the people. He is not like Jesus. He sees evil. But perhaps ..."

A great roar from the crowd penetrated the quietness of the room and Jerith ceased. Her heart leapt.

Claudia snatched up a cloak and drew it closely about her. "Come," she said. "On the other side of the tower we can see into the courtyard."

Jerith followed her out of the room along a circular passage to a casement. Claudia thrust out her head. "Pontius has not

come back," she said. "He has had Jesus brought within to question him, and he sent word by Quartus that he had found him a guileless man. But look at your countrymen, Jerith. Look at their murderous faces."

Jerith stood on tiptoe and peered out. Only a few officers stood near the seat of judgment talking idly but with watchful eyes on the crowd. Another great shout went up and every head was turned toward the arched gateway. Fifty legionaries were beating their way through the throng with the flat of their swords.

Behind them, walking with awkward steps between two rows of guards, came a prisoner in a sackcloth shirt, with a chain dragging from one ankle. His shrunken legs seemed too thin to support a man of such height. One arm swung feebly at his side. The other was missing. His protruding shoulder-bones gleamed lividly in the hazy sunshine. Through his matted beard ran the white line of a scar.

Claudia gasped in amazement. "Is that the notorious robber?" she exclaimed.

But Jerith could neither speak nor see. A rush of sobs filled her throat and she lowered her head to hide her tears.

As soon as he saw the press of the multitude in the courtyard Barabbas understood why a guard of fifty legionaries had marched with him from Antonia. The cursing Romans had to force their way with uplifted swords toward the seat of judgment.

Outraged cries changed into a roar when those who fell back recognized Barabbas. He heard his name shouted and repeated until it echoed against the palace walls like rolling thunder.

Until that moment he had been uncertain of what awaited him. The guards who had taken him from the dungeon had told him nothing. Their grim faces and harsh refusal to answer him had extinguished the faint hope he had nursed most of the night like a guttering candle. As they led him through the prison yard he had seen three crosses lying in readiness near the gate. He fancied he could feel the stab of the nails. But when the guard marched out southward along the temple wall, instead of turning toward Golgotha, the agony around his heart abated.

His expectation had risen with every step that took him closer to the Praetorium, and now the stunning outburst of noise left no doubt in his mind that the throng had assembled to demand his pardon. The walk from the prison had exhausted him. His legs were shaking. But he drew himself up to his full height and sent a proud glance over the faces turned toward him.

Near the Mariamne tower he could see a number of men raised above the rest. Two officers stepped forward on the pavement of the *gabbatha*, lifting their hands for silence. The uproar diminished as the legionaries surrounding Barabbas came to a halt. Four of them, with a centurion, moved with him up a short flight of steps on to the place of judgment.

A shaven, thick-necked man in the robes of a dignitary was trying to make himself heard over the continued muttering. His voice was hoarse and trembling with exasperation. His small eyes had the puffy look of a man resentfully aroused from slumber. In his clenched right hand he held a roll of parchment and from time to time he struck at the air with it as though he wished it were a whip.

"The governor," Barabbas decided, but his eye was caught immediately by an unexpected figure standing with bent head on the other side of Pilate. The man was bearded and his hair flowed to his shoulders. Over a seamless tunic, which marked him as a villager, a long tattered purple robe hung to his heels. A few sprigs of bramble, twisted into a wreath, had drawn blood from his brow.

"Is this some Roman buffoonery?" Barabbas asked himself, staring at the figure arrayed in mockery of royal purple.

But at that moment, as he grew accustomed to Pilate's clumsy use of the speech of the people, one phrase told him that the man crowned with thorns was another prisoner!

"You accuse this man of perverting the people," the governor was shouting, "but I have examined him and find no fault in him. Moreover, I sent him to Herod Antipas, since he is a man of Galilee. But the tetrarch has sent him back, saying that the prisoner has done nothing worthy of death."

Blood rushed to Barabbas's head and an inner grip of horror tightened on his heart as he looked more closely. Jesus had raised his head and Barabbas recognized him instantly.

He had been sure that the priests could never prove the Galilean guilty of evil-speaking, yet here he stood, condemned, and like himself, in danger of death.

Facing the mob for the first time, Barabbas saw many scribes and Levites among them, their eyes burning with the fanatical fire of persecution, their voices raised louder than the rest.

"Golgotha! Golgotha!" they were crying, but the Roman officers again demanded quiet, and over the waning murmur Pilate blared out: "This man is not deserving of death. I will chastise him and let him go."

