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THE FOURTH KING

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BY NORBERT COULEHAN



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THE FOURTH KING

CHAPTER ONE

THE storm fled and dawn broke, as glorious as a legion's battle shout.

The city stirred. Life took shape, deep-ravined and noisome. Slaves yawned over their porridge. The markets opened. Tradesmen topped greens, checked their small change and discussed the games.

A trumpet rang. Doors banged and the narrow streets lumped muddy with rushing workers. Masons toiled the heights, raised their wooden mallets and suddenly the face of Rome was changed an imperceptible inch from brick to marble.

Ridge-high, sun-touched within Minerva's porch, a young man's figure grew into the winter light. His tunic was sea-faded, his helmet weather-dulled, but it carried clearly the star of a serving officer in the courier branch of the Roman navy. Across his breast lay the rare insigne of a sea-tribune.

Emerging, his countenance came patrician in profile; a handsome severity, fashionable enough to pass for that of a popular Greek actor.

He surveyed the near-by river thoughtfully, as if to seek further communion with the wet chest of Father Tiber, to savour again the cries of distant mariners and the splash of multiple oars.

Abruptly he retraced his steps, crossed the wide pavements above the Forum and plunged down the shallow steps until he reached the vicinity of the world map.

The hour was early, but already a group of students were within the precincts, clustered about their teacher, a dried-up professor who

was indicating the map with a pointer and explaining its significance.

'This is the first map ever incised in the lapidary. Or rather should I say cut in stone. You will observe that it covers ten cubits of faced rock, the empire proper being porphyry, while the main routes are set in lapis lazuli. Trading posts and garrison towns are not, of course, up to date. The map's value lies rather within the historical sphere and its importance as yet another contribution to the cartological science by Caesar.'

The boys stared owlishly. A few made notes on their tablets. One, a short fat fellow with a dark line on his upper lip, scratched himself with his stylus and contemplated the buttocks of a slave girl who had bent down to retrieve a stray orange from an adjacent pavement.

His teacher broke in sharply: 'Attention, Marcus Adronicus! It is not permitted to gaze at a person's person when I am lecturing.'

'But, sir, you were watching her yourself, sir!'

'If I am Aristotle it is not necessary for you to presume you are Alexander Magnus. That is all. We will continue on our way to the upper chamber, where the deputies will be assembling for a debate on the amendments to the sumptuary laws.'

They trooped off, leaving the young sea-tribune to contemplate the world map, to reflect on its mad logic, and the careless assumption that Augustus could indicate the outlines of the universe with the same negligent ease as he would dictate peace terms to a conquered race.

His professional glance marked the glaring inaccuracies of the Atlantic coastline, the faulty charting of the Lesser Ionians, then sought a more familiar perspective. There it was, Nether Africa, Rome's last outpost, left dangling below Ethiopia like a petrified nerve; as if the world were a mutilated torso with its lower members crushed off by a monstrous agency, then swallowed within a steamy cauldron of tropicalia.

But to the engrossed watcher it stood also for the hall-mark of memory and the point of recent departure; Zanzibar, and the monsoon which had swept him north past the Cape of Spices, the long haul up the Red Sea, with every oar-beat bringing Rome closer; until at last he had caught the courier's bireme from Caesarea, and the excitement of homecoming had overflowed within his heart.

His reflections were disturbed by a voice crying his name. He turned sharply, and saw a fellow dressed in the gown of the legal

profession leaping the steps to greet him.

'Titus! Don't tell me you spent the night in your ship!'

'Not quite. It was midnight before I concluded my business, and too late to disturb you. I sent a message to Vipsania, acquainting her of my arrival. Surely she received it!'

'It was in her hands when I entered the house. We made a place for you, immediately.'

'Calpurnius! I am sorry! I should have hastened more quickly, but being in the vicinity of Neptune after I left the dock, I decided to pay my debt to the gods. A thunderstorm swept the ground and I found myself engaged in an argument with the priest on watch. Suddenly it was dawn, whereupon my reluctance to disturb you late last night became a hesitancy to drag my wife out of bed this morning. I idled away an hour, then glanced in here.'

'Where I discover you studying the world map. Speculating no doubt on your next voyage?'

'Calpurnius! You ought to know whither I am bound, if anyone does!'

'Not quite. My knowledge extends no further than your own. You are rostered for immediate departure.'

Irritability darkened the seaman's eyes. He protested, 'There are fully a dozen couriers available for service in Rome; some, indeed, who have been idle for a month! I have just returned. Why should I be marked?'

'Ask your admiral, Titus. He is head of the marine. I am but its legal adviser. He did say, however, that you were the most suitable officer for the highly delicate task involved.'

'Highly delicate task! What do you mean?'

Calpurnius glanced around; said quickly, 'This is no place to talk. Come with me to the club. After all, it is on your way home.'

They moved off, into the thickening stream of street life. Housewives fluttered their brooms in doorways. A fuller lurched from a side alley, his pots a-slop. A careless match hawker barged into the reeking cargo and was splashed for his pains. Two charioteers teased an early-rising harlot, while a Macedonian mercenary, in the city for the first time, attempted business with a Syrian antique dealer; produced furtively some silver earrings, a worn comb and a pair of brocaded slippers, soft as a slut's belly, the hasty loot from some slaughtered Belgian's hut. A knight went by in his litter; oiled, perfumed; his

servants clamouring for passage, his clients beseeching the occasional favour.

The commotion separated the two men, and Titus found himself marooned on the pavement, diverted by the bargaining which had opened up beneath his elbow.

‘A shilling the lot,’ the Syrian dealer said.

‘But she was a princess! And this comb is solid amber, even if there are a few teeth missing.’

‘So what? Rome is full of amber combs since the Second Immortals returned from the Rhine. And don’t you auxiliaries ever murder anyone under the rank of princess? These slippers stink a bit, too.’

‘No, they don’t. That’s me. I was splashed by that bloody fuller. Or maybe it was because I stowed the stuff in my underclothing when we marched south. They’ll wash, anyway.’

The dealer twisted the shoes speculatively. ‘I suppose I could sell them to a blind slave who had lost her nose. Only she wouldn’t have any money, would she?’

The prostitute abandoned the charioteers, snatched up the slipper and attempted to don it. She asked over her shoulder, ‘Is it true that these German tarts will do it for a bar of ash-soap?’

The soldier grabbed the slipper, turned to the dealer and said abruptly, ‘Give me the shilling then.’

Across the street Calpurnius awaited his brother-in-law. ‘Don’t tell me that in all your travels you have never seen a streetwalker ply her trade, or a huckster rob a soldier.’

‘Not within the shadows of a temple,’ Titus told him. ‘Such refinements in blasphemy are exclusive to Rome.’

They reached the Poseidon Club, a cool, quiet spot nested on a low plateau above the street and approached by a flight of narrow steps. An elderly member was in the entrance, adjusting his toga and about to depart. He greeted Calpurnius in a voice of measured deliberation, surveyed Titus calmly, appraisingly, then moved off, the purple hem of his dress swishing ceremoniously.

‘It’s old Manilius, a retired procurator,’ Calpurnius explained. ‘A bit above himself since he was raised to the Senate. He seems to think you are a comparatively new member.’

Titus stirred his thoughts. ‘Did he? I’m sorry. My mind was adrift for the moment. Perhaps I should have hailed him.’

'Not necessarily. He cheers for the Red at the games; and, as you know, we have always been for the Green. Quite a distinction these days.'

They were met inside by the manager, a quick-witted provincial who prided himself on his memory for faces. 'Titus Terentius, the Sea-Tribune! Why, it must be fully two years since you were in the club! Welcome back to Rome, sir!'

He engaged Calpurnius in conversation and left Titus to seat himself at a table adjacent to some surgeons, one of whom was declaiming resentfully against the mangled condition of the dead gladiators whose corpses were sent up to the Anatomy College for dissection.

'Most unsatisfactory. You discuss a certain nerve with your class, then uncover the cadaver to find that the precise part has been torn out by a careless hyena. On the other hand, if you get a clean skin it turns out to be a hot day and everyone excuses himself. Has anybody ever thought about pickling?'

Titus changed his chair, drifted into the garden and occupied an empty bench, where he could stretch his legs and chase the mood of the sounds which swirled up from the streets below. The distant roar of argument from the slave market came to his ears. Horses neighed, dogs barked, the club janitor called the hour in discreet undertones, and a trumpet call blared silvery through the tree-shaded ridge on the opposite hill, a martial note laid unexpectedly across the multiplex din, like an admonishing finger on garrulous lips.

Calpurnius reappeared, apologetic. 'I am a committee man now, and find myself embroiled in innumerable discussions. There is a great fuss going on at the moment about litters being made available, down at the street corner, to carry members up the steps. Some of the older men are finding the climb trying these days. What were we talking about?'

'Nothing much. I was enjoying the air and listening to that bugle sounding off at the barracks. Could it be the morning air, playing tricks? It appeared quite close.'

'It is closer than you think. Augustus has changed his residence since you were last in the city. Maecenas bequeathed him his gardens and palace on the hill. The trumpet note was the second guard change. You could set your water-watch by it, for it brings the hour as accurately as Cleopatra's clock. Are you going at once to Vipsania, or shall I send a message with the news that you are delayed here?'

'I will join her immediately. But what of yourself?'

'Busy as usual. The augurs declared today as propitious for public business and the admiralty is bringing a case against a swindling ship chandler. We have engaged lawyers to watch our interests and I am watching the lawyers.'

He broke off, whistled softly and a servant crossed to their table, bringing them each a goblet of spiced wine laced with raw eggs.

A young officer entered the club and rushed to greet them. He was dressed in the uniform of a sea-centurion, but with an unusual armband superimposed on his tunic, which at once caught the attention of Titus. He sprang to his feet. 'Tarquin! By the Gods! And temple insignia on his tunic! Or are my eyes deceiving me?'

The fellow winced in assumed misery. 'You needn't rub it in. The priests have been out a bit lately in their weather forecasts, and someone decided that a sea-officer should be made available as professional adviser. They asked for a serious-minded chap with spiritual leanings. I think the admiral sent me along as a joke.'

Calpurnius interposed gently, 'But, Tarquin, we heard that you were most taken with your work. Indeed, there is a story going around that you are contemplating an approach to holy orders.'

'Why, Calpurnius! I am not even eligible physically! There are warts on my hip hideous enough to exclude a camelopard from the games! I'm in trouble, too, with the high priestess from Vesta. Forty years in the Goddess's service, she said. Hasn't seen a girl walled-up yet, and doesn't intend to because of me.'

He nudged Titus: 'She's been mentioning your name. Asked if you were the son of the Madame Terentius who studied theology with her as a girl. I gathered she didn't think the navy had shown much imagination in choosing me as its representative.'

'Neither do I,' Titus said. 'But what are you doing down here? Is it not the hour for the third sacrifice?'

'Everything's late today. As a matter of fact they were still arguing over the first sacrifice when I left. Two pigeons with identical liver trouble, and just the thing to delay the omens. Last night's thunderstorm didn't help either. It appears there's a special courier leaving Rome tomorrow, and the Supreme Pontiff doesn't want bad news.'

'Neither does Titus,' Calpurnius interposed. 'He is your special courier.'

'Take me with you,' Tarquin begged. 'Before the College of Augurs has me quietly strangled.'

He gulped his drink and hurried off.

'I don't know why I like that fellow,' Calpurnius declared. 'He offends almost everything I hold sacred. Yet he is not wholly incorrigible, and I always leave his company in a better mood than I joined it.'

He broke off, and added, 'But you must be off. Vipsania awaits you, and the knowledge is pressing on my conscience. Until the eighth hour, then.'

Alone, Titus crossed the ridge and threaded the trees; toiled upwards beyond a further slope, until the familiar outlines of the Villa Calpurnius took shape before his eyes. There it was, the saw-toothed brick wall trickling across the undulating ground, the high gates flung wide, the moss-patterned cobble-path, beckoning homeward his tired feet.

He paused abruptly, baffled by the unusual stillness which hung in the air. The morning breeze had expired. Not a leaf trembled nor living thing moved. The hum of insects fell below ear-level. Time itself seemed in a trance.

The faint sound of voices drew his attention. He glanced across at the house and discerned a group of people, dimly outlined in the entrance corridor. Heads bowed, they were clustered before the niches in which stood the images of the household gods.

He drew back out of sight, sought a stone bench within a near-by alcove and contemplated a marble bust which stood on a slender pillar.

It was an arresting piece of statuary, so flawlessly sculptured that indeed it seemed as if the mind which conceived and the chisel which shaped had truly turned brute rock into living flesh and flowing muscle.

His eyes dwelt earnestly on the statue's features: the unhooded gaze, the short nose, good-humoured mouth and square jaw. A seaman's face. The face of his own father.

He abandoned himself to sudden emotion. The compelling significance of tradition overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER TWO

Not only his father but his grandfather, Terentius Magnus, had contributed to Roman sea-power; for in his time the old fellow had been a veteran sailor with the great Julius, had built and captained the sprawling flotilla which the Dictator had commissioned for the invasion of Britain. This was not in itself considered an achievement of great importance. Rome's indifference to its navy was a notorious joke; and no one expected that when the triumphal ornaments were handed out, there would be anything left over after the favoured Tenth Legion had staked its claim.

But Julius Caesar rarely forgot an old comrade who was also a useful servant. He clapped a surtax on the metropolitan pig-swill trade and issued an edict that the proceeds should be allotted to Terentius Magnus. He additionally appointed him port-prefect at Ostia, a sinecure which called for little more than the caretaking of the laid-up home fleet and the occasional victualling of a trireme which might be required in a hurry.

A widower, the elderly admiral's state pension died with him; and Titus' father, Terentius Junius, inherited but a broken-down villa on the beach at Ostia and the rank of sea-tribune in the planning section of the Roman marine.

Persistence gained him early sea-duties. Family prestige brought him rapid promotion. Beardless, he became officer-commanding Mediterranean grain convoys; a hard school for a young seaman and a service of rich interest to a budding naval architect. Junius soon discovered that the pirates who preyed on Roman shipping were better served by ships than himself, and sought to improve the standard of escort-craft under his command.

He developed an interest in the liburna, a swift, hard-hitting twin-

decker which could work to windward under sail and was highly manœuvrable in enclosed waters. In the course of time he drew plans for tactical evolutions with these craft, and frequently amused himself at sea by deploying them in mock attacks against his convoys.

When the civil war broke out it was natural he should fasten his fortunes on those of Caesar's nephew, Octavian. He was recalled to Rome and given command of the light forces under Grand Admiral Agrippa, the head of the Roman navy.

Time was short. Antony, the renegade triumvir and potential usurper of the purple, was at Alexandria. An eloquent firebrand, he had kindled the East with discontented legions. Cohorts abandoned their garrisons and fell back to join his standard. Tetrarchs and tyrants poured in subsidies by the million, while Cleopatra surrendered her all to aid a lover's cause; and to quench an unparalleled thirst against a Rome which had proscribed her from its precincts and branded her as a royal whore.

The loan of her fleet to Antony was a more practical contribution to personal hatred, and incidentally a potential headache to Octavian, for the Egyptian navy was the world's mightiest, including squadrons of battleships, quintuple- and quadruple-oared, each capable of floating a double-century of soldiers, complete with field equipment.

The issue was decided at Actium, where the Romans trapped the Egyptians within the entrance to a deep bay and badly mauled their unwieldy armada. As Antony retired seaward to lick his wounds, Octavian flung out a signal to the distant Junius, hovering over the horizon with his cruiser force. The swift-manceuvring twin-deckers fell on the Egyptians from an unexpected line of bearing, smashed their oar-banks with metal-tipped beaks and spread confusion on their decks with showers of arrows. The cumbrous mass broke and fled, with Junius and his long, lean attack-craft in close chase. By dusk the horizon was strewn with burning wrecks and broken hopes. Rome as a republic went down with the sun and Rome as an empire came up with the stars. Octavian changed his name to Augustus and considered the case of his favourite young admiral.

'It's a pity you didn't catch up with Cleopatra,' he said. 'I wanted her for my victory parade. At the end of a gold chain, if possible, behind my chariot. However, I'm not forgetting you've pulled off a fine piece of business, and intend to marry you into the family.'

So Junius was united with the most eligible female in the land, the Emperor's elderly aunt.

The affair was solemnised by proxy on the field of battle, and appropriate arrangements were made for proper nuptials when the fleet returned to Rome.

But Junius found much to delay his passage. After all, duty came first, and time didn't really matter to the lady of his heart, now well in her seventies. He dallied at Rhodes to pay off his reserve crews; swept the Eastern Mediterranean and snapped up the strayed remnants of the Egyptian fleet; glanced into Alexandria and offered a doomed Antony the length of a halter; settled a private account with some Sicilian pirates and arrived back at Ostia just as the autumnal gales were piping and his ships due for their winter lay-up.

'It's poor timing,' his admiral told him. 'I don't know how Augustus will take it. Your bride passed away last week in a fit. Convulsions, aggravated by an excess of excitement at your imminent return.'

The old lady possessed a grand-niece who had lived with her as a companion. This girl was beautiful, modest and exceptionally chaste. She had been considered seriously as a candidate for the Vestals, having possessed the necessary qualifications of patrician blood and an unblemished body. She was barred finally by an unfortunate accident. A slave spilt boiling water over her foot, leaving an ugly scar and rendering her hideous in the eyes of the gods.

Nevertheless, she was still highly desirable to a young sea-tribune with a strong sense of responsibility and romantic inclinations. After claiming his wife's fortune under Roman law, he applied for the girl's hand. Augustus said he supposed it was the same thing in principle, although not exactly what he had intended. Junius married the grand-niece and gave a banquet to celebrate the occasion with true Roman magnificence. There were quails' eggs and larks' tongues; a sow roasted on one side and boiled on the other. The wines were cooled in snow which had been stored in the caverns of Vesuvius. There were tropical fruits of rare flavours and exotic shapes; after which Junius carried off his bride to a villa which he built on the seacoast. He named it Actium; installed his lares and penates; and was stabbed to death by an insane freedman, six months before Titus was born.

There, by the Tyrrhenian shore, where primitive tides sobbed

and the muddy Tiber stained the blue sea, widow and son lived out their immediate years. At his mother's knee Titus imbibed good counsel; learnt to applaud virtue and to abhor evil, to accept Roman master-destiny as second nature and never to forget that in serving his country he was at the same time, by a miraculous alchemy, also serving the gods.

Formal education came early. It was taught by a Greek freedman of letters named Theophilus and shared with the two children of a neighbour, an obscure knight whose residence abutted the Villa Actium, and to whom Madame Terentius had extended her interest. The boy, Calpurnius, was pleasant-mannered, amiable and naturally studious. The girl, Vipsania, was a warm, generous child with the promise of considerable beauty. Being the eldest, she wielded a schoolroom authority over the two boys and maintained a superiority in matters scholastic; a factor which influenced the regard of both Madame Terentius and Theophilus, and which incidentally gave her scanty knowledge an exaggerated value.

The curriculum drew heavily on the classics. Theophilus was a poet and the apostle of poets. Lyric beauty ran in his blood. To him the bitter-sweet Euripidean dramas were both family history and living memory. As a boy he had trod the cold stones where once Medea wept and before the Greek gods had fled the skies for Roman sanctuary he was reading his own sonnets within the shadows of the Olympian colonnades.

Neither was he without philosophy. Captured at Actium and dragged to Rome at a conqueror's heel, he could perceive readily the logical relation between his rude slavery and the iridescent tradition that a legion never broke its ranks. He had taken his sudden bondage and eventual manumission as the natural sequence of events in a world where even the gods were forced to recognise the paramount argument of might being right.

When the boys donned their gowns of manhood the school split threefold. Calpurnius, who had early revealed forensic ability, sought employment in the legal field. Madame Terentius used her influence to secure him a position in the law section of the Roman marine, and he went off to Rome.

At her brother's departure, Vipsania drifted closer to the Villa Actium. She had matured into a good-natured, simple girl upon whom Madame Terentius leaned increasingly as the years passed.

They made a devout pair, the woman and the girl; much addicted to strict observance of the state religion. Devotion marked their hours. The calendar of Heaven was rotated with blessed regularity within the high walls of the Villa Actium, where all deities were served with equal zeal.

Titus, however, made bones for one god alone. Neptune, the bearded sea monarch, claimed his allegiance at birth. His temple was the unbroken horizon, his thurible the curved spoon of a steering-oar, his incense the wind's salt tang.

All about him were the indications of dedicated profession. The ancient sea lapped beneath his nursery window. The true sailing-winds bent the trees within his mother's orchard. The sands of Ostia, gritty beneath his bare feet, were ever cluttered with the matériel of the Roman navy. In winter the water's edge was darkened by the stranded hulls of laid-up ships; cuneiform rows, cloth-shrouded and redolent. An empire's sea-power slumbering, but still a fleet in being. On the first of spring the hibernation ended. The long cloth covers were whipped aside and the beaches yawned into ordered life. Engineers brooded over plans. Leather-aproned ballisterii tinkered about their rope-and-timber artillery. Blacksmiths rigged portable forges, sweated Spanish iron into bolt-rings, rigging cleats and fittings.

Adjacent, within wooden frames, the new-entry bench slaves practised rhythm and stroke on dry land. Oars swept meaningless above tufty dune grass. Blades feathered thin air, then bit deeply into nothing. Make-believe ships sprang across imaginary waves. A child's game, but one fraught with bitter intent.

The blue Mediterranean skies flung back sound and smell. Odorous pitch fought the fragrance of sawn pinewood. The monotonous threnody of the bench slaves filled the air, a drab thread within the coloured weave of imminent embarkation.

Waterborne in bright new ships, Titus saw early action in small affairs, studied his various subjects and was granted the rank of sea-tribune in company with other youths of the equestrian order.

He forged ahead. He was educated above the level of the average sea-officer, was the son of a fighting admiral and on the fringe of the purple. Inevitably his gifts took him into the *corps d'élite* of the Roman marine, the courier-tribunes, who were entrusted personally with Rome's most secret instructions to its proconsuls.

He served on the Northern circuit until his promotion to the second rank of sea-tribune, whereupon he was commissioned for special duties to the East, a post of considerable importance and one which marked him out as palace-favoured.

Before his departure he hurried down to Ostia, bent on sharing a brief respite from duty with his mother. But the Widow Terentius was now dying and past sharing anything with anyone, beyond the wish which had long burdened her thoughts.

Were Titus to marry Vipsania, she said, then truly she could join the gods with a contented mind.

'She esteems and admires you,' she told her son. 'Indeed, she loves you deeply.'

The news troubled Titus; for the cadences which vibrated within Vipsania's heart could prompt no responsive chord within his own. Yet he held both a Roman's strong sense of filial duty and a deep regard for his mother's feelings. He desired her happiness beyond the point of personal sacrifice and was prepared to do her bidding without question.

He found Vipsania in the walled courtyard which led from the villa to the orchard. She had been collecting climber-roses and was accompanied by a garden slave, carrying her basket of flowers.

There was a disordered fragrance in her appearance. Beauty without design, yet shadowed, for she was standing at that point where his father had been struck down, twenty-five years previously; and the spectacle of the menial standing beside her, armed with his short pruning-knife, prompted a sudden picture of the long-gone tragedy.

He took the girl in his arms. Their long kisses climbed, but they did not take root.

CHAPTER THREE

THE wedding was without benefit of confetti. Vipsania was not of patrician descent, and unqualified for the sacred grain shower which underwrote the purest matings in the eyes of Roman society.

Religious observance rather dictated the nuptials. Vipsania duly received Titus at her own door. Her head-dress was superimposed on six pads of artificial hair. An orange-coloured veil covered her face and was surmounted by a simple wreath of verbenæ and sweet marjoram. The marriage-broker initialed the signatures of ten witnesses and personally guaranteed the entrails of a pig which was sacrificed to ensure the approval of the gods. There was a procession to the Villa Actium, with flute-players, torch-bearers and children throwing nuts. Titus offered water and fire to Vesta, then formally invited Vipsania to the nuptial couch. As he removed her garment, untied the knot in her girdle, the neighbours gathered outside the door and chanted songs appropriate to the occasion. Thus, with bleeding sacrifice and subdued splendour, were Titus and Vipsania made man and wife under Roman law.

After the wedding, Vipsania revealed an unexpected desire to enjoy the sophisticated pleasures of the city. The Villa Actium was closed down and the pair moved to the Villa Calpurnius, a fashionable residence which Vipsania's brother had acquired on a slope facing the Maecenas gardens, well within the orbit of best society.

The arrangement suited Titus. He would see little of his wife during the ensuing years. It was comforting to reflect that Vipsania would be well secured as matron of the Villa Calpurnius, and under her brother's protecting eyes during his absences from Rome.

He found little time for contemplation of his married state. International relations, the stimulus for his employment as a state courier, had recently acquired a new accent, with the emergence of a com-

mercial world within the military.

Trade had grown overnight to the point where even the Roman roads were changing their nature. Strings of donkeys, pannier-fat with flasks of Falernian, and wagons laden with export earthenware now replaced the tramp of marching legions.

The known world glittered under the sweet glow of buying cheap and selling dear. Wharves became an elegant concourse of babble and goods. Outbound dress trinkets rubbed bale-corners with piculs of spice. Counting-houses took preference over temples and played leapfrog with the exchange-rate lists on their notice-boards.

But trade returns are at best mere cyphers; shadowed reflections of the human substance, which indicate yet do not amplify. Furthermore, the very medium which prompts their origin is suspect at its source; for is not a merchant's judgment also a huckster's prejudice? The man who sells is constitutionally charitable towards those who buy his goods. He reads their minds only as far as it opens their wallets. It does not matter if they robbed a widow, legally of course, to purchase his wares. They are honest fellows if they lighten his caravan and finance his further passage towards opulence.

But Great Augustus, the shrewd and wise, wanted his foreign policy based on something more trustworthy than bazaar talk, more durable than a yearly import list. The dubious first in enlightened Roman emperors, he had dreamed since boyhood of a world family, one and indivisible. His nimble mind cogitated on this unexpected slant which international relations were taking, and sought to employ it fortuitously for the benefit of his stubborn dreams.

After all, what could not be achieved wholly by force of arms might perhaps be furthered by cajolery and persuasion on a commercial level.

He encouraged trade envoys to visit him, including three mandarins from China.

They came to complain that the silk-run caravans through Persia were being delayed unnecessarily.

'The Persians don't like me,' Augustus said. 'But it shouldn't affect your silk. It keeps, doesn't it?'

'Not its market value, O Divine Augustus! Furthermore, the tolls which the Persians exact for the privilege of passing across their territory are ruinous. We thought that Rome might consider the suggestion of creating a trading port in southern India.'

'But wouldn't that mean double-handling? Caravan to ship in India, and ship to camel in Egypt? It might be better to humour the Persians, unless you can think of a better alternative.'

'What about a canal across Egypt, O Augustus?'

'A canal?'

'A mere ditch through the sand would suffice, and would save Rome perhaps millions of shillings annually. We understand that the difficulties are not insurmountable; indeed, that a waterway was there hitherto.'

'I know. I've heard the story. The Queen of Sheba dug something of the sort from the Upper Nile to the Red Sea, for her royal barge when she visited Solomon. He filled it in when he discovered the trick. I am rather inclined to that Indian trading port, nevertheless. It might be useful for another idea I have in mind. Anything else?'

The third mandarin, hitherto silent, aired an old grudge.

'Why is our Chinese currency not acceptable in Rome, O Caesar? It is not always convenient to change our money on the Jerusalem bourse. Or, for that matter, to take your shillings back there, all the way from Ostia, when we want to repurchase our own yen and sen.'

'In a temple courtyard, too,' the second mandarin interjected. His almond-shaped eyes slanted upwards, piously, significantly.

'Why throw it in my teeth?' Augustus asked. 'It is not my religion any more than it is yours. You know very well that Roman policy permits its subjects to serve their personal gods in the manner best appreciated. If you have been to Judaea, you should realise that my procurator has no jurisdiction within the Temple walls. I believe some traders change their money at Caesarea; although I admit that at times it could be inconvenient.'

'If you ask me, O Augustus, the present practice is injurious to business feeling and reeks of monopoly.'

'It certainly reeks,' Augustus said wearily. 'Almost as much as your ban on the export of silkworms; but there's nothing I can do about it at the present. I have passed laws against the constitution of finance cartels within the empire, but I am hamstrung by delicacy when it comes to policing my edicts within the shadow of the Jewish Temple. I'd have another war on my hands overnight, and at present I am dedicated to peace. Let's all go to the games and talk again tomorrow.'

The mandarins failed to overturn the money changers' tables in

the Temple; but at least they contrived to by-pass Persia on the road to Rome. Augustus glanced into the matter of a trading port on the Indian coast and weighed its disadvantages. Red Sea pirates could prove as great a menace as the Persians, but were more readily subdued. The monsoon blew its favours only once a year, which meant seasonable gluts and shortages.

Nevertheless, Pondicherry, the new town of antiquity, was opened up like an exotic flower. African Zanzibar, too, was created for the ivory-and-slave market; Augustus rarely did things by halves and if trade were the most convenient medium through which a Roman peace could be pollinated, then it was well worth a try.

Despatches flew down the Appian Way and up the Via Flaminia. Distant proconsuls opened their mail and added burdens to their multifarious duties by being nice to customers. A genial sun warmed the imperial arteries. Customs officials literally apologised when they took their two-and-a-half per cent. Centurions opened road blocks with affable courtesy. Legionaries caught pilfering were occasionally crucified. Leading merchants were hailed and farewelled like charioteers' molls. Innocent-faced hawkers crossed and recrossed into foreign territory as if there were no such thing as a Roman spy.

Personally more important, Titus was suddenly posted as investigating officer on courier traffic beyond the frontiers; and almost overnight found himself traversing the outer edge of the thin, curved blade which ran from Nether Africa to the Bosphorus; and upon which were precariously balanced the advanced detachments of the garrison legions.

In due course he crossed into India, where a new world was opened before his eyes; and where his curiosity was aroused by the mystery of the dark-skinned masses, the great counter-civilisation which streamed endlessly to the east of the sun.

At the mouth of the Indus, where dusty trade-roads converged like tapering fingers on a darkening palm, he found life which teemed a millionfold. By day the streets crawled with thin, dun bodies and bright loin-cloths; by night the helpless earth shook with the shuffle of sleepless feet. If comparatives were to obtain, then Rome was a deserted village and all Italy an empty landscape.

On the water-front he discovered godowns more vast than any warehouse on the Tiber's banks, with dhows tiering endlessly under their bulging doors and tapping their many riches. Holds yawned.

Merchandise tumbled forth. Clarified butter came reeking. Muslin stuffs snatched colour from the occasional airs. Rice trickled from jute bags and etched pearly patterns within the raddled contours of a hot-pink ballast called *coral*.

Downriver the deep-drawn ships multiplied in their moorings and awaited the unmuzzling of the monsoon. Anchors corroded and crews idled.

Suddenly the breeze blew. Hardwood blocks clucked and croaked. Greedy sails stretched; filled, spilled and hauled their wind. Long hulls moved, lengthened their shadows and grew over the horizon, Romewards. Heigho! Before Neptune could yawn twice the vast armada was gone and the water meadows emptied. The river mouth drew in primly behind its mangrove lips; silence fell and nothing was left beyond the chance fragrance of an abandoned bale to tell of gums and spices gone overnight to perfume the breasts of a Roman matron.

Uptown, flung unexpectedly on his own resources, Titus found new wonders unfolded before his inner gaze. His deeper interest was aroused by the mode and fashion of local religions. Temples were a familiar enough sight to his Graeco-Roman eyes, but not the grotesque monsters which dwelt beneath the consecrated roofs of this strange land. Bisexual significance ran riot. Quadruple mammaries and multiple limbs were as commonplace as pillars in the Parthenon. Was this a sign, then, that the gods thus mirrored in the statuary were of minds equally distorted? He spoke to the smiling, saffron-robed priests within the temples, but discovered them soaked in a ritualism which evaded his reason and confounded his mathematics.

One fateful day, restless, uneasy, he sought a bench beneath the shade of a large tree and contemplated the busy street scenes which swirled about him. His gaze fell on a holy man, one of the privileged beggars who sat in the hot sun, hour by hour, lost in meditation. There was a rice-bowl at his side, into which natives of the lower castes dropped their occasional coins as they hurried past.

Titus had heard of these endowed and dedicated creatures. Such were their powers of sublimation, they could levitate their bodies in defiance of natural laws or, buried alive, suspend their animation for a given period. It was said of them that they peered into the future and foresaw the destinies of mankind. They were called *proph-*

ets and could bring comfort to an anguished soul by the mere dwelling of their glance.

As the Roman watched, a camel driver swaggered from the entrance of a near-by tavern door, flung a fistful of pice into the begging-bowl, roared a drunken remark and lurched off up the street.

Titus came to his feet, crossed the intervening ground, and picked up a stray coin which had rolled into the dust. He wiped the money on his cloak and dropped it in the bowl. Suddenly he became aware of an averted face; sunken eyes which searched within his soul, and a voice which seemed to come from out of the skies above. *Prepare your house! A guest awaits to enter!*

CHAPTER FOUR

FURIOUS barking ended his daydreams, bringing him back to Rome and his immediate surroundings. His father's statue swam back within his vision. The old familiar saw-toothed brick walls of the Villa Calpurnius emerged once more before his eyes. He glanced across at the house; discovered the entrance hall deserted and the prayers at an end. The dogs bayed louder and jerked their chains. The janitor banged his cane against the pillars, roared angrily until the house slaves came tumbling into the open, followed by Vipsania. In a moment she was in his arms, ruffling his hair, stroking his cheek, crying his name, *Titus! Titus!*

He drew back from her embrace, self-conscious and embarrassed. He noticed the unusual frontal across her brow, a metal-studded strip of woven material; observed awkwardly, 'Didn't I send you that thing from Egypt?'

The servants closed in. One seized his helmet, another his cloak. A third crouched on the ground; was fumbling at his boots before he could stop him. 'Master! They must be cleaned before you enter!'

Vipsania chased them away; led him round the side of the house, into the garden.

'I expected you earlier,' she said. 'I heard the dogs and hurried to the door. There you were! Tarrying at the gates, as if you were a stranger!'

'You were at devotions, and I did not wish to disturb you. Although it is long past the hour for house prayers, is it not?'

'I was offering a special votive to Vesta. We have had trouble with the chimney lately. Charcoal smoke drifting through the house. Cooking odours in the atrium, when we were at dinner.'

'Vipsania! Would not a chimney sweep have been more practical? After all, the gods expect us to be industrious as well as devout.'

'But, Titus! Industry has already been attended to! Has it not, Theophilus?'

She turned to the old man who had tottered into their presence, breathless. 'Indeed it is so, Master Titus. I coughed many a futile prayer myself, until Vesta in her wisdom led us to the smoke-box and revealed a vent which a careless slave had blocked. Whereupon my lord Calpurnius sent for the cleaners and cured our ills. I see you have grown! Or is it I who have shrunk?'

'Not in my eyes, Theophilus,' Titus said.

He contemplated the old scholar; noted the swift ravages of nature. The sturdy Greek of his schoolroom days was now a rheumy septuagenarian whose frail body could scarce carry the weight of its rough wool coverings. His voice, too, had lost its well-remembered resonance. The clipped scholarly accents of the trained rhetorician were slurred into mumbling ellipses, glazed and indistinct, like a splendid portrait which dust and neglect have brought to shabbiness. He insisted, too, on tedious reminiscence; detained them, there and then, with long-forgotten stories of their childhood.

'I was but recalling the other day, O Titus, the occasion when little Vipsy fell into the river and you pulled her out. How futile was our conspiracy to conceal the incident from your dear departed mother!'

'I learnt my lesson,' Titus observed, smiling. 'She said that while Vipsania's clothes merely suggested the Tiber mud, my dishonesty stank like the Cloaca Maxima.'

Theophilus cackled on, 'And did I not warn you it would be thus? But, then, it needs more than one immersion in Father Tiber to teach a small boy wisdom. For, alas, we are born liars, and must be

trained to truth, even as the heavens are trained to darkness when the sun sets. Why else do the gods give us twilight?’

‘Or a parrot speech,’ Vipsania interposed gently. ‘Now run off, Theophilus, for I have many things to say to my husband.’

Together they watched the old man vanish through the servants’ quarters, to his room.

‘He is sick and ailing,’ Vipsania said. ‘It overshadows my mind sometimes, that I cannot look after him properly.’

‘Why not place a menial at his disposal? Surely we owe it to him!’

‘Titus! I intend to do so! But at the moment we cannot afford additional dependants. Slaves are at a prohibitive price just now. There have been no really big wars lately, and therefore no captives. You know how that sort of thing affects the market. I decided to wait a little.’

She changed the subject: ‘But what of yourself? Is it true that you will be leaving almost immediately? I am most disappointed!’

As she chattered on, he crossed to the entrance porch, where his sea-bags stood propped against the pillars. He dragged out the largest, and told her over his shoulder, as he fumbled with its cords, ‘There are some presents here for you.’

She clapped her hands, and sent a hovering slave into the kitchen for a sharp knife; whereupon he reminded her, amused, ‘And you a sailor’s wife? Have you forgotten that rope should never be cut?’

The knots came adrift and he spilt an assortment of articles at her feet. There were phials of unusual perfume; scented Egyptian soap, moulded in the shape of strange beasts; a row of quaintly wrought canisters, each containing a different Hindoo spice; a length of gowning material, soot-black and stiffened with silver thread.

A squatting statue of solid brass caught her attention. She placed it in the palm of her hand; held it aloft, enquiringly.

He explained, ‘It is an Indian deity who once lived on earth. He sought contentment, until at last it became reflected within his face.’

‘A smiling god! Has he a name?’

‘They call him *Buddha*. He embraced the disguise of philosopher when he lived among men. There is a growing tendency in Barbaria to worship gods of that type, you know.’

He broke off; observed thoughtfully, ‘I wonder if there could be more than one Heaven.’

‘Titus! What an extraordinary thing to say!’

He hastened to add, 'I don't mean anything blasphemous. I realise that the vast universe is but a meadow to our Roman gods, and there could not be room for heathen others. Yet, after travelling the East, I grew to accept some of the self-evident truths which came before my notice.'

He continued with great candour, 'Surely, Vipsania, that is not sacrilegious?'

'No, dear. But it is an indication that you have been neglecting your religious duties, for it reveals a loss of faith even to consider the existence of false gods. Now you are home again, you must invoke more wisdom through Minerva. She is still your patron goddess, is she not?'

'But of course! Nor do I think I have fallen wholly from grace within her eyes. On the many occasions in which I invoked her aid the auspices were most favourable. I cannot, of course, claim that my desires were vital; but the results were sufficient to convince me of continued favour.'

He halted his unpacking, and smiled down into her eyes. 'I have prayed daily that she watch over you and Calpurnius during my absence. Do I not see now that this has indeed been so?'

He took his newly burnished helmet from a servant, donned it carefully and prepared to depart. 'I am to report at the admiral's office on the fifth hour, and already the sun hastens across the sky. I may be detained, Vipsania. Reserve a couch for me at dinner, nevertheless.'

He hurried off into the city, where his pace was soon slowed by the crowds which now thronged the streets. Halted by a sudden spate of traffic, he paused to watch a dandy in the hands of a kerbside barber.

The commotion had caused the *tonsor* to cut his client's face. He was applying a staunching fabric of spiders' webs soaked in vinegar and oil. At the same time he enslaved the man's ear with his smooth patter.

'It is a trifle thin on top, sir. Let me bring before your notice a marvellous new tonic which would honestly make hair grow on the Tarpeian Rock itself.'

'Well, why don't you try it there? But proceed. After all, what is belabouring my credulity, after well-nigh cutting my throat? This marvellous unguent, then. It is resin and pitch, I suppose? Enlivened

with powdered viper and bat's blood?'

'My lord, the torture chamber could not draw its secret from me, nor a million shillings tempt the words from my tongue. For in truth I do not know the formula. It was whispered confidentially to a kindhearted centurion on the Parthian frontier; by a dying witch, no less, whom he had befriended and who relied for her power over men on their being possessed of a full beard and whiskers.'

The barber glanced up, saw the watching sea-tribune and flourished his blade, crying, 'Won't keep you a minute, sir!'

Titus pushed off, towards the public buildings and through the markets. He picked his way across the various sections; the candelaria, with its willowy clusters of opalescent wax tapers, its furtive stench of crude tallow and torch-fat; the chartaria, piled high with new parchments and cheap paper. He resisted the blandishments of a goldsmith, quick to detect a newly landed sailor, and took a short cut to the river-front by way of the slave market.

He found the place unusually occupied and business brisk. A flock of child slaves had just been driven into the pens. They were in sketchy condition and, although sturdy-built prime stock, had clearly lost weight on the hoof.

Titus enquired their origin from a market attendant.

'They're fairskins, sir, from the Upper Danube zone. Confiscated against unpaid taxes and being sold under government authority.'

The fellow bent down; scratched his bare leg with his stylus. 'Hard luck with this village. Their crops failed. But you know what the tribute collectors are like. The Lex Julia says the eldest child in every family can be mulct for defaulted tax payment, and the law liveth. Caesar told them so.'

Titus stared at the auctioneer, now parading a boy on the platform. Voluble, vulgar, he painted an alluring picture of adolescent merit. He tapped the lad on the cheek. 'Listen to that! Why, his flesh rings like a bell! Before honour, most noble Romans, he could never have suffered from a day's sickness. Who will bid me eight hundred shillings for this splendid bargain?'

But business was slow; and sales not as brisk as the auctioneer desired. He was not, however, without experience in his trade. He poked the boy in the ribs. 'Come, my beauty! Are you not also a dancer, in addition to your many other accomplishments? Then, by the Infernal Gods, leap a little for these illustrious Romans! Show

your paces, lest neither of us eat tonight!’

Stimulated by a quick, sly pinch, the lad bounced up to the rafters and banged his head on the scaffolding. The crowd roared its laughter and a provincial knight purchased him at the reserve price.

‘Immortal Bacchus!’ he commented. ‘If he’ll do that at table, I’ll get a reputation enough to take me into the Senate.’

Titus, about to leave, found his interest rekindled by the child who followed on the heels of the boy; a girl, woefully thin, with wispy hair and dejected features. Her eyes were lack-lustre and rimmed pink. Apathetic, she was a poor subject for the auctioneer’s eloquence. Nevertheless, the fellow rose to the occasion.

‘Here’s a gem for the kitchen! Docility itself! You could buy frugally from the markets and still rest assured that nothing would melt too miraculously from the spit! My lords, such honesty and simplicity among slaves is indeed rare today! Come! I am in a generous mood! Five hundred shillings, then, for our sweet maid here!’

His quick-roving glance caught the sea-tribune, almost beneath his feet. Experience shrewdly assessed hesitancy. He bent down, confidentially. ‘I see you are interested, sir. No doubt you possess a young wife and do not desire her imposed on? By Immortal Venus, you are indeed lucky your feet brought you through here today!’

‘Thank you,’ Titus said, embarrassed. ‘But my wife is already well served.’

Retreating, he heard the man cry his disgust, ‘Well, you may have an old mother, too sick to help herself and anxious for a good girl to fetch and carry for her. But no doubt Vesta will come to her aid, for you certainly won’t!’

Impertinence stung memory. Titus recalled Vipsania’s comments on Theophilus and the need for someone to tend the ailing scholar.

He turned back. ‘Very well. Knock the girl down to me. I’ll give you your five hundred.’

‘Not so fast,’ the auctioneer retorted. ‘There may be better judges of flesh than even yourself, among these generous Romans. Come, my friends! Why should our haughty young friend be given a bargain for nothing? Let us make him appreciate his good fortune! How about an advance of fifty?’

‘Fifty what?’ a wag interjected. ‘By Bellona herself, you’d better grab his money and give him the bag of bones before he comes out of his dream and realises he has acquired a compost heap.’

Before the laughter subsided, Titus found himself in the adjacent office, with the girl beside him and a clerk jotting down particulars of the transaction.

He told the scribe, 'I'm afraid I have not five hundred shillings on me. Will my note of hand suffice?'

The clerk yawned; surveyed him politely. 'And what if the goods go bad overnight? Who pays Caesar's tribute then?'

Titus kept his patience. 'I am not acquainted with market procedure, nor have I previously purchased a slave. Doubtless the fact has escaped your notice, but I am an officer in the service of the crown. If my signature is not sufficient guarantee of payment, then pray advise me of the best course to follow.'

The fellow pushed the book across the table; said, 'Sign here.'

Titus took the pen, scrawled his name, then turned towards the door. Whereupon the clerk called him back, grinning. 'If you'll excuse me advising you of the usual procedure, it is customary to take your purchase with you.'

Titus stared at the drab, filthy child. She certainly could not accompany him down to the admiral's office, even if scrupulously washed and combed.

'Have her delivered to the Villa Calpurnius,' he instructed.

As he went off, the attendant called out, 'It will cost you a porter's fee.' He added to his smirking colleagues, 'But, then, what's a few extra pence when you've just tossed five hundred shillings into the Cloaca Maxima!'

CHAPTER FIVE

At the marine office, Titus was greeted by the chief scribe, Chrysolis. This fellow was an educated freedman, friendly with the palace clerks and invariably well informed on current affairs. He had a

weakness for the smart young couriers whose duties were transcribed under his pen, and whom he indulged in a paternal fashion. Titus was one of his favourites. He hailed him affably.

'Welcome, Titus! Take a bench! Admiral Taurus is closeted with the head of the customs at the moment. You had a poor passage, I believe?'

'Wretched. Seven days overdue, too. Shortly after we left Caesarea there was an outbreak of fever in the benches. The rowers dropped off like flies. We put into Crete for a lustration and fresh hands, but even so, we limped into Ostia under one oar-bank. You'll find the details in my day journal. I thought I had better write them up, although the ship was not under my active command.'

'I am pleased you did. The data can be pinned to her instructions, when she is quarantined.'

Titus stirred restlessly, as if an old wound were itching.

'Quarantining is no good. It has been proved all too frequently that once fever gets into a ship's timbers it can never be wholly eradicated. She should be hauled ashore and burnt to ashes.'

The scribe laughed. 'Perhaps she should. But not in the Roman navy. Crews come cheaper than ships. You merely sign a requisition to fill a slave bench, but it takes time and money to build a bireme. Ask for even a schooner these days, and the finance committee screams to the gods. That's money! That's serious! How is Caesarea looking, since Herod rebuilt it?'

'Quite a place. The harbour works are a dream. Customs buildings of solid stone and the wharves paved like temples. Deep-water triremes can berth alongside in tiers, shackled to iron rings set flush with the dock face; all the facilities for a quick turn-round. The port-tribune told me that he disembarked a legion with full equipment within an hour. The ships berthed at daybreak and he had the troops on the Jerusalem road by midday.'

The scribe whistled. 'Not bad for a Jewish king.'

'And Roman engineering. Do you know anything about my new schedules?'

'Nothing much. Your delayed arrival caused quite a stir. For that matter, so has your sudden rostering for departure.'

Chrystolis glanced, hesitant, at the closed door, and went on in lowered tones, 'If I am any judge, politics are behind it.'

'Politics?'

'That's right. Divine Augustus has recently been busy with international affairs. He has invented a new theory called the "Pax Mundana." We make treaties with the rest of the world and guarantee to attack anyone who attacks anyone else. Augustus says that war is man's greatest curse, and the Pax Mundana will eliminate it for all time.'

'Splendid idea! And how has the rest of the world taken it?'

Chrystolis smiled. 'Isn't that part of your job? To find out? But Admiral Taurus is free at last! I think you can enter.'

A door banged, a voice roared and a moment later Titus was being ushered into the inner office, where he discerned the sea-legate, partly disrobed, fumbling through a sheaf of papers on his desk. He greeted Titus without raising his head.

'Hail! Take a stool. I've just finalised these supplementaries of yours. Excellent stuff on Bactrian trade conditions, although a trifle beyond your authority, if I may say so.'

'They were no more than a few personal observations, sir. I hope I haven't done the wrong thing in including them with my official reports.'

'Not as far as I am concerned. Matter of fact, I showed some of them to the trade-legate when I was up between the Dolphins this morning. Usually he is in a hurry, but he was a touch constipated today, and gave me an extra ten minutes of his time. He says that bit about straw packaging for earthenware is an excellent suggestion. He intends to pass it on to the exporters' tribunal. They have been grumbling for years about the high percentage of breakages on the Egypt-Erythria route. Did you get my message?'

'Yes, sir. To prepare myself for immediate sailing, and shift my gear into duty-bireme 832. I have not yet, however, received any indications of my destination.'

'Neither have I. It's outside the Pillars, that's all I can tell you until this afternoon.'

'The Atlantic? And in a bireme? Should I not be given an oak-hulled squaresailer for an ocean passage?'

'Don't snarl at me; it's not my fault. When I detached the duty-bireme, I understood it was for routine courier work. In any case, 832 is too small for your complement. You are to sail under open standard now, and supported by a half-company of marine legionaries.'

‘A standard and guard! What on earth for?’

‘I’ll tell you later. In the meantime we’ll procure you a better ship. Slip down to Ostia and see if there’s anything worth while been shoved into the water lately. Or better still, glance into the dock across the river. There might be a stray merchantman there, suitable for charter. Anything else?’

‘Yes, sir. Is it really necessary for me to sail on this mission? I have just returned from a two years’ absence and considered that perhaps my services warranted at least a short respite from duty.’

‘A pretty speech, but it’s wasted on me,’ Taurus said. ‘I was asked to submit the name of my most trustworthy and capable officer, for work of extreme secrecy and despatch. Being a punctilious person with a high regard for his own well-being if anything happened, I shoved your name to the top of the list.’

‘Thank you very much, sir. But I still think . . .’

The admiral interrupted him. ‘Think again, then. There’s the seventh hour striking off, and I’m due up at Mercury’s. Fourth sacrifice of the day.’

‘One moment, sir. When am I rostered to sail?’

‘On the hour, it says in the orders. But we’ve still got to get you a clearance from the Metcorological College; and the way they’ve been prognosticating in the past few days, it’s just as likely to be the Greek calends before you get away. Quite frankly, Titus, I’ve grown tired of weather-forecasting based on supernatural instinct and interpreted by the priesthood. The diseased condition of a duck’s kidneys and the indecision of three gcese flying round the Tarpeian Rock is all very well for signs and portents when it comes to wondering when to strangle your grandmother or choose the exact day upon which to eradicate a business rival; but when it interferes with serious matters such as the sailing of a ship, then it’s time we turned the Roman navy over to the vestal virgins and took to coracles. Where’s that damned slave with my helmet?’

Outside, Titus watched the portly figure go solemnly up the street, preceded by his lictor, a brawny ex-seaman who scattered the crowd with his rods, belted the tardy and roared gangway for a Roman admiral. He waited until the hubbub died in the distance, then crossed the river by the Milvian Bridge, where he sought the naval basin and the quiet tranquillity which lay beneath the shadows of duty-bireme 832.

He stared at her slim flanks, the light grace of her pine planking and her egg-shell frames. Speed without strength and beauty without stamina. Where now would he find a stout ship to suit the unknown purpose of his voyage?

His attention was diverted by activity at the top of the dock. Gangs of slaves were dragging a splintered wreck out of the water with ropes and rollers. He stopped a foreman-rigger on his way back to the city and asked what was going on.

The fellow rubbed his hands on his apron. 'She was holed in the Naumachia, sir.'

'The Naumachia?'

'Yes, sir, the mock sea fight held in conjunction with the Luper-calian Games. It was a great spectacle. Supposed to be a war between the Egyptians and the Macedonians, but the ships were actually manned by slaves. Germans on one side and Lusitanians on the other. There are still a couple of third-raters at the bottom of the dock, and corpses floating up every day. The beggars squealed like rats when the ships burst into flames. It was a sight and a half, I can tell you, sir. Red won, as usual. The weather was fine, too.'

'Was it? What's that foreign craft doing, warping into a naval dock?'

'They sometimes lay up here, sir, when the berths are full on the other side of the river. Or she may be under senatorial charter. Things have been a bit easygoing since the Fathers closed Janus and declared universal peace. You know the old story, sir. No wars, no navy.'

The man hurried off, and Titus turned his attention to the ship in the dock entrance, his interest aroused by her smart manœuvring. The Tiber current ran swift, too swift for the average squaresailer to mount the stream without drag-teams and tow-boats. Yet this fellow had caught the wind and sailed up under his own linen!

He withdrew under the shade of some stacked timber and watched the vessel float across the dock, borne on the last breaths of the dying breeze. A tall mainmast which played leapfrog with the passing clouds; a stem so neat and sharp, it cut the dark surface of the dock waters like an iron blade shearing into black jelly.

His admiration took in the upper detail; the mast-guys of bleached rope, turned and tarred, four fingers a side, elegant and sea-proper; the cleatings and racks of running gear, neatly spaced on the sailing-

deck; the coloured maincloth, brailed in the spill-lines, folded and caught with the meticulous negligence of a senator's toga; the rough-cast, red-painted anchor, poised for the drop.

Without warp laid or oar tossed, she drifted in astern of the duty-liburna. The crew sprang from nowhere. Lines whirled through the sky, snaked shorewards and were caught by berthing slaves. She closed with the dock wall, ranged restless for a brief moment, then died inert, secured and fendered as if she were part of the living rock which formed the wharf facing.

Titus emerged from his hiding-place and contemplated the silent docks. The steering-niche on her poop was empty. The master-seaman responsible for her working, whoever he was, had gone below with his men. The ship seemed deserted.

The young tribune crossed the road; reached up and rapped the topsides with his knuckle. The oak rang softly beneath his blows, like a sensitive temple bell. He clambered aboard, up the chains; noticed that the cross-timberings were dovetailed and secured with copper facings. No clumsy rope-lashings here, or awkward make-doings. Why, this stranger was as magnificently contrived as the Forum colonnades!

The ship's master emerged from the after-cabin, a burly fellow with a seaman's carriage and an authoritative gait. Unseen, Titus watched him make his way to the wooden stern-rail, don an old cap, bait a hook, toss a line into the water and settle himself on a coil of rope.

As Titus approached he turned his head. He came to his feet, enquiringly, and the Roman found himself facing a most extraordinary being, a colossus of fully seven feet in height, faintly menacing.

Yet his eyes, deep-set and vividly blue, were pleasantly kindled. His voice, when finally he spoke, was couched in friendly melodious tones.

'A fine afternoon, is it not, O Tribune?'

'It is indeed. And a fine craft you command here, if I am permitted to say so.'

'I am pleased you like her, O Tribune!'

'Like her? She bewitches me. Where was she built?'

'It is a long story. I desired a certain type of timber for her hull. It is grown only in Yonder Gaul. She was keeled and hulled in Britain.'

'British oak!'

'O Tribune, there is nothing to equal it, when weathered. True timber, for a true ship's heart.'

'But how is she named? I see neither insigne on her prow nor shrine in her stern. Surely she is dedicated?'

'Her name, O Tribune, is the *Fravashe*.'

Titus nodded. A strong name for a strong ship. He stared about the decks. She was a deceiver. From the dockside he had taken her for a normal cargo hull. Now she revealed the dimensions of a battleship, with shoulders the broadest he had seen. Why, a full company of troops could deploy in her waist and still leave room for a working crew! Yet she was all of a piece, like a perfectly proportioned fish. Neptune himself could have designed her.

'It is the same thing,' the shipmaster observed in his ear.

'Eh?' Titus ejaculated.

'You said Neptune could have designed her. I said it was the same thing.'

'But, by the Gods, I never opened my mouth!'

'Your pardon, Tribune. Your lips moved. I am used to reading lips.'

Titus brushed the incident from his mind. Time was pressing, and necessity more urgent than miracles. He came to the point.

'This *Fravashe* of yours. Is she available for charter to the Roman government?'

'Why, certainly, O Tribune! Available and ready for immediate departure.'

'Excellent! We will get an agreement drawn up at once. You can water and victual tomorrow, after I clap a crew into you.'

The *Fravashe*'s master displayed a sudden interest. 'One moment, Tribune. That is a point! My crew goes with the charter. There it is.'

'Nonsense! This ship will be wearing my personal standard. There will be troops on board. Conditions would be chaotic. No authority and all confusion.'

'You have nothing to fear from my crew. And without them, indeed, the *Fravashe* could not be worked.'

The fellow had something there. The squaresailer was certainly odd-rigged. The smartest Roman seaman would take days, even months, to learn her points.

'Very well, then. Your ship and crew are chartered, subject to

confirmation by the port-admiral. And now, before I depart, what is your name?

'In the Latin tongue it is Quadrantus, O Tribune.'

'Quadrantus?'

'Just Quadrantus, O Tribune!'

'Very well. I am Titus Terentius, senior staff-tribune in the courier branch of the Roman navy. I shall board you again tomorrow, before the third hour.'

Going ashore, he reflected that his search for a suitable ship had ended with remarkable ease. It was Minerva, of course, who had intervened for him; an excellent omen for a promising voyage.

But such portents were not to be neglected lightheartedly. He made a mental resolve to burn an additional taper within his goddess's temple before he left Rome.

At the rails he aired his thoughts, smiled: 'It is difficult to believe that but an hour ago I was wondering where in all Italy I would find a ship for my purpose; when suddenly your *Fravashe* was framed within the dock-head, as if in direct answer to my supplications! Is it not singular?'

The shipmaster's eyes flickered. Unexpected amusement twisted his solemn features.

'Most singular indeed, O Titus!' he said.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN the young tribune returned to headquarters, Taurus was still absent.

'He'll be at the Poseidon by now,' Chrystolis said. 'It is his bath hour. You'll probably find him in the cooling-room.'

The scribe paused, added, 'There's a fellow in the antechamber. He wants to see you.'

'Indeed? Who is he?'

'He didn't give his name, but I recognised him. He is Sequinus Piso, a young knight. His mother is the widow of old Caius Piso, the late governor of Armenia who died last year and was given a state funeral.'

'I heard of him when I was in the East. His wife, too. She was most active on his behalf.'

'You could call it that, O Titus. Although I think she is better known as being more active on behalf of a certain Lydian religious cult. In fact, she brought her soothsayer back with her from the province. He does very well, I believe, among the wives of our wealthy.'

'I will try to remember the point, Chrystolis. In the meantime let us see what this fellow has to say.'

In the next room he was faced by a youth attired in the dress of an honorary guardsman; a young fop with burning, sincere eyes and something on his mind. His voice betrayed a growing agitation.

'I am Sequinus Piso, sir. Centurion in the Praetorians. I heard you were leaving Rome on an important voyage and took the liberty of coming here to ask if I might accompany you.'

'Why?'

'I find ceremonial duties unsatisfactory, sir, and prefer a more active life. A voyage with you would give me an opportunity to gain useful experience.'

Titus contemplated him doubtfully. For an ambitious soldier, the quickest road to advancement was through a frontier legion. Courier work might be quietly adventurous, but it was a dead end for aspiring generals.

'Sailing under me would be pointless, unless you are interested in a sea career. I might add that, by taking you, I might be depriving a more suitable man of valuable experience.'

'I realise that, sir, and cannot deny that my ambitions are more in the diplomatic field than in the routine delivering of despatches.'

'What then are you motives in desiring to join my flag?'

'My father was a colonial administrator. He was concerned with the relations between Rome and its subject races, and sought to create a better understanding. I want to take up his work, but am faced with a complete ignorance of the outer world. Voyaging under you would enlighten me.'

'What makes you think so? You will see little beyond strange seas

and outlandish places. Furthermore, you will experience considerable hardship.'

'I am not afraid of hardship, sir. And to see strange places will be the first lessons in the knowledge I seek.'

The youth broke off, stammered, confessed: 'I fear I do not put my case to the best advantage, sir.'

'Quite to the contrary. Were I the sole arbiter, you would have convinced me into granting the post. But I do not allocate officers. The sea-legate, Admiral Taurus, is responsible for staff appointments. If he is agreeable, then I am.'

Triumph suffused the young man's features. 'Thank you, sir! I have already approached the admiral and he said that I could go, as far as he was concerned. The final decision rested with you.'

'Did he? In such case, of course, I shall take you. Report to this office on the second hour in the morning. Chrystolis, the chief scribe, will inform you of your ship and sea-duties.'

At the club baths, Titus found Taurus on the slabs, cursing the slave who was wielding the oil-scraper.

'Get off my bilge, damn you. There's no adipose tissue there. I don't mean you, Titus. Pull up a bench and talk to me. Twenty minutes of this, and you long for the caress of a blood-crazed tiger. You are bound first for Africa, it appears.'

'Africa, sir?'

'West Africa. The Niger delta. It's under the Mauritanian brow. You are to pick up some fellow who will represent the Nether barbarians at an impending political conference. From Africa you'll sail north, direct to the Oceanus Teutonium, and collect a king from the amber coast. He'll talk for the Yonder Rhenish tribes. Now for a ship. There are three triremes in the water at Ostia. There's also a few squaresailers unloading grain at Misenum. I've asked the port-captain there to send me up some details.'

'They won't be necessary, sir. There's a fine ship in the basin. She is prepared for sea and open to charter. An ideal vessel for the work, and named the *Frayashe*, sir.'

'I'll have her seized. Now for your personnel. Marines are being drafted from our own barracks. You'll be given two sea-centurions to officer them. The junior will act as standard-bearer, should the occasion arise. Tarquin goes as the senior.'

'Tarquin, sir? I understood he was on temple loan.'

'The madame president of the Vestal College has asked for his immediate transfer. For the rest, unless the forecast for an immediate departure is unpropitious, you'll be at sea within twenty-four hours.'

'I think I might be delayed just the same, sir. As I entered the club I noticed another thunderstorm in the east. You know how the Emperor feels about meteorological phenomena. They terrify him.'

'I wouldn't bank on a stay in port on those grounds, if I were you. An accredited soothsayer has revealed that sealskin is an antidote to thunder-poison. The imperial sempstress is making a special resistance-tunic to be worn by the Emperor on cloudy nights.'

'I am relieved to hear you say so, sir. One other thing. There was a young fellow down at the office when I called in. He asserts that you agreed to his sailing as my junior centurion.'

'I couldn't disagree. His mother is a wealthy widow with friends in the you-know-what. I wouldn't know who his father was, unless his face twitched in heavy weather and he asked for a sealskin coat.'

'He told me his father was a colonial governor. He wants to follow in his footsteps. I was rather impressed by his manner and agreed to take him.'

'Most prudent of you. Now slip up to the palace and ask for Marcus.'

'Marcus, sir? I've never heard of a Marcus.'

'He is the elder statesman who is handling this business on behalf of Augustus. The watchword at the Praetorian Gate is *Four Corners for a Roman Council*.'

'I'll try and remember it, sir.'

'You'll be slung off the Tarpeian Rock if you don't. See me at the office in the morning.'

As Titus left the Poseidon, a few drops of rain, warm and heavy, struck his helmet. He glanced upwards. Black clouds had crept across the evening sky, obscuring the early stars. Lightning, blue-white and pronged, stabbed vicious fingers between the house-tops. Thunder crashed, peal on peal, as if a maddened god were tossing invisible hammers against Heaven's dome.

Titus pulled closer his cloak, sought brief shelter within the wide-arched portico of a public building and stared into the convulsed night. What did it all portend? Was his voyage insufferable to the gods? Or could there be conflicting opinions on Olympus itself? Per-

haps Marcus could enlighten him; or Minerva, if he prayed with sufficient sincerity. He hurried on, rain-drenched, until he reached the palace.

Within the guard-house a bored centurion enquired his business without glancing up from his game of draughts. Titus, now damp and uncomfortable, asked coldly, 'Don't you recognise a staff-courier when you see one?'

The fellow raised his head; took in the starred helmet, the tribune's coloured flash on Titus' tunic. He jumped to his feet. 'Sorry, sir. I thought it was a flunkey with a message. Shall I turn out the guard?'

'You may do as you please, provided you inform Marcus of my arrival.'

They tramped off through the rain-swept gardens; quick step, guardsman fashion. Gates opened. Courtyards loomed. They skirted cloistered paths, gloom-shrouded; crossed corridors where vague-shaped statuary stared sightless. A wide-flung door took them into a brilliantly lit banqueting-hall, where countless slaves were clearing away the remnants of a feast.

Beyond lay dim antechambers and contrived silence. Thick carpets soaked up the tramp of boots, accentuating the atmosphere of disciplined peace and privileged privacy. Rooms shrank. Walls closed in.

'One for Marcus,' the centurion roared. 'Titus Terentius, staff-courier.'

The escort retired. Curtains moved and a thin gaunt man emerged from behind the draperies. He smiled sourly; indicated a chair adjacent to a large table covered with parchment rolls.

'Be seated, O Titus,' he said. 'But first remove your cloak and we will see it dried before you leave the palace.'

A slave came from nowhere, noiseless, efficient; took the soaked garment and vanished, leaving the two men alone.

Marcus came to the point abruptly. 'Divine Augustus has called for a conference with countries exterior to our frontiers. These nations have been acquainted with the Emperor's desire and have signified their willingness to attend. Their representatives are expected in Rome at the end of November.'

Marcus paused. His lean jaw cracked into a warmer smile. A touch of amiable patronage thawed his glacial accents. He added, 'You

have been chosen to convey them here.'

'Thank you, sir. I am most honoured by the instruction.'

'I suppose you are. And now let us proceed with a few explanations. The impending conference is purposed to secure a pact for world peace. Secrecy is essential for its success; and sea-travel has been preferred to the inevitable publicity which would accompany a journey by road. We do not wish prematurely to alarm any ill-wishers, if you know what I mean.'

'Perfectly, sir. I presume my orders are oral?'

'Not quite. Your admiral possesses sealed instructions which will be handed to you on sailing. They deal with details too diverse for present discussion.'

The statesman's voice mellowed indulgently. He went on in a more conversational manner: 'I suppose I may inform you that these passengers are two in number and identified officially by code-names which signify their origin. For instance, *Southwind* is your African charge and *Northwind* your Teuton.'

'Is there an *Eastwind* and *Westwind*, sir?'

'*Eastwind* will be here when you arrive back in Rome. Your delayed return from Caesarea necessitated a separate arrangement for him. But as his sea-voyage is of short duration it lessens the import.'

Marcus jumped up, and concluded briefly: 'There isn't any *Westwind*. If the word is used at all, it will be as a codified allusion to Rome itself.'

His faintly sour smile indicated the meeting was at an end. He paused beneath the draperies, and said, 'Your cloak will be returned at the outer antechamber.' A moment later the curtain swished and he had vanished, leaving Titus to find his own way out of the palace.

He was met in the outer hall by a slave carrying his dried garment. He thanked the fellow and was about to plunge off through the gardens when a woman stepped from a near-by corridor and touched him gently on the arm. She asked softly, 'You are the tribune Titus, are you not? May we talk?'

She indicated an adjacent bench, seated herself beside him and proceeded quickly, 'You don't know me. I am Sequinus' mother.'

'Sequinus?'

'Sequinus Piso. I understand it is his intention to sail with you.'

'Of course! The junior centurion! But, madame, let me remove your fears. I have already decided to take him.'

The woman's features hardened with ill-concealed annoyance.

'My object in seeking your presence is rather that you hear an anxious mother's request to reject his application.'

Puzzled, he listened in silence. She went on in urgent tones: 'Sequinus is an only child and most dear to me. It is unthinkable that I should permit him to hazard his life, yet not lift a hand to dissuade him.'

He assured her earnestly, 'Madame, I appreciate your fears. But there is less danger in a sea-voyage than in a frontier foray. If you will forgive my saying so, it might be unwise to assume your son is unable to look after himself. He is a Roman centurion, and owes something to his career, after all.'

Madame Piso gestured impatiently. 'I have no quarrel with his desire for military prowess. It is embarking with you which terrifies me. Don't you realise? You are departing under a frown!'

He saw her meaning; laughed at her fears; told her gently, 'I am aware, naturally, that the gods have indicated their ill-will against a premature sailing. But consistent unfavourable omens must come to an end. Rest assured, the Supreme Pontiff will not permit my ship to leave the Tiber until Heaven itself has given a clearance. Does that not ease your mind?'

She shivered slightly. 'You do not understand. Your voyage has been cursed by One whose power for evil is much greater than that of our Roman gods for good.'

Suddenly his memory was flooded by his earlier conversation with Chrystolis, the admiral's scribe; the inference that Madame Piso dabbled in the black arts and sought the future through her Oriental necromancer.

He addressed her stiffly. 'Madame Piso, when my ship sails it will be under the benign protection of the true gods. I shall place my personal trust in Minerva and that of my crew in Neptune. Doubly armoured, how could any devil's advocate aspire to touch my voyage with evil?'

'But what of my boy? What of Sequinus?'

He jumped up, and donned his cloak. As he adjusted the clasp he told her quietly, 'If he wishes to accompany me, he may do so. Goodbye, madame!'

She vanished through the shrubberies and was lost in the night.

Out of the darkness he heard her voice crying angrily, 'Beware, O Titus, if harm comes to my son!'

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON the following morning he awakened at sunrise, dressed and emerged into the garden, where he discerned his brother-in-law tinkering with the water-clock.

Calpurnius indicated the contrivance, and observed, 'It hasn't worked satisfactorily since we changed to summer hours. Quite a nuisance. I wish someone would invent a more reliable system. What do the Eastern races do about their time?'

'Guess it mostly, or take it from us, when they are near a Roman settlement. In any case, being further south, their day's length is more regular. It is a question of latitude, you know, Calpurnius.'

'Of course. But there is Vipsania, beckoning from the atrium. Come in and have a plate of porridge.'

Over their meal Calpurnius informed him, 'Your slave girl turned up, although I didn't quite understand the message.'

'Why, Calpurnius, I thought Vipsania would have explained. She told me she lacked an attendant for Theophilus. I took the liberty of supplying one. That is all.'

'It was most thoughtful of you, Titus. I shall have the girl branded with the house-mark immediately.'

'By all means. And when the old fellow's time comes, which I am afraid is not far off, I would like you to free the girl. Return her to Dalmatia. At my expense, naturally.'

Embarrassment appeared in Calpurnius' face. 'Titus! It would create considerable unrest among our own slaves were I to single out the latest arrival for early manumission. If such is your desire, then we must leave her in your name.'

BUT I DO NOT possess an iron, Calpurnius! And unless she is properly branded, she could be anyone's property!

'Use your father's,' Vipsania interposed. 'It's around the place somewhere, rusty and useless. I'll have it found and get her done this morning. Poor child! She seems so miserable, it will cheer her up to feel that she really belongs.'

The matter settled harmoniously, they discussed more immediate events. Vipsania anxiously enquired the latest news on Titus' impending departure from Rome.

'I sail this evening,' he told her.

He hesitated, and added, 'Perhaps you and Calpurnius could accompany me as far as Ostia. I don't think the admiral will object, in view of the circumstances.'

'I don't think he will, either,' Calpurnius commented. 'I have a document down at my office for him, large enough to choke a bull. It is the charter agreement for your merchant-ship and bristles with clauses. I cannot see them being hammered out before midnight. But come! We can discuss the matter as we journey to the city. Already I am late for my appointments.'

At the law offices they ran into Admiral Taurus, waving a bundle of papers. 'Here's your sailing orders and a fistful of sundry rubbish. The dawn sacrifice came through with a double positive. Victualing's under way. So is everything else. You cast off at sunset. Now let's go and see your ship.'

In the courtyard, the admiral's lictors, two of them now, bounded out of their corners like dogs sniffing a country run.

Titus waved them back, and growled, 'Not you. I want to think. Get me a litter.'

They crossed the river, skirted the bank and entered the road which ran the length of the dock. An escort-trireme had come in late on the previous night and now lay quiescent in the top berth. She made a fine picture of dormant naval life. The morning watch sprawled idle under the fore-awning, and the waist was deserted. The deck-officer was just discernible, a relaxed figure stealing a nap within the shadows of the steering-shelter.

Titus poked his head above the bulwarks; roared, 'Ho!' in a thunderous voice. At once the startled air was filled with action. The ship's bugler came flying up through the main scuttle, moistening his lips. A short deep note blared through the ship and a twin row

of shocked faces manned the rail. The duty-centurion bobbed out from the steering-hatch, threw up his hand, palm outstretched, and bawled, 'Hail, O Sea-Legate Taurus!' as if he had been anticipating an admiral's appearance since dawn.

'Hail to you too,' Taurus muttered. He stared critically at the ship's gear, prodded the leather rubbing-piece on an oar-vent, sniffed the scuppers, kicked a projecting ring-bolt and when it refused to bend, inspected further afield until his keen eyes exposed a legitimate fault.

Strange joy touched his jowls. 'That awning,' he observed in menacing tones. 'It is rove instead of stoppered. Doubtless you possess excellent reasons for placing your own interpretation on standing orders for the port of Rome?'

'Not at all, O Legate. *Rig Awnings* was not included in routine instructions for the day. In view of the changeable weather I secured them with temporary rovings which, as, of course, you are aware, sir, take but one-tenth of the time to unleash as would stoppering off.'

Taurus stuck to his point. 'If *Rig Awnings* was not in the watch-book, then who authorised you to spread them, may I ask?'

'No one, O Legate!'

Taurus pounced, snarling. 'No one, eh? Well, in future you take your orders from a someone, otherwise you'll find yourself re-rostered to the Styx and no return passage. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly, O Legate! The awning will be taken in at once.'

They went off down the dock, with Taurus grunting happily. 'Wily dog. I caught him with his skirts up that time though. Personally I can't stand the fellow. He has too many references from important people for my liking. Is this your ship?'

They paused on the quay wall and contemplated the busy scene about the *Fravashe*. Commissariat carts, piled high, choked the loading-ramps. Scaffolding had been erected, to support the gang-planks which ran from the wharf into the dark recesses of the cargo hold. A chain of slaves studded the distance between; naked figures, twisting automatically on their bare heels as they passed sacks of flour from hand to hand.

On the foredeck, two serious young men measured space and talked ballistics. The senior tapped the bulwarks, and complained, 'She can't take mangonels. This rail is far too acute. The stones would never angle clear.'

‘How about chopping it down?’ the other asked. ‘The ship can’t possibly go to sea without artillery.’

Tarquin was already on board. He greeted the two officers as they came up the ladder. ‘Excuse the disorder. The stores came down at the second hour, and the crew wouldn’t speak to anyone. So I took the ship over.’

Taurus gave him a sour scowl of approval. ‘You did the proper thing; and by the way, you were damned quick off the mark from that temple job, weren’t you?’

‘I got my clearance just after dawn, sir. As soon as the augurs verified the omens. Two white rabbits and not a blemish on either.’

‘Rabbits, eh? Usually they don’t agree with me. Well, Tarquin, it’s nice to know they can co-operate at a crucial moment.’

The centurion’s face creased happily. ‘Don’t forget the pound-keeper, sir. He let me help him choose the animals this morning, before the priests were up.’

The admiral’s gratified expression deepened. ‘When they hail you Emperor, as assuredly they must, you can appoint the fellow as palace gamekeeper. Of course, he might be strangled in the meantime. Where is the ship’s master?’

A deep voice from the skies said, ‘Here, and at your service, O Sea-Legate!’

They lifted their gaze to the steering-platform above their heads; to the ladder-head, where the Greek captain was standing.

‘Come down,’ Taurus said irritably. ‘I’m not going to gape up at you all day. It’s bad for my neck.’

Deck-level was even less advantageous. Face to face, the admiral and the seaman were as stunted obesity and powerful manhood.

‘By the Infernal Gods,’ Taurus commented. ‘You are a giant.’

‘We are as Heaven decreed,’ Quadrantus said solemnly.

‘All right, all right! Don’t bring religion into it. The point is, can you read Latin as well as speak it. If so, take me somewhere where we can quarrel amiably over this charter-draft.’

The shipmaster indicated an adjacent deckhouse. ‘The navigatorium is at your disposal, O Legate! Enter!’

As the two men vanished into the chartroom, Titus turned to Tarquin. ‘My quarters? Have you located them?’

‘Follow me. They are in the stern. The usual place, although somewhat sumptuous for an old squaresailer.’

They descended a near-by scuttle, traversed a short alleyway and emerged into a spacious cabin, massively timbered. Long windows, built into the stern-frame, opened out above the counter. They were leaded, glassed with transparent stone, and rigged with wooden shutters to protect them in heavy weather. A wide couch curved against the square-shaped pooping, amply cushioned. An ornamental bronze lamp hung circular from the oak cross-beams. Lockers ran flush with the bulkheads. A wide table flanked by chairs was clamped to the deck. Sliding-doors gave access to a private quarter gallery from where, behind breast-high rails, a clear view could be obtained of the surrounding scene.

Titus stepped over the low sill and into the open air; found himself gazing down on the dockside, immediately above the confused din of ship-loading and almost in the centre of a sudden commotion which had arisen. A fashionable litter, borne by eight Nubian slaves, had just collided with a store wagon. Boxes and bales were strewn about the roadway and a crowd was gathering to enjoy the argument which was now taking place between the litter-leader and the carter.

'Government stores, you've scattered,' the drayman said with gloomy satisfaction. 'Don't you move until I call the dock police.'

'And don't you move either, you impertinent fool, or my mistress will have you flayed alive.'

A young officer jumped from the litter, and was about to intervene when the curtains twitched violently and an arm pulled him back. There was a flash of jewelled sandals below a fluttered hem, a brief glimpse of an angry woman's face and a shrill order, screamed at the litter-leader. The conveyance wheeled about and swayed back towards Rome. The young soldier shrugged his shoulders, turned and made his way quickly aboard the *Fravashe*.

At the ladder-head he paused, hesitant. He saw Titus in the quarter gallery, crossed to join him and revealed himself, as he did so, as Sequinus Piso.

He submitted the impassive-featured Tarquin to a wary side-glance, turned to Titus and asked, 'Could I see you alone, sir?'

Titus re-entered the cabin; gestured the young man to follow him. He took the chair at the head of the table and queried, 'Well?'

'Your pardon, sir. It was not until this morning I discovered the reason for my mother's seeking your presence last night.'

'Go on.'

'You must forgive her, sir. Since my father died she has been overwrought.'

'Has it not struck you that her distress might stem from an anxiety for your well-being?'

'It is only partly true, sir. She is fearful for my safety, but her fears are prompted by superstitious premonitions. In the light of my own religious convictions I cannot accept them seriously.'

'Nor can I, in the light of my own conscience, permit your entry into this ship against her wishes.'

Titus paused, embarrassed by the stupefaction which flamed into the boy's face. He went on in gentler tones. 'Perhaps I could take you on my next passage. After all, my safe return from this one will effectively counter the evil forebodings now current. Come now, Sequinus! Let us consider your mother's desires on this occasion, and I will assuredly consider yours on the next.'

Frustration moistened the youth's eyes. Uncontrolled, he burst out, 'You mean consider my mother's influence, sir? After all, she is one of the most powerful women in Rome, is she not?'

'You may go,' Titus said coldly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN Titus returned on deck, victualling had ended. The stagings were being dismantled, and the commissariat wagons already commencing their journey back to the stores depots.

The ship's military detail, marched down from the barracks, added fresh confusion to the chaos about the *Fravashe's* decks. Spearmen were drawn up in the deep waist, receiving an issue of javelins from the master-armourer. Close by, a detachment of slingers counted their iron missiles into leather pouches. A regimental cook, querulous, suspicious, banged his pots and pans. He nudged a near-by

thrower, indicated a sack of meal which had been left in the scuppers and complained, 'Look at that lot! I get flung overboard for dishing up lumpy porridge, and the bastard who did it goes to the games and sleeps with my wife.'

The thrower stared. His hard mouth twitched. 'You talk too much,' he said. 'It worries me.'

The admiral emerged from the chartroom, paused at the ladder-head and spoke to Titus. 'I've told Quadrantus to shift-ship across the river. There's a berth empty at the water jetty, under the main tap. Sniff the casks yourself, before they are filled. If they're sour we'll get them coopered. We don't want your passengers arriving in Rome with tainted belches.'

'Of course not. What of the charter, sir?'

Taurus waved his documents. 'Quadrantus can sign it on the passage downriver. A few details yet to be filled in. See these marines are received in properly, and prepare to take my barge under your stern. I'm coming with you as far as Ostia. Was your gear shifted from 832?'

'It's in my cabin, sir. Tarquin saw to it.'

'Hoist your flag then, and let Rome know you are commissioned. Chrystolis will tell you where I am, if you need me urgently.'

The admiral waddled off down the gangway and the *Fravashe's* crew appeared on deck. Berthing-lines were slackened, cast adrift, and a team of slaves tailed on to a thick towing-rope. At the basin entrance a works-galley took the main cable across the Tiber and within twenty minutes the squaresailer was secured at the water jetty, a pleasant corner of the old Roman waterfront, overshadowed by the giant aqueduct which fed the city with fresh water. The massive stone arches were broken by a branch which tapped the main channel and curved off in diminishing spans, terminating in an ornamented tank with pouting lips, from which leather hose-lengths trailed to the ground.

The ship began to water. Seamen rolled the casks ashore and removed their bungs. Titus sniffed and tapped. Government clerks thumbed ledgers and produced measuring-rods. Above, on the parapet of the master aqueduct, a bondman opened a tiny sluice, and a crystal stream splashed into the service-tank. The hoses bulged and writhed. The casks gurgled in ascending chromatics; took their

fat corks, protesting, and were returned within the hold. Tier on tier they grew; unbunged for the voyage and plank-covered loose to give them sweeter breaths. The *Fravashe* nested a foot deeper in the flowing Tiber. The master-waterman took her draught and came aboard for a receipt. He was a pleasant-faced provincial, elderly and quite at ease with authority. He smiled at Titus, stared curiously at the scrawled signature, nodded his head in the direction of the main truck and observed, 'I thought you were a Terentius, sir, when I saw the standard.'

'Did you? It is really my father's triumphal ornament. Of course you knew that.'

'I could never forget it, sir. I was at Actium when Augustus gave Agrippa the Green and your father the White. It was quite a change, sir, to see a couple of sailors get something instead of the generals. Good luck to your voyage, and I hope you come back with another laurel.'

The fellow went off and Tarquin brisked up, cool and efficient. 'All stores are checked in the afterhold. We are victualled for sixty days, with fresh meat for ten. Call it fresh, anyway. Do you want to inspect the troop deck?'

He found the sleeping-quarters already secured for sea. Neat rows of straw pallets, each with its military cloak, folded in the regulation manner. The weapons were racked and cleated in the wings. Polished mess-gear was strapped against the lower mast and glittered in the sunlight which filtered through the open hatch. A cool breeze blew the length of the deck, wafted in from a large port, flung wide in the bows.

Titus turned to his centurion. 'What about your own accommodation?'

Tarquin indicated a curtained-off section, abaft the troop deck. 'There it is. Berths for two of us. We get privacy, and can still keep an eye on the men.'

'Where are they now? The ship is unusually quiet.'

'I sent them back to the barracks to eat, while you were in the lower hold. No sense in their making a mess here, when the finest kitchens in the Roman navy are only a thousand paces away. I am going up to get them shortly. Anything I can do for you?'

'You could give the staff-commander my compliments and tell him I still need a junior centurion. Time is short; perhaps you can

pick one yourself, if he is agreeable. After all, whoever we take will be more closely associated with you than with me.'

'I suppose that wouldn't make Quadrantus a disguised pirate, would it?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'He and his crew are a trifle smart for merchant-jacks, and this ship's too well found to be hired out for a miserable fee. There must be another reason for his taking this charter. What is it?'

'Well, Tarquin, you tell me why he bobbed up in the dock, just when I wanted a ship, and I'll tell you why he took the charter. The gods willed it.'

Tarquin grinned. 'They took a lot of convincing. Days of doubtful omens from official sources, and a Lydian soothsayer, working for someone else, telling everybody the voyage was accursed. That's one thing I learnt on temple-duty. The gods are always willing to cancel each other out.'

'I wonder you learnt anything except blasphemy,' Titus said calmly. 'And if it comes to a profession of faith, I would sooner have Divine Jove on my side than a Lydian's goat god.'

The young tribune paused, frowned faintly at recent memories, brushed them from his mind and pursued a more congenial enquiry.

'Our mysterious passengers, by the way? Where are they to be berthed? The admiral is sure to check the point with me.'

Tarquin led him aft, into the stern section of the ship, where four small cabins were revealed, built into the main hull. Each was furnished with a cot and dressing-table, a lamp and rugs. Doors led inboard to a short alley which gave egress through a companionway to the poop above.

Titus glanced across at the steering-platform and asked, 'Where does this Quadrantus berth? For I see no further accommodation!'

'There's a couch in the chartroom. Perhaps he sleeps there and messes with his crew. We'll find out in due course. Have you noticed he never gives an order?'

'I had not. But there is nothing new in silent routine. I have been told my dad practised it. He learnt it from the African pirates. They said they didn't have to smell a fat merchantman on a quiet night. They could hear him.'

Their talk was interrupted by an extraordinary procession which had just hove in sight. A line of slaves, richly caparisoned in palace

livery and burdened under boxes and bales, was halted at the gangway. As a functionary herded them together the admiral puffed aboard, waving his hand.

'No time for fuss,' he said. 'Your passengers are higher than I was led to believe. You are to receive two chamberlains and sundry parcels of bedchamber fripperies. There's special rations, and enough drapery to make a set of fancy sails. Bundle the stuff below, while I think.'

He collapsed on a near-by hatch-coaming, mopped his brow and muttered beneath his breath. He was still there when Titus returned, after seeing the last of the slaves leave the ship.

'I put the chamberlains in the spare cabins,' Titus told him. 'The merchandise is stacked in the alleyway.'

Taurus emerged from his trance and jerked out unexpectedly, 'Ever thought about pirates?'

'Pirates? Why, no, sir.'

'Then you ought to. There's a fellow called Redbeard lurks outside the Pillars, dead in your track. An innocent squaresailer laden with costly draperies or a couple of fat diplomats ripe for ransom, might be well worth the taking.'

'A corsair matching his strength with a warship! I'd like to see him try, sir!'

'Who says you are a man-o'-war? Take down that standard and you are just a merchant-ship, bound from anywhere to nowhere. You'd better keep your eyes open and your marines exercised.'

'I most certainly will, sir, and thank you very much.'

'Don't thank me. It's my own neck I'm concerned with. What happens to me if anything happens to you? I get a polite note from Marcus, suggesting I open my veins next time I take a bath. My estate might be sequestered too, to pay for the cost of those damned draperies. Where's that fellow Quadrantus? I'll have a word with him, while I'm on the subject.'

The shipmaster appeared in the chartroom door. 'Were you calling me, O Sea-Legate?'

'Of course I was. The river has been cleared for your passage downstream. A government pilot will take you as far as the Ostia bar. Stand by to slip at sunset. Do you require any stores for the voyage?'

'I am prepared for sea in every respect, O Taurus!'

'All right. There's one further point I must bring to your notice. This ship is now under naval discipline. No reference must be made to movements, under pain of capital punishment. Warn your crew.'

'I will certainly do so, O Taurus, for what it is worth.'

'What do you mean? For what it is worth?'

'The tongues of my men have been stilled since birth, O Taurus. They are natural mutes.'

The admiral stared; exploded, 'By the Immortal Gods, don't tell Augustus that! He'll make them senators! Every mother's son!'

CHAPTER NINE

TOW-BOATS plucked the *Fravashë* from her berth, spun her keel on the current's crown and swept her downstream towards Ostia.

The jetty shrank, and grew impersonal as the water-streak widened between ship and shore. Tanned faces merged and blurred. The top-channels faded. The main aqueduct became a groined, arched centipede of dripping stone, sprawled supine on the Roman doorstep.

The tow-boats cast off and took their station in the aquatic procession which formed astern: the admiral's barge, a works-boat and the department-galley which had been placed at the disposal of Calpurnius and his clerks.

Quadrantus and the pilot were on the steering-platform, guiding the ship around the bends. The crew streamed a kedge anchor over the stern; a restraining weight which bumped and dragged on the river-bed, checking the speed of the current-swept hull and keeping its stem well-nosed to the distant sea. The notaries were with Calpurnius, completing the charter. Vipsania was sorting out Titus' clothes and Tarquin was attending to the troops.

Titus, alone, stood on the quarter gallery beneath the steering-oar, contemplating the vanishing city walls. As he watched, the last

rays of the setting sun shot low from beneath a bank of cloud. Spears shafts of light hurtled from the west, glanced off the seven ridges and flung a cold brilliance through the clustered buildings. Unexpectedly a long ray caught the façade of the Capitoline Jove. Marble turned to fire. Rome seemed a splendid corpse, suspended between heaven and earth, rich-blazing on the lavish fuel of its own history.

But not to Titus. Devout, impressionable, for him the holocaust held deeper meaning. Within his anxious eyes this portentous confusion stood for a last denial of impish meddling in heavenly affairs. The gods, as they sought their couches, had turned their gaze to give him a personal omen for the *Fravashe* and her strange-wrought voyage. He knew at last that benediction was his for the asking. Spiritually engulfed, he extended his palms upwards.

Vipsania, emerging from the cabin, broke the spell.

‘Anything the matter, dear?’

‘I was invoking Minerva,’ he explained politely.

‘I’d remember Mercury too,’ she adjured him earnestly. ‘I think we are inclined to overlook the winged gods. Yet they are most important for journeys.’

‘I always thought that Mercury was more of a Greek than a Roman god. Is he in the Pantheon?’

‘I’m not quite sure, dear. There are so many statues there now, it is difficult to define them individually, except on their garland-days. However, if he isn’t, you could always reach him through the Unknown God. His bust is just inside the entrance, and generally very busy. A prayer to him will cover anyone the priests have inadvertently overlooked. After all, that is what he is there for.’

Silence fell. Titus muttered, ‘Quite so, Vipsania.’ He stared moodily at the passing river-bank and sought for a conversation less irksome, for he had discovered suddenly that his wife, intensely spiritual herself, possessed the unhappy knack of touching the subject with a commonplace wand.

‘How is Theophilus?’ he asked. ‘And the attendant we purchased for him?’

‘He is delighted! And proud! He is telling everyone of your thoughtfulness and how it recalls your father’s consideration after his capture at Actium, when he took him off the benches and put him in the schoolroom.’

'Common sense, I would say. Theophilus, even as a youth, would not have lasted twenty-four hours on a trireme's oar, not even in the lowest bank. What of the girl?'

'Sullen, I fear. But she will brighten up. Theophilus told her she ought to be honoured by her brand; for only he and she, out of the whole household, carry the Terentii cypher. I thought it sweet of him, to make such gentle capital out of a normal domestic practice. At least it dried her tears, if it didn't cool her scorch.'

'Her tears? Why should she weep?'

'For her brother. They were taken into bondage together, and only separated this morning.'

'But she was alone on the auctioneer's stand when I saw her at the market!'

'He went earlier, just before you arrived. At least, so she told Theophilus. Poor thing! I suppose the shock of sudden parting has distressed her. I must keep her fully occupied, for, as your mother used to say, industry swallows discontent and leaves but pleasant languor.'

'True enough, Vipsania. Nevertheless, I would suggest that you enquire her brother's whereabouts. He must be in Rome and somewhere close by. Explain the situation to his master. Permit the girl to see him occasionally.'

They were disturbed by a deck messenger, who informed Titus that the admiral required his presence. The young tribune excused himself and followed the orderly up the ladders to the chartroom, where he found Taurus sprawled against the table, tapping an opened chart with his stylus.

'Here's your African landfall. A small island in the efflux of this river. No need to worry about finding it. Quadrantus says he has traded the district before.'

Titus stared at the crude-drawn coastline; contemplated the vaguely indicated approaches, unenlivened by mariners' notes. 'Is this chart reliable, sir? I would really like to know!'

'For that matter, so would I. Chrystolis dug it out of the archives for me. It goes back to the second Punic, when someone talked about taking the Carthaginians in the rear. I should say the only authentic information on it is this cross marking your destination. I put it there. It is called Two Hump Island because of its camel outline. Should be identified readily enough.'

‘And my passenger, sir? Are there any means of identifying him?’

‘He’ll be accompanied by a mixed cohort from the Egyptian garrison. They left Alexandria some time ago, with instructions to pick up your man and escort him to the coast. They’ve gone by way of the Mauritanian slave route, and should be at Two Hump long before you round the African bluff.’

Taurus poked his stylus at the chart. ‘The centurion in command will fly his legion colours from this hilltop. He’ll challenge you from Caesar’s first code. The key’s in your diplomatic bag.’

‘And his men, sir? Do they come under my flag?’

‘Use your discretion. Pack the lot back to Egypt the way they came, if circumstances permit. If not, take them in your ship and return them to Rome. Well, that takes care of *Southwind*.’

‘One moment, sir. Is he really very important? I would like to know something of his background, if possible.’

‘I can’t tell you much. He’s the paramount prince of Torrid Africa and nobody’s fool. Play him carefully.’

‘And his name, sir?’

‘Unpronounceable without two sneezes and a cough. However, Augustus has latinised it into Daq. Address him as King Daq. And while we’re on it, his favourite dish is elephant’s foot stewed in palm oil. There’s a footnote in your orders, authorising you to ship a few barrels of the oil for use in passage.’

‘But I’ll have to wean him off the elephant’s foot, won’t I, sir? It wouldn’t keep, and in any case he’d have to do without it when he gets to Rome.’

‘Who says he will? You can get anything here, if you are powerful enough. And what’s wrong with a couple of prime beasts which have been slaughtered at the games? Even the poor can have elephant steak here, when they want it. Well, at least you won’t have any trouble with *Northwind*. He lives on dried fish. Let’s see where he’ll be hiding.’

The admiral removed the African chart, replaced it on the table with one marked *Oceanus Germanicus*, and commented, ‘Here it is. A walled-in bay marked with a red circle. You’ll find him standing on this rock, prompt on the agreed date.’

‘Is he a king too, sir?’

‘An erlking. There’s a difference, I believe, and he is most punctilious on the point. You’ll find him rather stuffy. On second

thoughts you might like him. He doesn't chase women or get drunk deliberately. Drusus met him a few years ago, at a barbarians' banquet on the Lower Rhine. Amiable, but highly suspicious of Roman policy. I should say that this sugared mushroom known as the Pax Mundana will stink like the Cloaca Maxima in his nostrils. Still, our job is to get him there, not sell him the Milvian Bridge. Give me a signature for these papers, then let's go and eat. I'm starving.'

In the main cabin, the notaries were clearing their papers from the table, and a chamberlain spreading a makeshift meal. There were broken meats, rich with hot sauces, new-warmed in the troops' galley. Fresh bread was heaped in a silver dish, flanked by giant flasks of wine. There was cold roast beef, chopped rough and soaked in spices; a platter of green vegetables, dressed ready for the fingers; and, rare delicacy, a jar of green ginger crystallised in honey.

In the stern windows, Calpurnius was explaining the intricacies of marine brokerage to Quadrantus.

'It is what we Romans term a time-charter. You must be signalled off Ostia on the date stipulated in Clause Two, Para Five, or you pay my government five hundred shillings a day demurrage.'

'Demurrage?'

'Call it delay-money then. Actually, it is a fine for being back late.'

'And what, O Calpurnius, if I am back early?'