Phanuel Ben-Phabi, who stood with several priests a little apart on the platform, raised an accusatory finger. Moistening his lips, he forced his dried-up voice into a shrill challenge.

"If you release this fellow," he charged, "you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks treason

against Caesar."

As Pilate scowled defiantly at the Chief of the Scribes, Quartus stepped from among a group of officers and stood whispering in the governor's ear. While they spoke together, Barabbas saw Pilate glance at him for the first time with astonishment and contempt.

At last, after nodding several times impatiently, Pilate turned his back on Quartus and moved a pace or two forward. Shaking the roll of parchment over his head as a signal for silence, he spoke in an even tone, deliberately, challenging the mob to hear him.

"Your people have a custom ..." he began, lifting his hands with the palms upward, as though they were scales held evenly between the two prisoners.

Barabbas glanced behind Pilate's back at Jesus, whose chin had fallen forward again on his breast. His eyes were open, but unseeing. His arms hung at his sides. Barabbas saw that the long delicate fingers were unclenched.

"They will never condemn him. They will choose me!" he groaned, and as fear and fury mounted in him, he remained staring and marvelling at the other's calm, feeling that Jesus indeed possessed a power to see beyond all the evil of men. The blows that had bruised him had not driven from his lips their accustomed gentleness. There was no anxiety in his posture, nor any disquiet in his face. His head was bent, neither in shame nor exhaustion, but in meek acceptance of the violence of his accusers.

A sudden silence had seized the mob, that was more ominous than the noise before it, and Pilate's voice, floating over their heads, rang out against the walls of the courtyard.

"You have a custom that a prisoner of your race should be pardoned at the Passover. Which of these then shall I release unto you ... Barabbas, the robber ... or Jesus, who is called the king of the Jews?"

The answer was like the roar of an avalanche.

"Barabbas!"

"What then shall I do unto him you call your king?" demanded Pilate.

A cry, terrible in its swiftness, and as though uttered by one giant voice, came from a thousand throats: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Staggered by the ferocity of the crowd, and knowing nothing of their accusations against Jesus, Barabbas turned in bewilderment to the centurion. "What have they against him?" he exclaimed.

When the man did not answer, Barabbas took a step forward, flung up his arm in an appealing gesture, and glared down into the faces nearest him. "What evil has he done?" he shouted.

One of the guards dragged down his waving arm. Another struck him across the mouth. Out of the confusion of his senses he heard Pilate crying out:

"Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I see no fault in him."

At that moment Barabbas felt a rough hand swinging him round by his shoulder. He was ordered to lie down so that the ring around his ankle lay on the flagstones of the pavement. The smith who had followed them from Antonia directed a soldier how to hold a chisel against the iron, and he swung his hammer, cutting loose the fetter with four or five blows.

Every stroke jolted Barabbas's body, and he was not aware that he had been freed of the chain until there was a rush of feet beside him and he felt himself lifted up in strong arms.

A voice close to his ear spoke his name in Arabic and in the same language warned him to be silent. Turning his head, he saw Margaloth's face, closely hooded, among those who were hoisting him on to their shoulders. The soldiers cleared a way for them to carry him down the steps.

Barabbas tried to look back, but he could no longer see what was happening on the raised pavement.

"Have they released the Galilean?" he said in Arabic, to Margaloth.

"No," said the Nabatean. "The governor has gone within again."

"Halt here and let me stand," demanded Barabbas.

"No, master," growled Margaloth, tightening his grip. "We must make haste. There is another danger."

"What danger?"

But the Nabatean paid no heed. He began shouting: "Make way! Make way!"

Swaying on the shoulders of Margaloth and the others, Barabbas glared about him at the rabble, who were still crying for the Galilean's death.

"These are the humble!" he marvelled. "These are the suffering ones that men in many ages have tried to save. But who can save them?"

The trial of Jesus was still in doubt, but as he was borne helplessly and in haste from the courtyard he felt that whatever would be the outcome, no blacker moment had been known on earth.

"Judas was near the truth," he sighed. "What, now, can save man from a terrible end? What can change his heart? Only the impossible! Only a change in heaven! Only a gentle and forgiving God!"

They had reached the archway. A few had turned with triumphant cries to join those who were carrying Barabbas. Others had cheered him as he passed, but most eyes were turned toward the *gabbatha*, and the outcry for Pilate's return had swollen into an uproar.

"Wait!" he demanded again.

"No, master!" panted the Nabatean, who was struggling harder than ever to make his way through the crowd squeezed in the gateway. "Trust me! Hold your tongue!"