'In that case we pay you two hundred and fifty shillings for every day saved, additional to your charter fee. You see, it is all very simple, Master Quadrantus. The sooner you return, the more money you will make.'

'It is indeed simple, from the Roman point of view. But I am not an avaricious man and will not push my ship for a few extra shillings. You may expect me precisely on my expiring hour.'

Calpurnius folded the agreement and placed it carefully within his toga. He observed, smiling, 'You are certainly a most assured person, to define exactly your day of return. We Romans, of course, have learnt through experience that one must always leave something to Chance.'

Quadrantus asked solemnly, 'What is Chance?'

Tarquin, overhearing the query, thrust a beaker of wine beneath the shipmaster's nose. 'Have a Falernian, O Shipmaster mine! And in case you don't know, Chance is the careless belch of a windy

goddess. Never rely on it to fill your sails!’

Quadrantus laughed unexpectedly; a noisy, infectious outburst which provoked curious, smiling eyes. A sudden silence fell, whereupon the giant Greek stiffened, stared thoughtfully at the goblet which Tarquin had thrust into his hand, and which Calpurnius now replaced with another containing a thick, golden-hued liquid.

‘This will be more to your taste,’ he observed pleasantly. ‘It is a cordial distilled from Macedonian peaches; most stimulating.’

The chamberlain, hitherto unobtrusive, turned to the admiral, and interposed, ‘I would like you to try one too, sir. It is not a vintage found usually outside the palace cellars, and has quite a history, if you would care to hear it.’

Taurus backed off and raised a protesting palm. ‘Wait a minute! We are only going as far as the river mouth, so, by the Bibulous Gods, don’t start one of those sermons on the timid grape which grew in sandy soil seven hundred paces up Vesuvius and thereby acquired a certain cunning! Any galley slave knows that the only cunning associated with wine is how to get some when there isn’t any.’

Calpurnius interposed urbanely, ‘But, Admiral, you will readily agree there is good wine and bad wine. There is also discrimination.’

‘You mean a nodding acquaintance with the wine-taster, when you dine with an enemy. Personally, for public drinking I prefer that stuff the Germans drink. It’s fermented from rotten grain and they quaff it out of troughs. Not, perhaps, as civilised as Roman fashions, but, on the other hand, who can poison you out of a wooden trough? Could I have another measure of that peach brandy? I’m beginning to like it.’

‘I’ll leave the flagon with you, sir,’ the chamberlain said, faintly huffed. He moved off in the direction of a more appreciative group, and Taurus turned to Titus and asked unexpectedly, ‘Where is your junior centurion?’

‘You mean Sequinus Piso, sir? He has been exchanged. His substitute is coming aboard at Ostia.’

Sensing a sudden displeasure, Titus added hastily, ‘His mother was most distressed at his departure. She prevailed upon me to cancel his appointment. There was no time to consult you.’

Taurus scratched his jaw thoughtfully. 'You've done the wrong thing.'

'I don't understand, sir.'

'You will in a minute. Prince Marcus is a lady's man, and Madame Piso was on his string. He dispensed with her services when she was widowed.'

'But should not the condition have made her more eligible?'

'You ought to know by now that in Rome there is more political capital in seducing a matron than a widow. The point is, Madame Piso retaliated by initiating Marcus' wife into a secret religious cult run by a charlatan called Phosphorus. This annoyed Marcus and he promptly began moves to get Phosphorus expelled from Rome. Madame Piso appealed to Augustus to stay proceedings and further inflamed the affair by acquainting Madame Marcus with details from some of her husband's less savoury extra-marital escapades. This thoroughly aroused our noble prince. He had already been pestered by young Piso to find him employment in high places, and knew also that the mother would be angered if the boy were detailed for hazardous service. What could be better than to pack him off to Africa with you?'

'I wish I had been acquainted with these facts earlier, sir.'

'I can't tell you everything. Well, there's a lop under the keel and, if my old legs don't deceive me, we are in the last river-reach above Ostia. Poke your head through that stern window and signal my barge alongside.'

On deck they found a windless night under a canopy of stars, with Ostia passing close, a diffused glow against the widening horizon.

The work-galley bumped under the ladder and the notaries were bundled over the side, with Calpurnius at their heels. The pilot disembarked, followed by Vipsania. She clung to Titus and murmured her last endearments; then sank through the gap in the bulwarks to the boat below, where her brother's arms awaited, outstretched, to receive her.

The muffled shape of the barge-captain loomed up, expectant. The admiral gestured briefly, then turned to face the silent, watching marines. Tarquin roared harshly and two hundred pike-butts clashed against as many shields. Thrice, ragged and abrupt, the din

echoed about the ship, and died away, lost among the whispering reeds of the river-banks.

Titus felt strong fingers grip his forearm. Taurus' throaty voice fell on his ears, bringing with it the admiral's farewell to his favourites. 'Good luck, son, and may the gods protect you otherwise.'

The bulky figure vanished. The barge cast off, dropped astern and was lost in the waste of waters. Titus, about to dismiss the parade, was distracted by unexpected noises from beneath the counter. A rope slithered across the rails. Voices cried. Oars banged violently in their thole-pins.

Tarquin, sent aft to investigate, returned with a stranger under his wing. 'Our new junior,' he explained.

There was a touch of mockery in his words; enough to arouse Titus from his detachment. A moment later he was facing Sequinus Piso.

He demanded harshly, 'What are you doing in this ship?'

Embarrassed, the youth handed him a note, sealed with the palace crest.

The chartroom was close by. Titus stepped across the sill. He beckoned the young guardsman to follow, then opened the note; stared at the abrupt wording:

Take this officer back into your ship.

He glanced up. 'How dare you go over my head?'

The youth dropped his gaze. 'I'm sorry, sir. When Prince Marcus heard I was not sailing with you, he sent for me and enquired the reason.'

Titus folded the paper and placed it within his tunic. Piso, watching his actions, asked, 'May I resume duties, then, sir?'

Titus contemplated him reflectively. 'Go to your cabin. You are under arrest.'

He stood in the chartroom door until the sound of receding footsteps had died away down the ladders, then crossed to the rail. He withdrew the note from his breast and flung it far into the sea.

CHAPTER TEN

IN the morning, Titus was awakened by sounds from the deck above his head. The leathery squelch of a distant pump came to his ears, the splash of water and the harsh scrape of twig-brooms on wet wood.

He dressed leisurely and spoke to the sentry outside his cabin, who clashed his buckler in a clumsy manner and hailed him with provincial accents.

The young tribune asked: 'How long have you been under training?'

'A few weeks, sir. I am from Misenum, and was conscripted into a short-service draft during the scare with Sextus.'

'But that was off Sicily! What were you doing in Rome?'

'We were discharged in the city, sir. The ship returned to Ostia direct. She was sprung in a gale and there was nothing else for it.'

'I see you are part Nubian. Are you enfranchised?'

'Not fully, sir. Father's a freedman, but mother was taken during the Jubal affair and sold outright. Her owner could claim me under the Lex Julia, if I showed up at home. Not being eligible for a first-grade legion, I did the next best thing and joined the navy, sir.'

'A trifle rash, wasn't it? This is a tough life.'

'So I was told, sir, but it's a means to a good end. They told me I could transfer to the infantry, if I could show service in a sea-legion. That'll mean full citizenship quickly, and I don't want to let the chance go.'

The youth grinned shyly; added: 'I know a lot depends on the report you will give me, sir.'

'Which, of course, depends on yourself,' Titus told him. 'See to it well.'

He returned within his cabin, ate some food which a servant brought him on a tray, then spent an hour with his instructions,

brooding over their main features and memorising the details.

A tap on the door revealed Tarquin, who informed him the morning parade was over and the men sent to breakfast.

The sea-centurion indicated the papers, and asked, 'Anything of interest?'

'Plenty, and headaches to accompany them. There is a warning here about African pirates outside the Pillars. The secret police caught a fellow down at Ostia, carrying a description of a rich-laden outward-bound squaresailer which fitted the *Fravashe* like a glove. He was under suspicion as a contact-man for Redbeard and admitted that he got this particular information from a palace colleague.'

'Did he say who it was?'

'He was dead before they could put the question. However, I am more puzzled by the news that the man was apprehended before I had even seen this ship. How could that be?'

'Simple enough. He could have been lying to save an accomplice in the harbour department. After all, a colleague there would be more useful to him than one at the palace. What would a flunkey know about ship movements?'

'In this case more than a harbour-master. It might interest you to know that the *Fravashe* was not reported in, and, furthermore, came upriver and berthed in the naval basin without a pilot.'

'No one saw her?'

'No one, until I did. But work that one out in your spare time. I am concerned rather with my ability to repel a pirate attack. If the specimen on sentry duty outside my cabin is representative of our military escort, then you and I will be bearing the heat ourselves.'

'I can lick them into shape,' Tarquin said carelessly. 'There are some veterans among them, too. Enough to inspirit the rest. In any case, we'll be four days before we pass the Rock and make the Atlantic. Why worry?'

Titus produced a second paper. 'Here's something else. An instruction that we train a ceremonial guard to receive our passengers. They are of royal blood and will expect palace etiquette.'

Tarquin's grin returned. 'If nothing else, it explains why Piso was pushed back into the ship. Someone knew enough to realise that you and I weren't cut out for the job.'

'You are aware, of course, I have placed Piso under close arrest?'

'I gathered as much, from his remarks. Although you can't confine him to his berth for the rest of the voyage.'

'I could, were I so disposed. I could also put him ashore in the Balearics and have him sent back to Rome. But it would endanger his career.'

'And your own too,' said Tarquin. 'It is obvious now, he was sent into the ship for a definite purpose.'

'So it seems. There could be a misconception. You may authorise him to resume duty, and I will speak to him later.'

Tarquin went off and Titus paced his cabin, his mind provoked into uneasiness. Misconception or not, Madame Piso's behaviour was scarcely motivated by a desire to conceal the *Fravashe's* need for ceremonial guard. She had revealed plainly an angry woman's resentment against personal spite, cleverly masked beneath a pretended terror of supernatural powers.

Or was it pretended? The rumours which were current on the squaresailer's fate were too persistent and general to be dismissed as a silly woman's sensationalism.

No enlightened Roman could wholly neglect the possibility of impious meddling in his affairs; and unquestionably the sudden materialisation of the *Fravashe* was worthy of scrutiny. The machinery of design had run its course with a suspicious smoothness: the discovery of the ship in the dock, her suitability for the secret voyage and readiness to charter; all revealed the workings of an invisible power.

Naturally enough, he had given Heaven credit for so fortuitous an intervention. It would be a loss of faith to ascribe it otherwise; yet it could be possible that the underworld was the real instigator. The temple priests were ever exhorting the devout to guard their innocence against the devil, for no human pie was ever completely beyond the reach of his long spoon. He could even quote the Twelve Books, if it served his purpose. Undeniably, the *Fravashe* was a mystery ship, potential with evil, and her captain a dark, enigmatic figure.

Nevertheless, evil must carry counter-evil within its shadows, as night follows day, and day, night! If the squaresailer were a marked ship in the eyes of the goat gods, there was reason for it. Could heaven be interested in his voyage?

But, then, how could the wanderings of a few obscure kings influ-

ence the course of divine destiny? And if their appearance in Rome marked no more than a moment of political expediency, the rest was nonsense.

Titus yawned, stowed away his papers and went on deck for a breath of fresh air.

He found the weather boisterous, with the *Fravashe* diving before a strong easterly. The sky was blue and cloudless; the sea a spume-streaked expanse of green-shot waves. The ship, dark-etched under the high sun, laboured sturdily, tossed her bows and plunged onwards to the west in a stiff, monotonous weave. The wind shrilled through the rigging, and rippled a top-song across the loose ropes of the running-gear. Snowy-winged gulls hung motionless over the poop.

Titus battled his way into the windward shelter, from where Quadrantus was watching his crew take in a mainsail and reset it on the aftermast.

'She is sporting with me,' the Greek explained. 'A little pressure further aft will steady her nose.'

Tarquin interrupted his words, toiling up from the waist, followed by an apron-clad marine, wearing an expression of bewildered concern.

'This is the ship's butcher,' Tarquin explained. 'He wants to report about the pigs.'

The marine wiped his hands nervously on his apron, interjected, 'It's a wonder you didn't hear the commotion, sir. They broke out of their sty and jumped the rail. Six porkers and two sows! One after another, into the sea, and drowned themselves!'

'Most regrettable, but not unduly alarming. Put the men on three-quarter rations and supplement their meals with something else. There is plenty of preserved food in the ship, and some bullocks.'

'But the bullocks are dead, too, sir! They were found stark in their pens this morning. Rigid with terror, my orderly said.'

Titus stared across the stern, at the receding wake. He was speculating on how far pigs could swim, when the butcher interjected: 'They say there's a curse on the ship, too. Not bad, eh?'

Titus turned on him sharply. 'Nonsense! Cattle are not amenable to sea-passages. They are timid and readily terrified. The pigs, of course, panicked and leapt their sty. Resume your duties!'

The man went off and Titus glanced across at Tarquin enquir-

ingly. The centurion's clownish grin emerged, masking his true thoughts.

'That only leaves the rats. And when they go, Sweet Venus! Watch my dust!'

Quadrantus, who had been standing by during the incident, said, unexpectedly, 'There are no rats in my ship.'

The two Romans stared. 'What a pity,' Tarquinius told him. 'There's nothing sweeter than a fat rat, fished out of a grain-hold and broiled over a brazier.'

He went off, whistling, down the ladders to the open deck, where the soldiery were engaged in routine drill.

Titus, after a moment's silence, followed him. He stood at the foot of the mainmast and contemplated his tiny force. Near by, the slingers were grouped on the second hatch, examining their gear, polishing their round shot and flexing their throwing-bands. A file of javeliners were lined up against the bulwarks, listening to a short, stout master-spearman explaining how to hurl, sailor-fashion.

'This isn't the Campus Martius and you don't get room for open order on a ship's deck. Here it is then. Stand elbow to elbow. Throw from the hips, not the shoulders. Now, on the word of command, follow me by numbers. Hup *pilum*! Swing in, swing out! One two! One two! By the Immortal Gods, doesn't anyone have poise?'

Further forward, at the break of the bows, a number of artillerymen were clustered about a newly erected ordnance piece, a throwing-contrivance, angled for close range. Missiles were stacked into the scuppers. Two brawny marines were matching their speed in smart loading. In one movement they snatched up a huge stone and nested it neatly in the machine's ejector-apron, leapt back until the rope-twister concluded the pretence of springing his catch, then deftly returned the stone to the deck.

Sequinius Piso was in their midst, eager-eyed and curious; a fact which did not escape Titus' observation. He called Tarquinius across; asked, 'What is Piso doing with the ballistarii? Is he skilled in gunnery?'

'Is a guardsman skilled in anything? I gave him a station up there to keep him out of the way for the time being. If the work gets hot, he can watch it from a cool corner until he gets used to it.'

'Does he know he will be called on to train a ceremonial guard?'

'It was mentioned, but on the understanding it takes second place

to pirates. He seemed quite interested.'

'In what? Guard duty, or a general brush?'

'Both. Incidentally, these men are shaping quite well. Their routine drill is excellent. I can take them along a step further, if you have any plans.'

'I thought of the old trick. Concealment and surprise. I haven't made up my mind yet.'

'You'd better hurry,' Tarquin told him. 'With this breeze, we'll soon be in Redbeard's waters, and I'm beginning to get a thirst for red wine.'

Titus smiled. 'Join me at dinner tonight, and try my Falernian instead.'

He added, 'Bring your junior. It is time I made his acquaintance socially.'

He had intended the meal to serve as a pleasant subterfuge; the accepted shakedown, initialed by a prudent leader, and which enables him the better to understand those who will interpret his commands.

In Tarquin's case it did not matter a great deal. Although they had never sailed together previously, they held the close bond of comrades in the same branch of the Roman arms. They were known to each other by repute. It was enough.

With Sequinus Piso the case was different. The youth's ill-starred entry into the ship and the bleak necessity of overlooking it for the sake of a harmonious voyage had called for a new approach. Furthermore, Titus was not going to pile double duties on Tarquin because of someone else's delinquencies. What steps he took when he returned to Rome was another matter.

But the meal proved a failure. The youth was ill at ease. He revealed no desire to forget imaginary injuries, or fraternise with the forces which had inflicted them. He listened, white-faced, to the general professionalisms of the two senior officers; ate but little, drank sparingly, and excused himself on the plea of duty as soon as he could.

Tarquin followed on his heels and Titus went to his cot, if anything more uneasily than on the previous night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHEN Titus awakened, dawn was a gray glimmer filtering through the opaque stone of the stern windows. The sleep-mists melted. He recognised Tarquin's homely features.

The centurion shook his shoulder; whispered, 'There's a blackbird under our wing. A fine, cheeky fellow, anxious to peck.'

Titus flung on his cloak and hurried to the deck, into a half-world of dark suspense and sea-whispers. Southward, the Atlas mountains stood sentinel to the Afric land mass. Blackened peaks reached for an unknown heaven, fell to sea-level. The pitted coast loomed obscure and heavy-shadowed, the deeper to mask cruel ships and murderous minds.

Titus peered over the rail; muttered, 'Where?'

'He's lurking astern and won't come in yet. Perhaps he has a mate in hiding. We're ready for him, too.'

Titus glanced aloft. His standard was struck and the main truck bare. The *Fravashe* drooped under her night sails. Windless, a slow wave broke against her hull, a harsh smear which traversed the water-line until its weak stridence was smothered in the wake.

'Where is *Quadrantus*?'

Tarquin nodded in the direction of the steering-hatch, a shapeless lump pinned against the stars. 'Up there. He didn't like it when I told him what we intended to do.'

'He'd have liked it less, were we not here to protect him. What did he say?'

'Nothing much. He watched me strike the flag and nodded his head when I told him to maintain his course. It was when I alerted the marines and manned the side his manner changed. He picked up the corsair himself, trailing us, and sensed immediately what was up. He wanted to know if it was your idea or mine.'

‘I’ll have a word with him.’

Titus found the giant Greek, tight-lipped and grim, handling the steering-oar alone. He said to him in low tones, ‘You realise these creatures prey on defenceless merchantmen such as yourself. If we teach them a sharp lesson, we might be saving the lives of many innocent seamen.’

The shipmaster surveyed him enigmatically. ‘You mean rather to slaughter every living soul on board that craft astern. Is not such your purpose?’

Annoyance gripped Titus. ‘If you put it so, then it is indeed thus. Would you have it otherwise?’

‘If the choice were mine, blood would never be spilt on these decks. Yet I cannot prevent your foolish wickedness.’

Titus kept his temper. ‘If we Romans were not in this ship, blood would still be spilt. Your own.’

‘It is not so. Were I ordering my own vessel, she would have borne away and given this fellow the slip.’

‘And wind, Master Quadrantus? What would you do for heels?’

Quadrantus glanced sideways, at a near-by sail leech, now gently aquiver. He pressed his weight against a suddenly responsive steering-oar. A faint mockery touched his deep tones. ‘Here it is, O Tribune! At my service, as always!’

The sparse sail area filled. The *Fravashe* curved away. Titus felt a quick hand touch his sleeve.

‘Look at him,’ Tarquin muttered. ‘He thinks we’re off! He can’t lay us alongside quickly enough.’

Titus glanced along the centurion’s arm and picked out the low black shape which was emerging from the murk. Oar-driven at high speed, it darted under the squaresailer’s stern, twisted on its long keel and bore up alongside.

Cold joy swam through Titus. He had them now, almost. A few brief seconds, and they would pour across his bulwarks, innocently.

He shoved the crouching Tarquin across to the ladder-head; muttered, ‘Go!’; flattened himself unseen behind the aftermast, from where the *Fravashe*’s waist was visible beneath his feet, fanged and barbed with the menace of two hundred crouching Romans.

The intruder touched. Hull kissed hull in a drawn-out scrape. Soft noises seeped up from the ocean’s surface and grew over the deck like tendrils of grim premonition. Pine planks complained to stout

oak. A block creaked. A sea-bird cheeped. Tarquin pursed his lips a second time. Again the guileless *peep* stole into the rigging. The infantry stirred. Men grew out of the scuppers. Swords flashed cautiously. The twilight weakened before the rising sun. A colorful tide arose, curled and fell in quiet thunder across the rails. Blue shirts, black beards. Dark, gleaming eyes above proud noses. Curved daggers between white teeth.

Brown hands reached for jewelled hafts, in vain.

The jovial master-spearman drove the first blow home: '*Hup Hup!* One two! And don't jam your point in his pelvis.'

The slaughter widened. Horror became humdrum. Belly-spitted, the writhing bodies piled in the scuppers. Dismayed roars brought deeper confusion. The second wave pushed up and mounted. A green scarf tied about his skull, the corsair chief reached the *Fravashe's* deck. He came over the after-rail, unsuspecting, and stared unbelieving at the bloody scene, a few feet from where the watching sea-tribune was standing.

'Ho!' Titus said, conversationally.

The fellow saw the gleaming helmet and flung his dagger, dart-swift. Titus turned his head slightly and the weapon glanced off, to sink quivering in the near-by mast. The Roman whipped his sword upwards and the corsair collapsed to the deck, ripped from pubes to navel.

'Clean gutted,' Tarquin said. 'Like a sucking pig on a Druid's altar.'

He grabbed the corpse by the beard; dragged it across the waist.

'One moment!' Titus told him. 'I'll have that dainty nut, if it is there for the asking.'

His long blade whistled through the air and Redbeard's head came off his trunk. Tarquin held it aloft and the grinning marines took their cue. Heads rolled like ghostly skittles. A tall thin lad from Pompeii struck trouble with a fat corpse in his corner. He stuck his boot into the slack mouth; hacked, sawed at the bare white throat until decapitation was complete.

'Toss them back,' Titus ordered. 'Then over you go after them.'

Several heads bounced and rolled on the intruder's deck, a gory hail. The laughing Romans mounted the *Fravashe's* topsides; poised to leap. Aboard the corsair, a gangling Nubian, one-legged and with a crutch, tore a knife from the hands of a dazed shipmate, hopped

to the bows and hacked away the grapples. As the ships drifted apart the slingers reared up in the squaresailer's gangways, flexed their throwing bands and sent a death shower across the widening gap. The one-legged Negro crumpled across the stem, his forehead split like a ripened cherry. The *Fravashe* caught the breeze and fell off. The affair was over.

The master-spearman tugged Tarquin's sleeve and indicated the still-writhing heap in the scuppers. 'What about the offal, sir?'

The centurion wiped his brow. 'Toss it in. Then hoist Redbeard aloft, where his friends can see him.'

Someone rove the knotted green scarf into a signal halyard, tangled the ginger whiskers in the running part, and up went the bloody trophy, with glazed eyes a-popping for the last view of the fine prize which might have been.

Mangled trunks were shoved over the squaresailer's rails, *plop, plop*. The depths swirled and the sea monsters surfaced. Jaws crunched and snapped. Long black shapes fought for toothsome gob-bets. The ocean's face blushed a weak crimson.

A low moan drifted across the water; bewildered grief and a growing anger for frightful revenge in the future, somewhere, somehow. The sounds died in the distance. Shame-faced peace crept back into the world.

Titus crossed to the rail and stared at the fading corsair, a crippled hunk of broken oar-blades, now merged within the shadows of the distant mountains.

The bitterness of failure grew within him; for to have allowed even one of the damned brood to escape was to double the evil he had sought to crush. They would be back again, these sea-hellions, and slitting sailormen's throats with a more savage joy.

His gaze swept back to the *Fravashe*'s forecastle. He contemplated the huge rock poised on the catapult's apron. Had that pill been hurled down the corsair's throat, it would have cured his final ills. Shattered timbers and damned souls could have gone to perdition in company, and the sea's face wiped clean of evil scum.

He walked up the deck, stared thoughtfully at the cumbrous mechanism, poked his sword at the still-taut spring and released its catch. The boulder ascended slowly, curved in the air and hit the water not more than six feet from the *Fravashe*'s side.

He turned to the embarrassed Sequinus; observed, coldly, 'By do-

ing this, ten minutes ago, you could have made victory secure. Why did you not act?’

‘It all happened so quickly, sir. I was watching the fight in the waist. The ships parted suddenly, and it was too late.’

Titus turned to the master-stonethrower, a reliable catapultist and veteran of many campaigns. ‘Did I not see you in the waist during the action, alongside the spearmen?’

‘I thought I might get a nut for myself, sir, when I saw we weren’t wanted up there.’

‘Rather say you deserted your post, and created failure out of futile leadership.’

He broke off and surveyed the rest of the team; youths, fresh from the barracks and scarcely to blame for what had happened.

‘Secure your platform,’ he told them abruptly.

As he returned aft he passed beneath the main yard. The thin line which held Redbeard’s head to the truck parted suddenly. There was a muffled thud and the soggy object rolled across the deck to his feet. He kicked it to one side and continued his journey to the poop ladder, where he paused, astonished at the sight of *Quadrantus*. The Greek was swaying, as if engulfed in a trance. His eyes rolled. His head lolled; his lips moved, but no sound emerged. Titus mounted the steps, shook the fellow’s arm, and told him, ‘All right. You can come out of your catalepsy. They’ve gone. Now square your ship and make sail. Instruct your crew to scrub down. Those scuppers are like a shambles.’

Quadrantus emerged from his fit, stared at the Roman and said deliberately, ‘Tell your own men to clean them. They made it so, did they not?’

Titus lost his temper. ‘By the Insufferable Gods, say no more! Or I will clap your precious crew under hatches until we return to Rome!’

At the steps leading to his quarter gallery, he paused for a final word. ‘The main-truck halyard is rotten. Get a new one rove, before you hoist my standard.’

Quadrantus surveyed him with growing calmness. ‘It was stout enough, until the blood you spilt so wantonly touched its strands.’

Titus went to his room, flung open the stern windows and brooded over the distant mountains until his indignation subsided.

Tarquin entered the cabin to make his report, seized a biscuit

from the sideboard barrel and chewed hungrily.

'I've had no breakfast,' he explained.

'Neither have the men. Are they paraded?'

'They're mustering now. I thought you might like to make an issue of wine.'

'After prayers. Fall them in at the break of the poop.'

He faced his men from the ladder-head. The élite, his marine infantry, were in the first ranks, untidy and battle-soiled. The slingers stood amidships, ceremonially neat and with their equipment tidied. The catapult squad was in the rear, red-faced and ruffled. It was plain their more successful comrades had rough-jested them.

All hands removed their helmets, and he stared down at their raised faces, transformed by bared heads from a grim band of soldiery to a group of youths and men.

But there was a quality now, in their watching eyes, which hitherto had been absent. Overnight, from raw Italians, he had turned them into Romans.

Or rather, the gods had. Abruptly, he opened the thanksgiving service. Raucous, their rough accents roared back the responses. The babble spread, echoed across the ship, until it seemed each passing wave-top was flinging invocation to the smiling skies. Praise and promise rang upwards through the wooden spars. Mars was singled out and thanked. Neither was Neptune nor Minerva overlooked; nor great Jove himself, the mighty father of all heaven.

'God of Gods!' Titus begged. 'Take our humble victory!'

He turned towards distant Rome, outstretched his palms and flung himself prostrate on the deck. 'O Janus! Close thy temple!'

Below, in his cabin, his servants had prepared a simple meal. Bowls of fruit, bread and honey were spread on a clean white cloth.

The famished Tarquin seized an apple and sank his teeth through its rosy skin.

Suddenly he pitched it through the stern window, pulled a wry face and said in disgusted tones, 'There's a maggot in it!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE day dragged. The Atlas mountains broke through their haze; materialised into a discoloured shroud of awry peaks, brown-blotched against the careless symmetry of the coastline. The wind dropped to wayward puffs, brief mouthfuls of air which bellied the drooping sails, and glanced off, dark-ruffled over the face of the waters.

A weak swell came in with high noon, and the squaresailer worked in the seaway. Oaken timbers groaned, as if a pent-up sadness, lodged deep within the keel, were crying its pain through ribs and frames.

The swell increased; the noises redoubled, deepening the ship's agony. Slack lines trembled and twitched.

High on his steering-platform, Quadrantus brooded over the desolate suspense of sea and sky. His glance rarely left his aching ship. Once he stepped to the rail, flung a chip of wood overboard and watched it drift astern with a thoughtful, measuring eye.

Then he stared at the weaving mast trucks, as if in deep communion with the wild arabesques which were being dry-scrolled across the bare parchment of the skies. Titus watched the fellow unseen and speculated on his behaviour. Perhaps, the young Roman reflected, he was assessing the quality of the coming wind. Perhaps his unfathomable mind was enmeshed with stranger, vaster affairs. Who knew? Who would ever know?

A splashing beneath his feet terminated the tribune's speculations. He glanced over the side, and saw a school of sea-beasts boil up from the stilled depths. Pig-eyed, with glistening black bodies, they sported briefly about the bows then plunged westwards.

About to return to his cabin, Titus found his ears trapped by the idle conversation of some marines sprawled beneath the waist awnings. Listless, they were viewing the porpoises as ill-omened outriders from hidden empires of the watery world. One superstitious soldier

asserted that the monsters had affixed invisible ropes to the *Fra-vashe's* bottom and were towing her to Hell.

Another voice said idly, 'You don't talk sense. Hell is a place of fire. All this water would put it out.'

'But there is steam there too! And is not steam made from water? I tell you, Hell is yonder, where the world hangs at the edge of the ocean. Do not the priests say so? And if we are not being drawn towards it, then why are the days growing hotter as the winter deepens?'

'Because the world is round, you fool, and we approach that part which is nearest the sun. At least the philosophers state it thus, and I would sooner believe them than your chanting priests.'

A third voice joined the discussion, and observed lazily, 'The world must be round. Why else, when I shoot a stone in the air, does it fall vertically to the ground?'

The first speaker was outraged. 'You are a greater ass than Antonius! Your stone comes down at the same angle as it goes up! Furthermore, we would topple over, were the world round. Common sense therefore makes it flat.'

'But a nit doesn't fall from an elephant's back! I think the world is an elephant, and we are all nits.'

Titus returned to his cabin, sat at his table and resumed his report on the recent action; a work which took him several hours to compile, and many more in which to dwell on its implications; for the conflict had gone much further than teaching African pirates a lesson. It had also sorted out and set apart the various personalities now crowding into his daily life.

It was good to discover that Tarquin was a cool, unruffled leader, as well as a competent administrator and amiable shipmate, and equally reassuring to find his raw legionaries were sound material.

Sequinus Piso still remained a problem, although an incident which occurred during the evening somewhat lessened its magnitude. As Titus was about to retire for the night, the young centurion presented himself at the cabin door, pale-faced and faintly agitated.

The tribune bade him enter; asked, 'Well? What is your trouble now?'

'About the action this morning, sir. You reprimanded the senior catapult for deserting his post. I should have told you at the time,

sir. He asked me if he could join the fighting in the waist. I told him he could go.'

'Why?'

'He said all his life he had wanted to take a pirate's head home to his mother. He thought he saw an exceptionally good one, for shrinking.'

As Titus reflected the point, the youth went on in lower tones, 'Nevertheless, sir, I don't think he would have left me, had he known I'd lost my nerve.'

'I wouldn't permit the fact to distress you unduly. It was your first experience in action. Doubtless you will do better next time.'

'Thank you, sir. I think I will, too. In fact, I hope the ship stays becalmed and the corsairs come back. It will give me a chance to reinstate myself.'

'And I, for my part, hope they don't return. A second time, and we might get more than we bargained for.'

Titus crossed the cabin and placed his hand on the youth's arm: 'Resume your duties. Forget the other part of the affair, as I have.'

He went to bed, reassured into a better mood by the boy's frankness. He turned up his lamp and read poetry until drowsiness overtook him and he fell asleep.

During the night the weather changed. The wind blew up from the northwest and drew the ship away from the land. At dawn, when Titus entered his quarter gallery, he found the *Fravashe* flying south before a half-gale. Black clouds scudded low. Solid water crashed unceasing in the waist. Overworked scuppers hissed and gouted. The high wind screamed through the sparse cordage.

He donned his warmest cloak and clambered the ladders to the poop; surveyed the wild tempestuous scene. The waist awning had been taken in, the main deck cleared and fretted with lifelines. Two burly seamen were straining at the lee steering-oar. Quadrantus was at their side, watching the remainder of his crew shift a topsail. Soon the ship rode easier. Her bows ceased their violent dives. She skimmed the seas instead of butting them; sailed proud, with her decks drying rapidly under a growing sun.

Tarquin bobbed out of the main hatchway, with Sequinus at his heels. Titus arrested his attention. 'The morning muster? It is late, is it not? Where are the men?'

'In the troop deck. Seasick.'

'What? Marine legionaries! Seasick!'

'This is the worst weather we've had since we left, and most of them are first voyagers.'

'But it still doesn't explain the absence of deck sentries!'

'I'm coming to that. The veterans are holding a meeting.'

'Indeed? What about, may I ask?'

Tarquin grinned. 'They think we are bound for Hell.'

'They'll get there sooner than they expect, if I find them refusing duty. Sound the general alarm. Enter the troop deck yourself. I want every man up, sick or fit.'

He went below and donned his full uniform leisurely. He awaited until the bull-bugle had sent its deep note booming through the hull; listened to the scuffle and scurry of hurrying feet, satisfied himself that the ship's complement was assembled, then returned to the poop.

He stood at the break of the rails, where they could see him clearly. Silently, reflectively, his glance searched every face. More than half were pea-green and dulled with misery. A stout sprinkling glowed with health and rugged individuality. Several were doggedly resentful and at least two were ripe for mutiny. He asked, 'Well? What is your complaint?'

He received no answer, nor had he expected one; for their wits were about them, their cunning street-wits. Only a fool would have spoken: a fool to be marked and penalised if the necessity arose.

At least the discovery gave him the measure of their minds. Now he could cope with their grievances, real or imaginary.

He addressed them in reassuring tones. 'This is a hazardous expedition, and some of you are not here by your own choice. However, we are now full embarked and cannot go back without encompassing greater dangers.'

He paused, and continued in a more deliberate voice, 'We are a raw team and know but little of each other. Misunderstandings naturally arise under such conditions, but they can be removed by simple explanation. I am prepared to receive a deputation of three in my cabin. Resume your duties!'

Below, he had barely removed his helmet and taken his chair at the head of the table, when there was a knock on the bulkhead and

three marine-seamen entered. One, whose voice he immediately recognised as that of Antonius, said quickly, 'We want some assurance, sir, that this ship is not being towed to Hell.'

'I think your greatest assurance is my own presence here. When I am gathered to the gods, it is not my intention to travel via Hades.'

They smiled doubtfully. Titus went on, 'You must not assume that because we have lost the land, we are in danger of being drawn over the ocean's edge. I could fetch the coast tonight, were I minded to do so.'

'But, Tribune, last night we observed the stars against the masts. It is clear that the ship has suddenly pulled her course to the westward! Is not Africa, our destination, to the south?'

'Quite so. I set the change myself, last night before I retired. The master convinced me of a favourable breeze which would waft us the swifter on our journey if we entered its windy tunnel. And has not this dawn proved it so? Gaze through those windows! Are we not flying on the pursed lips of Boreas himself!'

Antonius, a fellow with a clever, cynical face, muttered, 'Or sucked to perdition on the breath of Hell.' He raised his voice, adding in bolder tones, 'Is this shipmaster to be trusted fully? Could he not have sold us to the water-gods without our even knowing it?'

The first speaker interposed, hurriedly, 'We have watched this man and his crew, O Tribune! If they possess a religion, then when do they observe it? Is it not strange that this ship possesses neither shrine nor images for worship?'

The third marine, a thin moody fellow, burst out, 'Furthermore, there are these persistent stories of the ship being accursed. One does not have to see the dung to scent the dirt, you know.'

He suddenly shouted, 'Why won't those bloodstains come out of the deck? Who drove the pigs mad and frightened the heifers to death? We want better food too! The same as you and the centurions get!'

Silence fell. Titus asked coldly, 'What is your name?'

'Valerius Magnus, slinger, first class.'

'Your previous regiment?'

'I was with the Fourteenth Pannonian, on the Upper Danube.'

'Fourteenth Pannonian? Disbanded, was it not?'

'We were away too long, sir. The veterans revolted.'

'Over what? The food?'

'Partly. Some of the cohorts had trouble with their officers. They didn't like them.'

'And will you like me, if I give you the same food as myself?'

'Most assuredly, O Tribune!'

Titus nodded his head, and indicated his breakfast on the table. 'There it is. A few olives and some porridge. It was prepared in the lower-deck galley. I water my own wine, of course.'

The other two marines grinned slyly and Titus seized his moment to dismiss them. At the cabin door, he told them, 'Don't be afraid to bring me your troubles; for I am concerned with your well-being, even before my own. Remember, in return, that you owe me obedience and discipline. You may go.'

As they trooped off, Valerius Magnus said over his shoulder, 'It isn't your rations I was really meaning, sir. But we know there is better stuff in the ship, and those chamberlains are getting it. Last night they had turkey pie.'

Titus called him back. 'The chamberlains are palace functionaries, sent into this ship to attend the emperor's guests, our passengers. You are a Roman soldier. Nevertheless, if you envy their situation and wish to share their food, I could re-enter you on the muster-list as their lackey. Would you prefer it so?'

Red-faced, the fellow protested his refusal, returned on deck with his comrades and left Titus to further reflection.

It did not take him long to make up his mind. He rang his bell and sent for the senior chamberlain, curious to meet a palace flunkey who could gobble rich pastry in boisterous weather.

He discovered a stout, elderly person, pale-eyed, yet glowing with a certain ruddy health. Quite an experienced sailor, too, for he stood, legs apart, countering the ship's motion as effortlessly as any gull on an upper yard.

Titus commented, 'For one who leads a sedentary life, you are remarkably at home in a ship.'

'It is not so remarkable, O Tribune Terentius! I was Agrippa's factotum before I went to the palace.'

'Admiral Agrippa! You sailed with him?'

'As his personal steward, for twenty years. When he died I was bequeathed to the Emperor. I was sent to accompany you because of my background.'

‘Quite so. I can see no other reason, unless it is to inspire my crew with a passion for turkey pie. Why were you so indiscreet?’

The chamberlain smiled blandly. ‘I baked the pie in the galley ovens, with the cook’s permission. Were those grounds for deception?’

Titus scrutinised him carefully. Doubtless this chamberlain, a freedman, in common with his class, was skilled in artifice and procrastination. To prolong the discussion would merely discredit his own authority. He was about to end the meeting when the chamberlain said, unexpectedly, ‘I was instructed to place myself at your disposal, O Tribune. This is the first occasion upon which the opportunity has been made available to me. If there is any way in which I can serve you, pray command me.’

‘Thank you,’ Titus said politely. ‘My officers are dining with me this evening. A special occasion. Could you suggest something appropriate?’

The fellow scarcely moved a muscle in his fleshy, pendulous cheeks. ‘But, of course, O Titus Terentius! A sea-pie would be most fitting, if your centurions are not averse to its containing the turkey’s humbles.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE days mellowed as the *Fravashe* slanted south. Seamen grew out of the masts and rigging, and materialised unexpectedly into painters and handymen. A round dozen of burly bronzed giants, they teamed and paired as a band of brothers. Beneath their deft fingers, sea-husbandry came to life. Sails were shifted and gear reversed. Hot pitch was laid into cracked seams. Masts were scraped and oiled. Standing gear rubbed down; ratlines jerked and overhauled. The fibre-jagged three-strand anchor cable was hauled up from its locker, aired in the sun and searched for flaws. A length of chain was shack-

led to the anchor-ring; rough-cast links of Spanish iron, strong enough to withstand the twitch and scour of an African river.

Betimes, these silent men sat on the forehatch, sails tucked neat under their skirted smocks, sewing new cloths, patching and stitching.

Their communion with Quadrantus was remarkable. He never gave an audible order. They sensed his directions, without turning their heads, and moved to his wishes as automatically, collectively, as a flock of birds wheeling in the sky.

The Roman sea-life pursued a noisier course. Trumpets blew at frequent intervals. Cooks clattered their pots. The infantry exercised their arms and the sentries clashed their bucklers. Over all, squeaky-voiced, Sequinus put his ceremonial guard through their first awkward paces.

Suspitions and fears had been lulled with the coming of fine weather. The soldiers no longer spoke of curses and brimstone. The bloodstained scuppers ceased to be a bone of contention, for this pink efflorescence which had bloomed persistently since the pirate action, stubborn alike to broom and abrasive, had vanished overnight.

There it was, winking its evil reminiscence in the sunset; and by dawn it had gone, like a guilty thought before the blistering glance of a holy eye!

'It is a good omen, sir,' the senior shot-slinger told Titus. 'That bloodstain had us all uneasy, if you know what I mean, sir. I don't think we'll hear any more about the ship being accursed now.'

'I should say not,' Tarquin interposed innocently. 'Lepidus, the chief chamberlain, has the bile, too. After that, one might even say the voyage possessed charm.'

The shot-slinger eyed the centurion warily. A man with a face like Tarquin's should be throwing stale pies in a farce, not airing sarcasms on a trooper's deck.

Still, Tarquin was the senior executive officer in the *Fravashe*, and a fellow with the venomous potentiality of a double-charged viper, if he didn't like anyone. The shot-slinger pretended not to notice the remark, glanced down his nose and said artlessly, 'It is probably the growing heat, sir, and what's in your stomach. The chamberlains get bilious and the troops get diarrhoea.'

Titus, examining some equipment battened to the mast, glanced

up sharply. 'Diarrhoea? What do you mean?'

'Nothing unusual, Tribune, and not worth a sick parade. Troops are generally one way or the other, if you know what I mean.'

'Perhaps they are, in the field. But disease and sickness can spread quickly in a ship. If you don't mind, I'll have the men regular, or reported in the daily returns.'

He dismissed the matter from his mind, until the squaresailer reached the equatorial zone, and turned in under the African belly. Then, overnight the weather changed. The heat blew prickly moist. The sea-winds sighed their last, and faded astern into the west. The swell lapsed leaden, congealed into oily undulations, long and laboured, as if Neptune were fretting in his sleep.

Lower Mauritania emerged, a coastline of evil implication a-shimmer with salt-water shrubs and fringed by wild-fingered surf. The land grew large beyond, a thick mass of brown hills, crunched against the molten dawn like grease piled up on a tilted pot.

The *Fravashe* stood in. Rain fell, leaving the ship covered in mud; a red-glazed iridescence which cracked dry under the rising sun.

Titus came on deck as the crew were swabbing down and the buccina roaring its bull-notes through the 'tween-decks. He watched the tired, tousled stream of men erupt from the hatches, fumbling with their breast armour, as if a new weariness were in their bones. His glance caught ominous gaps in their parade lines and he turned enquiringly to Tarquin.

'There's fifteen in the sick bay,' the centurion explained. 'They've developed a heat rash. Diet, I think. Porridge no longer agrees with the weather, and since we turned in from the main ocean we don't seem to be catching many flying fish.'

'Put them on dried fruit, then. There are biscuits, too, and some lemons, which could be broken into their drinking water. Is there anything else?'

Tarquin removed his helmet and mopped his brow with a large cloth. 'How about relaxing routine orders? By Vulcan himself, this gear is ill-contrived for an African climate! And my helmet has doubled its weight in the past twelve hours, or my neck is no judge!'

'It would be less of one, if the metal didn't glance the sun off your nape. However, I agree in part with you. The men can strip to shirts for future parades, and linen shrouds may replace helmets. Carry on, and I will visit the sick as soon as the inspection is finished.'

He watched the centurion stride off, then brooded over the rail, judging the ship's rate through the water. It was enough to reassure him. The *Fravashe* was drawing comfortably, almost uncannily through the light airs which came fiftful off the land.

Yet, for all his delight in a wind-borne ship, he found himself thinking how pleasant the splash of oars would sound within his ears. A double-score of rowers on the benches, he reflected, and King Daq would be as good as in his stateroom.

He crossed to the chartroom, bent on checking the ship's position, and was confronted by Quadrantus as the latter emerged through the sliding-door. He queried, 'How long now, before I make my destination?'

'A day, perhaps two,' the Greek said.

They were interrupted by Tarquin's reappearance. 'That heat rash. It is something else. There are black spots on the men now. Suppurating spots. And six more are down.'

Titus turned on him sharply. 'Isolate them. Stretch a sail cloth across the bows and house them there. And on your way tell the senior chamberlain I wish to see him.'

He paced the poop, attempting to stifle the rising agitation within his breast. He recalled his last voyage, the sea-passage from Alexandria to Ostia. A fever ship, with rotting corpses strewn on the benches and the hull a cesspool of pollution. On that occasion, medicaments and assistance were close at hand; and conditions favoured by the approach of a Mediterranean winter. How would they fare now? Thousands of miles from Rome and lost in this endless heat?

A break in the distant surf caught his glance. The indications of a broken sandbar; the promise of a quiet river and secure haven. He shaded his eyes and muttered aloud, 'I should put them ashore, before pestilence rages through the hull.'

He became aware of Quadrantus, still framed in the chartroom door and contemplating him with pleasant enquiry.

'Well, Shipmaster?' he asked him. 'If this is fever, what of your crew?'

'My men are immune to plague, O Titus. Nor could my ship be tainted. This thing must burn through the *Fravashe* and leave her unmarked.'

'But not so with my Romans,' Titus insisted. 'None are seasoned to the tropics! If it takes hold, they will die like flies!'

He broke off; cried, 'We are several days ahead of schedule. I am of half a mind to put back into the deep ocean, where the clean winds can blow health back into the troop deck.'

'If your men are stricken, it is too late to return. What purpose could it serve? Your purging would be delayed and recovery prolonged.'

'Is there a creek within the vicinity, then? Where I could put my sick ashore, erect tents and procure fresh food?'

'There is a river ahead. I know it well. The *Fravashe* could shelter there for a few days, if it suited your purpose.'

'How does it lie with the rendezvous in my instructions? Two Hump Island?'

'Close enough. But a day's journey by boat.'

'Then put me in there. For by Aesculapius himself, my situation could not be worsened by doing so.'

The senior chamberlain toiled up the ladder, tranquil and unhurried. He was shocked when Titus ordered him to submit his store returns.

'Everything, O Titus Terentius?'

'Of course not! Only your foodstuffs. We can't make medicine out of your draperies and bedgowns!'

'The edibles, I was given to understand, are reserved exclusively for Their Majesties!'

'Quite so. But unless we are very lucky we won't even see Their Majesties. There is fever in this ship, and I require your stores to assist me in combating it.'

The chamberlain revealed a sudden interest. 'I will bring the list immediately. May I also assist? My junior, too, has a knowledge of diseases. We could perhaps tend the sick.'

'Why, most certainly! Although I scarcely expected such an offer from a palace functionary! You realise, of course, that you will be in danger of plague, yourself?'

A dimple emerged, embedded within the chamberlain's fat jowls. As he turned to go, he said over his shoulder, 'After ten years in Roman society, O Titus, what is a mere pestilence?'

Hurrying forward, Titus was met at the forecastle entrance by Tarquin. Anxiety had grown deeper on the centurion's face.

'I've isolated the worst cases, but more men are coming in. The bows are not large enough to accommodate them.'

'Increase the space. Shift the screens further aft. And take that accursed expression off your face. By the Gods, it screams more your fears than concern for your men.'

He affected a casual air, talked on, idly, until they reached the makeshift hospital. Already it stank; a revolting aroma in which Death itself seemed to hover. He strode to the centre of the open space, forced his features into a mask of polite anxiety, and reassured the dying men that everything was being done to secure their return to health.

'We'll have you out of the ship and ashore within a few hours,' he told them. 'Under tents and with fresh provisions to give you back your strength.'

He was interrupted by the entry of the chamberlain and his assistant, both laden with rich dishes.

'Soup made from cured meats,' the chamberlain said cheerily. 'And preserved venison, for those who fancy something rare.'

The sick marines stirred on the pallets. One muttered in a despairing voice, 'Deer's flesh? I swore I would taste it before I died! Is it an omen?'

The stout functionary knelt beside him, broke the food into fragments, assisted the fellow into a more comfortable position; observing at the same time, 'A good one too, brother. For once having eaten venison, you will insist on living to eat it again.'

As he was about to leave, a sick man asked Titus if his best jacket could be brought to him from the troop deck.

'I am in the colour party,' he explained. 'Centurion Piso told me to care for it, or I would lose my place.'

The realisation of a notable absence swept into the sea-tribune's mind. He turned to Tarquin, 'Where is Sequinus? Did he not report this morning?'

'Yes, from his cot. He slept badly and complained of the humidity. In the crisis I forgot him completely. However, I told him I would take his first parade.'

'I would rather you told me. After all, he is our only remaining officer. What happens if he contracts this thing?'

'Less than if you or I did. Shall I see how he is?'

'No, I prefer to find out for myself. You await me on the troop deck. I will join you as soon as possible.'

In the centurion's quarters, Titus found stark terror writ large on

the young guardsman's face. The youth murmured weakly, "They say there is fever in the ship, sir. Do you think I have caught it?"

"Of course not! There is not one visible symptom to betray it. I should say you are seriously indisposed by the heat. You must rest. I will relieve you of duties until tomorrow."

Sequinus clutched his hand. "Not here, sir. I fear to be left here, alone. Could I not go into the sick bay?"

Titus hesitated. To shift the youth into the company of stricken men would be tantamount to writing his obituary.

"I will have you moved into my own cabin," he said. "It is cooler there, and I can keep my eye on you. Will that suit you?"

"Anything, sir, as long as I don't have to stay in this place."

"Very well, then. I will make immediate arrangements."

He was distracted by the sound of quickening footsteps, echoing louder down the near-by alleyway. He stepped outside and collided with Tarquin.

"The first has gone," the centurion muttered. "It's the old shot-slinger. Two others look as though they won't last another five minutes."

Titus led him away, to the wing of the hold; told him, "Erect a mortuary in the heads. We'll cremate the bodies tonight, after we get in."

He paused. "Any more reported sick?"

"Twenty, and the rest are too scared to move off their pallets. They won't even clean up the mess their sick mates have left."

"Why not?"

"The black vomit. They think it is a carrying agent. It's not so bad in the hospital now. They're helping each other there."

In the troop deck, Titus found the remaining marines sprawled on their beds; a dull-eyed, apathetic pack. His gaze took in the unclean boards, the growing stench, the atmosphere of utter hopelessness.

Convulsive moans came to his ears. His eyes grew inured to the semi-gloom and he saw the junior chamberlain in a corner, crouched at the side of a sick marine, holding a metal dipper close to the fellow's mouth.

He crossed the deck, took the dipper from the man's hand and raised it deliberately to his lips. A moment later, before the watching eyes of a hundred men, he swallowed a mouthful of black vomit.

He reached for a water-jug, rinsed his mouth, then surveyed the horrified troops.

'Romans?' he asked. 'Are you Romans? There, then, is your example.'

As he left for the deck, his ears caught the clatter of a bucket; the first swish of a quickening broom.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE ate his midday meal on deck; under the awning, where all could scan his features and witness Nature's swift revenge against his abominable jesting.

He dipped a thin biscuit in olive oil and munched away. Within his outraged mouth the morsel tasted like swollen wood chips, hard and unappetising. He felt light-headed and possessed of a blinding headache. Otherwise, he reflected, there were no indications that his flesh had been blighted by early corruption. Madame Plague, indeed, would have to do better.

He reached for his jug of crew wine, lowered the full measure at a draught and sent his attendant for a refill. Anon he marvelled at its sudden sweetness and the unpredictability of vintage. Here was a hold full of the poorest Falernian, barrelled and stored above bilges which contained, no doubt, its betters; fit only for the wretched palates of an outcast marine legion, and yet, out of its thick depths could arise a couple of jugs to rival the most delectable of temple wines!

He emptied the second measure, and contemplated his bare forearm with an air of studied deliberation. There were spots there all right. Pimples of lustrous hue and marvellous shape. Expensive ornaments, he would say, but nevertheless cheaper by far than plain black ones with a tendency to suppurate.

The swinging horizon distracted his attention and he glanced up.

He discovered the ship was under the land and about to enter a natural basin within the mouth of a short channel.

Green shallows emerged. A grassy knoll loomed and took shape beneath a clump of palm trees, petrified in the noon air, like maids affrighted by this monstrous bulk which slack water had drifted noiselessly into their innocent asylum.

A shudder betrayed the ground to the keel. The *Fravashe* touched. A seaman amidships hauled in his sounding-rod. Further aft, the watch assembled about an unlashed kedge anchor. A soft splash echoed. The racked squaresailer shuddered gently to sleep and the tide turned to ebb, as if some mystic spell were broken.

Quadrantus poked his head beneath the awning in priestly manner, as if he were closing a page in holy writ.

‘O Tribune Titus, we are moored and at your orders.’

Titus stirred his thoughts, and asked, ‘Where lies our port from here?’

‘To the east. A march through the forest would bring you in sight of your landfall.’

‘You say it can be reached by water?’

‘Within a day. The course lies inside the reefs. It is not a hazardous passage.’

The Greek added unexpectedly, ‘I can give you a boat, but I cannot loan my crew.’

‘The boat will suffice,’ Titus said briefly. ‘Make it available.’

He sent a message to the chamberlain, instructing him to victual the craft, then called Tarquin into the chartroom, indicated the *Fravashe*’s position on the parchment and revealed his plan.

‘Take your best available seamen and seek out the rendezvous. The point is readily perceived. An island with twin humps and not unlike a camel in outline. Tell the Egyptian centurion I am plague-stricken and incubating in this cove. When I am purged I will join him.’

Tarquin surveyed him anxiously. ‘Will you? And what if your act in swallowing that infection is brought home? What then, I ask?’

‘Await the ship, whatever happens. If I am called to the gods, see these two kings safe on their journey. You can do no more.’

The chamberlain interrupted their conversation. ‘The boat is being provisioned for three days, O Tribune. There are ointments against sea-boils and gangrene. I have wrapped a large German ham

and secured it beneath the stern sheets. It can be eaten raw. Is there anything else?’

‘Include some warm coverings for the men, in case the nights prove cold. And how is Centurion Piso?’

‘Comfortable in your cabin, sir. There is no cause for anxiety at present. He is sleeping.’

‘I am relieved to hear it. You may carry on.’

As the chamberlain padded off, Tarquin exclaimed in disgusted tones, ‘What’s the matter with him? I looked in on young Piso a few minutes ago. He was raving like an insane Druid. Why should that fellow tell a pack of lies?’

‘I suppose he doesn’t want to alarm me,’ Titus said wearily. ‘But come now, collect your men and be gone. Already the sun is lower. There is no time to lose, if you are to clear the bar before dusk.’

He hustled the men into the boat, personally checked the gear and gave his final instructions to Tarquin.

‘Wear neck cloths instead of helmets. Row throughout the night and rest during the heat tomorrow, if you count it prudent.’

When the centurion bade him farewell and embraced him with an unusual warmth, he exclaimed, amused, ‘Beware, Tarquin! But a few moments ago, you were declaring me a doomed wretch! Do you too, then, wish to die?’

In silence he watched his shipmate tumble briskly into the boat, stood at the rail until the tiny craft vanished up the coast, then made his way to the stern cabin. He discovered the place in semi-darkness, the stern shutters pulled tight and a sickly, fetid atmosphere hanging to the deck beams.

As he flung wide the windows, Sequinus opened his eyes: ‘I thought you would never come, sir.’

Titus forced a smile. ‘There has been much to do in the past hour. I have detached a boat to Two Hump Island. The centurion there must be told of our situation. Tarquin commands. He asked me to give you his wishes for a speedy recovery.’

Disquiet enlivened the boy’s dull gaze, as if hateful memory were conjured by the mention of his brother centurion’s name. Titus suddenly realised he knew very little about the relations which existed between his two lieutenants.

Sequinus broke in on his thoughts, quietly: ‘You are aware, of course, sir, that I was sent into this ship to intrigue against you.’

Titus maintained his pleasant smile. 'I am aware you made an unfortunate entry. But already we have agreed to forget the matter. The rest is of little consequence.'

His blind refusal to perceive the boy's true meaning prompted an angry insistence: 'You do not understand! I agreed to spy on you! It was the price I paid to set aside your edict and force you into taking me!'

The scales fell at last from Titus' eyes. 'The price paid to whom?' he asked coldly.

'The Prince Marcus. Have I said enough?'

'No! There is the motive. I wish to know all.'

The chamberlain entered, bearing a dish of soup. He smiled faintly at Titus, and asked in an undertone, 'Is he better?'

Titus nodded, and said briefly, 'Put that dish on the table and join me in the gallery. I wish to speak to you.'

Outside, he told the man, 'The boy is very sick. Take no notice of his words. They are ill-contrived by his troubled brain, and could be held against him later. I think you know what I mean.'

The chamberlain's eyes glittered; pale, sympathetic. 'Only too well, sir. Is there anything else?'

'The dead. The day wanes and we must dispose of the bodies. You will attend the obsequies and assist me to administer the rites, in the absence of my officers.'

He rounded up his remaining marines and they spent a dreary hour collecting driftwood for a funeral pyre. As evening fell they bore their silent shipmates to the threshold of their last journey. Through the reeds which fringed the river; up a gentle slope and out on a weed-blown plateau, the one dry corner of this tropic swampland where twigs would ignite and tainted corpses burn quickly.

Their task complete, Titus mustered his remaining strength and surrendered his gaze to a scene he could never forget: the forest gloom; the choking heat; the slurred waters of the near-by creek, convulsed unexpectedly as a crocodile poked a curious snout; the poisonous vapours which ascended from the sea-marshes and through which he could discern the ship, a lost shape distorted into the seeming of Charon's barge itself.

Within his tired, overworked brain it seemed for a brief moment as if Hell itself were manifested; and that this ragged group of silent

soldiery were a vanguard of spirit creatures, diabolically conjured to ensure his own soul could not escape the black clutch of malevolent destiny.

He came out of his trance to perceive the chamberlain pouring oil over the funeral pyre, and thrusting the fateful taper within the hungry fuel. As the flames roared he raised his arms; cried to the alien skies; begged that compassion might lift a cloud-locked corner and hasten the flight of these shrivelled souls, back to their immortal heaven above their immortal city.

The marines stirred into sullen animation, mouthed their mechanical responses and filed past the charred flesh of their ship-mates, plucking baleful blooms from any chance clump which flowered beneath their feet and tossing them into the mounting flames.

As the holocaust subsided, he ordered them to fuel the ashes with green branches.

'The smoke will stifle the insects,' he explained.

Pale ghosts, they caught his meaning; grinned and shoved, hacked at the mist-wet shrubberies with their entrenching tools; piled them on the embers and staggered back, coughing. Dense clouds swirled into gouts of white incense, which burdened the off-shore breeze and drifted across the *Fravashe's* deserted decks.

About to return, dazed under the heat, he sprawled his length on the fringe of smouldering grass. They hauled him to his feet, croaking their concern and dusting his cloak, for his reckless gesture in the forenoon had stung them into a new regard for his well-being.

'Who will give us a passage, if you go first?' they joked; and pushed him slithering down the river-bank, over the squaresailer's bulwarks and into the waist.

He mustered them in the 'tween-deck and poured each man an issue of cool wine. As he splashed the thin liquid into their filthy mugs he told them, 'A regimental surgeon would hang me for giving you this in your present condition. That is, if we had one, and he, too, still lived. Now off to your beds, you scoundrels.'

When they were gone he drew off a jug for himself, stared at his grime-stained hand, hard-knuckled and rock-steady. It should be shaking like a leaf, he told himself. Were the gods, then, still with him?

He lowered the draught in quick gulps; dropped the jug and found

his way along the decks until he reached his own cabin.

The chamberlain was sitting on the couch beside the sick youth, wiping his brow with a damp cloth.

As Titus stumbled across the sill, slipped off his cloak and dropped his helmet, the boy raised his head:

'It has grown dark,' he whispered. 'I cannot see!'

The chamberlain suddenly leant forward; said softly, 'Take my hand and I will lead you.'

So Sequinus died.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TITUS was delirious and out of his senses for many days. When he came to, Tarquin was back and the *Fravashe* shifted to strange surroundings.

'We are under the lee of Two Hump Island,' the centurion told him. 'Quadrantus moved the ship up yesterday, while you were still insensible.'

Titus stirred. His gaze sought the cabin confines, rested on the distant corner of the settee, now vacant.

'What did you do with him?'

'Sequinus? We fired him three days ago, with the remainder of the dead. I couldn't keep him any longer, or wait for you.'

'What do you mean? Wait for me?'

'You were expected to keep him company. Do you not recall what you did?'

'What of it? I live, do I not?'

'But not so the other man. You swallowed his infection. Was it not reasonable that you should have gone with him?'

'That I did not do so, Tarquin, is the divine intervention of the gods. I must guard my gratitude, when I am well enough to pray.'

'I'd burn a taper to Quadrantus too, if I were you. I returned to

find him dosing the sick with a specific of his own brewing. The juice from a convenient tree bark, hammered between large stones, contrived as if they were an olive mill. The chamberlain has been forcing the stuff down your neck for the past forty-eight hours.'

'Lepidus? It was he, then, who tended me during your absence?'

'None other. He is on the quarter gallery at the moment. Do you wish to see him?'

'Later. In the meantime give me your report. Did you make juncture with the Egyptian cohort?'

'Their advance party is encamped on the other side of the island. Their leader told me King Daq is due tomorrow, with the centurion and the rest of the Romans. The royal quarters are scrubbed and purged. In fact, you can be back at sea within a day, if you so desire it.'

'More than anything else in the world, except perhaps some fresh fruit.'

'You can have that too. A local chief is supplying our requirements. Women do most of the work. Buxom ebony bits, as warm as a couplet. They can cook, too. Would you like to see one?'

'I'd rather see the casualty returns. What remains of our strength?'

'We've lost seventy-five per cent of the first rank, and nearly all the slingers. The catapult squad was scarcely touched. Maybe there is something about an artilleryman after all.'

'Or the simple fact that his quarters are set apart from the rest of the company. Can we still muster a ceremonial guard?'

'The drummers have recovered and the buccina player is tonguing up again. I'll have the rank and file in shape by tomorrow. But who will parade them? Guardsmen aren't picked up every day in Nether Africa.'

'You can have the job. The dress uniform should fit. You and the late Sequinus are about the same size.'

Lepidus entered, cool-garbed, pleasant, and carrying a tray. He assisted Titus into a comfortable position, and said, 'Strange fruits, O Tribune Terentius! There is a dish of mushrooms in gravy. Also a haunch of cold gazelle.'

'The fruit will suffice,' Titus said. 'And some wine.'

He slaked his thirst, ate the fruit and watched the chamberlain move about the cabin, a quiet, efficient, well-trained servant. A sud-

den curiosity aroused, he asked, 'What part of Greece do you come from?'

'Cos, O Tribune Terentius. The isle of healing. But doubtless you know it.'

'What sick Roman doesn't? Our shipmaster, Quadrantus, is also a Greek. Think you that he too comes from Cos?'

'It is conceivable. He is unquestionably skilled in the art of herbs and simples. He knew, for instance, that Nature can hold its own answer to pestilence, and that the juice of a tree grown in swamps which give birth to plague can destroy the evil which it has itself created. Is that not a useful knowledge?'

'Very useful,' Titus said abruptly. 'Help me on with my boots.'

He donned his lightest tunic, made his way to the deck and surveyed his surroundings.

The *Fravashe* was sheltered under the lee of an island, in the mouth of a large estuary. Upstream, the river twisted into the African forest. To seaward his glance caught breaking surf and sandy beaches, with the ocean beyond. White clouds dappled the sky. A salty breeze blew through the rigging and bellied the waist awnings. Sea-gulls swooped for food. Once more it was a seaman's world.

His men were sprawled about the hatch-tops. Thin, sparse-clad, there was a healthier glow in their cheeks, a brighter glance in their eyes. They came to their feet as he appeared, and enquired shyly after his health.

'Excellent,' he assured them. 'Thanks to those miracle men under the forecastle.'

He indicated a group of seamen, bent over a pile of logs. They were stripping and pounding bark, straining the juice off into a fat pitcher.

'No doubt about it,' a slinger said. 'That Quadrantus ought to be given a triumphal procession for what he's done.'

'Indeed? Yet, only ten days ago, you were howling for his blood. I wonder why?'

When the laughter subsided, a veteran marine remarked, 'It just goes to show, sir. Never take the heavens for granted. They were omens all right: the pig business, the rumours and the bloodstains. But they indicated something too big for us to grasp. The gods have a bigger problem on their minds than dicing the destinies of a few

deadbeats from a Roman sea-legion.'

'And what's more,' another interjected, 'that Greek in the steering-hatch knows more about it than we think. He's a sorcerer all right. I'll wager my spoils on it.'

'I'll take you up when we return to Rome,' Titus said. 'Like the gods, I have bigger things on my mind for the moment.'

He found Tarquin in his quarters, talking to a stranger, a young officer wearing the flash of an overseas legion. As Titus entered he jumped up, saluted smartly and introduced himself as second in command of the cohort from Alexandria.

'I was on my way to present my respects, but heard you were indisposed. I hope you don't mind my being discovered here?'

'Not at all. Seat yourself and tell me the news. Who is your commander and when may I expect him?'

'Rufius Galba, sir. Top centurion from the Fourth Bactrian. He is a day's march to the rear, with King Daq. I expect him at sunset. I have prepared his camping-ground and laid out the Praetorian lines. I understand we embark at midday tomorrow.'

'What sort of a journey did you have from Alexandria?'

'Dull, sir. Had a bit of trouble in the mountain defiles, south of Mauritania, but the stones were too small to do any damage. They bounced off the shields without even leaving a dent.'

'Who attacked you?'

'A few bands of wandering Moors. But they weren't in strength, and soon scattered when our main party came up. The Numidian cavalry deserted when we passed close to their country. I thought it a bit of a risk taking them in the first place. But the only other horse available was Belgian, and it could never have stood the heat. It's quite pleasant to be aboard here, sir, hear some Latin spoken and drink a drop of decent Falernian. Is it correct that we are going back with you?'

'Quite. I am under-officered and short in experienced troops.'

Titus hesitated; added, 'Tell your men they need have no fear of pestilence. We are purged, and in addition possess an excellent curative.'

'So I have heard, sir. Is there any message for my captain when he comes in?'

'Tell him I intend to sail as soon as King Daq boards. In the meantime, strike camp and bring your own men off.'

He dismissed the young man and returned on deck, where he caught Quadrantus, about to vanish within the chartroom.

'One moment, Shipmaster! Not so fast! Or are you unaware that I have been ill for several days?'

'I knew that you were asleep, O Tribune!'

'Others term it the plague, and die for it. What then is your definition of sleep?'

'The dark, is it not, O Titus, which grows dear when our bodies tire? The oblivion which soothes our minds, when they rack themselves with heedless questions?'

'But it doesn't feed a hungry crew, or quench their thirst in mid-ocean. Does your philosophy include sea-stores? That is what I want to know.'

'I want but little. We watered yesterday. There is some fruit, and root vegetables from the forest, when my crew are free to gather them.'

'I see they are still employed in preparing your plague antidote. Are you anticipating a further outbreak, then?'

'By no means. But a draught administered at a timely hour will prove beneficial to further voyaging.'

'Then, Master Quadrantus, you believe, after all, that prevention is better than cure?'

The shipmaster saw the trap, too late. His deep-set eyes dilated slightly. 'Assuredly, O Titus. But to combat an evil, one must first isolate its source. All else would be blind folly.'

'Or deliberate design,' Titus commented grimly. 'Neither of which gives me back my dead.'

He instructed the shipmaster briefly in his sailing directions, then busied himself with the final preparations for departure. The Egyptian cohort broke camp at dawn, were taken aboard and berthed with their fellows on the troop deck. Rufius Galba proved to be a leather-faced old ranker, as tough as a sandal and with enough scars on his torso to qualify him for a double page in Roman history. There was no nonsense about him. He automatically passed his responsibilities over to Titus; indeed, seemed relieved to discover someone at last who was superior to himself.

'I'm not cut out for this plu-perfect escort stuff,' he confided. 'I once got stuck with a Gaulish princess who wanted to see the city. I shepherded her as far as Marseilles, where a guards tribune did her.'

Three months gone, she was, by the time we got back to Arles. Her old man wasn't the sort you could palm off with a tumour, either. Who did it, he wanted to know. Augustus' nephew, says I, no less. So he gave me a gold bracelet and asked the general to make me a senior centurion. I wouldn't worry about this King Daq if I were you, sir. Give him a white woman and let him cook in palm oil and he'll sit out the Lupercalia. He asked lots of questions about your, sir. I told him you were big heap Roman.'

'Obliged. And now, about papers. I suppose you have managed to retain your credentials among all this fuss?'

'No fuss, sir. Lost my cavalry after I was through the mountains, and belted the living daylight out of a bunch of bandits who stoned me in the defiles. Toughest time I had was in Daq's palace. By the Gods, sir, these Nubians can soak it up. It's a sort of Falernian, stewed in coconut gourds and spiked with melted-down helmets. I'd form battle positions if I were you, sir, if they call for a parting pledge. Here are the papers, and General Capito's compliments, sir. He said he knew your dad in the good old days.'

'Thanks. I must drop him a line some time. And now, your berthing arrangements. You had better bunk in with Tarquin, my second. And by the way, I'm afraid you will have to accept his seniority, at least during the voyage.'

'No trouble at all, sir. I'll just keep my own men in order and leave the rest to you.'

On the following day, prompt at high noon, the forest leapt to sudden life. Monkeys chattered in the tree-tops. Invisible beasts trumpeted, yapped and snarled. A noisy crescendo burst forth, as if all Hell were unyoked and tearing footloose through the thickets. An aroused lion raised its sleepy enquiry; a strange, terrible note, solemn and commanding.

The noise died; waxed again in a distant mutter which grew and grew in volume, finally to ricochet against the skies in the splashing of a thousand paddles, the full-throated roar from as many throats.

Six great war canoes shot around the river-bend, towing the royal barge in their wake; a gaudy craft, laden to the gunwales with King Daq, his weeping wives, his prime ministers, his court musicians and his palm oil.

On the *Fravashe's* deck, welcome glowed like an enamelled fresco. The guard was drawn up in ceremonial array. Spear-points were

dressed and the helmets lined up like a long row of metal urns. The shot-slingers, their throwing-straps neatly taut, were three-deep in the scuppers. The two centurions were stepped three paces before the infantry, bronzed, confident, and feigning an indifference to the howling din which floated up from the river.

Titus stood alone at the entry-port, clad in immaculate white and with his tribune's star glistening on his silver breastplate. The eagle, held high above his head, was lost in the shadows beneath the awnings, but every Roman was aware of its presence, for insistent above the alien tumult could be heard the slow, endless ruffle of the parade drum.

The buccina blared the *silentis*! The decks trembled and two giant Nubians, fantastic in elephant hair, bobbed up over the bulwarks, bent their backs and hauled King Daq, a colossal, panting figure, through the entry-port.

He staggered to the rail and stared, immobile, into the water beneath. The canoes turned upstream. Paddles bit deeper into the stiffening current. Mahogany backs strained to a longer rhythm.

King Daq raised a jewelled hand, palm out, in doleful benediction, and sudden song burst upwards to the hot skies; a sad plaint, which drifted across the *Fravashe's* crowded decks.

'Look at that black bastard crying,' a soldier muttered. 'By the dumb Gods, did Antonius die for that?'

'Guard your breath lest you join him,' his comrade said. 'Can't you see the White Crocodile, coming in for a last sniff?'

He indicated the mangroves across the estuary, the mud flats, from whence the thin vapours of pestilence were already rising. In the distance, tiny insects hummed, poised their invisible fangs to stab sullen flesh and swim raw poison into unsuspecting veins.

But already swift Nature had swung her counter-forces into the useless fray, and the selfsame breeze which bore Death over the river began quietly to pluck the squaresailer from her treacherous haven.

Soon they were on the bar in the surf. Spray danced a grey-wet welcome against their oaken strakes. Neptune came in over the bows with his tow-rope. The ship flew seaward.

Titus prayed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KING DAQ was a restless friendly soul, an educated, if uncultured, monarch. As a boy he had been sent to Alexandria, where he was taught letters and figures. He spoke a fair Latin and could plough his way through a Greek document without difficulty.

He was popular about the decks. Even the dumb seamen smiled at his approach, and answered his questions with nods and gestures.

He spent considerable time with the Roman troops, examining their equipment and discussing its use in relation to his own methods of war.

He saw no virtue in the spear. Too unwieldy in an African jungle, he declared, although it might possess a certain value when out hunting.

The short stabbing-sword was the queen of battle for him. He took one from Centurion Galba and balanced it appreciatively on his large pink palm. 'Much better than our knobkerry, eh? No fear of swinging this into a low tree branch. Out and up, eh? Is that the style?'

The centurion retrieved the weapon before the black king filleted a passing shot-slinger.

'More or less, sir. Only we prefer it under and up when we're dealing with barbarians. They just can't take it in the pubes, sir, if you know what I mean.'

'I ought to,' King Daq roared heartily. 'I'm a barbarian myself, aren't I?'

He was a different person at table. Shrewd, hard-hitting and capable of a frankness which seemed unbelievable in a prince.

'I don't quite know what decided me to make this journey,' he declared. 'Roman treachery is a byword among the Eastern races, though opinion appears to be divided about Augustus. How do I

know I'm not going to be held as a hostage?'

'You have my word for it,' Titus said stiffly. 'And if I may presume to say so, my Emperor is incapable of the behaviour you imply.'

'Is he? What about Antony and Cleopatra? There were a few incidents after Actium which your gods must have glossed over, when they received his application for divinity. Although I suppose from the Roman point of view they are best forgotten.'

'Not quite. I know the incidents to which Your Majesty refers. Augustus met treachery with counter-treachery. The Egyptian queen was a sorceress, and he was forced to stoop in his dealing with her.'

'Well, he doesn't have to stoop with me. I suppose it's a waste of time, asking you about this Pax Mundana?'

'I am aware of its general outlines, sir, and find myself in agreement with them. World peace is something which should appeal to all men of goodwill.'

'It certainly should,' King Daq said. 'Although personally I fail to see how my country can benefit from any sort of alliance with Rome. What is more, if I refuse to co-operate there is nothing you can do about it. Even if you subdued the Mauritanians, you still couldn't invade me. Nature has already shown you what would happen.'

'I more than agree,' Titus observed, faintly nettled. 'Doubtless Your Majesty has other reasons, then, for his decision to make this journey?'

King Daq wiped the palm oil from his thick lips, dipped his fingers in the water-bowl and dried them reflectively.

'I was offered no bribe. That was unusual enough to attract my attention. Furthermore, the theory of a supreme power being created to end war and determine peace, was one which appealed to me. I felt I would like to meet the man who had first thought of it.'

He went on; confessed, 'You see, I am a born idealist, in spite of my occasionally eating a wife.'

Titus maintained a cold politeness. 'I am afraid we only thought of elephant's foot; and even that has presented difficulties.'

The stout Nubian waved a deprecatory hand, and assured him, 'Quite unnecessary. When in Rome I intend to do as Romans do; except, of course, to throw coloured slaves into my fish-pond when I wish to fatten my mullet.'

'The knight who did that,' Titus told him, embarrassed, 'was given twenty-four hours by Divine Augustus in which to end his own life.'

I might add that the story is usually cited to point our humanity, not discredit it.'

'And we in Daqland only practise cannibalism for religious purposes. Has Rome any quarrel with that?'

'Why should she? Our cardinal policy is to permit freedom of worship. If your gods expect you to eat your wives, they no doubt have excellent reasons for it.'

'It's patent you're not a married man,' King Daq said. 'And while we're on the subject, could I have some more of that honey-cake your chamberlain made this morning?'

Conversation took a lighter turn when Tarquin was present at a meal. The young centurion's down-to-earth behaviour appealed more to the Nubian monarch's loose-footed way of life than did that of the too readily ruffled Titus; and when talk centred on Rome, King Daq made it plain that it was Tarquin's bawdy, gusty metropolis which caught his fancy rather than the hallowed temples and cold Forum of the patrician sea-tribune.

'I've always wanted to see the Saturnalia,' he told Titus. 'I think I'd rather like the idea of running around the streets masked, and being pelted with flowers. I tried something of the sort in my own capital once, but its success was limited. The slave I changed places with took advantage of his temporary kingship and tried to have me pinned on an anthheap. He finished up there himself, of course. I suppose we'll be too early for your festival?'

'I'm afraid so. But I think you will find that Divine Augustus will declare a special holiday in honour of Your Majesty's arrival. Something in keeping with the occasion.'

'But I don't think I want something in keeping with the occasion. If I'm to be given a holiday, I'd much prefer it as a carnival, with fun in the streets and kissing strangers. What is wrong with holding our conference after the Saturnalia?'

'I really couldn't give an opinion. I would suggest, however, that Your Majesty shelve the matter until we reach Rome. There are two other kings to be consulted in the terms of reference; and, after all, they may possess different views on *modus operandi*.'

One way and another, Titus was relieved to see the black king take up dice with Tarquin. This Roman convenience for annihilating time was more to Daq's taste than speculating on protocol, and one which he embraced with a born aptitude. He could not have been in

better hands. Tarquin could throw a Venus with more than luck, and was quite prepared to reveal the trick to his royal pupil.

Titus overheard him tell the king he had acquired the knack when he was on loan to the temples.

'There's a crack in the mosaic pavement at Minerva; I discovered I could turn the dice on its edge and bring up a winning number every time I threw.'

'But didn't anyone get suspicious about your luck?'

'Not if I shouted *Minerva!* Then the priests would think the goddess had guided my hand.'

'But what if I dice with Augustus and keep on throwing Venus?'

'Same thing, only shout *By Jove!* instead.'

Tarquin grinned, and added, 'Augustus doesn't gamble.'

'He might play as king to king, if I give him a herd of elephants.'

Tarquin's grin broadened. 'Why not? Everyone has his price. But I'd include a white one, if I were you.'

Titus returned to his cabin and stared soberly at the mass of papers on his table, his routine despatches, to be dropped in at the Pillars as he passed to the northward.

He had just completed his casualty returns and was staggered by his enormous losses. Three-quarters of his men dead with the plague! Nipped off like guttering tapers in a savage wind! A fine price to pay for no more than even the preliminaries of a peace conference!

Yet this Nubian, one of the three chosen from all mankind to indicate the coming of the golden age, could talk of nothing but the Saturnalia and the prospects of dicing with Caesar!

His reflections were disturbed by the sounds of soft movement within the cabin entrance. He glanced up to see the chamberlain enter, carrying a tray.

'You have eaten but little, since we left Africa, O Titus Terentius,' he said. 'This might tempt your palate. It is zebra steak, spiced with meadow herbs.'

Titus sniffed the steaming dish and reached for his table knife. 'Food has been a minor consideration lately,' he admitted. 'Perhaps, now all this is off my mind, I shall be able to do more justice to my trencher.'

Lepidus nodded his head in the direction of his papers.

'You have notified the boy's mother, sir?'

Titus hesitated.

'Not personally. My position is difficult. He entered this ship against her wishes. Nevertheless, I feel a certain degree of responsibility. It is most unfortunate.'

'Most unfortunate indeed,' the chamberlain murmured.

He went off, leaving Titus to gnaw a zebra bone and brood over the intrusion. During the course of duty, and since the African departure, he had held several conversations with the chamberlain, but this was the first occasion upon which the name of the dead centurion had been mentioned.

Now on his guard, the young commodore found himself construing innocent questions into artless contrivance. Lepidus could be a subtle mind seeking information.

But for whom? For the Emperor himself? For if treachery began in high places, then counter-treachery could begin still higher. After all, this would not be the first time intrigue had raised its head within the precincts of the palace; nor, while the Caesars lacked natural issue and co-opted their successors, would it be the last.

He retired to his couch, reflecting that the affair was none of his personal concern, dismissed the matter from his mind and fell asleep.

The sea was fresh and the morning brisk when Titus made juncture with the Roman guardship off the Pillars.

The boarding-officer experienced some difficulty in closing the *Fravashe*, and received a soaking when he clambered from his low-hulled bireme up to the squaresailer's waist-rail.

He proved to be part Spaniard, of flag-rank and in a crusty mood.

'You're Titus Terentius, aren't you? I've been out three days looking for you. Wretched weather, too. Can't see why a pilot-centurion couldn't have picked you up in half the time. These despatches of yours must be damned important, when Rome politely requests that no one under the rank of sea-legate is qualified to receive them.'

Titus handed over his papers and invited the fellow below for some refreshments.

'You might like to dry yourself,' he added.

'Thank you, but, if you don't mind, I'll push off at once. There's a fast bireme stemming-on behind Algeciras, and waiting to slip this stuff across to the Tiber.'

He glanced quickly about the decks, noticed the yellow mark on the mainmast and inclined his head towards it. 'I see you've been fevered. Or is that just a precautionary sign?'

'Not quite. We experienced a slight attack under the African bluff. The ship is purged now; but, of course, I cannot remove the mark until I am cleared from Rome.'

'I'll give you a Mediterranean clearance, if you want one. It is under my authority, you know.'

'Many thanks, but I'll waive the offer. My own flag will privilege me in the ports I am making. It will suffice.'

The Spaniard's nut-brown features cracked into a bleak smile. 'Please yourself. After all, if I cleared you I would have to check your muster; and then you would have to tell me who that fat nigger is, playing dice with a centurion.'

'His name is *Southwind* and he is on passage to Rome. He likes dice.'

'Who doesn't? What's he play for?'

'Denarii, aboard here.'

'That's a laugh,' the Spaniard said. 'Fancy having all those gold bangles on your arm, and dicing for pennies!'

'Rome will offer him better stakes,' Titus said. 'Goodbye and good luck, sir.'

The bireme cast off, drifted astern and tossed her oars. The *Frashe* let fly her topsail sheets and bore away north.

Titus stayed on deck until the two ships lost touch, then went below. He had barely reached his cabin door when Tarquin slid down the ladder in his rear, to borrow some money.

The sea-tribune opened a box and gave him the balance of the ship's small change; commented, 'Don't you think you are overdoing it?'

Tarquín counted the coins, glanced up. 'I can win it all back, if you like. But you told me to treat His Majesty with tact.'

'That doesn't mean to say you have to squander the ship's chest foolishly. After all, I am responsible to the finance board for all discrepancies and I might be told to make your losses good out of my own purse. Can't you think of a less expensive pastime than gambling?'

'Several. But in the long run this might work out cheaper. For instance, he has been pestering the ship's bugler to loan him his bucina.'

'There's a spare one in the armoury. Give him that. What do you two talk about, when you're not dicing?'

'Rome, mostly. But for the last couple of days he's been harping on trade agreements. He wants to barter slaves for wine.'

'But hasn't he been doing that for years?'

'Through the Alexandrian market, and getting him Falernian for fat boys. He says he won't sign anything on the Pax Mundana unless it includes a clause which fixes the barter rate on a better basis. It's my opinion he'll be asking for refunds on previous raw deals, too.'

Titus locked away the cash-box, contemplated the grinning centurion and observed thoughtfully, 'You appear to possess quite an appreciation of the barbarian mind, don't you?'

Tarquin's features twisted comically. 'I ought to. My mother was one.'

'Your mother?'

'An Atrebate princess, no less. Were you not aware of the fact?'

'Is it likely? I have always assumed you held a similar background to the rest of the officer corps. That of an equestrian, with a weakness for salt water.'

Titus paused, stared at Tarquin with a rekindled interest. 'You have Gaulish features. Although I suppose, naturally, your father was a full citizen?'

'A most important one. At the end of his first year of marriage he took a proconsulship in an Eastern province. It was then he divorced my mother.'

'And she?'

'She died when I was two years of age, at Marseilles. I was taken to Rome and reared by foster parents. Money was forthcoming. I was educated liberally, although never permitted to surprise the identity of my father.'

'Yet you are aware of him?'

'I am not sure. Chance has part-revealed him on more than one occasion, and sufficient to mark him out as a very tall poppy. I have grown to accept that a recognition would be neither in his interests nor mine. A day might come, however, when circumstances might change his mind.'

Tarquin's lips twisted wryly. 'A day, perhaps, when he will need me more than I need him,' he continued.

'In the meantime,' Titus said soberly, 'I am grateful that the circumstance has given me a most competent second in command.'

Tarquin took the money from the table and observed in gentler

tones, 'Why don't you relax until we pick up *Northwind*? Don't forget, he neither drinks nor gambles, which makes him more or less your responsibility.'

'Minerva save me!' Titus exclaimed. 'I am keeling over as it is!'

He went off to his cot, resolved nevertheless to take the sea-centurion's advice, for the shrewd comments had gone home. He was indeed still weak from the after-effects of the plague and must now recognise that his opportunity for brief leisure would lapse with the advent on board of the second king.

The days flew past. The *Fravashe* held her plunging persistent course, with a newer magic vesting her hull as she drew north into colder oceans. It was as if some strange god had seized dominion while the tropic-loving Neptune drowsed. Frost winds bellied the dark-spangled sails, boisterous and sporting. The green wave-crests came harsher scoured to the top-rails. The fanned-out spray, flung from the quivering tuning-fork of the stem-piece, snarled back with a deeper note. White gulls, polar cold, flew out of the arctic horizon and perched bright-eyed on the yards, checked the Romans who thronged the decks below, then winged off, purposeful, as if bent on carrying the import of their findings to a Higher Being.

Eternal as the stars above his head, Quadrantus kept his endless vigil in the steering-hatch. Below, in his lonely cabin, Titus slept.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DAWN glanced through the sea-darkness.

The *Fravashe* threaded a silent fjord, a treacherous runnel of dark jet which split to the oaken bows, stroked the keel and passed astern.

Swift-hauled, the squaresailer measured a rocky tongue and drew within a landlocked reach. Huge cliffs leapt monstrous, like earth gods petrified within the spattered convulsions of their own wilful chaos. Grotesque as hunchbacks, twisted peaks snarled at the skies,

as if to stab and pierce the idle clouds which mocked their deformity. At their knotted feet the black lake laved in torment, a hateful heaving, without relief of ruffle or guile of sound.

The sun grew over an eastern hill. The scene warmed and colour deepened. Blanched moss in cavern nooks came vivid green. Wild flowers took pattern, bright-clustered. Sub-arctic grass spawned. Trees laid shadows. A mountain torrent brawled into life, dropped twenty feet and splashed into the fjord at the base of a flat rock, a glistening platform of wet granite, upon which stood the figure of a man.

He was tall and of commanding aspect; attired in a velvet gown, blue in hue and waist-trapped by a linked silver girdle. His long hair, neat-brushed, was crowned by a silver helmet, skull-shaped and winged like a sea-bird in flight.

The *Fravashe* drifted in. A gangway dropped and the figure came to life, stepped aboard and revealed himself to Titus as a man of indeterminate years, full-bearded and flaxen, with wide-spaced eyes of ultra-blue, which sought the Roman's soul and mind in a deep lingering glance.

As he passed the foot of the mainmast, where the young tribune had mustered his ceremonial guard, a sunbeam seeped through the brailed-in sail cloths and bathed his helmet. Strange light quivered about his form; prismatic pure, as if a mystic presence were underlining a significance of time and space which was far beyond man's awareness.

The tension deepened. A soldier, guilty-faced, moved uneasily out of rank. High on his steering-platform, Quadrantus for once betrayed a normal curiosity. He walked deliberately across to the poop ladder and stared down at the stranger's face; hesitant, as if there lay within a message of long-familiar expectancy, the key of which now eluded him.

The bugle blared and died away. The soft, insistent drum-ruffle ceased abruptly and Titus stepped forward to meet his guest.

'Welcome, O Northwind! From Augustus of All the Romans! Northwind nodded amiably. 'And you? Who are you, then?'

'I am Titus, O King! Of the Terentii.'

He indicated his flag, touched in at the main truck, and now clear-revealed under the challenge of a mountain zephyr.

Northwind peered at the fluttering standard, inclined his head,

knowledgeably, and said in a precise voice, 'Let me see, that makes you Titus Terentius, doesn't it? Or is it Terentius Titus? Your Roman use of name and pre-name always confuses me. There is this fashion of cognomen, too. Take your emperor. When I first heard of him, he was called Octavian. Now you dub him Augustus. Am I to address him thus?'

'He is a simple man, Your Majesty, and feels honoured to be titled The August One.'

'I am pleased to hear you say so. And while we are debating the point, I am not Your Majesty. I am an erlking, or leader of erls. My name is Saga.'

'I know it well, O Erlking. But secrecy necessitated the masking of your identity with a code-name.'

The Erlking's mouth tightened faintly. 'Secrecy, indeed! From what I have heard, the whole world seems to be expecting our journey.'

Titus led the Norseman below as quickly as he could. At least the fellow held opinions of his own, and was ready enough to air them if the opportunity arose.

The Erlking, pausing at the gallery ladder, enquired, 'Should I not pilot you out to sea? I know this fjord as I know the stars.'

'So does my shipmaster, O Erlking. I understand the short flood, which bore us in, will ebb us out at the same rate.'

'Not quite. The efflux is stronger, for it bears the weight of melted snow to urge it onward. A mariner must look to this seasonable flush, when hazarding the long tongue at the lower entrance.'

'Master Quadrantus will still look to it, I have no fear. Would you care to see your quarters, O Saga?'

Tarquin detained them before they could descend the ladders, tugged Titus' cloak and told him, 'There's a barge alongside, with the Erlking's gear.'

'Yes, yes. Put it in his stateroom.'

Tarquin hesitated. 'One bale stinks a bit.'

The Erlking interposed: 'It is my dried fish. I never travel without it. I don't mind the odour at all.'

Titus pushed the centurion away, and said hurriedly, 'I'll have the chamberlain take charge of it, and any other edibles you may have brought.'

He noticed Lepidus standing on deck, beckoned him across and

whispered, 'I have decided to alter the berthing arrangements. Shift the Erlking from the cabin next to King Daq. Put him on the other side of the ship.'

Aloud, he said, 'This is Lepidus, the palace chamberlain, placed aboard by Divine Augustus as your personal servant. He will be attending to your wants during the passage to Rome.'

The chamberlain bowed. The Erlking began another speech and Titus went off to his cabin, where he could change his uniform and reflect on his new arrival. There would be plenty of variety when the Pax Mundana met in Rome. Perhaps world peace was not going to be as readily achieved as Augustus anticipated. Speculation struck deeper. He found himself dwelling on Admiral Taurus' face, when he saw Daq and heard Saga. He laughed uncontrollably.

Tarquin knocked and entered; stared, astonished. Titus abruptly regained his composure. 'Something struck me as being ridiculous.'

The centurion eyed him speculatively. 'Well, I'm safe enough. Watching our passengers will keep me sane.'

'Where are they now?'

'Daq is playing noughts and crosses with the junior chamberlain. Saga is still with Lepidus, in the new stateroom. When I took the dried fish in, he was hammering the fellow about the Latin language. I heard him say that it should be simplified for foreigners.'

'Why not? He could make it one of his conditions for signing the Pax Mundana, if it ever gets signed.'

Tarquin scratched his jaw speculatively. 'The philosophers say that if a man doesn't dice, booze or wench, he should be watched. He is sure to possess three other secret vices. Well, there is dried fish and dull talk. What's his third sport? I shudder to think.'

'I wouldn't call either his choice of diet or his conversational style a vice. The former is no worse than eating lampreys fed on blood, or even elephant's foot; while the wonder of the latter is not so much that he speaks the Latin language in a stilted style, but that he speaks it at all.'

Tarquin arose to go. 'The wonder is all yours until we reach Rome. His cabin opens out on your quarter gallery, in case you don't know.'

'I'm quite aware of it. As a matter of fact, I think I'm going to like him. There is something unaffected about his demeanour which appeals to me. And without having seen the third king who is to attend this conference, the Erlking, as he calls himself, is the one

whose point of view would interest me the most, were I, of course, Augustus.'

On the first evening at sea, in an attempt to create an initial harmony between the two kings, Titus invited them to share his supper. It could scarcely be claimed that the affair was a success. The Erlking ate frugally and drank most sparingly; whereas the Nubian monarch, who dearly loved his food, evinced a desire to turn the meal into a riotous banquet. He consumed prodigious quantities of Falernian, then insisted on preparing a special dish with his own hands. Too exuberant, he spilt some palm oil over the cabin brazier and at once the stern quarters were permeated by a rankness which secretly annoyed Titus and openly distressed the Norseman. While the chamberlain flapped about with a large cloth, the Erlking retired to the quarter gallery and could only be persuaded to return when Titus asked him to share a parting cup and a pledge to Eternal Rome. Whereupon the old fellow produced his favourite drinking-vessel, a curious affair of ancient bone, veined with silver threads.

King Daq, his interest aroused by the goblet's odd design, seized it for examination. 'Erlking! Where did you get it? I would like one for myself'

Saga smiled quietly. 'I am afraid they are not readily available commercially; nor, indeed, is it considered correct to use one, unless there is a personal significance embraced within its possession. You see, it is the skull of a Teuton chief who was sufficiently ill-counselled to prey on one of my fishing villages. Dried and cured, naturally.'

King Daq, still somewhat huffy under the brusqueness with which his culinary efforts had been received, pretended to a polite horror.

The Erlking turned slightly stiff. After all, the conversation was none of his asking, and if he had been prepared to accept a portion of the Nubian's palm-oil mess in good faith, then the African could have at least accepted his own simple traditions without comment.

After this clash of personalities, generally speaking, the two kings very much followed their own inclinations while aboard the *Fra-vashe*.

King Daq became once more the affable monarch of the earlier sea-passage, the dusky potentate who knew how to unbend and yet maintain his natural dignity. Child of a race which could never grow up, he drew the only smiles ever seen spontaneous on Quadrantus'

graven lips, and the one solitary friendly gesture which the dumb crew were ever known to have made to mortal man. From the centurions with whom he diccd, to the bugler whom he pestered and plagued, the ship's company loved him. He was a playing-card monarch who would sign the Pax Mundana blindfolded, provided, of course, it was designed to create an everlasting peace of endless carnival for coloured kings.

On the other hand, the Erlking betrayed but little desire for anyone's company beyond his own. He spent his time either reading in his cabin, or seated on the quarter-gallery bench, staring at the horizon and lost in meditation. He took a slight interest in the ship's navigation, asked to see the chartroom and knew what he was talking about when he commented on the course which Quadrantus had plotted off.

'I see you intend to take the channel between Proper Gaul and Britain. Most prudent at this season. The east wind holds timely into Atlanticus and permits full sea-room to make the Pillars.'

'If you'll pardon me saying so, Erlking, your knowledge of seafaring is almost professional. I marvel at your acquiring it so readily.'

'It is not really remarkable, Titus. We Norse are a race of seamen, as the Romans are a race of warriors. My captains are in command of many squaresailers which trade to the Mediterranean. They often discuss their voyages with me and trace their journeyings on my own charts.'

'Yet you have never voyaged yourself?'

'I have never obtained the opportunity. Ruling my people and directing my parliament has engrossed most of my life. I have been content to stay at home.'

'Yet you have decided to make this journey to Rome, which is longer and more arduous than voyaging with one of your captains.'