Barabbas was too weak to wrench himself out of the grasp of the determined men who were bearing him away.

"What do you fear?" he demanded.

"The daggersmen Herodias has hired," answered Margaloth, impatiently. "I saw three of them in the crowd. They have been pointed out to me in the taverns. For days there has been talk of your pardon, and over their wine these men have said that you would not live an hour after Pilate released you."

Barabbas said no more. In dejected silence he permitted Margaloth and his men to carry him through twisting alleys to the rear of the inn of Jacob Three-Sheaves. Without a word or a knock they ascended the outer staircase to an upper room.

When they were all inside, the door was bolted and a great slab of rock, wrenched from a ruined wall nearby, was laid against it.

"Last night we took three camels from Meshech's yard," said Margaloth. "They are tied in the Kedron Valley with a man to guard them, in the trees behind the tomb of Absalom. Tonight, after dark, a man I know will pass us through the Water Gate, for three pieces of silver. Before dawn we shall have crossed Jordan."



It was past mid-day when Hezebel awoke, having spent most of the night in a vain search for Judas. She did not stir except to open her eyes. Vague, gloomy thoughts swam in her head, and after a long time she found that she had been listening, without knowing it, to the footfalls of people passing outside. There was haste in the clatter of the sandals going by. Now and then stray cries floated in to her.

"Whither? Whither?"

"To Golgotha!"

"Come and see the prophet hang!"

Hezebel rose from her mat and stood at the open door. Soon she caught from passers-by the ugly gaiety of a mob hurrying to witness a spectacle that would chill their blood.

She had more reason to shout than anyone beside her, she thought, as she stepped into the alley. The trouble-maker from Galilee had led her son astray. If he were crucified, Judas might return to his trade, and there would be a smell of spices in the shop again and a little silver coming in.

She began to shout with the rest, but louder and with more venom than anyone around her, fighting her way forward with hips and elbows until she reached the Street of David. On either side of the broad roadway the crowd was shouting:

"Make way for the King of the Jews!"

"Hail to the King!"

A voice near Hezebel said: "They have given him a crown."

A man standing on tiptoe said: "What? Of gold?"

"Gold, you fool! No! Of thorns."

A voice in the middle of the street cried: "He is half dead from the scourging! He has fallen under his cross!"

"There are three carrying crosses," said another.

"Two of them are robbers, they say."

"Yes. Two of Barabbas's captains."

Individual voices were soon lost in the roar which swelled up as the first row of helmeted Romans came in sight. Seeing no sign of her son, Hezebel allowed herself to be driven forward with the moving throng. Outside the Damascus Gate a cohort of legionaries formed a solid ring around the desolate knoll called Golgotha. The prisoners were dragged up the slope and their clothes stripped from them. The three crosses were flung on the ground and soon the ringing of hammers and the screams of the two robbers sent a hush over the gaping crowd.

Hezebel hardly saw what went on within the circle of soldiers. She pushed this way and that, looking for Judas, glaring into hundreds of faces. Once she glanced up the hill, when a wild roar greeted the hoisting of the cross on which the hated prophet hung. One furious shout burst from her lips, and then she continued elbowing and shouldering her way through the rows of jeering watchers.

Suddenly the crush around her slackened. The crowd was breaking up. Not until then had she noticed the darkness. Another storm, like one that had struck earlier in the week, was rolling blackly toward the city over Mount Scopus.

The scornful cries of the crowd turned into shouts of fear. Hezebel ran with them, the weight of her body pitching forward at every step. Reaching the gate in the Broad Wall, she stood there panting for breath, wondering if she should stay there for shelter.

The clouds were so low and heavy that the darkness was like night, and out of the murk flashed forks of lightning. At times the lightning appeared to ascend, branching like trees of white fire which illumined the whole sky, so that tier upon

tier of clouds were revealed, rolling at a mad pace as though whipped by the darting flame. Not a drop of rain fell, making the violence of the elements even more terrible.

Hezebel, huddled under the archway with a hundred others, had regained her breath. She began wondering if she could reach her house before the heavens broke loose.

She could not make up her mind, but before she knew it she found herself running. It was not far to the inner wall, from which her way home lay under the Royal Bridge and through a maze of streets descending into the valley.

As she came out from one of the arches of the bridge the first spot of rain struck her head. But by now her flight had become frantic and she hurried on. Great drops splashed on her face and neck, and soon the rain was spilling down. In the time it took to pass three doors her garments were drenched.

She was staggering now, holding herself up by groping with one hand at walls and doorways. The rain, dripping from her tangled hair, ran into her eyes; but she was almost there and she could feel her way. At last, reaching her own door, she flung it open and tottered in.