'There are most curious reasons for it. Lately I have undergone a spiritual restlessness. Perhaps it is because I am growing old, and feel my time is nigh. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that an insistence has entered my mind that I must visit certain countries before I die, or I will not be truly fulfilling the destinies of my people.'

'The opportunity may be made available, O Erlking, after the Pax conference is concluded. I feel sure Divine Augustus will readily make facilities available for you to visit the Near Orient and see such cities of antiquity as Athens, which is rich in religious relics, and

Alexandria, which houses the finest library the modern world has ever known.'

'I'm pleased to hear you say so, Titus. I am naturally interested in antiquity, and as a profound scholar have always desired to visit the Alexandrian library. But my deeper urge is to travel further, into India, where I believe there are wonders so old that even the Pharaohs are but upstarts of yesterday by comparison.'

The Erlking paused, and went on abruptly, 'Have you, in your journeyings, visited these countries?'

'Frequently. Indeed, I was back from India but a few hours, before I was detached for this duty. It is a strange and wondrous land.'

'I have often heard it described as the birthplace of abstract religion. Could this be so?'

'It could indeed be so, but I found it rather a land of tired superstitions and fatal resignation. The Hindoo gods seem blasphemous mockeries of our own. I was more provoked by their system of priesthood, which permits mendicants to ape the anointed. Under the guise of holiness these beggars masquerade as oracles and by intensity of concentration they can simulate the dead and defy the laws of gravity.'

'Did you witness the performance of these miracles? Or are their manifestations but the astonishment of the incredulous?'

'I never saw one, nor met a person who did. But I am quite prepared to countenance the existence of people who *believed* they saw them, for the powers of hypnotism are far greater than the most observant eye, and can dupe the observer into thinking he has seen that which is only visible in the mind.'

'Is this indeed so? You appear most confident of the fact.'

'I ought to, for I experienced these hypnotic powers within my own person. One of the fakirs, or prophets, so called, addressed me personally, while in a cataleptic trance.'

'May I presume to ask what he said?'

'Nothing of great importance, and wholly inaccurate, as it so happened. He told me to prepare my house, as a guest was about to enter. I have no house. When I am in Rome I reside with my brother-in-law, and during the brief hours I was there, no stranger crossed its threshold.'

'Why then, indeed, Titus, do you place significance on such a commonplace occasion?'

'He addressed me by my name, Titus Terentius.'

'Or rather,' the Erlking reminded him, smiling, 'he hypnotised you into *thinking* he had addressed you by name.'

'That,' said Titus uncertainly, 'is precisely what I mean.'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BLAND autumn laid its soft carpet through the Gaulish Narrows. The sun glinted on tranquil grey seas. Spain loomed and passed astern, into the northern mists. Off Portugal, an armed bireme shot out from behind the Burlings and wanted to know why an old windbag was wearing the standard of a Roman flag-officer, tossed an oar-bank and showed a cocky turn of speed when the fact was ascertained.

The Rock showed up, purple and chunky, and suddenly the Mediterranean was all about them, a swaying meadow of blue waters and bright sails, busy with an empire's traffic.

Off the Balearics they overhauled the Cartagena convoy, slow-moving squaresailers, deep-laden with the loot and barter of a province. Iberian gold and curly wool from Lusitania, wild beasts for the games, uncured hides for Ostia, topped off by a batch of sad-eyed slaves. Pick where you like! Some ships stank and some didn't.

South of Sardinia, the power of Rome reached out its mailed fist to safeguard their final stretch. The Misenum squadron junctured Titus with a special service force of three-bankers.

Swift-hauled galleys crowded out from the distant land, curved astern in a broad sweep and closed the *Fravashe*. Youthful sea-centurions, rich-cloaked against the sober grey of their steering-platforms, dropped a languid palm to the two kings, and fanned out, a splashing swarm, to take their patrol stations on the far horizon.

A portly sea-legate, punctilious and rank-conscious, ran alongside in his personal barge.

‘Welcome to my area, Tribune. The port-admiral had listed you for towing up the Tiber at dawn. At this speed you’ll fetch Ostia by midnight. Will you stem-on to seaward of the bar until first light?’

‘Thank you, sir. I will instruct my sailing-master at once. Do you intend to board me?’

‘Obliged, but Divine Augustus has specially requested to be notified as soon as you are spoken. My humble respects to your passengers, and cordial greetings from the Emperor.’

The barge leaped ahead and vanished Romewards, and Titus went below to make his final arrangements for arrival.

But he was not long permitted the privacy of his own thoughts. Two shot-slingers came aft to pay their respects. In the forced eloquence of the rude-born, they grappled for words to convey their feelings.

‘We didn’t think much of this ship at first, sir. What with all those stories flying around about her being cursed, and them odd happenings. But after that pirate fight, and the way you beat the plague, why, we’d like you to know, sir, these two months under your standard have been the proudest in our lives.’

‘Thanks. But I didn’t quell the pestilence, you know. Your gratitude should go to Captain Quadrantus, the man who produced the antidote.’

‘You’re quite right, sir, so it should. And to think we suspected him of being in league with the devil! It just goes to show how you can fool yourself, especially when you’re a bit run down!’

‘It certainly does,’ Titus agreed, absent-mindedly.

The second shot-slinger brought him back to his surroundings.

‘If you’re commissioning the ship to take these kings back home again, sir, we’d very much like to be on the muster-roll, if you can see your way clear to having us.’

‘Why, I’d never thought of the matter! I suppose someone must return them to their own countries, although I doubt very much whether I will be the responsible person. I am claiming a long-due leave of absence when the ship gets in. However, if I can put in a word with the manning-officer, you can rest assured I shall certainly do so.’

They went off, leaving Titus to contemplate his wide comfortable cabin, with its long curved settee and polished-oak fittings.

Had but a mere sixty days elapsed since this brief and transient

dwelling first enclosed him? It seemed now, every article of furniture, every cupboard, locker and cushion was flinging back time-old associations.

His reflections were disturbed by soft sounds at the cabin entrance. He glanced up as Lepidus, the chamberlain, quietly entered, bearing a sheaf of papers.

'I have just manifested my stocks, O Titus Terentius. The palace housekeeper will insist on my producing an admission from the ship, before accepting my statements of shortages. Would you care to examine this explanatory list?'

Titus held out his hand, scrutinised the neat-written sheets, the carefully detailed lists of goods and chattels.

He commented, 'So much can the mere signing of a name prejudice its owner, I know many a commander who would refuse to sign anything for a palace functionary. Yet, when I recall your prompt action in surrendering your property to assist me in combating dire calamity, I feel that a careless scrawl with a reed pen is but poor recompense.'

Lepidus smiled faintly. 'We have both done our duty, O Titus. We have now but to render our account to Caesar.'

Titus contemplated him with level eyes. 'I had in mind rather your services to the dead. You brought comfort to the last moments of Sequinus Piso to a degree which was scarcely required by palace protocol. Therein, Lepidus, you paid debts for us all, and may the gods recall it when you compile your last stock-sheet.'

The fat man's face twisted painfully: 'Yet,' he said, 'they were scarcely the reasons for which I was sent into the ship.'

'Well, even Augustus himself could not have visualised the plague, or even a pirate attack.'

'Or the death of a sick centurion,' Lepidus echoed. 'Yet it is upon these seeming trifles that our own destinies hang tremulous.'

'Well put, Lepidus,' Titus said briefly. He reached for his pen and ink, scrawled his initials across the proffered sheets and watched the stout menial depart, soft-footed as a great cat.

Tarquin poked his head through the door curtains, and asked breezily, 'How about the password?'

'*Rome Looms!*' Titus said. 'Give it, and return.'

'*Rome Looms!*' Tarquin roared the words through the door, at the sentry outside. The cry echoed about the ship, died, a despairing wail,

on the lips of the marine in the *Fravashe's* bows.

Tarquin re-entered, flung himself full length on the cushions and grinned comfortably. 'Rome Looms, eh? I thought you'd pull that one. It's a great favourite with homeward-bounders.'

'Yes. Rome looms. And with it loom problems which have been perhaps too long shelved.'

'Well, what, for instance?'

'You, for instance. What do you intend to do, when you leave the ship tomorrow?'

'The usual things, until I'm broke again. After that I suppose I'll be posted somewhere.'

'I suppose you will. On the other hand, I was going to suggest that I recommend you for the command of the ship which returns these kings to their homes.'

'I wouldn't get it, Titus. I'm not privileged.'

'I think this might be one of the occasions when favouritism wouldn't count. It will be a question of ability, if Augustus has anything to do with it. And none is more able than you.'

'Except yourself, Titus.'

'I am out of the question. I am just realising my condition. The burden of bringing these monarchs to Rome has left a mark on me, Tarquin. I am still weak from the fever. I must rest a little.'

'I don't think they'll let you. On the other hand, I quite agree. I've never known a voyage so fraught with hazard. A dozen times we seemed doomed to disaster; and yet a dozen times we were saved at the last moment by a guiding hand. Our luck seems so miraculously blessed, one could almost be persuaded into believing in the power of the gods.'

'Don't do anything rash, Tarquin,' Titus begged, amused. 'Don't do anything rash.'

He reached within his locker, and produced two goblets and a jar of Chio.

He poured two bumpers, carefully handed one to Tarquin and raised the other high above his head, saying solemnly, 'To those who died, Tarquin.'

The centurion jumped up, drained his glass and poured another, tossed it off rapidly and added in brisk tones, 'To those who deserved to die, and be damned to them. You never knew that Sequinus Piso was a spy, did you?'

Titus opened his eyes: 'Of course I did!'

'You did!'

'The admiral gave me a hint that a secret observer was on board. At first I suspected the chamberlain.'

'Who wouldn't? He creeps around like a poxed-up priest. For that matter, he still might be.'

'If so, his case is not proven. Sequinus Piso damned himself out of his own mouth.'

Titus broke off, and surveyed the centurion with a friendly smile: 'But, Tarquin, why did you not tell me previously of all this?'

'I wasn't sure at the time. After Piso died, I saw no point in mentioning the matter until the ship was on the eve of arrival in Rome. It might have distressed you unnecessarily. I caught him memorising papers the day after we left. He tore them up and threw them over the side when he saw me. He said they were love-letters and implied they were from a married woman, but we were not long on the voyage before I discovered he was not in any way interested in women. Once I entered the berth and discovered him making notes on the mutiny. When he told me he had no intention of submitting them to you, I accused him of behaving like a senatorial informer, whereupon he went red in the face and mumbled evasively.'

Titus slowly revolved his goblet between his thumb and forefinger. 'Why should anyone call for secret reports on this voyage? Surely the importance of the Pax Mundana puts it far above petty intrigue!'

'You mean its importance to Augustus. Many things happened during your long absence in the East. Both the old man's grandsons dead, no less than the heirs-apparent upon whom he built his hopes for the succession. Tiberius brought back into favour and a few army commanders on the Rhine up to their old tricks. If you ask me, the Pax Mundana is the last desperate move by a disillusioned old man, endeavouring to patch up his family toga before it turns into his shroud.'

Tarquin paused, and glanced across enquiringly, 'But you have not told me how you made your discovery? In what way did you trap our fine-feathered friend?'

'I didn't trap him. He was left with no further advantage in concealment, on his deathbed. He was just revealing the name of his

employer when Turkey Pie walked in. I had heard enough, however.'

'And Turkey Pie? Did he overhear it too?'

'Of course he did! And probably a great deal more, if the truth were known. But, as I said before, if there is a case against him, then it is not yet proven.'

'But it is proven against Piso. Do you intend to do anything about it?'

Titus raised his voice sharply. 'Most naturally! My allegiance is to Augustus, not any member of his family who sees in the Pax Mundana an opportunity to serve his own dark ambitions!'

Anxiety appeared within Tarquin's features. 'I'd move with care, Titus. If there is a plot being hatched, then its instigators will stop at nothing to gain their ends. I don't want to come in here some day and discover you lying in a pool of gore, merely because you poked your nose into affairs which didn't concern you.'

Titus laughed. 'There is scarcely any fear of that! I shall certainly handle the matter with discretion, although I doubt the necessity of my having to handle it at all. If there is a guilty man within the shadow of the throne, Augustus is quite capable of marking him out himself.'

Tarquin grinned. 'Watch he doesn't mark you out at the same time.'

He jumped up, and reached for his wine, crying recklessly, 'Here's damnation to the fellow, whoever he is!'

He quaffed his drink, hiccuped a hoarse 'Good night' and lurched off to bed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OFF Ostia, Admiral Taurus boarded from his barge; clambered over the taffrail and emerged without ceremony on the quarter gallery.

'Don't want any fuss,' he said to Titus. 'Hail, everyone!'

'Nevertheless, sir, it is a personal pleasure to be the first to greet you.'

'Keep that stuff up and you'll get my job. You've lost weight.'

'In Africa, sir. Nothing much. Fever. I think I notified Rome in the despatches posted from the Pillars. I trust they arrived safely.'

'They turned up all right. Also the casualty-list enclosure. Why did you have to kill off young Piso? I have had that mother of his in my office every day since, pestering me for news. I hope you kept his ashes.'

'I was ill and out of my senses during the cremation ceremony. I take it that Tarquin, who conducted the obsequies, would have attended to such details.'

'Well, if he hasn't he'll be wishing he'd caught the pestilence himself, before this day is out of the sky. Believe me, Titus, that woman bids fair to being the greatest headache the navy's had since Cleopatra. Where are those two royal beauties of yours?'

'Still in their quarters. They are not generally early risers. I can have them aroused, tactfully, if you wish.'

'Leave them where they are for the time being. They'll need their rest, if I'm any judge of impending festivities. Lots of pie in this Pax Mundana for everyone. Even the slaves are talking about it in hopeful tones. Too hopeful, when one reflects that all they're likely to get out of it is an occasional bellyful of exorgitation and a free seat to the Circus. Where's that Greek wonder of yours?'

Quadrantus descended the ladders, a pleasant smile illuminating his weather-darkened features.

'I have just streamed your barge astern, O Taurus.'

The admiral gave him a glance of belligerent affection.

'You have, have you? Well, thank you very much for thinking of it. You're booked in to the top berth just below the bridge on the city side. You'll lay bows upstream, with the inshore section of your waist bulwarks removed. Charge all alterations to my government. Is that clear?'

'Perfectly. But there will be no additional charges, O Taurus. My midship section is hinged for cargo-handling. I but remove the pins and drop the bulwark. There is also a pile of red Bactrian carpet, cut to fit within the space; and an extension of the awning, for shade purposes.'

The admiral stared with a deepening admiration. 'Don't you ever do the wrong thing?'

'Not professionally, O Admiral. Not professionally.'

'And I take it that you're just as anxious as we all are to see this Pax Mundana a big success?'

'More than anything else in the world, O Taurus.'

'In that case you won't object to my using your crew in the ceremony of disembarkation?'

'In what manner, O Taurus?'

'They're a fine body of men. I want them in the picture. They'll complete the parade.'

'But they lack uniform! And are not skilled in the art of drilling!'

'Those knitted caps and blue jerseys they wear are uniform enough for me. If they stand-to in their watches as they do in their sea-stations, then as far as I'm concerned they're smarter than the Praetorian Guard. Dammit, man! You have a sense of irony! It should appeal to you from that point alone.'

'When you put it thus,' Quadrantus said, amused, 'how could I not see the point?'

As he vanished up the ladders, back to his steering-hatch, the chamberlain emerged from the door at the fore end of the quarter gallery, smiled hesitatingly at the two officers, then slipped through the alleyway leading to his office.

'Who's that furtive cow?' Taurus asked.

'Lepidus, the chamberlain, sir. Sent aboard by Augustus to super-

intend the passengers' requirements. Don't you remember him? He gave you a rare wine, just before we left.'

'That's right, so he did. Does he always creep around in that conspiratorial manner?'

'He is quiet and servile in his duties. But I have always accepted that as part of his palace training.'

'How did you get on with him during the voyage?'

'He was no trouble. We saw very little of him until the passengers came on board. After that, he administered to their wants unobtrusively. On the rare occasions when I required his services I found them invaluable.'

'Did you mention him in your report?'

'Hardly, sir.'

'I'll bet he mentioned you in his,' Taurus said. He paused, scratched his jaw speculatively, stared oddly at Titus, then went off to the upper deck, leaving the young tribune to reflect on his behaviour.

It was obvious that the old admiral, who suspected most people, should suspect Lepidus. After all, the chamberlain had come direct to the ship from the palace, and was a devoted freedman who held the ear of Augustus. What could be more natural than that he should act in the capacity of observer for his master?

He dismissed the subject from his mind and went off to see how his passengers were faring.

Daq was already up and about; had just completed his breakfast, a rich mess of palm-oil fritters, before donning his ceremonial leopard skin and tiger-tooth necklace, a simple enough regalia when laid on his couch, but which became invested with a mighty splendour when slipped over his woolly black head.

'I'd like to wear my ostrich-feather headpiece,' he told Titus. 'But if it is a windy day it will give me trouble. On the other hand, they tell me that it is most unfashionable for a barbarian to go bareheaded in Rome. What shall I do?'

'Wear your headpiece,' Titus said happily. 'My admiral, who has just boarded, brought the first weather report of the day with him. From every temple comes the benign blessing of the gods, and the augurs' predictions of a fine day.'

'These Roman gods of yours are suspiciously co-operative,' the Nubian observed. 'I hope they're not going to poke their noses too

far into the Pax. I'll start to worry if they say "yes" to everything. However, I'll thank them for letting me wear my special ostrich feathers. How is my friend Saga this morning?

'I am about to pay my respects,' Titus said. 'And will take the liberty of conveying yours at the same time.'

He found the Erlking in his cabin, at his table and with the remains of his simple meal before him. He was attired in his blue velvet gown and silver-buckled belt. The straps on his soft-skin sandals were set with tiny fragments of Baltic sea-stone. His metal skull-helmet sat on his lap, upside down. In common with his fellow king, Saga appeared to be having trouble with his headgear.

'I'd rather not put it on until the last minute,' he explained to Titus. 'It hurts my eyes.'

The young tribune examined the rough bare finish of the helmet's interior.

'Why don't you have it lined with something soft? It seems ridiculous to me that it should be constructed with absolutely no thought of personal comfort.'

'I suppose it does. But it is a tradition in my parliament that the crown must be made as uncomfortable as possible for its wearer. It chastens the mind, you know, and retards illusions of grandeur.'

'I perceive the principle all right. We Romans have a similar one. At a general's triumph, a slave rides in his chariot beside him and repeats in his ears, above the roars of the crowd, an admonishment that he must remember he too is but human. On the whole I think ours the much more civilised practice.'

The Erlking came to his feet and said firmly, 'On the whole, my young friend, I think rather it reveals the difference between the Roman and the Scandinavian way of life. On second thought, I will not do this thing until I reach the presence of Caesar. Now lead me on deck and show me the scenes.'

On deck they found the *Fravashe* had entered the river and was mounting the current. The drag-tcams along the banks had been doubled; powerful slaves, heads bent, were toiling stolidly upstream, twitching the squaresailer behind them, as if she were a child's toy being plucked up a brawling gutter.

The city stirred into sight, murmurous and thick with the Roman multitude. It were as if a giant tap had been opened in the blue skies above and the seven hills splashed with a million white, upturned

faces. Citizens and slaves, bond and free, men and women, they grew, multiplied. Crouched, sitting, standing, they flowed over rooftops and tenements. They were tight-jammed in the narrow streets and loose-packed on the rising terraces. Greater Rome was agog with an expectancy not known hitherto.

‘Are all these people here to welcome us?’ Daq cried. ‘How wonderful!’

‘I should think that they are assembled to do honour to the thing we represent,’ the Erlking commented. ‘Would it not be so, Titus?’

‘There are two ways of looking at it,’ Titus said doubtfully. ‘I should say rather they are inclined to view the occasion as a holiday first, and then consider its more serious implications later. They are like children, you know.’

‘Aren’t we all?’ Daq said wistfully. ‘If you gave me my choice, I would sooner hunt wild lions than argue about brotherly love.’

His dusky features, grotesque under the white chalk with which he had daubed himself for ceremonial purposes, became imbued with a sudden earnestness. ‘I’ll be glad when all the serious meetings are over. Then we can settle down and really enjoy ourselves.’

The squaresailer slid into her berth and the gaudy scene unfolded like a multi-coloured tapestry. A near-by hill had been battered into a flat eminence. On the landward side it curved away in a wide avenue and entered the Via Triumphalis. Offshore, it sloped gently to the *Fravashe*’s main deck, separated by the lowered bulwark, as a stage is marked apart from a rising amphitheatre.

Benches were erected on the outer perimeters, tier on tier, in which were seated the equestrian order, the Roman knights with their ornaments and families.

Nearer the ship, in chosen vantage, the senators stood in graven clusters. They reflected the solid assurance of pious government and pack-rule. Even the hems of their togas were incensed.

Of lesser import, the military filled the gaps between. A platoon of Nubian infantry, gigantic Negroes, shipped across from Africa to form an appropriate bodyguard for King Daq, were paraded, proud-nostrilled, against the bulwarks. A company of yellow-haired Teutons, tall and thin, matched them opposite. They were not picked men, like the Africans, but had been chosen mumchance out of the household troops for the colour of their hair.

The ship touched and the bulwarks dropped with a quiet clang.

Trumpets blared, a cheeky fanfare which echoed around the near-by Tarpeian Rock and stole back, chastened, as if its melodious journey had prompted sudden food for thought.

An elderly senator stepped forward, his hard mouth menacing with words. Eloquence trembled and fluttered in ivory parchment between his long bony fingers. Measured, sonorous, the flood of Latin syntax swung to the skies.

A rumbling grew in the distance, and burst over the hill-top in a mighty clatter of hoofs. The household cavalry galloped into view, followed by Augustus, solitary in his pimple-round chariot drawn by four milk-white steeds.

His stocky figure was draped in a purple toga flashed with gold. His face and hands were coloured vermillion. His painted skull was crowned with immortal laurels and his arms laboured under the weight of his military bracelets.

Alighting, he swam with slow dignity across the red carpet, into the ship, towards the point where the two kings stood.

King Daq, awestruck by the visible manifestation of a Roman emperor, flung himself prostrate on the deck, an unusually violent movement which sent Augustus wheeling in the direction of the mainmast.

A dramatic hiss of joy escaped the lips of the watching Taurus. 'By the Dung Gods themselves,' he breathed, 'he's going to kiss Quadrantus instead!'

The Erlking avoided an awkward moment in history by coming forward unheralded, holding out his hand and saying politely, 'I am Saga, O Divine Augustus. I hope I am not disturbing you.'

'Not at all,' Augustus said. 'If we can get this fellow to his feet, we'll board my car and I'll show you the sights.'

As the trio crossed the ground, Augustus added as an afterthought, politely, 'I hope you both enjoyed your sea-voyage?'

An ambitious senator overheard the remark and passed it on, as a characteristic example of the Augustinian consideration for other people's comfort. The crowds took up the cry in parrot-like recognition of the senator's profound astuteness, then fell to for fun and games in a Roman holiday. Musicians played in the streets. Free pies and sour wine tumbled out of the skies. Harlots darted. Thieves nimbled. Rome pleased itself and Titus went below to his cabin, wondering why his wife hadn't come down to meet him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TITUS found the stern cabin a hive of industry. Taurus was there, scribbling furiously at the table, with his chief scribe, Chrystolis, at his elbow. Two clerks were attending him and, much to his surprise, his brother-in-law, Calpurnius.

The latter embraced him warmly, and apologised. 'I tried to catch your eye, on the upper deck, but you were too busy to notice me. By Jove! You've altered, Titus! I suppose this voyage has been quite a strain.'

'Quite. Where's Vipsania? I half expected she would be down to meet me.'

'We couldn't get her litter through the throngs on the Via Triumphalis. She decided to wait until the excitement had died a little. I suppose you are wondering what all the fuss is going on here?'

Admiral Taurus glanced up from the table. 'My fault. I should have told him earlier. You are taking your passengers back home when the conference is over.'

Despondency gripped Titus' throat. He realised the futility of argument, bade a silent farewell to his respite from duty and asked, 'When?'

'You needn't look so damned miserable,' Taurus said. 'It won't be for several days. And as far as I can gather it won't be a long voyage. In the meantime we're sticking another charter on the *Fravashe's* keel. Same crew. Same conditions. Different landfall. That right, Calpurnius?'

Calpurnius smiled pleasantly. 'Quite correct, O Admiral. The destination is subject to the desires of the kings. All three have apparently agreed on their keeping a mutual appointment before dispersing to their own lands.'

'And about the only thing they will agree on,' Taurus grunted, 'if I'm any judge.'

'I wouldn't say that,' Calpurnius protested. 'They are astute statesmen, but they realise the Pax must benefit their point of view as well as Rome's. They will strike a hard bargain. Of that I have no doubt, although each will approach it from his own personal angle.'

'Of the three, I'm rather inclined to Daq,' Taurus observed. 'There's none of this confused idealism about him. When he says he wants a woman, he means a down-to-earth tart and not a starry staircase to a goddess' couch. I like Saga from what I've seen of him, which isn't much. But mark my words, Augustus is going to have trouble with him. He'll sniff the Pax from every angle, then ask for an emetic before he even swallows it.'

'What of *Eastwind*?' Titus asked. 'Is anything known of him?'

'He's been here a few days, but as yet has said nothing. He's one of these angular bony types, with a smooth yellow face and tufts of black hair sprouting from his chin. Cavalry man, I should say. Calls himself *Khan*.'

'King Khan?'

'Something of the sort. A thorough-paced fanatic into the bargain. When he mentions Rome he twists his lip in a horrible manner, as if the name were a piece of flesh which had gone putrid in his mouth. Not the sort of fellow you'd introduce your daughter to, or take to your club, for that matter.'

Tarquin entered, resplendent in his best uniform.

'The ship's cleared,' he said. 'Rufius Galba has marched the mob off to the barracks. He's meeting me at the Poseidon afterwards. I'd like to make him an honorary member while he's here, if someone will second him?'

'Put my name down,' the admiral said. 'And the pair of you needn't be in such a damned hurry to leave the ship. We're keeping her for another voyage.'

'Suits me,' Tarquin said. 'Also Rufius Galba. How about the troops?'

'Hold them at the depot,' Taurus said briefly. He added, 'Unless Titus here wants to make any changes?'

Titus shook his head. 'If they wish to come, I'll take the lot back,' he said slowly. 'Ghosts included.' He paused, and asked suddenly, 'Does Quadrantus know yet?'

A deep voice at the door said, 'Of course, O Tribune! But not officially.'

The admiral stared distastefully at the Greek shipmaster.

'Well, you know now. And where did your unofficial information come from? May I ask?'

'From the gods,' Quadrantus told him. 'Who else?'

Slow admiration burnt into Taurus' eyes. 'That's glib enough to be sincere! Although I could ask whose gods, yours or mine?'

'It is much the same thing,' Calpurnius interposed, amused. 'The point is, Master Quadrantus, we have decided to recharter your ship to take these three men to their destination. Are you willing to negotiate?'

'You can have my ship until the end of the Saturnalian Games. After that I have another appointment.'

'Until Twelfth Night! But we may not even be prepared to move these people from Rome by then! We must make a more fluid date!'

Quadrantus hesitated. 'Include a clause in the agreement, if you wish, that the charter can be extended until these three emissaries are put on shore. But make your terminating date otherwise to be Twelfth Night, and I am authorised to sign.'

'Who authorises you?' Taurus asked suspiciously. 'Don't you own the damn' ship yourself?'

'My crew are part-owners, and One Other. All must be consulted. May I sign now? I wish to take my ship out for careening. Her bottom is fouled.'

'We want you on hand, for immediate sailing, if necessary. You can careen at the navy yards, north of Ostia.'

'I am deep-keeled and cannot cast my ship on a shallow strand. Sardinia possesses the nearest and most convenient beach for my purpose.'

'We have your word that the *Fravashe* will be here on time?' Titus asked.

'You have more than my word,' Quadrantus said. 'After all, I am not collecting my charter money until the second passage is completed. That ought to convince a Roman.'

'Or make him suspicious,' the admiral grunted. 'All right, careen your ship where you like; and if you are not here when you're wanted, you'll lose your fees for the last voyage. Calpurnius, sign him up and let's be off.'

The simple details of preliminary chartering were transacted and the clerks bundled ashore. Titus packed his few belongings, sent them on deck, then turned to the departing admiral.

'Am I on immediate sea-notice, sir? You have not defined my position; and I would like to go home, if I am not required urgently.'

Taurus glanced at him: 'Take a rest. I'll send for you when I want you.'

When they reached the waist, the admiral nodded his head at the deserted scene: 'Bit different from when we went below.'

A pile of broken timbers and abandoned furniture was stacked in the centre of the flattened eminence leading to the *Fravashie*. A gang of slaves was dismantling the remaining scaffolds from the equestrian tiers. The red carpets, the gay poles and bright flags had vanished. Aboard the ship, the bulwarks had been replaced, the awnings taken in and the yards pointed. The seamen were at their berthing-stations and Quadrantus was at the steering-oar, contemplating the departing Romans with a mild gaze.

'If I didn't need my bath,' Taurus yawned, 'I'd stay and see him off. There's more in that fellow's routine drill than meets the eye.'

He waddled ashore, was helped into his litter by two burly lictors, and swayed off, around the side of the hill, leaving Calpurnius and Titus alone.

They stood on the quayside and watched the *Fravashie* put out. A slip-rope held the ship until the current caught her bows and canted her into the stream. She paused for a brief moment on the Tiber's breast, shuddered as the steering-oar stopped her swing, then swept downstream.

A faint mist grew. Imperceptible grey-pearl fingers, moist-thin and salty, curled upriver and drew the great dark hull into oblivion. In a moment she was gone.

Calpurnius broke the silence, nodded his head in the direction of the vanished vessel, and asked, 'How did you get on with that Quadrantus fellow?'

'He was no trouble, and is certainly an uncanny seaman.'

'How uncanny?'

'His landfalls were always dead on the nose, and he knew the waters adjacent to our ports of call as if he were a local pilot. He was lucky, of course, with the weather. I never knew him experience a contrary wind. In fact, they served him so well, one would almost suspect a

conspiracy between him and the sea-gods.'

Calpurnius smiled, amused. 'Perhaps Neptune is his One Other on the list of shareholders.'

He broke off; added thoughtfully, 'I wonder what currency he favours, when he collects his dividends.'

'If you are referring to the gods,' Titus told him, with a faint smile, 'I understand they never take their fees in cash.'

They employed their conceits for a few minutes, until the subject was exhausted; whereupon Titus asked, 'What is this business about our distinguished guests having a mutual appointment, after they leave Rome?'

Calpurnius shrugged his shoulders indifferently: 'Nothing very important. All three have come a long distance and naturally wish to make the most of their visit in this part of the world.'

'I knew that the Erlking desired to visit Alexandria. He is quite a scholar, you know, and told me he wanted to see the libraries there. It is a wise move on Rome's part, to study his inclinations. I think it will influence him favourably.'

'I hope so. On the other hand, Rome has had very little to do with this direction of plans. Herod of Judaea is the prime mover in the business. Apparently he and Daq knew each other when they were students together in Egypt, in the early days. In fact, he has quite a lot in common with the Nubian king, if you know what I mean. Loose living and all that sort of thing. Anyway, he has asked that the Khan and King Daq pay him a visit at Jerusalem, before they go home. As Judaea is in our pocket, and Herod a Roman puppet, we think it might be a good thing.'

'What of the Khan? Is he known to Herod?'

'Not to our knowledge; nor, for that matter, does the Jewish king know anything about the Pax Mundana. But he has to learn of it sooner or later, and who could tell him the story better than these three ambassadors?'

'Our procurator, I suppose, if it is a Roman political policy.'

'It will sound more convincing, coming from more or less impartial witnesses.'

'And if the Jewish king doesn't like it? Everyone knows he is an ambitious type. It might suit his purpose to scheme contrary to Rome's wishes.'

Calpurnius' handsome face grew faintly menacing.

'It had better not suit his purpose,' he observed grimly. 'Don't forget his son, Herod Agrippa, is being educated in Rome, and a most valuable hostage into the bargain.'

His features brightened, he glanced across the road to where a large litter had just appeared, borne on the shoulders of eight black slaves.

'Here is Vipsania. You ride back with her, and I will organise some slaves to bring up the baggage.'

The litter was lowered to the ground and Vipsania stepped out, excited.

'But the *Fravashe* has gone!' she exclaimed, disappointed. 'I wanted so much to see it again!'

She turned to Titus, explaining, 'Everyone in Rome is talking about the three kings and their remarkable voyage here. It has made me quite a figure in our set, having a husband who commanded the ship which brought two of them.'

Titus smiled. 'It will be back,' he told her. 'You will see it again, I promise you.'

He discerned an impatient movement within the litter and paused, puzzled. Whereupon Vipsania took his hand and led him across to the curtains; said secretively, possessively, 'Titus, I want you to meet a new-found friend. A lady whom misfortune has made most dear to me.'

The curtains were pulled apart, and Titus found himself staring into the face of Sequinus' mother, Madame Piso.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TITUS declined the proffered ride in the litter, which he now recognised as Madame Piso's grandiose vehicle.

'I'll come along with Calpurnius,' he explained. 'It will give us the

opportunity to discuss a few tedious personal matters.'

As they set off in the rear of the equipage, he ejaculated abruptly: 'Quite a surprise! Madame Piso being a friend of Vipsania's!'

'It oughtn't to be,' Calpurnius told him. 'You instigated the acquaintance.'

'I? In what manner could I be responsible for their knowing each other?'

'Through the slave girl you purchased for Theophilus, your aged teacher. Don't you recall your request when you discovered she was grieving over her twin brother? Your insistence that we should locate his master and ensure that the two children saw each other occasionally?'

'Of course! It comes back to me! But I understood that the boy had been purchased by a man!'

'Madame Piso's agent. Or was. She sacked him when she discovered he had split a pigeon pair.'

'It wasn't his fault. Apparently the boy was sold early; and if he were as bedraggled and unkempt as the girl, then no one could be blamed for not discerning a relationship.'

'Well, they are as like as two peas when you put them together now, and would make as pretty a brace of pages you could find in Rome, were they, of course, owned by the same master. Madame Piso thinks she has lost a highly valuable social asset and that's all there is to it.'

'But she makes no difficulty about the brother and sister seeing each other?'

'Quite the contrary. She is most proper about it. Sends the boy up to the Villa Calpurnius every Tenth Day, and arranges for his return. I would not say, however, that her humanitarianism is completely without point. She hopes you will sell her the girl, when it suits your convenience.'

'Hardly my convenience! She was purchased to look after Theophilus, until he is called to the gods.'

Calpurnius eyed him soberly. 'The old fellow was called, two weeks ago. Your return has been awaited before a decision can be made about the child's future.'

Titus swallowed the news in silence. After all, he had not expected the old pedagogue to last much longer. A brief sadness clouded his thoughts; a sudden fear that with his teacher's passing a cycle had

been terminated in his own life, and that a new era loomed, menacing and unpredictable.

Calpurnius broke in on his thoughts: 'I think, one way and another, it might be a prudent gesture to let Madame Piso have the girl.'

'Perhaps you are right,' Titus said absent-mindedly. 'I'll think it over.'

He pulled himself abruptly out of his reflections; asked, 'Could we call in at the club on our way? I would like to see Tarquin. Or leave a message for him, if he is not in residence.'

They found the Poseidon seething with excitement. Many out-of-town members had come into the city for the celebrations and were making the occasion a reunion.

Calpurnius, caught up in the throng, excused himself hastily for a moment. 'The secretary-manager, a new fellow, stared at Titus with an expression of blank politeness.

'Titus Terentius,' the young commodore explained. 'I am a member.'

'Titus Terentius! But, of course, sir! I knew your features were familiar! Welcome back to the Poseidon. Up here at the club, we have been most interested in your voyage and its unique nature! Is there anything I can do for you?'

'I was looking for my second in command, Sea-Centurion Tarquin. I understand he is staying at the club.'

'He arrived about an hour ago, sir, and booked a private room with a single couch. He went out again, with another centurion, an Egyptian infantry type. Would you care to leave a message, sir?'

'Thanks. A tablet and stylus will suffice. The message is not very personal.'

'Nonsense, sir. You must have proper writing materials. You will find them available at my table here; and the house slave will see your message is delivered to Centurion Tarquin, as soon as he returns.'

Titus had barely completed his task, signed and sealed his note, when Calpurnius' voice, at his elbow, brought him to his feet.

'Titus, I want you to meet our new president, the city sheriff, Aedile Vitellius.'

Titus found himself facing an elderly man, toga-garbed and wearing the bland smile common to fat people.

Calpurnius went on, urbanely, 'This is Titus Terentius, sir, the sea-tribune who commanded the expedition of the kings, and a member of the Poseidon.'

'A splendid achievement,' the aedile said. 'We're all proud of you. Remarkable thing, you know. There has never been a great event in Roman history, one way or another, in which a member of the Poseidon was not concerned.'

'You do me great honour, sir.'

'On the contrary, my boy. You do the club great honour.'

The aedile cleared his throat, went on: 'You know our policy towards distinguished visitors to this city. We like them to pay us a visit during their stay here. Gives them an opportunity to see that Romans can relax and play as well as rule and command.'

'My admiral, sir, would be the most suitable medium through which to approach the three kings. I am naturally under his orders.'

'Of course, of course. But we want you and your officers to attend officially in their company. Give the occasion a service background, so to speak. What do you think of the idea?'

'Highly appropriate, sir. It shouldn't be difficult to muster up a marine escort. Drum the guests in with a guard of honour. If you mentioned the matter to Admiral Taurus, I'm sure I can organise the mere details, sir.'

'Excellent, Titus. We'll get the chariot rolling at once. Join me in the cooling-room for a Falernian, if you're staying for your bath.'

The aedile went off, highly satisfied, leaving the two men to commence their journey towards the Villa Calpurnius.

'It will be a big thing for Vitellius,' Calpurnius observed, 'if he can get the royal visitors up here. His aedileship expires in a month, and he is contemplating a stand for the consulate.'

'He'll be most fortunate if he achieves his wish,' Titus said. 'To spend the best part of a day at the Poseidon will be a big slice out of the time available for the Pax conferences, too. Perhaps Augustus will have the last word to say on what engagements his guests should accept.'

'I'm sure he will. On the other hand, it pays to be pleasant about these matters when the club president brings them up. You know how these things are.'

'Quite,' Titus agreed.

He relapsed into silence until they arrived at the house. The home-

coming was pleasant. The servants and slaves rushed out. The dogs barked and the janitor banged his gong. Vipsania met Titus at the vestibule and invited him inside with a pretty, formal speech. Together, they threw some sticks on the hearth, watched the fire blaze, then retired to their dinner couch, where a special meal had been prepared for four people, for Madame Piso had been invited to stay.

'It was the least I could do,' Vipsania said, as Titus divested himself in his chamber. 'She generously offered her litter to take me down to the ship, and was so pathetically anxious to see you herself.'

'I can't imagine why,' he commented. 'On the last occasion when we met, she as good as gave me and my ship to the devil gods.'

'She has suffered a lot. First her husband's death, and then Sequinus to go so tragically. You must be kind to her, Titus, for my sake.'

He drew in the cord of his dinner robe, took her arm and led her back into the atrium; 'Of course, I will be kind to her. Don't forget the boy died in a ship which was under my command. I, too, feel a certain responsibility.'

It had become increasingly obvious, as the meal progressed, that Vipsania had changed considerably within the brief period which had elapsed during the *Fravashé's* voyage.

Her concern for Madame Piso, that of a young woman for an elder grown suddenly dear, was most noticeable. She saw to it that her wine was watered strictly in accordance with custom, and that she chose the dishes most congenial to her palate.

Once, when the Roman matron shivered slightly, Vipsania hastened to bring her a wrap: a Bactrian shawl made of the finest silky wool, and one of Titus' many presents to his wife on his return from India.

'It is the ague season,' Vipsania said. 'We mustn't let the gods take you, just when a happier era is about to dawn.'

Madame Piso glanced up, and smiled into the younger woman's face: 'Perhaps it would be better if I were taken. After all, it is only the dead who call me now.'

Calpurnius reached for a bowl of choice sweetmeats and extracted a honeyed fruit, which he pressed on Madame Piso. At the same time, with the determined air of a person hell-bent on avoiding dangerous subjects, he cried, 'But what is this happier era which is about to dawn for you? Come, now! I can perceive by your smiles that the

pair of you are concealing something from us!

Vipsania broke in impulsively. 'I suppose I could tell you, although it is a masonic secret, and something which men could scarcely understand. At our last lodge meeting the mother-mistress experienced a revelation about Cornelia's future. That is all.'

Titus stared at his wife. 'Why, Vipsania! It is indeed news to me that you have been initiated!'

Vipsania adopted a most touching, superior manner. 'It was really so wonderful, dear. I just didn't wish to tell you until we were alone together. I was accepted into the Good Goddess, the lodge your mother was always talking about. I promised her that as soon as I was married I would apply for membership.'

'Apply for membership! But I thought you had to wait until you were asked!'

Vipsania glanced across at Madame Piso. 'When I discovered Cornelia was a past-mistress, I just gave her a hint. It is the same thing, provided your aspirations are not prompted by an ambitious desire to exploit the craft.'

As Titus was cogitating on these points of added interest in his domestic life, Madame Piso leant across from her couch, warned in a low, dramatic voice, 'Remember, Vipsania, we are now taught to be cautious, and must guard our secrets within the sacred repositories of our innermost hearts.'

'But, Cornelia! Your revelation was made outside the lodge; and besides, it requires the co-operation of intruders to give it life!'

Vipsania broke off. She addressed the two men in urgent, impulsive tones: 'It was revealed through mystic channels that when the ashes of Sequinus were mingled with those of his father, a lasting peace would come to Cornelia. Could you not reassure her on the point?'

Trapped, Titus blurted out, 'But I am not in the position to reassure her on anything. I was unconscious myself when Sequinus died. Only my sea-centurion, Tarquin, could know what happened during the period in which I lay senseless. I have left a message at the Poseidon, where he is staying, requesting him to communicate with me immediately he returns. We must await his advice.'

Vipsania protested, 'But surely, Titus, when you came to your senses, you must have made immediate enquiries?'

'I did not,' Titus said curtly. 'I had more important matters on my mind.'

Madame Piso stiffened visibly, and asked in frigid tones, 'And what was more important than the death of my son?'

'The care of the two hundred living, who still remained in my charge,' Titus told her with a touch of heat. 'Could one have a greater reason for brushing aside one's obligations to the dead?'

Madame Piso rose abruptly from the table. Pale-faced, she left the room, with a tearful Vipsania trailing in her wake. Calpurnius and Titus followed reluctantly, and stood in the shadows on the entrance porch. The widow had now entered her litter and drawn the curtains. Vipsania, her head through the draperies, was consoling the distracted woman.

'Do you think the ashes were saved?' Calpurnius asked.

'I'm damned if I know,' Titus commented moodily. 'Tarquin is responsible for the church ornaments and sacrificial gear. It comes under his authority. If they were in the ship, they must have come ashore with the altar and religious furniture. What a wretched situation!'

The litter swayed off into the darkness and Vipsania put an end to the futile conversation. She brushed past the two men, weeping.

Calpurnius shrugged his shoulders and Titus went dismally off to his own chamber, undressed and crawled into bed. For once, it seemed, even prayers to Minerva were futile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AFTER a sleepless night, Titus arose early, and made his way down to the dockyard.

He found the chief scribe, Chrystolis, drowsing on the bench in the outer office, still dressed.

The freedman jumped up, rubbed his eyes, apologised, 'Hail, O Titus! Pray excuse my condition. We have been up at the palace most of the night. Such a nuisance!'

He dashed some water into his face from a near-by faucet, rinsed his mouth, adjusted his tunic and observed, 'The admiral is still in his office, writing. I am taking him some wine and water in a moment. Why don't you join him?'

'Thanks. I think I will. What is all the trouble?'

'Divine Augustus is being difficult, over the Pax Mundana.'

'Quite a change, is it not, Chrystolis? I understood that was the three kings' prerogative.'

'It will be their turn next, I suppose. In the meantime, the Emperor is holding a heresy-hunt behind closed doors, cross-questioning everyone except stuttering Claudius. I have never seen such a turn-over since Julia was exiled. But follow me in with the wine.'

The admiral was sprawled at his desk, scribbling energetically. He glanced distastefully at his pen as they entered, threw it into a corner, and remarked, 'Cut me another six reeds, Chrystolis. That should see my ink out, or the devil in. Take a bench, Titus, and tell me how peaceful life is for junior staff-officers.'

He gulped the large beaker of watered wine which the scribe handed him, indicated the pile of papers on his desk and observed, 'Your crew-list, every mother's son of them, from yourself down to the drummers. Divine Augustus wants their personal dossiers; or rather, the chief of secret police does.'

The admiral groaned, reached under his skirt and eased his under-clothing. 'Who would you suspect of planting spies in the *Fravashe*?'

'I wouldn't know, sir. The boy Sequinus made a few foolish admissions before he died, but he was out of his wits when he did so. He was, of course, forced into the ship by Prince Marcus, but, as you are well aware, under conditions too clumsy and obvious to mean anything beyond scandal.'

'I know. That's been gone into. Marcus satisfactorily explained his insistence for your taking the boy. He wanted a centurion in the ship capable of training a ceremonial guard. At the same time, the reason for a ceremonial guard had to be concealed. You and I know that there was a woman in it. Probably Augustus does too, but he said nothing and accepted Marcus' story. In any case, Marcus is very close to the purple. If the Pax is in the Emperor's interests, then it is

also in his. But what brought you down here at this hour?’

‘A few matters, not very important, but which I felt should be discussed with you. I was brought-to in the club last night, by the president. He wants to arrange a visit from the three kings, with full canonicals.’

Taurus growled. ‘He and a thousand others. The palace has been swamped with requests from every society, cultural, social and political, in Italy. Would the Emperor’s guests honour them at a feast or the public games! A few appointments were made, before the avalanche came; but the business has grown out of hand. However, I don’t think that even Augustus can afford to snub the city sheriff. I’ll fix something before the day is out. Where’s Tarquin? I want to ask him a few questions about this Egyptian centurion.’

‘I’m looking for him myself, sir. As a matter of fact I am having a few uneasy moments about young Piso’s death. Last night, I found myself manœuvred into a most embarrassing position, not being able to give a clear account of the obsequies. Tarquin is the only one who can help me.’

‘I don’t think you need worry yourself too much over the matter. As a serving-officer your position is clear enough. Tell Madame Piso to go and jump off the Tarpeian Rock if she doesn’t like the official report.’

‘It’s not so much Madame Piso, sir. It is the feelings aroused between my wife and myself which distress me. The two women became more than acquainted during my absence from Rome. Vipsania was initiated into the matrons’ temple society. The Bona Dea lodge, no less, and Madame Piso was her sponsor. You can just imagine the bond which unites them now.’

The admiral scratched himself uneasily. ‘That damned female masonic cult again. I hope it never spreads to our sex, Titus. I can’t imagine why Augustus doesn’t suppress it, after the trouble his uncle had over the Clodius Pulcher affair.’

‘But after all, sir, it is approved by the church, and indeed viewed with high favour in ecclesiastic circles. The madame president of the Vestal College always attends the big meeting, the festival of the Good Goddess. And I have heard my own mother declare that not even childbirth equalled the ecstasy of participation in the Good Goddess rites.’

‘Ecstasy? Nonsense,’ Taurus said. ‘If there is any pious pleasure in

running naked down dark passages, screaming dirty couplets about each other's privates and belting yourself with a dead serpent, then you can turn me over to the flamens and burn me as a taper.'

'I knew about the screaming,' Titus confessed. 'But the other part is news to me. Are you quite sure they flagellate themselves in that extraordinary manner?'

'Not quite,' the admiral admitted. 'But I wouldn't be surprised; although, not having possessed a wife, I wouldn't know either.'

The admiral jumped up, crossed the office and stared through the open aperture which led out to the boatyard. Suddenly his frog's mouth broke into a grin he could no longer conceal.

'One way and another,' he observed, 'I think you'll be pleased to smell salt water again, if I'm any judge of over-married officers.'

'As a casual observer,' Titus said, 'I suppose one could scarcely blame you for your opinions. In the meantime, may I help you with any of this stuff?'

'Go up to the club and get a haircut,' Taurus told him. 'You are a disgrace to the service!'

He pushed the young tribune out of his office, roared for his lictors and sailed in portly state off to the palace; leaving a morose and reflective Titus to make his way through the city and up to the Poseidon.

The club was deserted, with plenty of vacant chairs in the hair-dressing saloon. He surrendered himself to the ministrations of the chief barber, then walked across to the desk, where he perceived the club manager.

'That business of the royal visit,' he told him. 'I have just spoken to my admiral. He will take care of it.'

'Excellent news, Tribune Titus! You think, then, we may go ahead and make our arrangements?'

'I wouldn't do anything before you get a definite date from the palace. Their Majesties are under considerable pressure, it appears, and most unofficial functions are being cancelled. However, I think the Poseidon will be one of the favoured few.'

'Naturally, O Titus. I don't think any provincial association will deny our right to preference, if it comes to a competition for priority. And by the way, sir, Centurion Tarquin came in late last night. He left this note for you.'

Titus stared at the few brief words: *Don't worry. Everything ar-*

ranged. He folded the paper and placed it in his tunic; commented, 'I would still like to see the centurion personally, if he is in the club.'

'He left almost immediately he scribbled your note, sir. I gathered he had a choice of engagements for the rest of the night, all more or less dealing with the same two subjects.'

'I can quite believe it. In the meantime, you may inform him I will be at the admiral's office on the second hour tomorrow.'

He noticed a marine in the club doorway, speaking to the janitor. Both men stared inside, hesitatingly; after which the janitor crossed the floor and apologised, 'There's a man from the navy office enquiring for you.'

Titus, who recognised the fellow as one of the depot lictors, asked him to enter; whereupon the seaman told him, 'I've come direct from the palace, sir. Prince Marcus has asked to see you, at once.'

He gestured his intention to follow the man, said his farewell to the club manager and went off.

As they passed close to the Forum, before mounting the steps which led to the Palatine Hill, his thoughts were distracted by the hubbub in the vicinity of the public buildings.

As he paused, the messenger said, 'It's the three kings, sir. Divine Augustus has taken them down to view the state business being done.'

Skirting the main floor, mounting the stone stairs which led to the Palatine Hill, Titus caught a glimpse of the proceedings. The full Senate was assembled. A crier had just announced the next paper on the agenda, the Matrons' Insurance Act and further amendments to the luxuries restrictions.

A hawk-nosed, elegant senator, a lawyer by his professional stance, was about to open the case for the Roman matron. He was indicating with an eloquent hand, the direction of the Lupercal grotto, traditional refuge of Rome's founders.

The voice came booming through the stone colonnades, measured, resonant and deliberate with meaning. 'Romans! Gaze about you. Witness before your eyes the lasting adamant, these pillared columns, whose veins were first enriched by a she-wolf's pap.'

From the corner of his eye, Titus saw the senators sit wearily back in their seats. The three kings, unaware of the endless peroration envisaged within the ominous preamble, listened with curiosity

aroused; and Augustus, inured to his gusty parliament, huddled in his woollen cloak and settled himself for an hour's peaceful reflection.

Titus and the messenger toiled up the steps. The rolling periods died in the distance; the sweetness of altitude rarefied the air and the wind in the garden shrubs consoled the ear for the loss of knowledge.

They skirted the front of the palace and through to the rear, where the walls were low and the surroundings peaceful.

Titus was led direct to the prince's apartments and left in the antechamber where state business was transacted. In a few moments he was joined by Marcus.

A few brief months had passed since Titus last faced the prince, yet so altered was his demeanour, that, for a moment, the tribune felt he was being addressed by a stranger.

The dark, impenetrable Claudian, immune to human frailties and impatient of the common lot, was now touched into an affable warm-hearted princeling.

A gentle smile played about his thin lips; a smile so tender, indeed, that Titus could now well believe the stories current about this man's youth. When an army commander on the Upper Danube, he had ridden night and day through impassable German forests, weeping, that he might see his grievously wounded brother, dying on the Lower Rhine after a frontier brush; and when forced by Augustus to divorce his wife and marry the Emperor's daughter for state reasons, his grief was such that once, at a chance meeting, he fixed his eyes on the forsaken woman with a glance of such love and sorrow that care was taken that they should never meet again.

Nothing was said of the embarrassing circumstances surrounding the clumsy handling by Titus of the Piso affair, or the prince's abrupt insistence that the boy should sail in the *Fravashe*. Nor, indeed, was there the slightest hint that Marcus himself could be aware of the suspicions which persisted in Titus' mind.

The nobleman spoke only of the voyage and its successful conclusion.

'Congratulations, Titus Terentius! You not only brought these important people safe to Rome but I am also given to understand you gave them highly favourable impressions of our service standards.'

'Thank you, sir. I merely carried out my orders. The kings saw our sea-power engaged in its everyday routine work.'

'Yes, naturally. Although they didn't witness your action with Redbeard. A fine bit of business there, Titus. You didn't lose a man.'

'No, sir. Thank you, sir.'

'This outbreak of plague, of course, with its appalling aftermath, must have tried you sorely?'

'More than I can put into words, sir. I was well-nigh carried off myself; and when I came to, I was staggered at my losses. I was lucky to have the Egyptian detachment at my disposal.'

'Especially the officers?'

'Especially the officers, sir. Young Piso's death crippled my after-guard, and, as you might appreciate, embarrassed me personally.'

'I quite understand. Having forced the youth on to you, for reasons which, of course, became obvious to you as soon as you read your orders, I experienced a certain disquiet myself. However, my responsibility was somewhat lightened when I discovered what had been going on. I suppose it came as quite a shock to you, to discover his treachery?'

'You mean his admission that he was put in the ship to spy on me? I did not take it seriously, sir. Nor did the other two people who were party to the revelation.'

'I knew, of course, our own man, Lepidus, had overheard something. But who was the second?'

'Tarquin, sir, my senior centurion and with whom young Piso was berthed. I think, actually, he knew more than the chamberlain did.'

'In which case,' Marcus said abruptly, 'I desire to have speech with him. Send him here.'

He left the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TITUS discovered Tarquin at the club. He was in the gymnasium and dicing with some of the more sport-minded members. The cen-

turion was kissing the thimble as the tribune crossed the parquet, breathing on the dice and declaring, 'Naked Venus! Three thousand shillings in one forenoon! When will it end?'

'Right now,' the tribune said over his shoulder. 'Prince Marcus wants to see you.'

Tarquin scrambled to his feet. 'Don't tell me he's worried about the ashes, too.'

'I wouldn't know about His Royal Highness, but you may as well tell me the worst, now I have finally run you to earth.'

'They're in a container down at the dockyard. But give me a few hours to find out where they've been stored. When the *Fravashe* pulled out suddenly, everything was bundled on the wharf and carted up to the depot.'

'I'll give you as long as you wish, and my undying gratitude too, if you extricate me from my present embarrassing situation.'

Tarquin waved an airy hand. 'Think nothing of it. Get me out of my next scrape, and we'll call it quits.'

At the Villa Calpurnius, Titus found Vipsania in the workroom, superintending the wool-skeining. He told her the ashes were in safe keeping, although not readily available.

He hesitated, and contemplated his wife with an unhappy eye. He still sensed her hostility from the previous night and wondered how he could mollify her outraged feelings.

'I am not quite sure of Madame Piso's desires in the matter, but if I can assist her, I am prepared to do so. For instance, would she like me to go up to Minerva and make the arrangements for a proper consecration?'

Vipsania brightened visibly. 'Why don't you speak personally to her? She came over some time ago, and is in the orchard, sitting near the Apollo grotto. I know she would be deeply grateful for any assistance you gave her.'

Titus made his way through the villa, crossed the garden and entered the orchard, where he found the widow seated on a stone bench, sheltering from the wind and enjoying the sun.

Pale-eyed, she held a book of poetry in her hand. Her gaze was set on the distant ridges of the Alban hills. She appeared tranquil, although somewhat startled at his abrupt appearance.

He apologised for having disturbed her; went on, 'Your son's earthly remains are with the sacred ornaments in the marine legion's

treasury. I came to offer you my assistance in their disposal. Would you care to have the consecration held at Minerva? I could arrange it, for she is my own goddess, and amiably disposed towards my works.'

She smiled her gratitude. 'Sequinus, too, was a Minervan. I could think of nothing more suitable; and perhaps the temple priest could arrange the transport of the urn to the family mausoleum at Tibur. Paulus, my husband, is entombed there.'

Titus welcomed the opportunity to be of further service. He declared, 'Leave it to me. I will depart at once and initiate the necessary arrangements.'

As he turned to go, she detained him, and murmured, 'On the first occasion upon which we met, I fear I made but a poor impression on you. You must not think ill of me. I was distracted by my son's wilful insistence on departing on a voyage which I knew, with a mother's instinct, was doomed.'

He hesitated before replying. 'Perhaps it is I who should apologise, Madame Piso. If I recall the occasion, I expressed my opinions most rudely.'

'But you expressed them honestly; and, after all, you acceded to my request. It was not you who forced the boy into the ship.'

Her eyes filled with tears. She went on, 'He was made the instrument of my own follies. It was cruel and wicked.'

Embarrassed, he was about to withdraw, when she detained him with a gesture. She attempted to smile. 'Forgive me. Memory is fresh, and I grieve too openly.'

She turned to the stone bench and picked up the book which lay opened beside her. She said in quieter tones, 'I borrowed this from your chamber. It contains songs by Catullus, one of my favourite poets. I hope you don't mind.'

He glanced at the well-thumbed copy. It was one of the few volumes which Theophilus had bequeathed him, beautifully transcribed in the old scholar's meticulous handwriting.

'Pray accept it as a gift from me,' he begged swiftly. 'If it brings you some consolation in your present sorrow, then I am amply rewarded for having made it.'

He hurried off before she could embarrass him with her thanks.

On his way to the temple, passing the Villa Publica, the two-storied building which Augustus had erected to house visiting ambas-

sadors, Titus was surprised to see the Erlking quietly pacing beneath the shadows of the portico.

He crossed the intervening ground and hailed the Norseman, declaring, 'I had rather imagined you in earnest conference with the Pax commission, not tranquilly contemplating the Roman scene.'

Saga's serious features creased into a rueful smile. 'This morning's terms of reference gave me a headache. I feared to face another session this afternoon. I begged leave of absence and requested a written summary to be submitted to me when the meeting ended.'

He paused, contemplated Titus with his customary doubtful air, then went on, 'Was it not a great Athenian who said that the gift of speech was given to man in order that he might conceal his thoughts from his fellows?'

'I wouldn't be surprised, sir. Although I was rather under the impression that Your Majesty enjoyed discussion.'

'I am somewhat addicted to statement,' the Erlking confessed. 'It is a weakness which has grown on me with the art of government.'

He bent his penetrating gaze on Titus, and said smilingly, 'But where are you bound so purposefully on such a pleasant afternoon? And, indeed, with such a solemn expression?'

Titus informed him of his destination, adding, 'But pray, join me! For I think you once expressed the wish to see something of Roman religious life. This will be an excellent opportunity!'

The old Norseman required but little further persuasion, and they departed together for the Pantheon, which was but a short journey from the Villa Publica.

The senior flamen who showed them around was most knowledgeable on his subject. He insisted on their personally counting the sixteen columns of Oriental granite which supported the portico, and spending fully a minute in admiring the mighty dome which swept over their heads. He revealed also that Agrippa, who built the temple, had desired originally to dedicate it to Augustus, in his capacity of titular deity.

'However, Divine Augustus declined the honour, but permitted his statue to be erected in the peristyle. No doubt you observed it, occupying the niche on the right as you came in. After his death it will be removed inside and take its place among the other gods.'

The Erlking was most interested in this cumulative practice of adding to the heavenly hosts, and wondered if it worked both ways.

'For instance,' he asked, 'if the Emperor can be deified by senatorial decree, can the same body enforce an annulment, if it so pleases?'

'Why not? Although such an alarming contingency has not yet occurred, it would be unreasonable to presume that the Senate could not un-chaplet a god who was guilty of unheavenly behaviour.'

The flamen added, 'I refer purely to minor gods, naturally. Human agency could not tamper with the more exalted dwellers on Olympus.'

'This is most interesting. But pray, how would one differentiate between the various grades of gods?'

The flamen reflected for a moment; said thoughtfully, as if the point had not hitherto been raised, 'I think the best definition of a major god would be to describe him as one within the inner circle on Olympus. For instance, one would not consult a minor deity on such important matters as declarations of war, or the determination of a day for public business, and so forth.'

He brightened up as he talked, and continued in more enthusiastic tones, 'I might point as an example the relation between your own arrival here and the orbit of Jupiter. By divine indication the greatest god of all detained your ship in Rome before its departure. As the sea-tribune here could tell you, abnormal portents were manifested for several days. The results, baffling at the time, were justified by the excellent weather which prevailed during the whole of your voyage. Not one single storm.'

The Erlking reflected on this, then asked, 'But how do you know it was Jupiter who withheld the ship's clearance?'

'Why, who else could it be? The portents occurred within his sphere of influence! I must admit, however, that it was on the point of moving out. In which case, of course, we would have sacrificed to the Unknown God.'

'The Unknown God? Is he a major, or a minor, deity?'

'He is both, or could be, in a manner of speaking. Theologically, it does not matter.'

'I would, nevertheless, like to know a little more of him. What are his functions?'

'Zodiacally, he fills the astral gap which yawns between the definable and the vastly unknown. If we cannot ascertain the source of divine indication then we conclude that the matter is from Yonder

Astral and burn a taper to the Unknown, with a blanket supplication that he intercede on our behalf.'

The Erlking frowned faintly. 'But are you sure of this god's credentials? Is it not conceivable that he might draw his voting power from the devil gods, and therefore be malevolently disposed towards the human race?'

The flamen smiled charitably. 'In such case the good gods would have disapproved of the presence of his statue in their midst. There has not been one single portent beyond the average to indicate that he is not acceptable to his brother and sister deities. Can one say more?'

He added, as if by way of personal explanation, 'In matters religious, of course, one must make a slight allowance for credulity. I myself hold that simple faith is the best antidote against indecision. If one possesses it in sufficient strength, why, one can then almost believe anything.'

He turned to Titus. 'They are due to sacrifice over at Minerva in ten minutes. It is the third of the day, and a rather important one. Perhaps if His Majesty is interested in our religious observance he might care to witness the service. I think if you hurried you would be just in time.'

The young sea-tribune thanked him and the pair went off, across the intervening ground. As they paced along, Titus commented, 'We are in luck's way here. Minerva is very thorough. They're sticklers for strict observance. The priests are liable for degradation if they're not word perfect in their responses, and all the chants are sung in the ancient mode. I know the temple pontiff, too. He is a protégé of my mother's. You will like him, I think.'

But they were too late for the ceremony. The temple doors were barred when they arrived within the precincts. They were forced to wait outside until a temple guard flung wide the portals and indicated they might enter.

Inside, the attendants were clearing away the bloody mess. The high priest was bent over a marble slab, in earnest conversation with the chief augur and discussing the finer points of a slaughtered goat's urinary duct.

The pontiff glanced up, noticed the two men and at once recognised Titus. He crossed immediately to greet him.

'Minerva is a trifle touchy about bladders,' he confided. 'I wouldn't

be surprised if she didn't suffer from a celestial weakness at some time or other in her youth. Just a theory, of course. There's nothing in the Lives to back it up. How are you, Titus? I know you had a splendid voyage. Minerva saw to that.'

'But, Father, I thought the clearance came through Capitoline Jove?'

The pontiff, a plump Italian who liked good living and visiting the best houses, winked a beady black eye.

'Nonsense. Jove's were getting nothing but a series of rejects. I never knew there were so many two-headed goats in the country until we had all that thunder and lightning. As a matter of fact I cleared it up personally, with a quartet of pearl-doves. Not a blemish on any of them. But the credits went to Jove and Venus, as a personal gesture to Augustus in his capacity as Supreme Pontiff. But who is this most interesting-looking barbarian?'

Titus hastily introduced the Erlking. He went on to explain the Norseman's interest in Roman religion, whereupon the pontiff deigned to chat with him for some minutes. He stared curiously at the silken-bearded, earnest-faced king, and asked, 'But tell me something of your persuasion. You are a Druid, are you not? I am most interested in your blood-sacrifices. Is it true that human beings are disfigured before being offered up?'

'I am not a Druid,' the Erlking said stiffly. 'And therefore would not know.'

He paused, surveyed the pontiff doubtfully; continued, 'We of the Yonder North subscribe to a few simple gods who are not unlike your own. We possess Wotan, who resembles Jove in his methods. Also Thor, who is perhaps an amalgam of Jove, Vulcan and Mars. On the female side we own to Freia, or Fricka, who fills in for Venus, Minerva and so on.'

'You prefer the more hardy types, I see. Quite understandable, I suppose, when one considers your climate.'

'Quite so. If the gods generally are susceptible to the weather, then one can scarcely blame them for flocking to southern Italy, especially in the winter. Although such an invasion must sadly overwork such people as yourself.'

The high priest gestured with good-humoured dismay. 'True enough. But we must bow to divine wishes. If the gods in their infinite wisdom prefer Rome for their earthly lodging, then it is our

duty to accommodate them cheerfully and without complaint.'

An ecclesiastic secretary interrupted their conversation, requesting the pontiff's signature for the sacrificial report, whereupon they all turned to leave. At the door, Titus detained the priest for a moment and unburdened himself of the problem of the Piso ashes.

'These remains have been stored in the ship, without benefit of sanctuary. The boy's mother is most anxious to see them urned with those of his father, in the mausoleum which is situated at the provincial residence.'

The priest nodded gravely. 'A most proper wish. Very well then. If the ashes are brought up, I will conduct a personal lustration. Of course, once having been blessed, they will require a temple escort for their removal to their final resting-place. Did you say it was in the provinces?'

'At Tibur, Father. But permit me to cover the expenses of the journey. I feel a certain responsibility to Sequinus, and would be comforted spiritually were I permitted to defray the funeral costs.'

'A highly laudable gesture, my son; and one which I feel sure will be brought to the notice of the gods. Of course, it will be necessary to incarcerate the blessed residue in a silver-chased casket, emblazoned with the temple insignia. We don't do things by halves at the Minerva, you know.'

Titus interjected hurriedly, 'Would a donative of a thousand shillings be acceptable, Father?'

The pontiff extended his palm above the bent head of the young tribune.

'You are a true Terentius. Why, there is enough wax in your gift for a month's tapers. I am sure Blessed Minerva will broaden her usual smile when I invoke your name as her unexpected donor.'

After returning the Erlking to the Villa Publica, Titus was accosted in the street by Taurus. The admiral had just emerged from an adjacent building to the ambassadors' palace, was talking to an official wearing the insignia of the city sheriff, when he glanced across and recognised the young tribune.

'One moment, Titus. If you are free, walk with me to the club. I want to discuss something with you.'

As they crossed the ground together, Titus was struck by the unusually concerned expression on the old seadog's face. He asked, 'Anything wrong, sir?'

'Everything,' Taurus said briefly. 'That chamberlain, Lepidus, has been found in the reeds above the Campus Martius, a carving-knife stuck in his fat belly.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As the two naval officers toiled through the city, the admiral gloomily gave his observations on this latest incident in the affairs of the Pax Mundana.

'Our first straight-out murder, and if nothing else it crystallises a long-growing suspicion into fact. There are bigger stakes behind this visit of the three kings than meet our innocent eyes. However, let's swim with the tide and see where we are at slack water. There's an uproar going on over the suggested banquet at the club.'

'In what manner, sir?'

'Our royal friends have too many social commitments and Marcus says it is threatening the conference schedules. He has decided to split up the three visitors and allot one to each of the more important functions. A senatorial committee has been formed to handle requests, but already it has struck trouble. The madame president of the Vestal College wanted a king to address the students and someone with a false sense of humour allocated Daq for the job. On top of that, the Thespians asked for the Khan to attend their annual meeting and say a few words on trends in the Mongolian theatre. These people are notoriously long-winded, and if I'm any judge their business will drag on until after midnight, when no doubt they will discover that their distinguished guest has slipped away to a brothel.'

'And how about the Poseidon, sir?'

'They've given us the Erlking, under the misapprehension that he is an honorary admiral. He is available only tonight. The club secretary has been informed and messengers are flying in every direction,

notifying members. The function is due for the eleventh hour and you can dance attendance on me for once. Go home and slip into your dress uniform, then meet me in the gymnasium in time for a few Falernians before the official party arrives.'

At the Villa Calpurnius Titus was met by the house steward, who informed him that Vipsania and Madame Piso had gone to the ballet.

'It is the final performance of the Bactrian Scarf Dancers,' he said. 'Mistress did not expect you back. Would you care for a servant to assist you in dressing, sir?'

Titus declined the offer, crossed the courtyard to his room and changed unhurriedly. At the same time he reflected on the news of Lepidus' death. He had grown to like the stout chamberlain; indeed, after the plague episode in Africa, there had been the common bond of veteranship between them, for it was Lepidus alone who had shared the heat of silent battle with him, on that grim day when pestilence burnt the fiercest.

He recalled the final scenes. The cremations in the hot African dusk, his struggle to regain the ship and his discovery of the chamberlain seated beside the dying Piso. After that had come his own oblivion, and when again he regained his senses, it was in a saner world. Lepidus had slipped back quietly into his self-effacing rôle of unostentatious servant and he himself had automatically resumed his rôle of commander, isolated and unapproachable.

He could have unbent a little, he reflected; perhaps have tempered his cold authority with an occasional joke and treated the fellow more as a favourite centurion than a house steward, for, after all, he had borne the day with the courage of a dozen junior officers.

He speculated on the murder. Perhaps the motive was not now as mysterious as it seemed. Death frequently uncovers its own reasons. Lepidus was Augustus' personal observer in the *Fravashe*. The fact was well known. Had not Prince Marcus, that very morning, openly referred to him as 'our man'?

His thoughts were disturbed by the sounds of music, drifting in through his open door. He glanced across the courtyard and discerned a boy and a girl seated on a grassy plot adjacent to the fountain. The lad was clapping his hands to the accompaniment of the tinkling water. The girl, her gaze bent on the ground, was singing a tragic Greek ditty.

Titus crossed the pavement, stood behind the fountain, unnoticed,

and contemplated the scene. The pair were garbed neatly in slave dress and were of a startling similarity in appearance.

The voices ceased. The handclapping died away and the girl, raising her head, became aware of the tall sea-tribune standing behind her brother.

'*My cheeks are wet with weeping,*' Titus repeated, smiling. 'Who taught you that song?'

Alarm quickened in the girl's face. Her eyes opened wider, then retracted within their grey pupils, like strange stones, caught unexpectedly in a moonbeam.

'Theophilus, O Master!'

Titus whistled his surprise. But of course! The melody was one of the old scholar's favourites! How often had he himself, as a youth, heard those croaking cadences, bent to match the sweet-contrived verse! And this graceful child, then, could be none other than the slave girl he had purchased so hastily on the eve of his departure for Africa!

The boy scrambled to his feet, and stood beside his sister, protectingly. He smiled up at Titus, a touch of boldness in his manner.

'We have a note for you, Master,' he said. He turned to the girl; insisted, 'Come, Aurelia! It is written for him. You must not be afraid.'

The slave girl reached within her dress and withdrew a scrap of paper, wrapped in cloth. She gave it to her brother, who handed it to Titus.

The tribune rubbed the missive carefully on his breastplate and straightened its creases until the letters stood clear on the crumpled parchment. *Keep your promise, my son. Return this child to her own people when I am gone.*

He stared at the brief words and marked their singular firmness. He had not known Theophilus to pen such forceful script since the days of his childhood in the Ostian schoolroom.

He glanced down; asked, 'Do you know the import of this message?'

The pair nodded quickly, anxiously; and at once he sensed their secret terrors. They had no right to withhold the note. It should have been surrendered to Vipsania as soon as Theophilus died, even earlier, if the slave laws were to be observed strictly. For slaves could possess nothing without the permission of their owners. Even their

minds should be swept bare and left exposed for the casual glance of authority.

He tore the note into fragments and dropped it into the fountain trough, silently contemplated the pieces of paper, borne floating down the channels until they vanished into the efflux which led to the distant Tiber.

He stirred himself from his thoughts. 'You have nothing to fear,' he told the girl. 'I have not forgotten my promise to free you. But I have been too busy to give the matter a thought since I returned to Rome.'

His attention was recalled to the boy, whom he now recollected as having become the property of Madame Piso. He asked, 'What are you doing here?'

'It is Tenth Day, Master. My mistress permits me to share it with Aurelia. You asked that it should be so, before you went away.'

'You realise, of course, I possess only the power to free your sister?'

'I realise it, Master,' the boy said stolidly.

The girl's eyes filled with tears and Titus turned away, abruptly, before weak compassion could blind him to his strict Roman's duty.

His arrival at the Poseidon coincided with that of the Erlking and the club president. After formal introductions to important members, the official party went through to the swimming-pool, which had been floored over for the occasion. Trestle tables ran the length of the building, flanked by wooden benches, upon which were seated a large number of men. They sprang to their feet as the Erlking entered; broke into the Poseidon chant, a noisy battle-song about booze and good fellowship which terminated in yelps, grunts and jovial insults to their guests.

The president banged a gong, called for order, then welcomed the Erlking in a speech which was interlarded with quasi-humorous observations on the club's history and unique standing in the Roman social scale. He concluded with the Invocation before Food, a piece of pious grotesquerie which no one took seriously; after which the assembled company sat down to their meal, limited under the sumptuary laws to one dish and comprising raw fish in honour of the Erlking, with sousing a-plenty in the shape of pickled vegetables.

Entertainment came intermittently as the wine circulated. Roars of laughter greeted a tall thin fellow in a sloppy toga, who had been

persuaded by his neighbours into a performance of his favourite act, the impersonation of a young prince poisoned with a dish of tainted mushrooms. He opened with an uncomfortable wriggle, continued uneasily through a spasm of growing discomfort which terminated in speechless horror at the sudden realisation of impending death. With a final convulsive shudder he vanished beneath the table and slid to the floor, applauded by the delighted shouts of the members.

'He's very good,' the president chuckled to King Saga. 'I often think the Emperor himself ought to see his act. For Divine Augustus is very broad-minded, you know, and thoroughly enjoys a joke, even when it is at the expense of the royal family.'

'It is certainly most convincing,' the Norseman declared. 'But, pray, tell me more of your club's background. I understood it catered exclusively for naval officers; yet, when I gaze about me, I witness but few countenances imbued with the stain of salt water.'

'Our original charter did indeed limit us to such types,' the president confessed. 'But expediency brought about its inevitable compromise. Admirals and the like are not notoriously wealthy; and when renovations of the premises were in urgent demand it was deemed prudent to admit a few commercial knights, at a vastly higher membership rate, naturally.'

The president leant forward confidentially, and went on, 'We refer to these associates as city members. Of course, they are rather inclined to pack the club with their own class; but nevertheless we manage to retain our traditions and at the same time keep up external appearances.'

When the hour arrived for the Erlking to leave, the official party trooped out through the vomitorium, in order not to attract attention. At the entrance they stumbled into a small party of people grouped about a huddled figure on the floor, a toga-shrouded heap, ominously still.

'I can't understand it,' the manager was complaining fretfully. 'He has done this act a dozen times in the past year. In some of the best places in Rome, too. It is most embarrassing that he should decide to choose the Poseidon for his final appearance.'

'It's the member who did the mushroom-poisoning turn,' Titus explained to the Erlking. 'Apparently he was dead when they dragged him out from beneath the table.'

'Dear me!' the Norseman said. 'Oh, dear me!'

As they left the building, Taurus commented grimly, 'I always said he'd do that once too often. It's defying the law of averages to go around pretending that raw fish is tainted mushrooms, and not discover that once in a while you were mistaken.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AT breakfast on the following morning, Titus told Vipsania of his visit to the temple and the arrangements he had made on behalf of Madame Piso.

To his surprise, Vipsania revealed but little interest; as if the matter, once having been settled, were no longer of importance. Rather she chatted about her own adventures on the previous evening, when she had witnessed the performance of the Bactrian Scarf Dancers.

'We secured perfect seats. Cornelia, of course, still gets consular preference, and can choose to sit even superior to the equestrian order if she wishes. We were so close to the stage, we could almost feel the scarfs being flicked in our faces.'

Titus restlessly chewed a few dates. He was growing somewhat tired of Cornelia Piso with his meals, and, for that matter, with her seemingly interminable presence within his own domestic life. He attempted to change the subject.

'You have told me nothing yet of Theophilus and his death,' he observed. 'It was a loss, you know, to return and find him gone. Tell me something of his passing.'

'His frailty deepened after your departure, dear. He was taken quietly in his sleep. He would not have desired it otherwise. During the last few days he was concerned about the fate of his books. He naturally wanted you to have them. They were transferred to your chamber, immediately he died. Surely you saw them? Stacked in the corner?'

'They are all there, except the transcribed Catullus. Madame Piso was reading it yesterday, when I spoke to her in the garden. She appeared so taken with it, I asked her to accept it.'

'It was very sweet of you,' Vipsania said. 'Although it is not altogether the gift which I think she would have preferred you to make.'

Titus glanced up enquiringly. 'What do you mean?'

Vipsania's expression altered. A hesitant pleading coloured her voice. 'She expressed the hope to me, that now Theophilus is gone and we have no need for the slave Aurelia, you might be persuaded to sell her the child.'

'You know perfectly well, Vipsania, that we have a family tradition about slaves. We do not barter them against their will.'

'Of course, I know about the tradition, dearest. I told Cornelia of it, too, and she thought it most idealistic, although, naturally, devoid a little of realism.'

'What, then, is realism?'

Vipsania laughed, a brittle sound, as if her patience were running out. 'Why, we don't keep our livestock after its usefulness has expired. Are not slaves the same thing?'

'They might have been in republican days. In these times I prefer the example of Augustus. He would not turn an old servant out of his home and exchange him for a piece of money, merely because he had outlived his usefulness.'

'I'm not speaking of turning an old servant out,' Vipsania cried desperately. 'I am discussing a healthy young slave, purchased as a temporary expedient and whose use has now expired. Oh, how ridiculous you are!'

Calpurnius bustled in, dressed for his office. As he reached for a dish of dried raisins he exclaimed, 'What! Not quarrelling over a mere slave?'

Vipsania turned on her brother. 'Of course not! We happen to be at variance over the disposal of the slave girl Titus purchased to care for Theophilus. Now he is dead, I see no further point in keeping her.'

Calpurnius gulped a beaker of wine. 'Oh, I don't know,' he argued reasonably. 'She is a fine specimen. There's plenty for her to do about the place.'

'I refuse to have her here, and that's that,' Vipsania flashed.

Calpurnius prepared to leave. 'Is it? Not according to the law.'

Legally it is Titus who is the arbiter of all your destinies; although there is a tacit understanding that a wife's opinion can be considered in respect to domestics. However, sort that out between you. See you both at the eighth hour.'

'Wait a minute,' Titus begged. 'I'm coming with you.'

They said their farewells to a silent, angered Vipsania and went off through the city, down to the public buildings.

As they strode through the streets, Calpurnius said, 'I don't think it would be wise to keep that girl. Why not let Piso have her?'

'It is an excellent suggestion, Calpurnius, in the light of recent events. But it so happens, I have already given my word to manumit the child and send her back to her parents.'

'A tactless solution, to say the least; but, of course, your own affair. Nevertheless, Titus, if such is your decision, you will be well advised to implement it before you sail, even if only for the girl's sake. Shall I prepare the necessary papers for you?'

'Please do, Calpurnius. And if there is any unpleasantness, then I will have to face it when I return. In the meantime, at least I shall be away at sea until Vipsania's resentment has healed.'

'And the sooner you sail, the better,' the young lawyer commented thoughtfully. 'Farewell then, brother!'

He vanished into his offices and left Titus to make his way to the navy yards, where he discovered the admiral in the outer room, sorting papers with Chrystolis.

Taurus glanced up as the sea-tribune entered; told him, 'Don't go away, I want to talk to you.'

Inside his room, he growled, 'Here's a confounded dilemma. I've been told confidentially to prepare for your urgent departure, and now I can't find that damned *Fravashe*.'

'Quadrantus said he intended to careen her on the Sardinian coast. Surely a swift galley could pick him up within a few hours?'

'I've had every bireme in the water searching for him ever since he left Rome. As a matter of fact, I didn't trust him in the first place. But the fellow seemed to vanish from the moment he slipped his berth in the upper reaches. He wasn't even checked out at the Ostia signal station.'

'Do you think I should look for another ship, sir?'

'Not unless we are forced into it. That squaresailer was ideal for

our purposes. We could search for two thousand years and still not find anything to equal her. However, we can organise the sailing details up to the point of embarkation. In the meantime, let us see what happens in the next few days.'

'Is there anything I can do to help you, sir?'

'Plenty. I am supposed to escort the three kings from the Villa Publica to the conference chamber. Hasten across and act as my deputy. I will be at the palace, finalising your sailing instructions. At least that is the story, but between you and me I've been ordered to attend a private enquiry into that chamberlain's death.'

'Do you think his murderers will be traced, then?'

'Traced and the thing hushed up, I should say. It's an internal job, if I'm any judge. He's been done away with because he either said too much or knew too much, which is both the same thing when you come to think of it.'

'It is beyond me, sir. Lepidus was working for the Pax Mundana, or Roman interests. Who would want to murder him for it?'

'The Pax is the Emperor's personal interest and everyone close to the palace may not like it. Augustus is astute enough to realise that in persisting in a plan for world peace he might at the same time be provoking a civil war. I should say it only wants our three visitors to prove a trifle more difficult and they'll be bundled out of Rome quicker than a pagan goose can fly backwards around the Tarpeian Rock.'

'They are proving difficult, then?'

'According to Marcus, who has chaired the summit meeting so far, they are past masters in the art of procrastination. The Khan is highly suspicious. He says he can't commit himself to anything without referring it back to his advisers in Yonder Asia. He also complains he is being followed every time he takes a stroll through the city. King Daq reveals he has been afflicted with trembling fits since he came to Rome, therefore his cabinet would not accept his signature as genuine, and the Erlking does nothing but deliver long speeches about peace on earth and goodwill to all men.'

'What about the trade agreements, sir? I have always understood that a barter-pact was a convenient cement with which to bind together conflicting elements.'

'They are on today's agenda. If they fail, then you can kiss goodbye

to the Pax in our lifetime. On the other hand, if the Pax succeeds, you could perhaps kiss goodbye to any lengthening of our life-span. Take your choice.'

At the Villa Publica, Titus found the Erlking alone on the portico, pacing up and down and scrutinising a roll of parchment.

'It is a memorandum on the Pax Mundana,' he explained to the young tribune. 'Your Prince Marcus wants me to supply the answers to the following questions: What is the maximum infantry strength I could concentrate in the Jutland peninsula within three months' notice? Are my troops familiar with the use of Roman weapons and what degree of fraternisation exists, if any, between the Norse countries and the Baltic Germans?'

The Erlking rolled up his parchment, thrust it within the folds of his blue gown and fixed Titus with a piercing scrutiny. 'My young friend, can you tell me the manner in which I could best reconcile such questions with my views on friendly relations with my neighbours?'

'It does appear somewhat tricky at first glance, sir. I suppose it is one of these knotty points which can only be translated in oblique terms. At least it reveals that our Divine Augustus has thought of everything.'

'Of that,' the Erlking said waspishly, 'there is no possible doubt.'

Inside the building, Titus was introduced to King Khan. He found the Mongolian ruler a most striking personality; tall, angular, with immense shoulders and slightly bowed legs. His whiskers trickled, barbarian fashion, down the corners of his mouth, with here and there a sparse tuft of black bristles encreviced within his yellow cheek wrinkles. His round face seemed perched on the high collar of his richly embroidered jacket, and imparted somewhat the effect of a great cat peering above a red brick wall. His eyes were the palest Titus had ever seen, and his voice the deepest he had ever heard.

'You must tell me about your navy,' he said to the young Roman. 'I am interested in navies.'

'But, Your Majesty, I was always given to understand that Vaster Asia was purely a land military power.'

'I am still interested in navies,' the Khan reiterated stolidly. 'I am interested in everything.'

King Daq emerged from his quarters, his ebony features shining like a polished nut. He, too, was waving his roll of parchment.

'Marcus has something intelligent here at last! I am to menace the southern borders of Mauritania during the tribute-collecting period. I rather like the idea of that one! A harmless little foray over the frontiers while the Moors are preoccupied with their annual argument on Roman taxes.'

The Khan poked a bony finger over the Nubian's shoulder. 'Look again, my friend. It costs money to keep troops under arms, does it not? You mount a campaign at your own expense while Rome collects its five per cent. Or has Prince Marcus added one of his famous footnotes, explaining that you will benefit indirectly to the mutual advantage of all concerned.'

King Daq laughed heartily. 'But, of course, I am to benefit! But it will be through the trade agreement section of the pact. In return for policing the borders of Mauritania, Rome guarantees that all hardwoods used within the empire shall be imported exclusively from Nether Africa!'

The Khan, picking his teeth, suddenly spat a sliver of chewed wood into a near-by fountain.

'Very interesting,' he said slowly. 'Especially when I recall that I also wish to export hardwood to Rome.'

The Erlking interposed abruptly, 'Come! Let us proceed to the council chamber, before our trade agreements become disagreements.'

They crossed to the rear of the Forum, where a gigantic guardsman challenged them for the password.

'I'm damned if I know what it is,' Titus said, annoyed. 'Get the officer commanding the guard. Tell him I want to see him.'

A Praetorian centurion tumbled out of the adjacent duty room, full of apologies; ushered them down the corridors and into the crowded conference room.

After seeing his charges comfortably seated, Titus went off, accompanied by the guards' officer. He asked him, 'What is the password, anyway? I suppose I ought to know it, if I am to return for these people, later in the day.'

'*Quid pro quo*,' the centurion said with a grin. 'Not that it matters much now.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

RESTLESS, at variance with his thoughts, Titus returned to the admiral's office, where he found Chrystolis surrounded by several clerks and engaged in a flurry of activity.

'The requisitions for your voyage,' the chief scribe explained. 'Material and personnel must be assembled for departure by the first hour tomorrow.'

'All very fine, Chrystolis, if I possessed a ship in which to stow them.'

'You mean the *Fravashe*? She was located about an hour ago, cruising to seaward of Ostia. The offshore winds have dropped the water on the bar and she can't enter the river. If there is no change by the time of your sailing for Caesarea, the embarkation will be carried out by boat.'

Titus, reflecting on the news, asked, 'Why Caesarea? I understood that Alexandria was to be my first port of call!'

'There is no time to take in two destinations. The charter agreement expires on the twelfth night of Saturnalia, remember; and the festival opens tomorrow, December twenty-fifth.'

'Well, it certainly doesn't give me much time to make the Judaeen coast; although, I suppose, a few days either way won't matter a great deal now.'

'Not to history, Titus. But government expenditure is quite a different matter. There are such things as penalty rates, you know, which come into operation if we keep the *Fravashe* after the charter has expired. Time is money, and money matters.'

Tarquin bustled in from the street, overheard the comment and ejaculated, 'Never more true, Chrystolis. By Midas himself, don't I know it!'

He turned to Titus, and asked, 'Do you think you could lend me a

thousand shillings until the end of the month?’

Titus surveyed him coolly. ‘I could. But, then, favours run on the ebb as well as the flood, do they not? And I think you already owe me one. Could I accompany you back to the barracks and secure that parcel for Madame Piso? I have the time to spare, if you have.’

The comedy vanished from the sea-centurion’s face. He rubbed his jaw ruefully. ‘By the Gods, Titus, this sudden spate of sea-orders swept the thing from my mind. I had asked Rufius Galba to secure it for me. Now I shall have to chase him.’

‘We’ll chase him together,’ Titus said, reaching for his helmet. ‘For, by Minerva herself, I’ll not let the pair of you sail with me, unless I get what I want.’

Embarrassment overwhelmed Tarquin. He stuttered, ‘But we can’t see him at the moment! We just can’t! He is otherwise occupied with a certain lady!’

The centurion paused. His old audacity returned and he continued persuasively, ‘Leave it to me, Titus. I swear I’ll have the package here within a few hours. Or, at least, no later than tonight.’

‘Very well, then,’ Titus agreed wearily. ‘I’ll find something to occupy me in the meantime. For I’ll swear equally that I dare not return home to my wife until this wretched business is settled.’

The admiral bustled in, and said in general terms, ‘Hail everyone!’ He nudged Chrystolis, instructed him to procure a drink, then eyed the two officers; growled, ‘Did I hear someone ask for occupation? Well, you’ve got it. The *Fravashe* is on immediate sailing notice. Get your stores off today, if possible, and see the marine division is in the ship by first light tomorrow.’

‘What about the auspices, sir? Are there any indications of ill omen which might hold us up? If you recall, on the last occasion upon which I sailed, there was considerable hesitancy on the part of the gods.’

Taurus waved a nervous hand. ‘I know, I know. Don’t bring it up again, or you might change our luck. At least the auguries were normal at this morning’s sacrifice. For that matter, Augustus is in such a towering temper, even the sacred geese are too scared to be temperamental. All right, Tarquin. Get moving and keep me informed. On your way out, tell Chrystolis to give you a requisition for a boat flotilla. You’ll need one, to shift your troops downstream.’

As the centurion departed, the admiral hung his cloak on the wall,

sat at his desk, mopped his brow, cocked an eye at the watching Titus and observed, 'Astonishing what the human frame can stand. I've witnessed two men tortured to death since I left here, a few hours ago. All for the sake of world peace.'

'The slayers of Lepidus, sir?'

'They could have been. They died silent. Not that it matters. Augustus knows who is behind it all right.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Indeed, yes. But take that polite enquiry off your face. He isn't telling. It's one of these silent affairs between Augustus and his inner conscience, like the Ovid affair, or that hushed-up scandal between Tiberius and Julia.'

A rare expression of pain flickered across the admiral's tanned features. 'He's taken a few beatings in the past few years, the old Emperor, one way and another. But it has really hurt him badly to discover that even a cherished bit of idealism like the Pax Mundana can't survive the selfish intrigues of his own family.'

'I take it then, sir, that this plan for international peace has failed?'

'Not wholly. It has been shelved for future reference. In the meantime its place is taken by a more practical policy, known as the "Pax Romana." For the time being we'll impose our own peace on the world, Titus.'

'And the three kings, sir?'

'Marcus will tender them a polite speech, expressing the Emperor's satisfaction at the splendid manner in which they have co-operated. He will say that the conference has been a great success, that much groundwork has been done, and the way paved for a future meeting, in which points of view can be reconciled and major steps taken to implement the Pax. You know the sort of stuff. There will be banquets tonight and the games tomorrow. After that, if our distinguished guests aren't out of Rome before the opening of the Saturnalia, you can call me a barbarian and paint my torso blue.'

The admiral broke off, contemplated Titus in silence for a moment, asked, 'What of yourself? Are you prepared to go aboard at once?'

'More or less, sir. I have a few personal matters which require my attention. A slave to manumit. A trifle of business at the temple and some purchases to make. My sea-gear is still intact. I can send a mes-

sage to the Villa Calpurnius and have it conveyed to the boat-sheds this afternoon, if necessary.'

'Don't bother. I'll get it picked up for you. Make your purchases, then rejoin me here before the seventh hour. Two of the kings have expressed a wish to see the pre-games parties in the Circus cellars. I've been especially assigned by Augustus to keep an eye on them. You had better come along with me, for, one way and another, I think I would like to keep an eye on you too.'

The afternoon had waned before Titus completed his simple purchases for the voyage and attended to minor affairs. As he hastened within the law courts the sound of the bell in the entrance came to his ears, announcing the closure of business for the day. He was just in time to catch Calpurnius in his room, divesting himself of his legal gown and about to depart for the baths. He told him of the events which had occurred since they parted earlier, adding, 'This unexpected notice to rejoin my ship has naturally hastened other matters. If you have not completed the documents for the release of the slave girl, pray do so as soon as possible. I will be indebted, too, if you will arrange her transport back to Dalmatia. Of course, I shall leave the necessary funds to defray the expenses.'

'Pay me when you get back,' Calpurnius said, smiling. 'And the necessary papers will be ready for your signature tomorrow. Does that ease your mind?'

'Fully,' Titus assured him. A faint expression of unhappiness crossed his features. He confessed, 'It has struck me that this business is not going to make you very popular with Vipsania. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer me to deal through another lawyer? After all, my wife is your sister, and you may not see eye to eye with me in the manner of my handling this affair.'

A slight grimness hardened Calpurnius' eyes. He commented in even tones, 'I see eye to eye with you on one very definite point, Titus. Cornelia Piso is wielding a most pernicious influence over Vipsania, and I have already determined to end it, one way or another. This might prove a convenient excuse for doing so. Let us leave it at that.'

His more natural geniality returned. He proceeded amiably, 'Shall I see you at the club this evening?'

'I doubt it. I am attending Taurus. I will be at the Circus cellars

until a late hour, whereupon I hope quietly to seek my chamber.'

They exchanged their farewells, after which Calpurnius went off in the direction of the Poseidon and Titus returned to the admiral's office, where he shared a hasty meal with the old seadog before proceeding with King Daq and the Erlking to the Circus.

They descended into a large basement beneath the race course, a low-roofed area which ran the full length of the grounds and terminated in a series of ramps leading to the starting-point. The stables were built along the walls and blocked off in sections, each of which displayed the colours of the faction it represented. Ostlers leant against the stalls, stroking the inmates and explaining their several qualities to admiring listeners. Further back, grouped about tables laden with food and wine, the charioteers discussed earnestly the morrow's prospects with their anxious supporters.

Bookmakers were well in evidence, hoarsely intoning the odds, accepting bets and issuing metal tokens in return. Nor, as the games held a certain religious significance, was a religious atmosphere denied. Soothsayers and oracles abounded like fleas within a frowsy couch. The more credulous citizens were clustered thickly within the vicinity of a Syrian astrologer. Attired in his traditional gown and tall hat, he was bent over a chart marked with the signs of the Zodiac and divining winners by a system of astral conjunctions.

King Daq, who had discovered a horse listed as Nubia, wanted to know if there were any significance between this name and his own presence in Rome.

The Syrian charlatan contemplated the African's ebon-hued features, his broad nostrils and anxious liquid eyes.

'Oh, Illustrious Barbarian,' he cried, 'I had dismissed the horse as of little account until your words smote my ears.'

He poked a grimy finger at the chart. 'Here, in the forefront of heaven, and ridden by Mercury himself, is the horse named Nubia! Is this the significance which thou wouldst seek?'

A near-by bookmaker offered to supply the now fully convinced king with excellent odds. Pock-marked, raucous, as he reached within his leather apron for an appropriate token, he observed admiringly, 'By Chance herself, it is beyond belief, the manner in which you foreign gentlemen come to Rome and pick the winners.'