Through the murk of the room came the sound of a scraping sandal.

"Is that you, my son?" she cried, dashing the water from her eyes.

"No," said Jakim, limping to the door to close it. "Judas went up to his room."

"When did he come?" Hezebel demanded.

"Before the darkness of the storm fell."

"Where had he been?"

"To Golgotha."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He went upstairs without a word."

Hezebel stood still, listening, as she wrung the wet from her hair.

"He is home," she breathed to herself, and her motherhood rose in her breast, warming her cold drenched flesh. She wanted to sit beside him and push back his hair and ask him, "Do you love your mother?" as she had done when he was an ailing boy.

Sighing and breathing heavily, she lifted her soaked clothes and started up the stairs.

"Light the lamp, father," she said over her shoulder. "It is like night in here."

Treading softly she ascended into the gloom of the upper chamber. The wind and rain were lashing against the one narrow window. In the distance thunder was echoing.

As she came to the top stair a flash of lightning streaked the dark window and flickered like pale fire over the walls. She was blinded for a moment, but before she had blinked her eyelids she had seen something that made her heart stand still. The bluish light had glimmered over the bed. And Judas was not on it!

Now it was dark again, darker than ever, and a dreadful silence seemed to rush upward to meet the clap of thunder which came crashing down, shaking the whole house.

There was a tingling sensation through her hair as she tottered against the wall and screamed: "Judas! Where are you?"

There was no answer.

The roar of the thunder died away and the frightening quiet in the room sent chills like running insects under her damp clothes.

"Judas! Speak!" she screamed again, and began groping her way toward the corner where the ladder led to the roof.

But where was the ladder? She could see only some shadowy shape between her and the wall. Was it a garment hanging? And what was that in the corner? Something knocked over. His table! The scrolls spilled from the shelves lay all over the floor. What was it doing there?

And then she knew and shrieked.

She knew, even before another lightning flash lit up the body hanging by its neck from an upper rung of the ladder, the head twisted, the feet dangling above the overturned table.

"*Alelai!*" she whimpered.

Her fingers clawed at her muddied woollen gown and with both hands she rent it from the hem to the neck.

Falling on her knees, she scratched at the floor, trying to clutch up dust enough to heap on her head, while her voice broke out in frantic weeping.

"Judas! My lamb! My poor lamb!" she wailed, letting the salt, scalding tears roll into her mouth.



The storm had passed and now the dusk was falling. Barabbas had been lying all day in the upper room of the inn, his mind tortured by doubts, his body twitching with impatience at the hours of inaction.

More than once he had entreated and even commanded Margaloth to send a man out to learn the fate of Jesus, but the Nabatean captain had refused to risk a life on such an errand. At times during the day Barabbas had almost come to believe that death could not overtake a man so innocent. And as the day drew on, he felt that he could not restrain himself any longer, that he had to see for himself, as if he were being led on by some inner beckoning.

He dragged himself upright and looked through the window.

"It is almost dark," he said. "Let us be going."

"Where?" said Margaloth, rousing himself and watching Barabbas closely.

"Before we leave the city there is a man I must see."

"Why risk your life? Quiet yourself until the moon rises."

"There are nine of you to guard me."

"Ah, but these daggersmen throw their knives as the Romans fling their javelins. You might be pierced in the back from a doorway."

"Am I your leader, or your prisoner?" demanded Barabbas, harshly.

Margaloth leaped up, but his eyes were only at the level of the other's shoulder. He did not glance up. Instead his thick brows descended.

"Who is this man you must see?" he said.

"The prince of Arimathea."

Margaloth took a step between Barabbas and the men who were kneeling near the door casting dice. "To reach Bezetha," he warned, "we must pass close to the Hill of Skulls. Half the city will be there, and that is where the queen's daggersmen will look for you, mingling with the crowd to see the end of your two captains."

"Nevertheless, I must go before we start for the desert," said Barabbas.

Margaloth gave the men a command. They sprang up, pocketing their winnings, and stood in some sort of order.

The Nabatean captain then stepped close to Barabbas and whispered, without raising his eyes: "When you have spoken to the sister of this prince ..."

Barabbas thrust his hand violently against the Arab's face, covering his mouth.

The men, who were watching, saw the action, and there was a stir among them. Barabbas turned away from Margaloth and pointed at the man nearest him.

"You, Rajil! Give me your dagger," he demanded.

The man drew one from his belt. Barabbas took it and turned to another who was wearing a long cloak over a woollen tunic. The rest were clad only in skins, like goatherds. "Give me your cloak," he said, and when the man had slipped his arms out of it, Barabbas put it on over his prison shirt.

Without a word, Margaloth unwound a striped scarf from his middle. Barabbas took it and wrapped it closely around his head, letting one end hang over the scarred side of his face.

"Follow me," he said.

The slab of rock was removed from before the door, and they went out through the courtyard of the inn into an alley

behind, Barabbas stooping to disguise his height. The cloak, hanging loosely in front of him, concealed the loss of his arm.

"Sing!" ordered Barabbas. "Sing and stagger! Let them take us for drunken shepherds."

They splashed through puddles left behind by the storm, and at times leapt over streams of water which still poured down the steep streets. Few people were about in that part of the city, but those they met made way for them.

When they had passed under the great bridge and had begun to ascend toward the tower of Antonia, Barabbas said: "You are too solemn. Sing the *Chad Gadya*!"

A strong, rollicking voice immediately broke into the ancient song:

"Chad Gadya!
Chad Gadya!
One kid of the goat,
And a cat came and devoured the kid my father bought for two zuzim.

"Chad Gadya!
Chad Gadya!
And a dog came and bit the cat which devoured the kid my father bought for two zuzim!"

Verse after verse they chanted, until they were out of breath.

By this time they were approaching the Damascus Gate, and the broader streets in the district of the bazaars began filling with people who were pouring back into the city.

"They are coming from Golgotha," said Barabbas to Margaloth, who was keeping close to his defenceless side. "Perhaps they have taken down the crosses."

"They will take them down tonight," said Margaloth. "Tomorrow is your sabbath."

"Let us go and see."

"But, master ..." Margaloth began in a warning voice.

"No daggerman will know me in this cloak and scarf," said Barabbas, and when they had passed through the gate he turned to the west, pressing through the dense crowds that were coming down from the Hill of Skulls. With difficulty Margaloth kept close behind him.

It was now nearly dark. The afterglow of the stormy sunset was fading into a deep purple pall on the horizon. The fires the guards had lit on the knoll to warm themselves sent shadows flickering in and out among the dispersing crowd. At times, when a log slipped down among the embers, a shower of sparks flew up.

In this unsteady light Barabbas at last caught a glimpse of the hill over the heads of those near him.

"Blood of God!" he cried, grasping Margaloth's arm. "There are three crosses!"

"Keep your head down, master," whispered the anxious captain.

Hundreds of muttering watchers who had returned after the storm were standing in a close ring, many of them raising their voices to revile the hated Galilean, although the centurion had pronounced him dead. But as Barabbas drew near, a frightful scream came from the cross nearest him, piercing all the noise of the crowd, and in the flare of the fires he recognized Jehoida. For a moment he thought the archer had seen him approach, but the tortured man's eyes were fixed and staring. His body was twitching, and at times, when a spasmodic shiver wrenched the holes in his hands, a wild cry broke on the air with shocking suddenness.

"Ah! Son of Joshua!" groaned Barabbas. "I should have died with you."

Dragging his glance from the dying lace, Barabbas looked toward the middle cross, from which came no sound or sign of

life. The dangling limbs were still. The chin hung forward on the breastbone. A spear had been thrust into the Galilean's side, but blood had stopped flowing from the wound. He was dead.

Barabbas bent his head and wept.

The savagery of the voices around him broke in upon his grief. Swallowing down his tears, he moved to one side so that he could see Zibeeon. The youth of Bethabara hung motionless in a merciful stupor, but a groan issued from his gaping mouth with every breath; his eyeballs were rolled up in a hideous trance.

"Little Zibeeon!" sighed Barabbas.

A newcomer, pressing closely behind him, said: "Is the blasphemer yet alive?"

He was answered by another scoffing voice: "No. He is dead. He saved others, but himself he could not save."

Turning swiftly, Barabbas saw a sneer on the face of a Levite who was pointing with derision at the middle cross.

"You are a son of lies!" declared Barabbas, vehemently. He glanced with scorn at the tassels of the priest's robe, marking him as a Councillor of the Sanhedrin. "You are one of those who condemned him. You know how he could have saved himself. If he had denied his words, you would have loosed him. But he would not. If he had cringed before you and declared that your god who lusts for blood is the All Highest, you would have let him go. But he would not. He stood silent while you accused him, knowing you would take his life unless he bowed himself to the will of priests who serve a monstrous deity ..."

"Who dares to speak of a monstrous deity?" demanded the priest, raising his hands as though warding off a blow.