Admiral Taurus, who had been listening to all this humbug with ill-concealed irony, interposed, 'I don't suppose there's a horse run-

ning called Pegasus, is there? For if there is anything behind this equine astronomy, I'd like to make a bit of ready money myself.'

There was not; but the quick-witted Syrian, who had been surreptitiously assessing the Erlking, announced that his chart had revealed one named Boreas, unquestionably a stallion of no uncommon significance to one who hailed from the Far North lands.

'I am not a person addicted to gaming,' the Erlking said primly. 'Nevertheless, I would like some memento of the occasion. Perhaps an earthenware bowl, enscrolled with this beast's name, would meet our requirements?'

The bookmaker, in somewhat bitter tones and unquestionably in the mood to revise his previous opinions on illustrious foreigners, described in part the most appropriate piece of pottery to suit the Erlking's advanced years; after which the party moved off to a more select corner of the cellars, where many Roman knights were discussing form with a group of elegantly garbed charioteers. These young men were the driver-owners of the ten-horse teams which would decide the most spectacular equestrian event of the day, and were themselves drawn from the patrician classes.

One splendidly built youth, who was related to the Emperor himself, had brought his butler to dispense refreshments. Liveried slaves moved about proffering drinks and small bowls of delicacies. In the background, soberly clad notaries discreetly copied the amounts, usually indicated by a casual nod, which were being wagered on the anticipated results.

The admiral, after explaining the betting system to the Erlking, commented, 'At least one of these fine fellows will be ruined by this time tomorrow.'

'And what happens then?' the Norseman asked.

'He'll probably leave Rome and get a commission in one of the frontier legions until his parents extricate him from the mess. Of course, there's a lot of romantic nonsense talked about selling themselves to the gladiatorial schools and fighting their way back to solvency; but I haven't seen it in actual practice and doubt if I ever will. Our gilded youth is not overendowed with a sense of gallant obligation. Would you care to see the wild beasts?'

They turned off at right angles to the cellars, and made their way through a stone-flagged corridor which led to a subterranean area beneath the arena where the combats were held.

Soon they found themselves in an underground chamber of thick pillars and rough-cemented arches. Silent, gloomy, ill-lit from a thousand smoking torches, the space imparted more the atmosphere of a bestial lair than the civic zoo.

Closer inspection, however, enlivened with an occasional sniff, revealed the more prosaic facts of menagerie; while a talk with a few attendants brought further expert information.

An arena official, who was leaning in a bored manner against the giraffe pen, supplied one or two sidelights on the impending spectacle. He commented, 'These camelopards won't be doing much bounding in the flaming amphitheatre tomorrow, if you know what I mean.'

'We don't,' Taurus said. 'But we'd like to, for the sake of our visitors here. They've never seen a spectacle before.'

The man aired his grievance. 'Roof's too low for them. Banging their skulls all the time, that's what's making them so touchy. They shouldn't be here. There ought to be a proper pound made for them, across the river. Personally I'm a lion man.'

'We've gathered that. Is there anything special about this magnificent creature we can discern over your shoulder?'

'I'll say there is! He's the only cat we've ever had in Rome who did two elephants and a half-section of Gaulish prisoners on the same day.'

'Indeed? Is that why he wears an expression of bored pride?'

'If that's bored pride, it'll come off his face tomorrow. He's up for a personal combat with a Spanish brigand who murdered a proconsul. After he's polished him off, he's to be paired with another lion against a pack of starved wolves.'

'And how do you think he will emerge from that ordeal?'

'Hard to say. He's been deliberately starved for a week; that ought to even things up a bit. It depends whether or not he gorges himself on the Spaniard. If they drag him off smartly he'll still do a good job, but if the bookies who've backed the wolves have bribed the ring-master to leave him on long enough to top off, that'll be the end of him. Watch him when he reaches the upper bowel. If he gets his nose really stuck into that, then the student-surgeons can have him for me.'

As they were about to move off, the fellow confided to Titus, 'Come early if you want to see something good. There's a secret

“special” being added to the preliminaries. An Hyrcanian dwarf has been matched against a six-foot British princess. She has drawn the net and trident, and he’s been given the bow and arrow, but he doesn’t know the string is timed to snap at first stretch. Believe me, it’s going to be real fun watching that pair stalk each other around the arena, wondering what to do next.’

Digesting this useful information, Titus was interrupted by Calpurnius, emerging from the corridor and hurrying towards him. The lawyer, serious-faced, took him to one side; told him in quick undertones, ‘You had better return to the house at once. Cornelia Piso has had that girl arrested, for theft.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As they left the precincts of the Circus and made their way through the streets, Calpurnius drew a brief picture of this most recent incident in their affairs.

‘Some of Theophilus’ books were found in a dealer’s store. They were allegedly taken there yesterday, by a slave. The copy of the Catullus which you gave to Cornelia Piso was among them.’

‘How was this discovered?’

‘Through the dealer. The law says he must check all transactions with slaves which do not carry an authorisation from their owners.’

‘And was this slave identified as mine?’

‘He was the brother of your slave. He himself was branded with the Piso cypher. But Calpurnia has charged them both. She alleges that Aurelia stole the books and gave them to her brother to sell. A common enough story.’

‘Perhaps so. But who is to say that I did not give the child the books to sell?’

‘No one. The charge is that she stole the one you gave Cornelia Piso. You are dealing with a clever woman, Titus.’

'So it seems. That she can punish her own slaves, goes without saying. But can she touch mine? What is the legal ruling in a case like this?'

'The Twelve Books say that if theft be proved, she can force you to punish your slave to her satisfaction. It is a pretty point, Titus.'

'But the theft has still to be proved, mark you.'

Caïpurnius laughed. 'A procurator's widow against a slave's word! Come! Where is your common sense?'

Titus strode along in silence. He muttered slowly, 'She'll have the hide flayed off the boy. Nothing can save him. Yet, I cannot abandon the girl.'

Aloud, he asked, 'What do you advise me to do?'

Calpurnius smiled secretively. 'Procrastination always helps in a case like this. I am not a lawyer for nothing. Don't commit yourself, that is all I beg of you.'

'What is Vipsania's attitude towards the business?'

'Undecided. If it came to a definite trial of strength I think she would side with you. For that matter, under Roman law, she could be forced to. But here we are!'

They found the two women in the atrium, with Madame Piso reclining on the couch, her eyes closed. Vipsania, bending over her, exclaimed in anxious tones, 'She is most upset, having to bring the matter before you. Oh, what shall we do!'

Titus surveyed the pair; asked quietly, 'What would Madame Piso wish me to do?'

Madame Piso sat up suddenly. She fixed him with a firm glance. 'How could I have a choice in the matter? The thief is a slave, and must be punished according to the Lex Julia. We owe it to ourselves to see the law is upheld. Were my husband alive, he would permit me no other course.'

'I quite agree, Madame Piso. But, first, as an eminent jurist, your husband would have established guilt. We must acquaint ourselves of the facts before we bring judgment to bear.'

Madame Piso compressed her lips. 'Gracious Gods! Have we not established the facts? The dealer returned the books to me and among them was the volume of the Catullus which you so generously gave me. Would you care to identify it yourself?'

'We could take so much for granted. The confusion which exists in my mind is who stole the books originally?'

‘Well, if we must be punctilious about it, the girl stole them, obviously, and gave them to her brother for disposal.’

‘I suppose all this has been established? She was seen taking the goods? Or, doubtless, she has confessed to the theft?’

Vipsania interjected coldly, ‘She has confessed to the theft indirectly.’

‘Indirectly?’

‘She has not denied it. That is enough.’

‘What is all this about?’ Madame Piso cried in distracted tones. ‘We are not here to prove guilt! We are here to decide punishment, are we not?’

Hot retorts seethed within Titus’ brain. But he halted the words which arose to his lips. Provocation would help neither the girl nor himself.

‘I will see the slave,’ he said abruptly. ‘Have her brought in.’

The child Aurelia was thrust into the room. She stood in the centre of the floor, garbed in her rough woollen tunic and wooden clogs. Her eyes were red-rimmed; her hair awry. Her mouth drooped. She was not a pretty picture.

Titus drew her towards him, and said gently, ‘You know you are charged with having taken Theophilus’ books and disposing of them? Tell me what you know of it?’

The girl, motionless, stared into his face. She was like a bewildered animal. He felt her shaking with fright and sensed her terrors.

Suddenly he pushed her away. He came to his feet and told the watching trio, ‘I will go into the matter tomorrow. There is no immediate hurry, and I am tired.’

‘Splendid idea,’ Calpurnius broke in, briskly. ‘No sense in staying up all night to sentence a slave to death. Let us go to bed.’

The two women exchanged glances.

‘By all means go to bed,’ Vipsania said in determined tones. ‘But this girl does not stay in the house. She must go at once. I will not have a thief under my roof.’

Titus could no longer conceal his growing irony. ‘Are you asking me to turn a member of this household into the street? Is not that too a crime under Roman law? Where, then, shall I send her?’

Madame Piso stretched a compassionate hand. ‘She may come with me. I will put her in the cellar with her brother, and their wretchedness will serve as an example to the rest of the slaves.’

'You will do nothing of the sort,' Titus commented grimly. 'I have not decided either the guilt or the punishment and therefore cannot permit premature correctives to be inflicted. Let her return to her duties until I go into the matter further.'

Vipsania lost her temper. 'I will not permit her to remain here, I tell you! Oh! This is absurd! Ridiculous!'

Titus crossed the atrium, took the slave child's hand and led her towards the door.

'As you please,' he retorted. 'If you insist on it, she will not stay in the house. But neither will she be flung in a cellar against my wishes. I shall find her another domicile myself.'

Abruptly he left the Villa Calpurnius, with the girl trailing at his heels.

As he strode down the hill, through the deserted streets of the city, the night breeze chilled his heated feelings and brought sober reflection within his thoughts. He found himself cursing the irksomeness of his domestic life and wondering with considerable bitterness how he could extricate himself from this latest involvement. Of course, he had been a fool to challenge Vipsania on a point of house discipline. As matron of the Villa Calpurnius she could decide a minor matter and make a ruling. If she did not want a certain slave under her roof, then she was quite within her rights to say so, and act upon it.

Yet, his stubborn nature could not have done other than assert itself. He had made his decision that the girl Aurelia must not become the object of Madame Piso's vindictiveness; and while she carried the Terentii cypher on her skinny buttocks, then, by the Gods, none could gainsay him.

In the meantime, he must find her a bed for the night.

The problem did not present great difficulties. Chrystolis, the admiral's chief scribe, occupied rooms in the rear of the navy office. For that matter, Taurus himself resided in the adjacent grounds. Either would help him in a crisis. Automatically he chose the freedman. Chrystolis, an ex-slave himself, would possess natural sympathies for the child in her predicament, and would be more inclined to oblige.

At his knock the freedman came to his door, rubbing his eyes. He waved aside the young tribune's apologies; said in sleepy tones, 'Think nothing of it, O Titus. I am used to being knocked up at all hours

by staff-couriers. Besides, I am always at your service, you know that.'

Titus briefly explained the situation; adding, 'I do not wish to go into full explanations at the moment, but I had hoped to manumit the girl before I left Rome. If Madame Piso persists in her charges, an injunction may be brought against me, restraining me from doing anything until the case is settled. In such eventuality I shall require this child cared for until I return. I would like you to discuss the matter with Calpurnius. He is protecting my interests during my absence.'

'None better,' Chrystolis agreed. 'In the meantime she can live with the caretaker and his wife. They occupy an outhouse at the back. I will take her to them immediately.'

Titus turned to the girl. 'Go with Chrystolis. You have nothing to fear now. He will look after you.'

She spoke for the first time. Her eyes, tragic under the stars, glistened with tears. 'My brother!'

'I will do what I can for him,' he assured her.

He drew his cloak about his shoulders; hurried off into the night, before his features could reveal the disquiet which had suddenly overwhelmed him.

His personal crisis had brushed the boy's fate temporarily from his mind. Not that it mattered a great deal. Only the gods, now, could avert the menace of Cornelia Piso's intention. It went without saying that if the sister escaped punishment, then the brother would suffer doubly.

Titus shrugged his shoulders. After all, he could not fight the accumulated civil constitution of the Roman Empire, any more than he could carry a burden of sorrow for the rest of suffering mankind. The licence of cruelty was lawful, and that was an end to it.

He discovered his mounting feet had brought him to the first crest of the Capitoline Hill. The pre-dawn air was fragrant with the scents of the earth. A late moon arising languid over the Pantheon flooded a weak light across the sacred plateau and caught the vaulted domes, the pillared arches in a strange mystic glow.

It is an hour for omens, he thought, and searched the skies above his head, wondering. Sure enough, two ravens appeared, flying low. As they flashed past, the larger viciously attacked the smaller, plunged an ivory beak into its mate's breast and sent it plummeting with a splash into the Tiber.

Aghast before the overwhelming significance of the implied portents, Titus hurried into the near-by temple, flung himself prostrate on the cold stones of the sacred hearth and prayed feverishly, until all awareness had left him and his torment was stilled.

An elderly sacristan, crippled with rheumatism, entered as dawn broke. He hobbled across the parquet and shook the tribune's crumpled form.

'Come on, sir,' he said petulantly. 'We can't have this! Worshipping all over the place, when I have to clean up for the first sacrifice. You'll have to come back later if you want to pray.'

Dazed and stiff, Titus went outside. He stood in the warmth of the rising sun until movement returned once more to his stiffened limbs, then made his way down the hill, back to the navy office.

Already life was astir. Taurus was at his desk and messengers were flying in every direction.

The old seadog glanced up as the tribune entered, and said briefly, 'Hail, Titus. Take a chair until I get rid of this rabble.'

When at last the place was cleared, Taurus informed him, 'You are sailing in the *Fravashe* at sunset. The three passengers will be embarked in the late afternoon, but I want you off before then.'

The admiral paused. A rare geniality illuminated his froglike features. He smiled, 'You are coming up to the palace with me this morning. Augustus has expressed a desire to see you personally.'

His words were interrupted by the entrance of Tarquin. The sea-centurion was dishevelled and pale-faced. His tunic was soiled and his helmet unpolished. He dropped a small bag in front of Titus, smiled wanly and observed in mechanical tones, 'Hail, Admiral! Hail, Tribune! It looks like a fine day.'

Taurus eyed him unpleasantly. 'Does it? And what is that filthy object you have just deposited on my table, without my permission?'

'Sorry, sir. It is our late junior centurion. His ashes.'

'Charmed. And now, having formally met, may I presume to ask what he is doing in a lower-deck meal-issue bag?'

'There was nothing else to put him in, sir. I thought he would be all right there, until we got him a proper casket.'

Titus sat up suddenly. 'We didn't possess that type of bag in the *Fravashe*! Where did you get it?'

'Down at the depot. The other thing he was in had gone rotten. The tropic heat, I suppose.'

The admiral scratched his jaw, sucked his teeth thoughtfully, then asked in a curiously soft voice, 'Let me see those ashes.'

Tarquin spilt the white-grey residue across a sheet of parchment, whereupon the admiral darted out a thumb and forefinger, and held aloft two fragments of charcoal.

'By Charon himself,' he roared, 'a sea-centurion with two wooden legs! And none of us knew it! He ought to be deified!'

'I scraped the stuff up in a hurry,' Tarquin said weakly. 'You know what these African forests are like. You just can't see a thing after the sun has dropped. I wouldn't be surprised if a few bits of driftwood didn't get in by mistake.'

'And damn little else,' Taurus commented grimly. 'Bless my soul! I haven't seen this trick worked since the Pompeians raised a statue to a cremated rabbit, under the illusion they were doing the last honours to a dead corps-commander.'

Angered, Titus came to his feet. He faced the centurion. 'Where did you get those ashes?'

Tarquin tried to grin. 'No need for a fuss. They're human enough, all right. But I'm not quite sure who owned them originally.'

Taurus interposed genially, 'He has an argument there, Titus. And, after all, he was only trying to get you out of an awkward spot.'

He turned to the now thoroughly embarrassed Tarquin. 'Come on, speak up! Where did you get the stuff?'

'I'm not quite sure where it came from, sir. When I found there wasn't much time to spare, I sent a marine down to the charnel grounds, to find me something suitable.'

'The charnel grounds! But, damn it, man, only slaves' bodies are burnt there!'

The admiral rocked with sudden laughter. 'By the Gods, I like it, though. A slave's ashes, duly consecrated and deposited in the Piso mausoleum with those of Sequinus' father, the late governor of Armenia!'

Tarquin, with the admiral now openly declared on his side, permitted himself a conciliatory smirk. 'Quite right, sir. Never thought of it that way, sir. Poetic justice, if nothing else.'

Anger died within Titus. A strange warmth suffused his veins. For the first time in his devout and strictly ordered Roman's life, he felt the sweet flame of impassioned fanaticism touch his flesh. The prospect of glorious blasphemy, poised for once on the pinions of right-

eousness, was too alluring to resist. He snatched up the bag of ashes and hurried from the building. He couldn't mount the hill to Minerva quickly enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

IT was late in the forenoon when he arrived at the palace. The two seamen who usually escorted Taurus were nowhere in sight, and the young tribune made a few enquiries at the watch-house.

'An admiral?' the centurion grinned. 'I wouldn't know. There are dozens of silver-chests here this morning. In fact, it's quite a change to meet a common tribune. Is your name Titus Terentius? If so, you are wanted in the reception chamber. The password is *Festina Lente!*'

'*Festina Lente?*'

'That's right. *Hasten slowly!* We're back with the old favourites again. Look out for cavalry in the main avenue. There's a body of horse bringing the three kings up from the Villa Publica. *Festina Lente*, then!'

The monarchs had already gone in when Titus reached the main hall. The cavalry was grouped under the pine trees which flanked the entrance, tall guardsmen in spotless white, resting with their horses until the conclusion of the ceremonies.

Titus pushed his way through the throng until he found the two seamen-licitors. They acquainted him with the details of the admiral's whereabouts, then escorted him within the assembly room. He discovered an impressive spectacle. On three sides of the enclosure the might of Rome stood in formal farewell to the three kings. Tier on tier, their snow-white togas flashing purple at the hem, the full Senate occupied a full wing. Opposite, knights and lords faced them in colourful disorder. Giant guardsmen, the Praetorian élite, towered picturesque behind the scarlet-covered dais which supported the curule chair. A large gilt table occupied the centre of the floor. Velvet-

draped, it was the focal point for every curious eye.

Trumpets blared and Augustus emerged from behind a wide pillar. His cheeks were rouged vermilion. Scanty locks were painted shiny black on his bald skull. He moved awkwardly under his three sets of underclothing and thunderproof jacket of padded sealskin. Three chamberlains came close on his heels, bearing silver salvers upon which rested the Emperor's gifts to his famous guests. They were placed carefully on the table, where the December sun, pouring through the gallery apertures in a solid shaft of light, could indicate their mystic destiny with a brief and dazzling finger.

Three caskets of Spanish gold, blistered with fabulous gems. Gifts unparalleled. Were they the lively expectation of favours to come? Or the inspired gratitude of a great ruler, genuinely surrendered from the unpredictable heart?

In the meantime Augustus was handing out his pots. First the Khan, then Daq and the Erlking. A suspicious acquiescence, a hearty smile and a dignified bow. The trumpets blared. Caesar vanished behind the pillars and the ceremony was ended. The glittering crowds melted silently and the royal visitors were driven back to the Villa Publica. The clatter of cavalry died in the distance and the palace returned to its erstwhile atmosphere of somnolent respectability.

Within the antechambers, an official caught Taurus' glance, a significant, pertinent gesture. The admiral poked Titus in the ribs and grunted, 'Augustus is ready to see you. Wipe your feet when you go in.'

Titus followed the flunkey down a side corridor, passed through a heavily guarded enclosure and was ushered into the room in which Augustus was accustomed to give his private audiences.

The Emperor was seated at his desk, perusing a sheaf of documents. He smiled patiently, indicated a convenient chair and told Titus to be seated. He went on in a light, pleasant voice, 'You are Titus Terentius? Well, now, how the years roll back! It seems but yesterday I had your father in here. I saved him quite a lot of money, you know.'

'Yes, sir?'

'Bachelors' tax. I gave the handsome ruffian a wife. But I can't do that to you, can I?'

'I cannot complain, sir. You gave me a mother.'

'Yes, yes. That father of yours also got a standard from me. Not that he didn't earn the right to fly it.'

'It is my proudest possession, sir.'

'So it ought to be. Agrippa tried to talk me into reserving the honour for himself. He said it would create invidious distinctions if I gave flags to every admiral.'

Augustus paused; chuckled into his memories; thrust his hand into an adjacent tray and whipped out a bundle of cloth.

'Here's a new flag for you, Titus. Or rather, the old one with an ornament added. I designed it myself, to mark your work with the recent Pax Mundana.'

The Emperor unrolled the fabric and revealed the familiar Terentii standard, now superimposed with a red cross. He commented, 'Unusual, eh? It's funny that none of my advisers thought of that pattern before. A trick in favour of the old man for once, eh?'

Titus stared at the singular shape; the challenge of colour and simplicity of line. 'It is indeed unusual, sir,' he admitted. 'And I am deeply honoured to carry it at my masthead.'

'Off you go then,' Augustus said amiably. 'Come and see me when you get back from Caesarea.'

On leaving the palace, Titus hurried down to the public buildings. He sought Calpurnius in the legal offices and was fortunate enough to discover him disengaged.

'I am sailing at dusk,' he told his brother-in-law. 'I was on my way to say goodbye to Vipsania, but decided to call in on you first. How is she?'

Calpurnius smiled reassuringly. 'More amenable to reason. Your impetuous departure last night really frightened her. I don't think she realised you were capable of such temper. This morning at breakfast she asked me where you had gone. I told her I hadn't the slightest idea, although I knew, of course, there was no need to worry.'

'I left the slave girl in the care of Chrystolis, then wandered around the city. I did quite a lot of thinking, one way and another. It would serve Vipsania right if I divorced her, after last night's performance.'

'You would be perfectly correct, on legal grounds. Challenging your supreme authority has placed her in a dangerous position. Even her outrageous disloyalty, properly pleaded in our courts, could produce a verdict in your favour. There is the moral aspect, too.'

'I know, Calpurnius. Caesar divorced his wife for less. But the subject is painful to me. Let us talk of something else. Divine Augustus has just honoured me with an ornament to my standard. I want you to be one of the first to see it.'

Titus unrolled the flag and spread it across the table, where the strange design could be clearly seen. Calpurnius was quite taken with it.

'A cross,' he commented. 'Certainly most odd, superimposed on a family standard. It is the sort of thing you only expect to find on the Appian Way after a slave rising. You know, the gallows upon which they crucify the condemned.'

Titus was shocked at the suggestion. He objected, 'I am sure when the Emperor thought of this design, he had nothing as sinister as gallows in his mind.'

'I am sure he hadn't, either,' Calpurnius agreed. 'I suppose it is just the unusual shape which captures the imagination. We are apt to view it as barbaric, because there is nothing resembling it in Roman art.'

He broke off, as Titus refolded the flag, then enquired, 'Speaking of slaves, what do you wish me to do about that girl?'

'She is quite safe with Chrystolis for the time being. If there is any likelihood of Madame Piso bringing a charge against me, through her, then keep her out of sight and do not attempt to manumit her. I suppose it is unnecessary for me to tell you all this. You are a lawyer, and know what to do better than I.'

'Very well, then. If Cornelia Piso presses, I will ask for an adjournment until you return to Rome. Is there anything else I can do for you, during your absence?'

'I think not. I know you will keep an eye on Vipsania. My own farewell will be brief, for I neither wish to provoke her, nor depart with ill-feeling between us.'

Titus paused, and smiled across at Calpurnius. 'It will not be the same on this occasion, going down to Ostia alone.'

'Not so fast,' the lawyer told him. 'For I shall still be joining you in the *Fravashe* for a parting Falernian.'

He picked up a document and brandished it under the sea-tribune's nose. 'Master Quadrantus has not yet signed his amended agreement. We cannot have his transport of the three kings declared illegal, you know.'

'I suppose not, Calpurnius. In the meantime, then, I shall look forward to seeing you off the river-mouth, before the sun sets.'

The two men embraced and left the office; Calpurnius hastened across the Forum, and Titus made his way to the Villa Calpurnius.

He found Vipsania in his chamber, tidying up. She smiled in his face; said in subdued tones, 'Some marines came for your sea-clothes. I'm afraid I did not have the time to pack them properly.'

He removed his helmet; ran his fingers through his hair; told her casually, 'It does not matter. My cabin servant will put them in order.'

Vipsania hesitated, and went on, doubtfully, 'Their arrival gave me quite a shock. I had no knowledge of your sudden departure.'

'It was hastened by events. Indeed I did not know myself until the first hour this morning. Had I been apprised earlier, naturally I would have hastened to you with the information.'

'Of course,' she echoed mechanically. 'Naturally.'

She picked up a book from the table and stared at its cover thoughtfully; whereupon he abruptly crossed the chamber and stood against the door, contemplating the deserted courtyard, where but two days previously he had seen the slave children at play. They were happy then, he reflected, singing their songs.

He came out of his bitter trance to discover Vipsania by his side. Motionless, she was gazing with unseeing eyes across the garden. Her voice, when at last it came to his ears, held the disembodied quality of a mind speaking to him from a great distance.

'We cannot part in anger.'

He turned on her swiftly; assured her in low tones, 'There is no anger within me.'

'Nor love, either,' she retorted.

He attempted to address her quietly. 'Vipsania, do not speak of love. If it exists at all, then it is not for us. What else can I say?'

'Already you have said too much,' she cried, and began to weep.

He dried her tears with the corner of his cloak, murmuring loudly, 'Come! This will not do!'

Bewildered, he stared down into her puckered face, simulating a compassion he did not feel. He attempted to take her in his arms, a clumsy, consoling gesture; whereupon, speechless with sudden anger, she pushed him away and fled within the house.

He clipped on his cloak and reached for his helmet; turned off

down the pathway towards the entrance, overwhelmed with misery and wondering if indeed Hell could yawn twice on the same day.

He was soon to discover. As he reached the city and pushed his way through the throngs, he heard the public crier ringing his bell and announcing the description of a runaway slave. The escapee's name meant nothing immediate in his ears, but the name of the owner made him halt in his steps. It was that of Cornelia Piso.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

IF Chrystolis knew anything of the boy's escape, he certainly did not reveal the fact in his demeanour. Nevertheless, the questions he asked were pointed enough.

'Does anyone else know the girl is here, O Titus, apart from you and me?'

'Calpurnius, my brother-in-law. I am leaving him to handle the legal side of the case. You have nothing to fear.'

Chrystolis smiled. 'I was not considering the matter from that point of view. My enquiry was made in the interests of my charge.'

'She is my property, and under Roman law can only be touched through me. Calpurnius will know all the subtle points to exploit, if the matter reaches the courts before my return.'

'And what if she is genuinely guilty of theft, O Titus?'

Titus stared. 'By Bellona herself, Chrystolis, I never gave the likelihood a thought! I have been concerned more with the implications than the act itself!'

He paused to reflect, then ejaculated, 'Is she guilty?'

'Yes, if taking a gift already given, is theft.'

'What do you mean?'

'Theophilus, before he died, instructed her to sell a few of his books and keep the money.'

'He was quite in order. A freedman can bequeath his property to

whom he wishes. But she, as a slave, should have divulged the fact to her owner and requested permission to retain the receipts.'

'You were away. She spoke to the butler, to whom she was responsible. He told her first to dispose of the goods, then come and see him about the permission.'

'A piece of damned impertinence. But go on.'

'The book you gave Madame Piso was one which Theophilus had set aside for her. In her ignorance she assumed she was being deprived of something which belonged to her alone. She wanted a few pence, to buy a gift during the Saturnalia. You know the rest.'

Titus stared out of the window at the busy scenes in the boat-basin below; the bustle and orderly confusion of naval movement; the galleys, troop-laden, moving off into the stream; the provider's gangs, naked to the waist and loading barges with sacks of meal.

'A stroke of misfortune,' he commented slowly, 'this transaction being so readily discovered.'

The chief scribe rubbed his mouth with the frayed top of his reed pen. He observed, 'A stroke of misfortune, rather, to be born into slavery.'

Titus stirred restlessly. 'The system cannot be blamed for the individual, Chrystolis. You are a Greek, educated and cultured. You must realise that a higher civilisation cannot function without forced labour in some form or another.

'Don't forget,' he went on to argue, 'Greece itself, in all its glory, exercised the right of slavery to as great a degree as Rome.'

'With a few distinctions,' the freedman reminded him quietly. 'The Greek was forbidden by law to kill a slave, or treat him with positive cruelty.'

Titus sensed an unexpected trend in the conversation and jumped to his feet.

'True enough,' he agreed calmly. 'But I am ready to go off. Is my gear stowed in the boat?'

'It should be in your cabin in the *Fravashe* by now, O Titus. There is a staff-gig, manned at the steps, to suit your convenience.'

'What of my passengers?'

'Taurus is bringing them personally. I will be attending him. Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime?'

Titus hesitated. 'If there is news of that boy, I would like to hear it. His escape is troubling my conscience.'

Chrystolis contemplated him steadily. 'Good or evil,' he said, 'I shall bring you the news.'

Titus found the squaresailer cruising some three cables to seaward of the Ostia bar. Her decks, when he boarded, revealed all the confused activity of a departing troopship. The sea was calm, and with barely sufficient breeze to give the huge ship steerage way. The conditions were ideal for the open barges to haul alongside and transfer their cargoes in safety. The customary sorting-out was in progress on the upper deck. Regimental cooks complained and artillerymen tinkered with their part-assembled equipment. The shot-slingers, with the careless adaptability of campaigners unencumbered by the responsibility of heavy arms, were already berthed down and taking matters easy.

In the fore part of the upper deck the infantry was being drilled into rough shape by Rufius Galba, the Egyptian centurion. As Titus came up, the stocky section-commander was eyeing his men despairingly.

'When you left this ship I was proud of you,' he said. 'You could have passed for the favoured Tenth, or stood a guard's turn at the palace. Now you're the biggest bunch of hoplites ever to clog the auxiliary forces. What's got into you?'

They stared stolidly at the bulwarks. The warm December sun poured into their faces, increasing the weight of their armour and returning the sour memory of cheap wine into their gullets. They were sick and miserable.

'Important people are coming off here shortly,' Galba went on. 'Potentates! And you've been chosen to escort them out of Rome. Don't history mean anything to you?'

The centurion turned to Titus; enquired in a loud, dramatic voice, 'What can I do with them! I ask you, sir!'

'Send them below until the royal barge is sighted in the river-mouth,' Titus advised him. 'Where is Tarquin?'

'Down below, checking over the special stores. No chamberlains have been sent off as yet. What happened to Turkey Pie?'

'He was murdered yesterday. And the junior chamberlain has been detached on other duties.'

Galba was highly amused. 'Now who'd want to murder a eunuch! It doesn't make sense!'

'Perhaps from one point of view it doesn't,' Titus commented.

‘There is, however, another angle to be considered.’

He went below to his cabin, where he discovered Tarquin, his sleeves rolled up, hard at work checking a pile of requisitions.

He jumped up when the young commander entered.

‘Welcome aboard, Titus. I hope you don’t mind my presence here. It was too noisy outside to add up figures correctly. Who signs for all this palace stuff?’

‘I will, for I suppose the onus will rest on me ultimately. You had better pick out a few likely servants for Their Majesties, while you are at it. From what I have heard, we won’t be honoured by chamberlains on this voyage.’

Tarquin buttoned his sleeves, and donned his jacket and helmet. He observed carelessly, ‘I’m not surprised. Who cares about the three kings, now Rome has no further use for them? I suppose they can go and jump off the Tarpeian Rock as far as Augustus is concerned.’

Titus removed his cloak and hung it in his locker.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ he agreed wearily. ‘One way and another.’

He paused, suddenly aware of a faint uneasiness in his old ship-mate’s manner. He sensed inexplicably a strained atmosphere within the cabin, as if, within the brief days they were separated in Rome, they had grown away from each other immeasurably. Memory flooded his mind. He recalled the episode of the Piso remains. He had lost his temper with Tarquin on that occasion. Perhaps the effect of his anger had gone deeper than he realised.

He crossed to the sideboard, reached down the decanter and filled two goblets with wine. He pushed one across the table and said in his most friendly manner, ‘It is good to see you on board again, Tarquin. Let us drink to our mutual fortunes.’

Abruptly the centurion emptied the draught. He crossed to the stern windows and stared at the seascape. A moment later he left the cabin, exclaiming in hurried tones that there was much to do before the ship sailed.

Titus spent a leisured half-hour, securing his personal gear in the lockers, then made his way back to the deck. He emerged on the poop to discover Quadrantus standing at the rail and staring at the main truck, where the tribune’s standard was fluttering under the faint breeze. He hailed the Greek seaman, ‘I perceive you have noticed my new flag. How do you like it?’

Quadrantus stared aloft and observed, 'Very interesting.'

Titus proceeded, 'It is a most unexpected honour, and a rare design. Augustus himself thought of it.'

The shipmaster turned on him, incredulous. 'Who?'

'Divine Augustus, the Emperor. Who else could have honoured me thus?'

'Who indeed, O Titus! Did you bring off my sailing directions?'

'We are bound to Caesarea, the Judaeen naval base. You know it, of course.'

'No, I don't. But I am looking forward to my first visit very much.'

'I suppose you are,' Titus remarked absent-mindedly. He glanced down into the waist; went on, 'What's all that noise at the ladder-head?'

He indicated an argument which was developing below his feet, between Galba and an officious fellow attired in civilian garb. The Egyptian centurion, his arms folded, was barring the intruder's entry into the ship; an attitude which was little to the visitor's liking. He stuck out his jaw, and said in a loud voice, 'You try and stop me and see what happens. If you have any sense you'll get the officer in command.'

'I command here,' Titus interposed. 'Furthermore, my centurions hold every authority to debar those whom they consider unimportant from entering this ship. Who are you?'

The man eyed Titus coolly. 'That's better. I was getting tired of this hoplite pushing me around.'

He paused, fished within his tunic, then flourished a badge within the palm of his hand. 'I'm Pomponius Magnus, chief investigator from the city sheriff's office.'

'You mean you are an accredited informer. But go on.'

'I'm an official enquiry agent, if that's what you mean, Tribune. Empowered to carry out my duties under senatorial decree, which happens to be the highest civil authority in Rome, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'I don't mind you saying so in the least. But I have strong objections to you forcing your way into my ship without authority from what I consider an even higher power. None other than the Roman navy. If you possess a permit from the port-admiral you are most welcome aboard the *Fravashe*.'

The agent cocked an admiring glance at the cold-featured, deter-

mined young tribune. 'No doubt about that helmet of yours. A tall one, isn't it!'

His manner changed. He resumed briskly, 'Come on, now. I've had enough of this, and for two pins I'd detain the lot of you. There's twenty men in my gang, and they're coming aboard to search this ship from stem to stern.'

'Indeed? And I have two hundred marines under arms who are here to prevent you. I repeat, unless you produce a pass from my admiral, you cannot cross this gangway.'

The informer replaced his badge within his tunic. He said menacingly, 'Very well, my young bantam. Navy or not, you'll face a civil charge for this. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

With a casual air he turned to go, scratched himself unpleasantly and paused at the ladder-head to spit energetically in the scuppers.

Titus stared at the desecrated deck with unbelieving eyes. At last he found his voice, and said calmly to the near-by Galba, 'Throw him overboard.'

The deck sentries closed in automatically. A moment later, the fellow was flying through the air and had landed with a heavy splash in the Tiber.

During the uproar which followed, the admiral's barge ran alongside. Taurus tumbled up the ladder, with the saturated police agent close on his heels.

'This man carries a senatorial order,' the old seadog told Titus. 'Even if he is an informer, he is an official one. You'll have to produce a pretty strong excuse for having thrown him over the side.'

Titus indicated the soiled scuppers. 'He spat on the deck of a commissioned ship.'

The veins bulged blue on the admiral's forehead. 'Heave the bastard in again,' he roared.

Below, in the stern cabin, Taurus mopped his face and called for a drink. After lowering a large measure he observed reflectively, 'I suppose we should have asked him what he wanted, before we tossed him in.'

Galba interposed, 'He told me he was looking for a runaway slave.'

'That's a good one,' the admiral said. 'Titus, pour me another Falernian and stop laughing.'

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE three kings came aboard in the late afternoon. They were stunned slightly under the impact of the civic banquet which had followed the Emperor's audience, and further overwhelmed by the splendour of the aquatic procession which accompanied them down the Tiber. Their departure had coincided with the eve of Saturnalia, with free corn in the offing and circuses aplenty. Carnival swamped the royal visitors almost from the moment they left the city hall. They were pelted with flowers, mocked mercilessly by japing students, hailed as good fellows on every street corner where their equipages were delayed, and pressed to share the wine which seemed to gush endlessly from every tap and fountain.

Nor were they permitted privacy when they reached the river. Decorated boats of every type dotted the water. Groups of musicians floated about on rafts and dispensed gay airs. Lilies floated loose on the surface of the stream. Discarded wine jars bobbed in the slow current. Ducking-parties of boisterous youths splashed elderly gentlemen. The nobility seized the opportunity to masquerade as slaves and more than one titled lady, wearing a mask and little else, gave her favours to the occasional barrel-chested stranger.

Many boats ventured as far as the sandbank, well out to sea and beyond the safety of the Ostia breakwater. Several overturned on the bar, engulfed in the briefly turbulent waves; and a story drifted to the *Fravashe* that a young girl had been drowned.

'It wasn't a young girl at all,' Calpurnius told Titus, when they met in the stern cabin, after the excitement had subsided. 'It was Cornelia Piso. I saw her with my own eyes, when they fished her out of the sea and took her body up the river.'

He broke off, and contemplated Titus with serious eyes. 'Further-

more, she did not die by drowning. There was a butcher's knife buried to the hilt in her back.'

'I thought she had gone to Tibur, with the temple funeral guard! What was she doing on the Ostia bar?'

'She was on her way off to have the ship searched, with a fresh warrant.'

'But these decks have been alive with troops since daybreak! An ant could scarce have crawled on board unnoticed, much less a fugitive slave!'

'The senatorial agent was not to know that. He assumed the craft was outward bound and made his normal check. It was not until he had boarded, and incidentally had been flung over the side, that he discovered his mistake.'

'Whereupon, I suppose, he assumed naturally that the slave was hidden in the hold; even more so, as I myself am commanding the ship.'

'In general, that is precisely what happened,' Calpurnius admitted. 'Cornelia Piso decided you were attempting to conceal something, and was determined to ascertain its nature.'

'Why, the woman must have been mad, to think a Roman in my position would compound the escape of another person's slave! I am just as likely to throw down the images in the Pantheon!'

Calpurnius agreed soberly. 'Mad is a mild word. As far as I can gather, she was demented beyond belief. She doubled the reward for the boy's capture when she heard the informer's story, and insisted on coming off in person to see if he was hidden in the *Fra-vashe*.'

A silence fell, broken by Titus. He asked abruptly, 'Who could have murdered her?'

Calpurnius shrugged his shoulders. 'Any one of our myriad slaves, or their countless associates in the freed classes. Cornelia Piso cannot treat her household worse than dogs, and expect the fact to be overlooked.'

He opened his papers, and waved a parchment solemnly, as if to emphasise his words. 'The truth is, I suppose, when the boat overturned, there was someone near her who decided to make the most of a convenient opportunity.'

Titus, his reflections provoked by a side issue which latterly never

seemed to be far from his mind, interjected, 'How will Vipsania take all this?'

'Badly, I am afraid. With her powers of self-accusation she will lay Piso's death at her own door, and suffer accordingly.'

'Lay it at mine, you mean,' the young tribune commented in faintly bitter tones. 'That is, if her recent pattern of behaviour persists.'

'I don't think it will, Titus. Now the influence of this baleful woman has been removed, I feel sure a more rational outlook will return.'

The admiral interrupted their conversation.

'Hail, Calpurnius! What's this new fuss?'

'I was just acquainting Titus with the information that Madame Piso had been assassinated, while on her way out to this ship.'

Taurus never turned a hair. 'You only assassinate royalty,' he pointed out. 'Common people are murdered and politicians' widows removed. Having established the fact, I trust it is not going to delay the sailing of this ship?'

'Not as far as the legal branch of the navy is concerned. As soon as Master Quadrantus signs these papers, the *Fravashe* is cleared officially.'

The admiral took a chair and sprawled his elbows on the table. 'Clear her, then. For I have a strange feeling that the sooner these three passengers of ours are out of Roman waters, the better for all concerned.'

As soon as Calpurnius left the quarters, the old sea-legate submitted Titus to a narrow scrutiny. 'You seem to be making a lot of powerful enemies, one way and another, in your innocent way. Is it a natural gift? Or do you practise it deliberately?'

'Really, sir! I was aware that Madame Piso bore me resentment; but apart from that, I would be surprised to find I possessed an enemy in the world!'

'I suppose you would. What's more, I wasn't referring wholly to Madame Piso, either. In the meantime, go and see how our guests are getting along. Keep them happy until I get this charter with Quadrantus off my mind. You'll find them playing with the presents Augustus gave them.'

Titus discovered the three kings in a temporary saloon, erected for their convenience in a section of the hull adjacent to their cabins.

They were seated at the table, discussing the caskets, which were placed before them.

'They are as like as three bananas on a stalk,' King Daq was saying. 'Augustus has certainly shown tact.'

The Khan carefully balanced a pot on each palm. He said in slow tones, 'Mine is heavier than the others. Perhaps there is lead in the alloy.'

The Erlking touched his arm, and reminded him gently, 'You are too apt to suspect deception in men of goodwill, my dear Khan.'

King Daq, who had been staring with a renewed curiosity at the three caskets, glanced about the table. 'I wonder if there is anything in them? Don't you think we ought to open them and see?'

'I would prefer to await my return home before opening mine,' the Erlking said. 'The nature of the contents do not matter a great deal. It is the spirit which prompted the gift which is important to me.'

'Nevertheless,' the Khan interposed gutturally, 'I intend to open mine tonight. If it is gold, then my suspicions are aroused.'

'And if it is not gold?' Daq asked.

'Then my suspicions are confirmed. It amounts to the same thing.'

The Nubian monarch, drumming his pink finger-tips on the table, came to a brisk decision. 'I don't care when I open mine. In fact, I am of a mind never to open it, then all my life I will wonder what's in it and why Augustus made it so.'

He paused; glanced across at his brother kings, 'On the other hand, if you two intend to ascertain the contents, then I must join you in the discovery. Shall we make it now?'

Titus, who had been listening in silence to this most interesting conversation, broke in quietly, 'If the gifts were made in Saturnalia, then they should not be opened until the last evening of the carnival. Why not perform your little ceremony on Twelfth Night?'

The suggestion pleased all. The Erlking raised his hand in amiable approval and the Khan nodded; reluctantly, as if the effort of committal were too much for his unfathomable mind.

Daq burst into a spate of enthusiastic suggestions. 'Splendid! We must make an occasion out of it! The end of our private Saturnalia, so to speak! Shall we call it that? Or can someone think of something better?'

Titus perceived by the Erlking's sage expression that he was on

the verge of one of his most erudite and lengthy dissertations; and indeed it was so.

'Let me see, now. Perhaps with a little reflection we could think of something more fitting. But let us return to first principles. The Greeks have a name for it, as they have for everything. It is the showing of our gifts, is it not? And would not our Hellenic friends call it precisely that? *The Epiphany*, or *Showing*? Come, now, what shall we say?'

From the corner of his eye Titus discerned Chrystolis in the door of the saloon. The chief scribe was beckoning him in a faintly conspiratorial manner. Mystified, the tribune joined him in the alleyway.

The freedman whispered, 'Your pardon for the intrusion, O Titus. The boy is safe. Just before I came off, an unexpected source brought the news to his sister. I thought you might like to know.'

Titus hesitated. 'I am not sure whether I do or not. You may not realise it, but the affair has gone beyond a compassionate interest in the fate of an unfortunate slave.'

He eyed the chief scribe firmly; went on, 'He is now indirectly responsible for the death of his mistress, and the fact that I am privy to this conspiracy places me in a most embarrassing position. You understand that, of course?'

'Of course, Titus. What is more, I myself could be put to the question for having ventured an interest in the affair, even if at your own invitation. Will this mean that you intend to revise your decision about the girl?'

'Definitely not. Rather, it clarifies her case. It means that her manumission can be expedited without further delay. I shall speak to Calpurnius before he goes ashore.'

He broke off, suddenly realising the severity in his tone. After all, as Chrystolis had hinted, he had placed his neck in the noose at the invitation of Titus.

He continued in a more friendly voice, 'Pray do not think I am ungrateful for your help, Chrystolis. But doubtless the speed with which events have overtaken us is confusing to all concerned.'

Calpurnius came up, carrying his satchel and prepared to depart. Titus, after acquainting him with the latest news on the runaway, accompanied him to the ladder-head, where they said goodbye. On returning to the stern cabin, the tribune discovered the admiral

snapping orders at Tarquin and Galba.

'I want double sentries in the passengers' quarters. Bare feet and no buckler-clashing when the password is exchanged.'

'Very good, sir. And the word for tonight?'

'I'll give it when I do the first rounds. And tell your beauties that I'm on board to stay, if they're contemplating any bastardry after the ship sails.'

As the centurions departed, Titus crossed to the stern windows. He stared unbelieving at the swinging horizon and the fast-receding coast. 'The ship is under way! What does this mean!'

'It means I'm coming with you,' Taurus informed him.

The old seadog stretched his short legs, yawned, and commented, 'It's about time I made a voyage. If you don't mind, I'll occupy the berth near the quarter gallery, then I won't disturb you when I go for a walk.'

Chrystolis entered, bearing the admiral's bedclothes.

'Is he coming too?' Titus asked.

'Of course he is. What's more, if there are any other burning questions on your mind, Calpurnius knew he was coming. All right, Chrystolis, stop fussing with those rugs and find yourself a couch for the night.'

Titus removed his helmet. 'I don't think I quite understand,' he began.

Taurus interrupted him with a nonchalant wave.

'No one is asking you,' he said. 'But if you want something to put you to sleep, you can spend an interesting hour cogitating over the watchword for the night. It is *Confusion on Parnassus!*'

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

WHEN Titus came on deck the following morning, he found the land dropped and the squaresailer plunging south towards the Sicil-

ian capes. The wind was steady from the westward; a sailing breeze, which whipped up the quartering sea and whirled a creamy spume across the wave-tops.

White clouds raced to leeward. The tall masts strained in their rope webbing, creaked in baritone to the hardwood wedges which held them prisoner. Running-gear thrummed. Block sheaves clacked against the top-rails. The taut shrouds sang high joy.

Titus, his nose over the rail and sniffing the salt glory of the gale, was caught by a muffled growl in his ears. He turned to find the admiral by his side, struggling with his cloak.

'I was enjoying the weather, sir,' he explained. 'The miracle of the winds. The manifestation of the sea-gods, which one feels yet cannot see.'

Taurus wiped his watery eyes and stood back out of the blast. 'Wait until you are my age. Then you won't boast so ardently.'

'You shouldn't be out here, sir. When the breeze quarters, this gallery is one of the most exposed parts of the ship.'

'It is also the most private, from what I can see of her construction. Who berths in that cabin?'

'The Erlking, but he is most unlikely to make an appearance when this is the weather side. He is probably at his morning meditations.'

Taurus flopped on the wooden bench which abutted the stern housing; pulled in his cloak and made himself comfortable. 'Let us talk then, before that damned Chrystolis comes pestering me about my health. Has your neat brain worked out the true reason for my presence in the ship?'

'It hasn't tried to, sir. But I am most happy to have you with me.'