Barabbas felt Margalothe dragging at his wrist, but he shook him off.

"Blasphemy!" cried out the Levite, turning in horror to those around him.

"Today you condemned a just, and gentle man for blasphemy, who never blasphemed," answered Barabbas, his arm threshing the air like a whip-lash. "Neither do I blaspheme. Who can blaspheme against a god who is a pitiless beast, delighting in thunder and blood? Who can believe in this almighty scorpion? Only the vile heart of men could have conceived such an evil one in heaven. No, not even the heart of men, for the heart is warm, and the soul can be lofty. No, this fiend comes from the cold and quaking bowels of men, a creature of man's ugliest fears!"

Shouts of "Blasphemy!" smothered his strong vibrant voice. He had raised himself to his full height, and now a circle of menacing faces glared up at him. Fists were shaken. Here and there a man pushed others aside to stoop and snatch up a stone. The outcry around him grew to a fury.

"Stone the blasphemer!"

"Is this another of the men of Galilee?"

"Take him before the priests!"

"Stone him to death!"

While the shouting continued Margalothe had been trying to drag him away, but Barabbas suddenly stepped up on to a flat projecting rock, so that every eye could see him. He tore the cloak from his shoulders, revealing the prison shirt and the stump of his arm. Hastily he snatched loose the scarf from his head and flung it down.

"Do you know me?" he demanded, his voice ringing with insolent challenge.

Fresh logs had just been added to a nearby fire, and the burst of flame lit up his face. The scar through his beard shone in the ruddy gleam.

Gasps of recognition could be heard, and his name passed from mouth to mouth.

Barabbas stared around him, his eyes roving haughtily from face to face.

"Today I was pardoned!" he cried. "You demanded my pardon! Hear me, men of Jerusalem!"

Without turning his head, he gestured behind him toward the cross where Jesus hung.

"This son of gentleness died in my stead," he declared, beating his hand against his heart. "He was a man without fault. Your priests charged him with blasphemy, although he had spoken only against them and the ungodly traffic of the temple. They were afraid of him. They were afraid, not for their lives, but for their trade. He did not gather men with swords to overthrow them. He was a gentle man. He preached against fear, and without fear they cannot rule, neither priests nor kings! That was his fault! For if he persuaded men to dwell together without temples or sacrifices, without fear, and without possessions, sharing all things together, as brothers, as equals, what would become of the fine palaces of the priests? And what would become of you who sell trifles to the temple pilgrims, and beasts and doves for the sacrifices? You believe in Jehovah, every one of you! You believe in fear. It pays you well. It brings pilgrims by tens of thousands to this city, this bloody city, for you to cheat. Praise Jehovah! He fills your pockets. Praise Jehovah!"

"Blasphemy! Blasphemy!" shouted a hundred voices at once.

Glancing around him at the murderous faces, Barabbas read his sentence in their eyes. They would have no pity.

He was standing with his back to the crosses. He could not see, but he felt the three men hanging there. He numbered himself with them, and with all the dead.

He exulted within himself, and as he awaited his death, the tenderness of the man of Galilee seemed to come alive in his soul. The old wrappings of hate which had bound up his heart all these years to imprison its aching were sundered by a sob which shook his chest. Now he felt only sorrow for a world beyond redeeming, for all who would be left alive to meet the next day's light.

Pointing again toward the middle cross, he burst out in anguish: "Now that you have killed this man, who sought to save you ..."

There was a warning shout beside him.

Margaloth, who had crept close, tried to drag him down out of sight, but Barabbas was shaken by a dagger, flung with cruel force from a few paces behind him. The blade entered his back between the spine and the shoulder bone. A tremor ran through him.

"This!..." he cried, choking, as a sharp stone struck his head.

He pitched forward into silence.

The centurion in charge, hearing an uproar on the eastward side of the knoll, turned from warming himself at one of the fires. He had been on crucifixion duty before, and was accustomed to the raging and wailing of the Jews when their people were executed. But now he saw stones hurtling over the heads of the crowd.

Calling a sergeant to him, he said: "Scatter these howling dogs! Use the flat of your swords."

Standing with his hands spread out behind him toward the warmth, he watched his men disperse the mob and drive them toward the city.

The sergeant presently returned and reported: "They have left two men dead."

The centurion went to view the bodies.

"That one is Barabbas, the robber, who was released today," he declared.

"This one has the look of an Arab."

A soldier who stood by said: "His head is crushed, but he is like a man I saw with Barabbas on the day they attacked the palace."

"What shall we do with them?" asked the sergeant.

The centurion looked over at the long shallow trench that had been dug for the bodies of the three men on the crosses.

"Dig your ditch deeper," he said.



Jerith lay grieving alone. All day long, since she had returned from the Praetorium, she had been praying and weeping. When Haggitha aroused her, she was startled to find that night had come. The old nurse had brought in a lighted lamp. She set it down at a distance from the bed and whispered across the room: "Are you awake, highness?"

"I have not slept," said Jerith, thrusting her hands into her hair which was tangled and sodden with tears.

Haggitha stepped nearer. "The Councillor Nicodemus has come," she said.

"The Councillor Nicodemus," Jerith repeated, as though the words were meaningless.

"The old man. The rabbi," said Haggitha.

"Yes, yes," murmured Jerith, raising her aching head.

"He asked for the master, but the master has not returned."

"Why has the rabbi come?"

"He has come to prepare the tomb."

Jerith sat up. She coiled her hair quickly, and Haggitha helped her from the bed, supporting her as she stood swaying dizzily.

"You have eaten nothing since daybreak," the old nurse chided.

"Hush, Haggitha," said Jerith.

With the old woman's help she began to move. At the top of the stairs she looked down. The hall was empty.

"Where is he?" she whispered.

"He would not enter. He is a Pharisee. He said it would pollute the house if he came in, for he has been with the dead."

Jerith went slowly down the staircase, clinging to the balustrade, while on the other side Haggitha supported her. Reaching the porch, she nodded to Haggitha and took the last few steps alone. She leaned against one of the outer pillars and waited for Nicodemus to speak. He was standing in the dusk ten paces away.

"Do not come near me, Jerith," he said.

"Where is Joseph?" she murmured, dragging the words out patiently.

"He has gone to Pilate for leave to bury Jesus."

"Why is he so long? Have you seen Barabbas?"

"I do not know Barabbas," said the rabbi.

"Did you not see him in the streets?"

The old man wagged his head widely from side to side, "I do not know the man," he insisted.

"Were you at Golgotha?"

"Yes, Jerith."

"You saw ... you saw Jesus ... dying?"

"He is dead, Jerith."

"I cannot believe he is dead."

"Joseph said he had sent you a message."

"He did."

Nicodemus looked at the sky. In the east the first star had appeared over the dark tower of Antonia.

"I have brought the spices," he said, glancing behind him at the tall slave who had rested his heavy burden on the ground, and stood with his arms loosely clasped behind him.

Jerith looked at the wicker basket and murmured: "I shall not believe he is dead until I see his body."

"You must not see his body, Jerith, unless ... unless he is raised from the dead."

"Ah, do you believe he will rise in three days?"

"Many of the disciples believe it, and this morning it was talked of in the Sanhedrin. One of the Council opposed condemning Jesus because he feared that if he were put to death his disciples would spread rumours of a miraculous coming to life."

Jerith leaned more heavily against the pillar. "Poor Judas," she breathed out, sorrowfully. "He has been expecting a miracle for months. What will he believe, now?"

Nicodemus glanced at her quickly. "Have you not heard?" he asked.

Jerith nodded. "Yes. Claudia told me it was Judas who betrayed Jesus to the priests."

"Ah, but since," cried the rabbi, spreading his hands.

"Since?"

The old man looked down, shuffling one foot forward and scraping it back. "I went to the Alley of Spices today ..." he began, falteringly.

"Yes."

"To buy ointments for the burial ..."

"Yes."

"And a neighbour, a spice merchant who lives near Judas, told me that he is dead. Judas is dead."

"How did he die?"

"His mother found him. He had hanged himself."

"O woe!" Jerith moaned. She lifted the sleeve of her gown as though to rend it, but instead she crushed it against her quivering mouth.

"Jerith," said the old man, quietly. "He went to Golgotha today, expecting a miracle ... and when there was no miracle ..."

"He was mad," said Jerith. "I saw him at Bethany only a few days ago, and he ..."

She broke off, startled by a noise of footsteps outside the courtyard.

Old Lod was already hobbling to the gate. She saw him disappear under the archway, and heard his quavering voice call out a challenge. Her brother's voice answered. The gate opened, and another voice she knew, raised in command, rang against the stones.

"Quartus!" she gasped.

A company of legionaries marched in and stepped aside in two wide rows inside the gate. Between them came four men carrying a bier. It was covered with a linen cloth, but the form of a body could be plainly seen. Joseph walked behind.

Jerith clung to the pillar and called out her brother's name. He came hurrying to her.