'It's nice of you to say so. Augustus sent me. He said he smelt a plot to murder our passengers.'

'All three, sir?'

'One or all, it doesn't matter. The point is, until the *Fravashe* reaches Caesarea I'm here to keep an eye on everyone.'

'Including myself?'

'Why not? Don't forget that, when you're a Roman emperor, suspicion begins at home. You start off with the imperial family, then, if you're still alive, you dwell on the aristocracy, the church and state. My case is much simpler. I merely watch every soul on board this ship, except Chrystolis.'

'Chrystolis? Is he aware of this new trend in affairs, then?'

‘Naturally. I have no secrets from him. I thought you would have realised that by now.’

‘And he none from you, I suppose.’

‘If you’re hinting at that damned business of the slave girl you left in his charge, of course not.’

The old seadog squinted up, amused. ‘She spent the night before last on my spare couch, and shared my breakfast porridge. What’s more, in future you come to me and not my chief scribe, when you want to smuggle slaves out of the country.’

‘I’ll try and remember it, sir,’ Titus said, embarrassed. He communed with his thoughts for a brief moment, then added, ‘Calpurnius is up to his neck with me in most of this. I wonder if he has any inkling of the other business.’

‘Not to my knowledge. Nor will he ever know, if Augustus and I have anything to do with it. The Emperor shares the same opinions as myself about lawyers; and always has done, since Cicero double-crossed Uncle Julius. Now let’s go on deck and inspect the troops.’

‘One moment, sir. Those other murders? Lepidus, the chamberlain, and Madame Piso? Has it not struck you that there may be a relationship between the whole?’

Taurus, his hand on the ladder-rail, paused with an air of sorrowing admiration. ‘Titus, my boy, you’ll never become chief of the secret police. You reason with far too much logic.’

They reached the steering-platform and stood at the break of the poop, observing the movements in the ship’s waist. The morning parade was over and the centurions were exercising the marines in their various arms. Galba was on the foredeck with the spearmen, monotonously practising six-stroke routine. Rasping efficiency rode the air and fought upwind to where the two officers were standing. As they watched, the Egyptian veteran split the company into files, facing inboard. A command roared and the men lumbered together, making mock thrusts at each other’s throats.

‘I like zeal for its own sake,’ Taurus commented. ‘But that fellow is either rehearsing a landing in Britain or about to storm the Pyramids. Neither of which suits my purpose.’

‘I think he is following out the training-manual instructions, sir.’

‘He can throw the book overboard then. What I want is a close-knit sentry system clapped over the ship, from stem to steering-platform and all round the sundial. It isn’t going to be very efficient

if the men are under arms all day in the sun, playing like Praetorian cadets on the Campus Martius. There's Tarquin, the chap I'm looking for. I'll slip down and give him a few headaches to be going on with.'

As the admiral vanished, the three kings appeared from out of the main hatch, accompanied by the soldier servants which the Roman government had placed at their disposal. Casually, they grouped against the bulwarks, scanned the horizon and talked among themselves. Taurus broke off his conversation with Tarquin to join them, leaving the young centurion to clamber the ladder and interrupt Titus' reflections.

'Phew! Double guards night and day in the passengers' quarters. Strict twenty-four-hour security and both centurions to act as alternating night commanders. Anyone would think we were outposts on the Upper Danube! What's it all about?'

Titus hesitated. Surely Tarquin could be trusted? After what they had been through together, it appeared childish not to give him a hint of moves behind the scenes. He contemplated the centurion for a few moments in silence, then observed with an air of indifference, 'By the Gods, Tarquin, don't ask me. I still haven't grown used to the shock of discovering that the admiral is with us for the voyage.'

'Or the shock of wondering why, I suppose, for that matter.'

'That's plain enough. Divine Augustus ordered him to take a holiday. Confidentially, the Emperor also implied an anxiety about the welfare of our passengers. The failure of the Pax Mundana has been sufficiently unpleasant, without embarrassing repercussions. Between you and me, Tarquin, I don't think anyone is going to breathe easily until Their Majesties are once more beyond the Roman frontiers.'

'You can say that for me too, Titus. It's a dull passage, with no dice and double duties. Daq won't like it either.'

'You can throw Venus with him as often as you wish, as far as I'm concerned. But, remember, your losses don't come out of the military chest on this occasion.'

'They don't have to. I touched a wealthy widow when I was in town. Here's what I owe you.'

Tarquin handed the tribune a number of gold coins, newly minted and shining dully in the Mediterranean sun.

'Why, Tarquin! There is no necessity to return this now! The end

of the voyage will do. After all, you may need money in Caesarea.'

'I've kept some back,' Tarquin assured him, smiling. 'In any case, I've decided to pay my debts. All of them. Let us leave it at that.'

He returned to his duties, leaving Titus to pocket the money and descend to the waist, where he found his royal charges discussing King Herod of Judaea, their imminent host.

King Daq was saying, 'The last time I heard from him, he was involved in one of his customary family arguments. One of the drawbacks, I suppose, of subscribing to a religious system which permits a man to possess but one wife. Funny thing, you know, where you get state monogamy you always seem to get more matricide, patricide and fratricide. It makes men in our position think a little before attempting to change the national habits. Personally I'm all for polygamy and no poisoning.'

'You must tell me more about this Herod,' the Erlking interposed primly. 'I do not mean, naturally, the more sordid aspects of his life, but the degree in which his behaviour is conditioned by his environment. For instance, he is not a free monarch. He renders tribute to Caesar. Does not this hamper his ideals on benign government?'

'It hampers his confidence in his own occupancy of the Judaeen throne. He is as nervy as an Egyptian cat that someone will supplant him, for he is not of the House of David, the hereditary line, and the disability preys on his mind. I suppose the Roman governor uses this shortcoming as a prod when Herod betrays restlessness.'

'He should employ more secret police, more spies and informers,' the Khan observed. 'An occasional massacre tones up the populace, too.'

The Erlking frowned his distaste. He attempted to approach the subject from a more innocuous angle. 'Herod subscribes to a most unusual religion, does he not? Perhaps our young friend Titus, here, could tell us of it. He has made a study of Oriental religions.'

Titus nodded. 'Herod's religion is indeed odd. He believes in the existence of but one god, a most jealous and highly personal edition of our Jove. This deity is most seriously circumscribed. He is not permitted male or female relatives and can only be communicated with on rare occasions. Even then, the conditions are strictly arbitrary. He manifests his will within a little cabinet termed his Holy of Holies, which is additionally concealed in a cramped-up corner of his temple. For some reason which escapes my awareness, his followers are in-

structed to term themselves his *chosen people*.'

'A wet blanket of a god, if ever there were one,' King Daq commented in hearty tones. 'And a poor example to royalty, earthly or otherwise.'

'Nevertheless,' the Khan insisted stolidly, 'it reveals honest doubts about his adherents. Suspicion is the divine right of kings and the natural manifestation of a god, whether he is one or a score. I like his approach to his problems. What is his name?'

'Tetragrammaton,' Titus informed him. 'But he prefers it pronounced *Jah-wah*. I understand that in front of non-believers it must be whispered without vowels.'

Servants interrupted the conversation, bearing the passengers' midday meal on a portable table; and Titus went below to the stern cabin, where he discovered the admiral, partly disrobed, snoring loudly on his favourite end of the couch.

Fearful of disturbing the old scadog, Titus reached for a book of poetry and settled himself quietly at the table. As the afternoon waned he dozed off himself, slept fitfully until he was aroused by the entry of Chrystolis, carrying a tray, and the admiral's gruff voice enquiring the hour.

At the sight of the food Taurus made a wry face. 'It's wine I want. Cool, deep and well watered.' He slaked his thirst, reached for his kilt and tunic, and observed huskily, 'Dreams, Titus. I've never known them to come so thick and fast before.'

'What were their nature, sir?'

'As queer as the contents of a Syrian pic. A sort of goddess with sprouted wings perched herself on the end of my couch, singing nonsensical jingles. I can't remember the words, although I suppose they'll come back to me later. Let's get a breath of fresh air, then do the rounds.'

On deck, they found Quadrantus had hauled his wind, set his fore-and-aft sails and headed the *Fravashie* down the Mediterranean towards Crete. The two Romans, seamen themselves, automatically scanned the stars and checked the ship's new course. Old friends twinkled in the heavens above their heads; strong man Orion, turning cartwheels a century at a time; the Pleiades, a sister short but still dancing; Sirius in his prompter's box; and Canopus far to the south, hinting knowingly of hidden constellations.

Suddenly Titus saw a star, dead ahead and low above the horizon.

He touched the admiral's sleeve. 'Look!'

Taurus peered through the night. 'It's a new one all right. But there's nothing unusual about that. They come and go.'

'But this one is brighter, steadier! And it appears to possess a lower ray, as if pointing to earth!'

'Nonsense, boy. That's merely its refraction, caused by the low altitude. You ought to know that. Poke a stick into still water and you get the same effect. However, we'll slip aft and see if Quadrantus has noticed the thing. If nothing else, he'll be able to use it as a steering-mark.'

They found the Greek shipmaster in his customary station, standing against the steering-hatch, watching the two seamen who were toiling at the lee oar. When they brought their discovery of the new star to his notice he smiled down at them. In the luminous gloom of the sea-night, his deep-set eyes twinkled faintly; as if they were reflecting in some mysterious fashion the beckoning gleam of this unexpected beacon which had come to guide them on their way.

'It has been there since the twenty-fifth day,' he told them indulgently. 'I wonder you have not seen it before.'

'What a bloody know-all you are,' Taurus said irritably. 'Anyone would think the damned star had been stuck there especially for your benefit.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE stowaway was not found until the ship was well under the Grecian archipelago and shaping her course for the Judæan coast.

Tarquin discovered him, and then only by the merest chance.

'He was skulking in the bows and must have come out of the cable locker, when he heard me approaching. He sneezed suddenly; scared the wits out of me and tried to slip off. Then I grabbed him.'

The centurion added, 'He's well fed. Someone's been looking after

him. Do you think it's worth an enquiry?'

Titus contemplated the wretched boy, now standing in the centre of the cabin, sullen and defiant. He asked him quietly, 'What are you doing in this ship? Who are you?'

Tarquin interjected, 'No need to ask him that. He's Piso's runaway slave, you could bet a million. And don't forget I found him first, when they're handing out that fat reward.'

The admiral entered the cabin unexpectedly, announcing, 'And don't forget who commands this ship either, my fine-feathered centurion. I'll take that reward, under Imperial Regulations and Naval Orders.'

Unabashed, Tarquin said checkily, 'Well, sir, on that basis, I'm at least entitled to my sixty-fourth.'

He went off, leaving the two flag-officers to exchange significant glances.

'What will I do with him?' Titus asked.

'Please yourself,' Taurus said indifferently. 'He isn't going to be much use on deck. Perhaps you'd better appoint him passengers' page. It will release a marine from menial duty, if nothing else.'

The admiral took a near-by chair; pushed his helmet to the back of his head, and commented in a tired voice, 'I don't suppose it matters in the end. Piso died without living issue, so her property reverts automatically to the Emperor. He'll become a state slave and get off lightly. Being a fugitive they'll probably brand him with the capital F and shove him into a construction gang.'

The old seadog pursed his lips; ruminatively, 'Isn't he the brother of that girl you were manumitting?'

'Yes, sir. And the relationship is more than coincidental. I am just beginning to put two and two together. Furthermore, that he should have escaped into this ship is most embarrassing.'

Taurus cleared his throat, growled, 'Where's that confounded Chrystolis? I'd like a word with him.'

The chief scribe entered the cabin, smiling amiably. The admiral indicated the boy; asked, 'Do you know who this is?'

Chrystolis examined the stowaway carefully. 'Why, sir, he certainly resembles the girl Aurelia. Indeed, remarkably so. Could he be her brother?'

'That's sagacious enough to get you appointed a minister to the crown,' Taurus rasped. 'But we'll brush it aside for the moment. The

point is, do you know how he got into this ship?

'Not in the slightest, O Taurus. Although I could suggest several ways.'

'So could I, from impersonating a bale of palace draperies and being carried on board, to flying off disguised as a sea-gull. What I am getting at, and probably what I'll never find out, is who smuggled him in?'

The chief scribe rubbed his palms together; said helpfully, 'Doubtless if we could trace the person who prompted the informer to search the ship we might get a clue.'

'And another murder on our hands. Probably the same thing which happened to Madame Piso would happen to him. You are a smooth rogue, Chrystolis, and I'll swear one of your confounded freedman societies is at the bottom of all this. Don't come to me, if your unsavoury associations land you in trouble.'

'I certainly won't, sir. Is there anything else I can do?'

'Ask this lad his name, I suppose. No one else appears to have ascertained it so far.'

Chrystolis turned to the boy: 'Do not be afraid any more. What do they call you?'

'Aurelius, sir.'

'Aurelius? Golden Boy? And your sister is Aurelia, Golden Girl! Who gave you those names?'

'The tribute collectors who took us from our home. They said we were so much alike. May I be permitted to work, sir?'

The freedman extended his hand, and said in low, friendly tones, 'Come with me, Aurelius. I will do what I can for you.'

As the pair left the cabin, Taurus commented, 'Another mystery. This ship is beginning to reek with them. Even the three kings are crawling around the decks as if they were seeing nothing else but spectres before their eyes.'

'It is this new star which has been brought to their notice, sir. I have a feeling that they have been affected by its presence.'

Taurus suddenly lost his temper. 'I've never heard such rabid nonsense. Honestly, Titus, if you begin talking like that, I'll suspect even you of being touched; and all because a stray star bobs up over the horizon!'

'It is more than a stray star, sir, and you know it,' Titus reminded him quietly. 'An astral body should move across the heavens in uni-

son with its fellows. This one hangs motionless on a line of bearing, dead east.'

'But, confound it, that's because we always see it at the same time every evening. Clouds hide it otherwise.'

'Only to us Romans,' Titus persisted. 'The kings keep seeing it at all hours. They spend their time watching for it now, and doing very little else. Unless they are mad or drunk, they *must* be seeing it.'

'Get me some wine,' Taurus said bitterly. 'For, by Bacchus himself, I obviously can't afford to stay sober any longer. At least your conversation has convinced me of that.'

Uneasy, Titus left the cabin and crossed the alleyway to the tiny cubicle in which Chrystolis had set up his pantry.

The freedman, who was cutting a Gaulish ham into thin slices, glanced up from his dresser as the tribune gave him his master's message. As he returned his knife to a drawer and reached for a jar of wine, he observed, 'I could not fail to hear your voices raised, a moment ago. I must tell you, Titus, I am concerned with the admiral's health.'

'He is overwrought, Chrystolis, and under considerable strain.'

'I am relieved to hear you say so, Titus; for I had doubted you realised the fact.'

Titus scrutinised the freedman's face, searchingly. The words, innocent enough on the surface, stung like a reproach; and were he not aware of the strong bond which existed between the old seadog and his ex-slave, he would have construed the remark as an impertinence.

'My feelings happen to go deeper than you may think,' he said quietly. 'Taurus is as dear to me as a father. Indeed, in many respects he is my sea-parent. If he is distressed, or in need of assistance, then I desire to help him as much as you do, Chrystolis.'

The freedman's lips trembled slightly. He picked up the wine and attempted to push past, as if he feared the glare of frank enquiry which blazed within the young tribune's eyes. He murmured softly, 'It is unnecessary for you to say so, Titus. All who truly know you, are well aware of your sentiments.'

Uneasy, disconcerted, Titus made his way up to the saloon where the three kings were gathered, and where he discovered them discussing further phenomena. It appeared that on the previous night King Daq had experienced a most disturbing vision. He claimed that Augustus appeared before him and revealed that an abnormality of

singular proportions was bringing about a change of feeling towards the Pax Mundana. The Roman emperor had indicated to Daq, so the Nubian declared, that the presents he had given his three visitors were not in effect intended actually for their own use. They were supposed to be taken on behalf of Rome to one who was of infinitely greater birth than any common earth king. None other than a King of Kings, who would implement the Pax after his own fashion.

King Daq eyed the caskets longingly. He complained, 'I fail to see why Augustus should have visited me. All this would have sounded much more convincing if it came from, say, the Erlking.'

'Or from Herod,' the Khan said. 'If it is established that this King of Kings is in his territory.'

King Daq grew excited. 'Augustus did not say that! He did not even imply it! He appeared to imply, in answer to my unspoken question, that Herod could perhaps direct us to the presence of this Paramount.'

The Erlking nodded. 'A pretty point,' he mused. 'Indeed a pretty point, and one well worth considering.'

The monarchs fell silent. They brooded over their gleaming pots, as if therein were contained the talisman of all their sought-for answers.

Titus, now most interested in this strange discussion, broke the silence. He put in helpfully, 'Excuse me for intruding in this matter, King Daq; but are you quite sure it was our Divine Augustus who came to you in your vision? To me it is a most unlikely story, for the Emperor is himself the known ruler of the civilised world, and scarcely the type to kowtow to a mere King of Kings. Furthermore, it has long been recognised that evil spirits impose their malevolent wills upon us by the adoption of innocent disguises. We are now adjacent to the shores of Egypt and within the sphere of Isis. Is it not possible that she, or one of her sister dung goddesses, could have sported with you under the seeming of our Divine Augustus?'

Daq, listening to this well-intentioned tirade with a growing distaste, could contain himself no longer. Considerably heated, he told the earnest young tribune, 'It is not my practice to sport with dung goddesses in my sleep and pigment is the only quality I have in common with Isis. You Romans possess too much imagination!'

He broke off, his dusky features invaded by dark foreboding. 'It has struck me that this King of Kings should be warned against any

trafficking with Rome. For if I am any judge, it will create something out of him which will make even my witch-doctors seem like grand-mas telling nursery tales.'

The Erlking interposed in conciliatory tones, 'Come, now, we must not pre-judge. Perhaps out of all this confusion may come an ultimate and lasting good. At least we must admit that Augustus, or whoever pretended to him, has shown a strong sense of history.'

'And a better sense of timing,' the Khan ejaculated pointedly. 'It is most convenient, is it not, that this King of Kings should manifest himself precisely at the moment when there are three delegates about to depart from Rome, suitably equipped not only to bring him advance tribute, but what is more terrifying, the implied homage from all the future peoples who will inhabit the distant corners of the world? I fear I can no longer conceal my suspicions. This is a plot, and one of the most cynical ever to be imposed on the mind of simple man.'

'A most profound observation,' the Erlking said. 'But not wholly helpful. If I may sum up the situation, it appears to me that we have reduced our problem to a question of faith; for there are no half-measures in matters spiritual, or compromise between gods and men. Either we subscribe unequivocally to King Daq's dream, or we reject it completely, retain our presents and go home.'

He concluded in a voice of tremendous gravity, 'My own attitude is clear. I do not understand, but my heart and mind tell me I must accept. It is enough.'

Daq embraced him enthusiastically; babbled with an excited hysteria, 'I too! I too accept!'

His noisy acquiescence died away. Together, he and the Erlking turned their enquiring gaze on the brooding Khan.

The latter, his long yellow face filled with stunned surprise, was mumbling through his shoe-string moustaches, 'I do not think I am very well! I am agreeing!'

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE wind dropped as the coast of Judaea hove in sight. A calm descended and the sea fell flat. A slow swell grew; hesitant, as if even Neptune himself were torn with sudden doubts.

The *Fravashe* lost her momentum and drifted into a lack-lustre inertia. Deadened, she lay on the water, logged and brutish, like a stunned sea-monster, blown up from the deeps in some monstrous gesture of primordial disgust.

A strange heat permeated the squaresailer. Black pitch bubbled sullen in the deck seams. Moisture beaded on the bulkheads. The timbers perspired and the sails sweated damp. On the main truck, proud-blown no longer, Titus' standard hung in shapeless folds.

The day grew and the heat intensified. Movement ceased about the decks. The Roman sentries stood listless at their posts. The three kings drowsed in their cots. Quadrantus, solitary on his steering-platform, sat on a hinged bench fixed to the shelter side. His hooded gaze and weathered face gave nothing away. His thoughts, were he possessed of any, were as hidden from the casual observer as were the stars above his head. His pose implied that of a person wrapped in a resigned expectancy. He was waiting.

In the stern cabin, Titus sat at the table and contemplated Taurus with a growing anxiety. It now seemed as if the old fellow's nerves had reached a breaking-point. His features were strained and he was monotonously cursing the weather; pacing the deck and staring, at intervals, through the windows at the distant grey huddle which marked the port of Caesarea.

He was maddened by the close proximity of soundings and the squaresailer's inability to make them. 'It is damnable! Here we are, with the anchorage almost under our bows, and bogged down in this

damned gravy. What would I not give for a bank of oars, or even the chance to fling out a signal for a dozen galleys to pluck me in. Hasn't this *Quadrantus* any boats?

'There is a large launch, and a gig fit for service, sir. But they could barely cast the ship's head, much less move her through the water. I fear we must await the coming of the night breeze. There is nothing else for it. In the meantime I could go on deck and ask the Greek what he thinks of the weather. He possesses an uncanny sense of anticipation.'

Taurus made a quick gesture. 'Leave it until later, then we'll both go and see him. I'd prefer you to stay with me, until we get in.'

'But what of the rounds, sir? And the passengers? After all, they are our primary concern until we make port.'

'Of course, of course, Titus. Damn it, man, I haven't forgotten! By the Gods, I've never known such unseasonable heat!'

The admiral paused in his feverish striding. He whipped off his shirt and reduced himself to his underclothing; scratched his bare belly; bawled, 'Chrystolis! Where's Chrystolis?'

The scribe entered, accompanied by the fugitive slave, Aurelius, who shrank behind the freedman's bulky form when he caught sight of the half-naked admiral.

'What's the matter with the damned boy?' Taurus growled. 'I won't eat him. And why isn't he attending on Their Majesties?'

Chrystolis patted the boy's shoulder, reassuringly. 'I found his services most useful in the pantry, and decided to retain them.'

Titus, who had been contemplating the scene in silence, observed suddenly, 'Do we have to turn him over when we get back? I am of half a mind to let him go and take his chance.'

Taurus glowered at him. 'What's got into you? I've reduced officers to the ranks for a lesser remark than that. Where would we be, without law and order?'

'We are on the high seas and a law unto ourselves,' Titus protested mildly. 'After all, there are exceptional circumstances in this case.'

'Then you tell them to the high court, when you are up on a charge of aiding a fugitive. I wouldn't give a bent penny for your chances of survival. Chrystolis, we'll have an early meal, if you don't mind.'

The affair could scarcely be termed comfortable. The admiral

sweated, fumed and drank copiously; while the boy Aurelius attended on him in a manner more reminiscent of a nervous cat than a cabin steward.

Afterwards, as the table was being cleared, the old seadog asked, 'What are our passengers doing?'

'Resting, I think, sir. I haven't seen them since this morning. They were still discussing King Daq's vision.'

'King Daq's what?'

'His vision, sir.'

'I'll need time to chew that one over. I suppose there was a woman in it?'

'As a matter of fact there wasn't. He claimed to have held an audience with Augustus, in his sleep. The Emperor told him a thing or two.'

'It didn't include a couple of signals for us, did it? Augustus could have saved himself a courier there, if he'd had his wits about him.'

'I don't think they reached the subject of naval communications, sir. The discussion was limited to some misunderstanding about the imperial gifts. It appears there was a slight error in calculation, due to the haste with which the farewells were made.'

'What sort of error?'

'A technicality, but rather an odd one. These jewelled caskets were properly intended for another royal person, and our passengers are supposed to deliver them.'

'Sounds queer to me. To begin with, Augustus isn't the type to be guilty of top-policy mistakes. If the Khan had thought it up, I would have said it was the beginnings of a bare-faced hoax. Who is this mighty monarch, anyway?'

'As yet there are no exact data available on him, although everyone seems agreed on his being the coming man. Even Augustus implied that, if this vision is accepted as authentic.'

'All right, suppose it is? Suppose these precious pots are genuinely intended for this King of Kings. Where are they going to find him?'

'I think his location has already been ascertained, sir. It is a hamlet on the outskirts of Jerusalem.'

Taurus scratched his jaw. He commented grimly, 'Wait until Herod hears that one. Another king in his territory, and being fawned on by Rome, to boot. He'll grab the gifts, cut the fellow's throat, then complain that Augustus has been guilty of a treaty-breach. Further-

more, I wouldn't be surprised if he makes things damned hot for our three friends, either.'

The admiral pushed his plate away and sprawled his elbows on the table. He stared speculatively at Titus; asked, 'What made them pitch on an obscure little hamlet outside Jerusalem?'

'It was reasoned out quite rationally. Everyone seemed agreed on the relation between Daq's vision and the new star, whereupon the matter resolved itself into a simple problem of navigation. Quadrantus obligingly showed the Erlking a chart of the approaches to Caesarea and gave him a line of bearing on the astral object. It led almost direct to the city.'

'I thought that damned star would be brought into it somewhere, and also that Quadrantus would have a hand in it. He's the most innocent-faced meddler I've ever met. What's he doing now?'

'He is on his steering-platform. He seems unusually anxious for the coming of the wind.'

'He can't be more anxious than I am,' Taurus commented gloomily. 'The strain of this passage is just about killing me. I'll wager I must have lost about ten pounds since we left Ostia. What with nerves, worries, new stars, king's visions and calms.'

Titus affected a light-heartedness which ill-matched his own forebodings. 'Well, sir, this is at least our last night of responsibility. We are as good as in Caesarea, and our three passengers safe and sound. Either your fears for their safety were unjustified, or the efficiency of our security watch has frustrated this would-be regicide we are supposed to be harbouring.'

Taurus became lost in abstract reflections. He agreed vaguely, 'Yes; but there is yet a night to pass, before we see our charges out of the ship.'

His briskness returned. He jumped up, donned his tunic and reached for his cloak. 'But brooding won't bring the dawn quicker. I'll be off on the first rounds. Chrystolis! Call the guard!'

'I'll come with you,' Titus interjected.

The admiral shoved him back into the cabin. 'Get some sleep while you can. I'll need you later, for the second watch.'

Alone, Titus turned down the lamp and sought his couch. But sleep did not come readily. His troubled mind was trapped in a swirling eddy of unanswered questions. Restless, he beseeched Minerva to bring him peace.

But it did not serve him well. A wild shriek echoed through the stern cabin. Taurus bounded in, roaring, while the young tribune reached blindly for a taper and sulphur match. As the weak light flickered, he saw Chrystolis leaning negligently against the sideboard. A silk cord dangled from his strong fingers. A still figure, vaguely familiar in the young tribune's eyes, lay motionless across the freedman's feet.

But it was the sobbing form of the runaway slave, clinging to the freedman's gown, which caught Titus' astonished gaze; and the angry bellow of the admiral which held his ear.

'A female! By the Unknown God, Chrystolis! I'll have your head for this trick!'

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

TAURUS donned his boat cloak and took the chair at the head of the table. The strain had gone from his features; the doubts and anxieties of the previous days were vanished from his eyes. Once more he was the crisp, efficient Roman sea-lord.

He fixed a glance of icy disapproval on the slave girl and said to Chrystolis, 'Before we proceed with anything else, put that creature in the pantry.'

Titus crossed the cabin. As he stared, unbelieving, at the corpse, Taurus told him, 'All right, it's Tarquin.'

'Tarquin! I'll never believe it!'

'Yes you will. But come and sit down. We owe you an explanation. Firstly, I am not in this ship to safeguard the three kings. Rome never considered them as being of sufficient importance to warrant the cutting of their throats. You and I were the marked men.'

'You? And myself?'

'No less. And if the news doesn't upset you too much, I might add that you appeared to be the obvious choice in the face of the avail-

able evidence. But we'll begin with Sequinus Piso, who was planted in the *Fravashe* by Prince Marcus, with instructions to spy on all concerned and secure any information which might prove useful to wreck the Pax. What His Highness failed to anticipate, however, was the possibility of his young dupe babbling deliriously before he died with the plague. The extent of these ravings was concealed from him, until divulged by you.'

'By me! Impossible!'

'During your audience with Prince Marcus you were tricked into an admission. Not only did you reveal that Piso confessed himself as an agent, but you were also trapped into stating that only yourself and the chamberlain were present at the deathbed. Do you remember that?'

'Only too well, sir. I also recall having reported that Tarquin was equally aware of Piso's treachery.'

'We're coming to that. In the meantime, Lepidus died the same day, and from that moment the finger was on you.'

'But why? Apparently the whole palace knew as much as I did! To eliminate me seems a remarkably clumsy device, and could serve no useful purpose.'

'Couldn't it? Don't forget you are still *prima facie* evidence of Piso's guilt. If this intrigue really comes to a head, then your word can exile a prince. It's been done before.'

The admiral paused; mopped his face, commenting, 'By the Gods, Titus, I've had a damnable time, waiting for our late friend here to show his hand.'

'It might have helped, had you given me an inkling of what was in the wind.'

'And planted an expression of horror and consternation on that patrician countenance of yours, which would have been more eloquent than a public crier's announcement? Apart from everything else, we were not quite sure; and if we had permitted him to sniff our suspicions we would have aroused his.'

'Which might have been all for the best, sir.'

'Not for you. He was a determined man, remember, and with a prize at stake, far greater than you have yet imagined. I knew at least that much. Also, he was hell-bent on getting you before the *Fravashe* reached Caesarea. I made things difficult for him until the last night before our arrival, then caught him in his own plot.'

'Go on, sir.'

'When I left you earlier in the evening, I took him with me on the rounds. In the ship's bows I feigned a weariness and told him I would take a brief nap in the cool air. I added that you were asleep after a hard day, but he could call you at midnight if I were still resting. I tracked him aft, and sure enough he dropped over the rail and down to the quarter gallery, where Chrystolis was waiting for him. You know the rest.'

'Not quite, sir. There is a question which will burn within my mind until the day I die. Tarquin and I were old comrades. After our mutual sufferings during the last voyage we would have risked our lives for each other. He knew my mind and I knew his. I cannot conceive a bribe in Heaven or Hell sufficiently inducing to have brought his dagger above my heart.'

'Perhaps you will when I tell you that he was the natural son of Prince Marcus, and formal adoption was to be his reward for having removed his father's enemies. Why, anyone in his position worth his salt would have stabbed the Emperor to death for less than that! Have I said enough?'

'Too much,' Titus told him briefly.

He covered his face with his hands, until the shock of discovery died within him. He raised his head; asked steadily, 'What do you intend to do with the body?'

'Heave it over the side,' Taurus said. 'He was last seen walking aft, and kept on walking, as far as history is concerned. After all, the news could come as a relief to his father.'

'And what of the Emperor?'

'I'll have to tell him. Every gory detail. He likes a good murder mystery, as long as he solves it to his own satisfaction. Which reminds me.'

The admiral turned to the freedman, who was still leaning thoughtfully against the sideboard. 'Well, Chrystolis? I take it we can now assume that you smuggled this slave girl into the ship?'

'Yes, O Taurus.'

'Why?'

'When I accepted her responsibility I did not know I would be leaving Rome myself. Her brother's hue and cry alarmed me for her safety during my absence. To bring her with me seemed the most prudent course.'

The freedman hesitated; protested in firmer tones, 'In doing so I was not infringing any major laws of the state. I was most careful on the point.'

'No one is saying you weren't. Although you've made a monkey out of the naval code which you are supposed to assist me in administering. Your most serious offence in my eyes, however, is in concealing your intentions from me. You know damned well I'd have condoned them.'

'You had worries enough, and I thought I could keep the child concealed until the ship docked in Caesarea. Your sudden decision to clap a close guard night and day caught me unawares. I was desperate, and on the point of confession, when she was discovered.'

The admiral drew his cloak over his crossed arms. He closed his eyes, lost in momentary thought; whereupon Titus asked, 'What of the boy? Where is he? Do you know?'

'On his way to Dalmatia, I hope,' Chrystolis told him. 'We changed him for the girl.'

'Does Calpurnius, my brother-in-law, know of this?'

'Naturally! Indeed, he set up the machinery to implement the deception. He appeared most confident of producing the necessary legal fictions to justify the action, were the matter brought ultimately to law.'

'I don't doubt it. Except, of course, for the Piso brand burnt into the slave's skin. Even Cicero couldn't explain that away.'

The freedman smiled faintly. 'As a matter of fact, O Titus, Cicero did explain one away, in the case of Paulus *versus* Paulus and Others, about forty years ago. Calpurnius looked up the records and decided the same arguments would serve his purpose. As an additional precaution, however, we scarred the Piso brand from the boy's bottom and superimposed your own. It will underwrite the case on our behalf, provided you do not refuse corroborative evidence if the occasion demands it.'

'I'm not likely to do that,' Titus commented wearily. 'Then, if the case goes against us, we can all jump together from the Tarpeian Rock, or ask to be exiled in company.'

Taurus returned to life, enquiring of the freedman, 'If you'll pardon my interrupting these interesting speculations and getting back to facts, what do you intend to do with this girl when we arrive in Caesarea? Not, of course, that it is any affair of mine.'

'I'm afraid it is, sir,' Chrystolis said apologetically. 'I was going to request an authority from you to ship her up to Greece. I have relatives in Lesbos who will care for her temporarily.'

'I'll consider the matter, when the ship's cleared her passengers. In the meantime, let's deal with this other business.'

Taurus jerked his thumb in the direction of the pantry door, behind which the slave girl had disappeared. 'Why did she scream? She damned near sprung the plot before its time.'

'She was beside me on the quarter gallery. She must have moved in her sleep. He touched her foot as he swung in over the rails from the deck above, frightening her. I had to take him then.'

'And risk a failure,' the admiral growled. 'I told you to wait until he raised the dagger.'

Chrystolis flexed the thin strangler's cord between his fingers. He said softly, 'He did not wait for my brother. Why should I have waited for him?'

'Your brother?' Titus demanded. 'Who was your brother?'

The freedman surveyed him tranquilly. 'Lepidus was my brother. Lepidus, the *Fravashe*'s chamberlain and the Emperor's confidential adviser.'

The admiral interposed, 'I'd like to ask a question, too, while confidences are the order of the day. Who did for Madame Piso? Come on, Chrystolis! Don't stand there like a cat which has stolen the milk! I know you were in it!'

'Not exactly, O Taurus. But when Calpurnius discovered she was coming off to the ship, he suggested I make some other arrangements for her. He thought she might be bit of a nuisance.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE wind came up before dawn, and in a twinkling, it seemed, the *Fravashe* was off Caesarea. A guard-boat shot out from between

the clustered merchantmen in the harbour, backed oars smartly and challenged the squaresailer's request to enter.

The centurion in command almost fell off his steering-thwart when Taurus bobbed out of the quarter gallery and told him to mind his manners.

'Can't you see the flag colours at my main truck? And where's your port-admiral? He was notified of my expected arrival. Look at your helmet, too. By the Gods, if you are a specimen of Roman naval might in the eastern Mediterranean, I'd hate to see a local fisherman.'

'Yes, sir. I am sure you are quite correct, sir. The sea-tribune in charge of the dock is clearing a berth alongside, but I'm afraid the admiral is not back from Jerusalem yet.'

'Jerusalem? What's he doing in Jerusalem?'

'An unexpected conference called by King Herod, sir. Something to do with your passengers, I think, sir.'

'Or feathering his nest, you mean. All right, push off and prepare to berth me. I want three camels, too.'

'Three camels? Very good, sir.'

The duty-boat backed away and headed off in the direction of the breakwater. The admiral returned into the cabin, where Titus was about to leave for the deck.

'Rouse out that fellow Galba,' Taurus told him. 'Let him muster his men and get them ashore. He can make his own arrangements with the local commander about travelling south to Egypt. The Rome detachment can be drafted into the local marine barracks. This place looks as if it could use a few extra men.'

The admiral yawned; stretched himself, adding, 'That should clear us of immediate responsibilities. For ourselves, we can get a slow boat to Ostia, and the slower the better.'

On the troop deck, Titus found a puzzled Galba contemplating Tarquin's empty berth.

'I don't know what's happened to him,' he explained. 'He never called me at the usual time. I can't quite think what to make of it.'

'There's no need to worry. He has been despatched on urgent duties.'

'What? And left all his gear here?'

'His departure was more unexpected than he anticipated. I'll look after everything.'

Titus broke off; surveyed the swarthy-featured, stocky centurion. 'I may not get the opportunity to speak to you informally before we part. I would like to thank you for the manner in which you have carried out your duties while in this ship under my command.'

Galba smiled, gratified. 'Thank you, sir. It's been an interesting experience, although a bit dull since we left Rome. Confidentially, I'll be glad to get back to Egypt and do a bit of fieldwork.'

'I suppose you will. Escort duty of this nature is not everyone's piece of pie. I think you have shown commendable adaptability in fitting so readily into the scene. Pray call on me at any time, if I can be of simple service to you.'

Galba grinned. 'I won't forget your promise, sir; but we bashed-up provincial copper-chests aren't used to favours.'

He paused, nodded his head at Tarquin's top piece, still hanging against the bulkhead. 'Get me a cuirass like that, sir, and I'll really think I'm somebody.'

Titus removed the exquisitely chased armour from its hook. After all, a centurion's breastplate was still a breastplate, whether tooled in silver or common metal.

He held it out, smiling, 'Let me give you this one. Tarquin holds no immediate use for it; and if it fits you, then wear it with both our compliments.'

'Why, thank you, sir! A regular's badge! Wait till I sport this in Alexandria, sir!'

He went off, delighted, leaving Titus to make his way on deck, where he found a half-flotilla of tow-galleys already in charge of the *Fravashe*, with the breakwater under the lee and the seamen at their berthing-stations.

There was much bustle and confusion after the squaresailer tied up at the wharf. The district military commander came down to pay his respects and proved to be an old frontier general who had known Taurus in his youth. He insisted on taking the admiral to the barracks forthwith, leaving Titus to empty the ship.

As the old seadog went down the gangway, he directed the attention of the young tribune to the naval tiers, where several duty-biremes were moored.

'Slip across and commandeer one of the most suitable for our use. Take number 642, she appears to be the cleanest.'

Some time elapsed before Titus could leave the squaresailer and secure their transport for Italy. He was delayed on board by trivialities, and officialdom on the part of the harbour trust, which came under local government authority and was little inclined to grant military priority in peacetime.

When at last he returned to the *Fravashe* he found her decks bare of Romans. The rear files of the marine division were vanishing down the road in the direction of the barracks. The commissariat wagons were lumbering off, heavy-laden with equipment and surrounded by a gang of cargo slaves. The dockside dust was settled and forlorn peace descended over the decks.

Titus hurried up the gangway to search for the three kings. He discovered King Daq and the Khan in their saloon, dicing in a bored fashion, with the Erlking in his private cabin, quietly reading. As the tribune knocked and entered he glanced up, enquiringly.

'You should be on shore by now,' Titus exclaimed. 'The afternoon is waning, and your road is not along the main highway, but by tracks across the hills. It is not prudent to travel by night in this country, you know.'

'But how else could we travel? For it is only by night that our star is visible. Daylight could but confuse us.'

'Of course. I see your point, King Saga. Have the camels arrived?'

'I understand they came down the wharf some time ago. Their attendant has taken them to feed and water.'

The Erlking went on, 'Tell me, my young friend. These beasts? Are they difficult to mount?'

'Not to a seaman. They are known in the East as ships of the desert. A natural sailor such as yourself should be quite at home.'

'I am pleased to hear you say so. The Khan and King Daq have been most jocular on the subject. They imply that not only will I appear ridiculous, but that I will suffer extreme discomfort in endeavouring to retain my seat.'

'I wouldn't take them too seriously if I were you. Although I could exchange your mount for an ass. I believe they are employed considerably for travel in this part of the world.'

'Thank you, Titus. But when one contemplates the inconvenience already incurred by your emperor on our behalf, to be in-

commoded on a strange beast appears a mere triviality.'

'It is most noble of you to say so, Erlking. And I trust I may be permitted to convey your sentiments by word of mouth to Divine Augustus himself, when I return to Rome. In the meantime, if you will excuse me, I will proceed about my duties.'

He returned through the adjacent quarter gallery into the stern cabin, where Chrystolis and the girl Aurelia were finishing their packing.

He pushed his helmet to the back of his head, sprawled in a chair and cried, 'By Minerva herself, Chrystolis, I am bone-weary! Pour me a drink, if there is anything potable left in the ship.'

The chief scribe smiled. 'I have kept some Chio for emergencies, never fear.' He clapped his hands and glanced significantly at the slave girl, who procured a goblet and poured a generous measure.

Titus gulped the drink, then stared at the girl. The freedman, by some miraculous means, had procured her some appropriate feminine attire. A dress of soft blue material graced her form. Her yellow hair, neatly brushed, slave fashion, revealed unexpected tints. Her cheeks glowed with health.

The tribune drew her towards him; took her in his arms; asked pleasantly, 'Well, child? Your brother is on his way to Dalmatia, and Chrystolis here is taking care of you. Are you not happy at last?'

A smile danced within her grey eyes, deepened to a blush and spread to her mouth, trembling, as if a strange kiss were hovering expectant above her lips. She uttered no words, and an unexpected embarrassment grew over the cabin, broken by the entry of two seamen from the duty-bireme, come to collect the flag-officers' gear.

One said, 'Centurion Varus' respects, sir. There's a signal just come from the admiral, in reference to sailing times.'

The message proved to be unimportant. Taurus was apparently in high spirits and thoroughly enjoying himself. He would sail at sunrise on the following morning, he said, and expected to be off at the first hour. He had made arrangements for the adjutant-general to pay Quadrantus, if the Greek required his charter money urgently.

Titus placed the note in his papers, left the *Fravashe*, crossed the dock, boarded the duty-bireme, and informed its commander of the

admiral's orders. He glanced about the ship; commented, 'I see you have smartened her up, and I'm very pleased, for your own sake. The admiral is sure to be in a critical mood when he comes down. Slap some whitewash on those berthing-lines. It will hide their muddy appearance. I'd fake your ropes instead of coiling them, too, if you don't mind a tip. And those fenders to seaward. Take them in. You don't really need them there.'

'Thank you, sir. Our evening meal is just prepared. I would be honoured if you shared it with me.'

Titus, suddenly aware of his hunger, agreed with alacrity. He joined the centurion in the bireme's messroom, where stiffness soon thawed and conversation became general.

Talk turned on the uneasy state of affairs in Judea, whereupon the centurion remarked, 'This has never been a quiet province. On the few occasions when I visited Jerusalem, it was either simmering with discontent, or boiling over. If it isn't racial riots, the Jews are quarrelling among themselves. Lately, Herod has been proving difficult. He is as nervous as a caged leopard over something, although no one seems to know exactly what it is.'

Titus observed, 'These Oriental nations invariably construe astronomical phenomena into abnormal portents, and to a far greater degree than our own gods would approve. Perhaps this new star is causing him exaggerated concern.'

The centurion stared oddly at Titus. 'What new star? No one here has seen one!'

'Why, the thing has been hanging in the eastern sky for twelve days now! It is as bright as a planet, and of a most unusual shape! You couldn't miss it!'

The centurion laughed shortly. 'Well, sir, I suppose if you have seen it yourself, it must be there.'

He changed the subject, and in a manner which plainly implied his incredulity; whereupon Titus confined the remainder of their talk to trivialities, excused himself as soon as possible and hurried back to the *Fravashe*.

He was astonished to find that the squaresailer had vanished during his absence. A wide gap of empty water stretched beneath the dock wall and the wharf stood deserted. In the background he discerned Chrystolis and the slave girl, leaning against a heap of baggage, and crossed to join them. The freedman explained, 'Quad-

rantus put me on shore before I could protest. He said he had urgent business in another part of the world.'

'But didn't he want his money?'

'He appeared to be in no immediate hurry for it. Rome could pay its debts at a later date, he said. His nominees would see to it, never fear.'

'He's a cool customer, all right; and a smart seaman, if he manœuvred out of this dock without assistance.'

'He held the breeze from every angle. I watched him, puffing out his cheek, as if he were conjuring the winds from his own lips. Look! There he is, just clearing the breakwater! You can still see him!'

Titus strained his eyes to seaward, where the *Fravashe's* black hull stood stark against the dying glory of the setting sun. She had caught the wind, a whole-sail breeze which sent her surging swift into the night. In a second, it seemed, the dusk had swallowed her and she was gone from mortal view, taking her mysterious commander and dumb crew back within the sea-shrouds whence they had so conveniently materialised.

The young Roman emerged from his trance. 'The passengers? Where are they?'

'They came ashore with Quadrantus, just before the ship sailed. I think you'll find them in the customs shed. They went through there to enquire about their camels. What shall I do now, O Titus?'

'Slip over and tell the watch-centurion on that bireme I will attend on the three kings. The child may stay with me.'

As Chrystolis vanished in the growing dusk, Titus found his attention distracted by sounds of furious argument emerging from within the near-by sheds. He entered the building and discovered a heated scene taking place between a customs clerk and King Daq. The three caskets were tabled on the counter and the official was scrutinizing them with high suspicion.

'We can't have this,' he said importantly. 'Must examine the contents before I let you take them out. How do I know that what's in them isn't highly dutiable?'

'Because I tell you it isn't,' Titus snapped, pushing his way in. 'By the Gods, man, how long have you held your post? Don't you recognise diplomatic privilege when you see it? These persons are

of royal blood and the guests of Divine Augustus while they are in Roman territory. You should be producing your red carpet, not your damned impertinence!

The fellow's glance instinctively sought the blazing insigne on Titus' breastplate. 'Very sorry, sir. But they have no escort, you know, and I have to do my duty. I hope it won't go any further.'

'Not if you open those doors, and quickly,' Titus told him grimly.

He stood by until the kings filed out into the street; was about to follow them when the customs clerk complained in his ear, 'I'll have to record something in the ledger, sir. The regulations say so. I'll get flogged if I just put down three pots, contents unknown.'

'Enter anything you like,' Titus said indifferently. 'Put down gold, frankincense and myrrh, for all I care.'

'Very well, sir, if you'll sign the release into Judaea, gold, frankincense and myrrh it is. Here's the book.'

The tribune hastily scrawled his signature beneath the entry, then hurried out into the roadway, where he could see King Daq and the Khan already astride their camels and swaying off towards the outskirts of the town.

He discovered the Erlking standing beside his crouched beast, his anxious eyes gleaming in the bright moonlight. The old Norseman said, 'My dear boy, I could not depart without saying farewell to you personally.'

'Nor I, you,' Titus told him briefly.

They stared at each other, reflectively, after which the younger man asked, 'Are you still going to Alexandria? You have not revealed your intentions, after you visit Jerusalem.'

'I think not. Lately I have experienced a growing conviction that I should return to my people. I feel I must tell them of the many wonders I have witnessed, and prepare myself for my end. I am an old man now, you know.'

He broke off, thoughtfully contemplating the slave girl Aurelia, who had followed Titus into the street. He went on, 'I have found myself recalling quite frequently your stories of the eastern world. The mysteries which were unfolded before your gaze and the influences they have worked on you, so innocently revealed in your spoken thoughts.'

Titus protested, 'But how absurd! Really, King Saga, you have misconstrued my zeal for facts!'

The Erlking's patient smile deepened. 'Have you forgotten so readily the *holy man's* words? Prepare your house! A guest is about to enter!'

Titus laughed. He indicated the girl, standing silently at his side. 'This slave is the only living soul to have entered the Villa Calpurnius since I returned to Rome. She could scarcely claim to be a guest!'

The Erlking clicked up his camel, and observed testily, 'My young friend, it is my opinion your guest could have entered your house and you would not know it.'

He turned off up the street. Soon he had overtaken his brother kings, and was mounting the ridge which guarded the hills to Bethlehem. A taller crown between two lesser crowns, they bobbed along the skyline.

Suddenly the trio vanished. Only the star remained.

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