"Why is Quartus here?" she demanded in a frenzied whisper. "Are they searching for Barabbas again?"

"No," said Joseph, his head drooping. "No. They have sent men to guard the tomb."

Jerith put her hand on Joseph's arm and looked up into his face. He closed his eyes, and she felt him trembling.

"Brother," she said in a firm voice. "Before you place him in the tomb, I must see him."

Joseph opened his eyes. "No, Jerith," he said.

"I want to look on him for the last time."

"No, Jerith."

"Do you think I cannot ..."

Joseph seized both her hands. "Remember him as he was," he said. He released her abruptly, turned to the men beside the bier and pointed down the hill toward the tomb. "Go with them, Lod," he said. "I will follow you."

Nicodemus made a sign to the slave and started down the slope behind the bier. Jerith saw her brother run a few steps to overtake him. They whispered together briefly, and the rabbi looked back at her, shaking his head. Then Joseph returned, put his arm about Jerith, and said: "It is cold, sister. Let us go in."

She went with him, her head bowed, but as soon as the door was closed she faced him with a frantic look.

"All day you have been telling me that Barabbas might wait until dark ..." she began, sensing something foreboding in his manner.

"He will not come, Jerith," said Joseph, his grasp tightening on her shoulders.

"Ah! He gave you a message?"

"Wait, Jerith. He went to Golgotha ..."

"While Jesus was still alive?"

"No. Afterward. I did not see him. I had gone to Pilate. I was told this when I returned."

"Tell me."

"Two of his captains were crucified with Jesus, and he came there. Jesus was dead, but the priests and others were standing near the cross, reviling him. Barabbas turned on them. They tried to shout him down. Some threatened to stone him. But he flung off a cloak he was wearing and sprang up on a rock so that all could see him and recognize him. They knew him, but by that time his words had angered them. They cried out that he was another blasphemer and began to pick up stones from the ground ..."

Jerith felt herself sinking against her brother. Holding her against his shoulder, he pressed his chin down into her coiled hair.

"But he went on ..."

Despair descended about her like a cloud, and she cowered closer to her brother's heart.

Joseph bent his head and crushed his cheek against hers. "He was killed by a falling stone."

"O my brother!"

She could not weep.

"Have they buried him?" she said.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"He is buried, Jerith."

"Where, Joseph?"

"The Romans buried him with two of his captains."

"On the Hill of Skulls?"

Joseph did not answer; he crossed his arms so that his sleeves covered her head, shielding her grief.

She began to shiver so violently that the earth seemed to quake. Then it gave way, and she sank into a dark tide.

She awoke to the sound of muted wailing.

Haggitha was on her knees beside her. A lamp was flickering. Light and sight and hearing came to her.

She sprang up, her hands reaching out, her mind filled with some urgent intent. But what was it? She tried to recall it, but now she was fully awake, and there was nothing she had to do. Nothing! The world was empty.

Haggitha had raised herself awkwardly, mumbling and groaning, and Jerith watched her, appalled. The cumbersome movements and cracking joints of the old nurse suddenly revealed to her the long, piteous story of womanhood, widowhood and palsied age.

"Leave me," she said, chokingly.

Her head throbbed with pain. Her limbs twitched without ceasing.

"Shall I ever sleep again?" she moaned to herself. "How can Jerusalem sleep? How can the world sleep ... after this?"

She felt ashamed to be alive.

"How can I live? Where? For what?" she asked herself.

A violent impulse to leave the city pricked her like a thorn, but when the thought of Arimathea rose in her mind, she knew there could be no joy there, now. Every sloping hill, every vineyard, every winding road, every sunset and nightfall would bring her pain, reminding her of the life she had dreamed of there, a long peaceful life with Barabbas beside her.

Now it was agony to think of him. She dared not think of him. But she could not banish him from her mind ... shrunken, pitiful, maimed, in a shirt of sackcloth. A man who had aimed to alter the earth!

What irony! What folly! To die in violent defence of a man of gentleness!

She heard her brother's footsteps in the upper hall. Joseph came in. His eyes were like two wounds. Without a word he sank down and put his arm over her shoulders. A faint smell of funeral spices hung about him.

Jerith leaned her face against him and cried: "O my sad brother! What remains for us?"

"Only love," he murmured.

"Barabbas never believed that love could change the world," sighed Jerith. "Who can believe it, now?"

She felt Joseph's arm strengthening about her. His voice was stronger, too, as he said: "The whole world must believe it ... or be lost!"

[The end of *The Robber—A Tale of the Time of the Herods* by Bertram Brooker]